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Two-way street

When college mentors
help students achieve,
success is shared





Editor's note: The three stories in this issue of *Focus* were reported and written by John Pulley, a freelance writer and editor based in Arlington, Va. Pulley, a professional journalist specializing in education issues for more than two decades, is a former staff writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

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On the cover: Walter Maya, a tax accountant with Ernst & Young (EY), counsels Olga Estephanie Menjivar Garcia, a student at Northeastern University in Boston. As a mentor in EY's College MAP (Mentoring for Access and Persistence) program, Maya draws on his own admittedly "bumpy" experience as a first-generation college student.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The success of any college student is always a group project. No one crosses that stage to accept a degree or certificate unless there are people *offstage* — instructors who inspire, family members who care and cajole, friends who share and support. Role models are crucial, particularly for students who are unfamiliar with the college-going process or face other barriers to postsecondary success.

In other words, mentors matter. And these days, they matter more than ever. As the nation grapples with its growing need for talent — a need that can only practically be met by significantly increasing rates of college attainment — we need more and more engaged, caring adults on the front lines. Systems can be tweaked, processes and policies improved, but without direct and sustained *personal* involvement, it's hard for college dreams to become realities.

A high-achieving, low-income student has about the same statistical chance of going to college as does a low-achieving, high-income student. Almost 25 percent of low-income students who score in the top quartile of standardized tests never go to college. And of those who do, many never earn a degree.

It's no secret that the main institutional resource for pre-college advising, the high school counseling office, is struggling. And no wonder. The ratio of students to counselors at the typical high school is more than 450:1. That number isn't an issue for some students. But for first-generation and other at-risk students — those who lack the resources or the built-in "college knowledge" of their better-situated peers — the lack of help can quickly douse those college dreams.

Fortunately, in communities all over the nation, volunteer mentors are filling the guidance gap and making a difference. According to a report released in January by MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, at-risk young adults who had a mentor are more likely to aspire to be college graduates than those who did not have a mentor (76 percent versus 56 percent). They're also more likely than their non-mentored peers to actually be enrolled in college (45 percent versus 29 percent).

Models vary, but the underlying premise of mentoring programs is the same: Caring, knowledgeable adult mentors help at-risk kids over the hurdles they encounter during the college-going process. When kids do stumble, mentors help them up. In the process, mentors are themselves lifted up — not just emotionally, but also practically and professionally, by sharpening their leadership skills and improving time management and customer relationship management.

This issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* explores the benefits of mentoring by shining the spotlight on three different programs. All are making a measurable difference for the students they serve — and for the mentors who provide that service. In this *Focus*, you'll read about:

- iMentor, a one-on-one mentoring model that has served more than 12,000 at-risk students since it got its start in New York City in 1999. Using a curriculum developed especially for the program, iMentor volunteers nurture their charges' college aspirations and help them build the non-cognitive skills that lead to college success.
- The College Advising Corps (CAC), a national program that got its start in 2005 at the University of Virginia and has since grown to touch the lives of nearly 130,000 students at 425 high schools in 14 states. CAC uses a "near-peer" approach, recruiting recent college graduates to serve as advisers in high schools with high populations of underserved students.
- College Mentoring for Access and Persistence (College MAP), which was developed in 2009 as a corporate responsibility program of Ernst & Young (EY), and has since grown to serve nearly 900 students in 20 U.S. cities. The idea here is to pair at-risk students — often the first in their families to attend college — with experienced and accomplished professionals.


There's also a wealth of information on our website, www.luminafoundation.org, where *Focus* offers extra features, including audio clips from students and mentors, as well as a slide show that explores the relationships built through the iMentor program.

Of course, the people and programs featured in this issue of *Focus* represent just a fraction of the mentoring activity now under way all over the nation. However it's done — whether in organized programs such as these or in more informal, individualized efforts — this work is vital and needs to be expanded.

The benefits are huge. And as any mentor will attest, they extend in both directions.

Jamie P. Merisotis
President and CEO
Lumina Foundation





What once seemed a mismatch turns out to be a marvel

You're from Long Island, the son of a man in the apparel business and a mother who didn't work outside the home until you were 10. Having attended junior college, your parents insist — without ever really saying so — that you will go further. Absorbing their expectations, you graduate from high school and attend the University of Wisconsin, earning a bachelor's degree in international relations in four years.





Adam Jacobs, a financial adviser with Morgan Stanley in New York City, has gained a lot from acting as a mentor to Kevin Wade (right). In fact, he calls it, "hands down, one of the best experiences I've been involved with. ... He's like the little brother who actually listens to me."

Degree in hand, you return to New York City, but not to Long Island. You land a coveted job with Lazard Asset Management, a leading global financial advisory and asset-management firm, with offices in San Francisco and Sao Paulo, Boston and Bogota, Paris and Panama City. You plug yourself into the high-voltage epicenter of the entire global enterprise: Wall Street.

You spend your days marketing complex financial products and investments to institutional and private investors. You serve clients with billions of dollars under management and you raise tens of millions more. You persuade investors to move large sums of cash into 10-figure hedge funds.

You live on the Upper West Side and work out at Reebok Gym, where comedian and actor Chris Rock goes to break a sweat and dues run to \$215 per month (not including facials, \$135).

Life is good. So what's next?

Finding common ground

If you're Adam Jacobs, you become a mentor to a kid from Brooklyn. You meet him through iMentor, an innovative mentoring program based in New York City. You find common ground with a young man who has no close relative who went to college and who seems unlikely to buck family tradition and earn a four-year degree. You meet with the young man monthly, texting him and talking on the phone between visits. You encourage him to look at himself and his habits, to take the long view, to think about what he wants from his life and how he might attain those goals. You help him to become a better student, and you guide the young man through a college admissions process that for him is bewildering and frightening.

Two years later, it leads to this, a moment on the 44th floor of Morgan Stanley's offices on Broadway, a financial



For Jacobs, the mentoring experience is collaborative, not prescriptive. "This is our journey together," he says of his work with his mentee, Kevin Wade. "There's a lot of learning and growth that goes on for both of us."

citadel where on most days you advise high-wealth individuals and families on how to manage their often eye-popping assets. But today your thoughts are elsewhere, and you beam as you share the news that Kevin, your mentee, made the dean's list in his first semester of college. This isn't like sharing financial advice. This is visceral. You feel as if you made the honor roll, too.

'It was hard growing up'

Kevin Wade grew up in Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood well before gentrification had smoothed its rough edges. His father did maintenance work for the New York State Board of Education, and his mother was a security guard at the Crown Building in Manhattan. The youngest of five kids, Kevin didn't know his two oldest brothers all that well because they were away, serving prison sentences for felony convictions. Childhood friends died from gunshots, some of them drug-related. Eventually, his parents divorced. "It was hard growing up. A lot of my friends dropped out of school," says Kevin, on winter break from Medgar Evers College, where he recently completed his first semester. On a rainy January day, he hangs out in front of the Barclays Center, the Brooklyn Nets' sparkling new arena that opened in 2012. "Park Slope hasn't always been like this," he says.

Despite the distractions of his formative years, Kevin did well in middle school. "I was always a hard worker in my own way," he says. "People called me a perfectionist." But something shifted when he began high school at New York's Secondary School for Law. Basketball became Kevin's top priority. Not far behind were girls, and then video games, which he often played into the wee hours. Waking up in time for school became a hardship. School attendance slipped; grades suffered. Academically, he fell into the middle of the pack. "When I first got to high school, it was a new environment. I felt like I could play around all day," Kevin says.

Even as he was compiling an unexceptional resume, Kevin aspired to something better. Like many at-risk youth, he had big dreams. His college of choice was Syracuse University or maybe UCLA. At night, he would scan the cityscape from the 19th floor of his building and gaze on the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, and the illuminated bridges that connect the outer boroughs to Manhattan.

"It's beautiful. It made me feel like I was on top of the world," says Kevin. He envisioned himself going places, but he had no idea how he would get there.

Kevin first met Adam Jacobs in September 2011, the beginning of Kevin's junior year of high school. Outwardly, they made an odd couple, a 16-year-old African American from Brooklyn with a net worth that would barely dent a balance sheet and a white, affluent Manhattanite pushing 40. The differences weren't strictly superficial. When Jacobs was a teenager, there

iMentor

The program: Since 1999, iMentor's one-to-one mentoring model has matched 12,000 at-risk high school and college students with professional men and women who have helped them meet educational goals. Volunteer mentors use a curriculum developed by iMentor to nurture college aspirations and develop non-cognitive skills that promote academic success.

Mentors: iMentor refined its model in New York City. Many of its mentors have worked for Wall Street financial firms.

Commitment: Mentors commit to working with students for three or four years, either ninth grade through high school graduation or junior year of high school through the first year of college.

Scope: iMentor NYC will serve nearly 3,000 New York City high school and college students this year. A franchise program, iMentor Interactive (iMi), extends the mentoring model to 13 not-for-profit organizations that serve 2,100 students in 11 states. Expansion plans include doubling the number of students served in New York, expanding the core program into three new cities, and doubling the number of iMi partnerships. The goal is to provide mentors to 20,000 new students in the next five years.

Funding: iMentor receives the largest percentage of funds from foundations, individuals and corporations, including firms whose employees serve as mentors. Fees paid by schools and nonprofit organizations also help to offset expenses.

Success: Approximately 67 percent of the program's 2013 graduates enrolled in college.

had been a clear educational direction. "You were expected to go to a good four-year university," he says. In Kevin's case, "the expectation wasn't there."

Kevin and Jacobs found common ground in common experiences. They talked about their parents' divorces, and Jacobs shared stories about his younger brother, Ryan. It didn't take long for them to discover a shared fluency in the lingua franca of many New Yorkers: Knicks basketball. They deconstructed the games of Carmelo Anthony and Amar'e Stoudemire and analyzed how the stars' ups and downs affected the team. When Kevin smiled, he looked a bit like a young Michael Jordan. Sizing up the young man, Jacobs discovered a "compassionate, thoughtful, sensitive" adolescent who "listens and takes direction. ... A great kid ... but not necessarily directed."

Jacobs followed the iMentor program's curriculum and worked with Kevin to set SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) for his junior year of high school. The emphasis was on the college process. Each month, they delved into another topic: applications, financial aid, study skills, entrance exams, stress management and resiliency, creating a college list, identifying college resources, etc. Kevin was an eager student.

"Adam has a solution for everything," Kevin says. "If he doesn't have an answer, he'll find it."


During Kevin's final two years of high school, he and Jacobs worked through crises and shared experiences. Recalling those events is like flipping through a family photo album, each image a plot point on an evolving relationship.

When the two were first getting to know each other, they began talking about study habits and the consequences of choices, such as playing Xbox until well past midnight. Jacobs suggested that Kevin set a curfew for himself. "He wasn't doing well," says Jacobs, recalling one of their early talks about grades. "I told him, 'You can't live your life like that.'"

Kevin heeded the advice, especially the part about impulse control, procrastination and delayed gratification. "He told me to put my priorities first before I try to fool around. It was basically like 'Cry now and laugh later.' It was kind of a new way of looking at things," says Kevin, who had a "C" average when he met Jacobs. A year later, he was a "B" student. When he aced a test, an image of the graded exam would appear, via text message, on his mentor's phone. "You've got to do the little things to do the big things," Kevin says.

When Kevin discovered, in May 2012, that an unethical lawyer had forged his mother's signature and taken his savings, \$11,000 awarded to him several years earlier in the settlement of a personal injury claim, he sought help from Jacobs. Together, they are working with an organization that helps clients recover funds illegally taken by rogue lawyers. The attorney is in jail. "I was the go-to person," Jacobs says. "That's how our relationship has grown."

Taking the SAT exam became an epic quest for Kevin, one he might not have completed without the help of his mentor. The process started well enough. iMentor



Romana Ryals (right), is a college success counselor with iMentor NYC. Her organization aids about 3,000 students each year in New York City, including Kevin Wade, a student at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn.



emphasizes preparation for entrance exams, and Jacobs bought Kevin an SAT practice book. On test day, overcome with anxiety, Kevin bolted the testing site midway through the exam. "I was overwhelmed," Kevin says. Jacobs promised him that they would be better prepared next time "so that this doesn't happen again."

The second time around, Kevin rode the subway by himself to the exam location, but he arrived a few minutes late. The proctors wouldn't let him enter the testing area. "Adam, I don't know what to do," said Kevin, who called his mentor at 7:45 that Saturday morning. "I was heartbroken for him," Jacobs recalls. "I told him it was a learning experience. There are certain life events that you have to show up for on time or be early. You cannot bend the rules."

Afterward, with the next test date approaching, Kevin began to waver. He wasn't sure that he wanted to make a third attempt. Jacobs was having none of it. On exam day, he showed up at Kevin's door at 6 a.m., took him out for a pre-test breakfast and "tried to keep him calm. ... There are moments in life when you have to face your fears." A few hours later, Kevin called and said he had finished the test. "That call was worthwhile," Jacobs says. "I was proud of him."

Over time the relationship deepened. Kevin was changing; Jacobs, too. "This is our journey together. There's a lot of learning and growth that goes on for both of us," Jacobs says. Between Kevin's junior and senior years of high school, he made plans to attend a summer college fair put on by the State University of New York system. He asked his mentor to join him, which "was his (Kevin's) way of showing trust," Jacobs says. "He was saying 'I'm aware of what my next steps could be and I want you to be a part of that.' It was meaningful."

At the college fair, they talked about practical considerations, such as admissions requirements and the number of students served by various campuses. "That's when you know you've gotten through," says Jacobs, his eyes welling with tears. "It was grounded in reality. With his grades, those SUNY schools were his best chance at continuing to grow as a student. It wasn't UCLA anymore."

Before Kevin met Jacobs, the teen's work experience had been limited to summer jobs toiling in stock rooms. Jacobs suggested that Kevin consider a summer internship that would expose him to an office environment, the kind of experience that "can be an important part of a young person's life." Kevin jumped at the opportunity,



Mike O'Brien is the CEO of iMentor. Since 1999, iMentor's one-to-one approach has matched 12,000 at-risk students with professional men and women who help put — and keep — the young people on the path to college success.



Tamiko Kamara, a vice president at Morgan Stanley in New York City, has served as a college mentor to young women since 2006. "It helps me in so many ways," she says. "When it comes time for my daughter to apply to schools, I'll be ready."

and Jacobs introduced him to an internship with a friend who runs a recruiting and staffing agency in the city.

Arranging the internship was a big deal for Jacobs, when people make referrals in the business world, he points out, "it's important how they represent you." Jacobs had faith that his mentee would "be accountable and work hard;" still, he waited anxiously for confirmation that the first day of Kevin's internship had gone well. Kevin called that evening, allaying his mentor's fears and providing a full account of the day. Kevin couldn't believe that he had his own desk, computer and telephone. "I had never heard him so excited," Jacobs recalls.

Months passed and Kevin experienced more of Jacobs' world. On one occasion, mentor and mentee went to the Apple store in Jacobs' neighborhood to buy a laptop with money Kevin had won in iMentor's inaugural Caroline Kim Oh Scholarship essay-writing contest. They visited Jacobs' gym ("It's like a resort!"), where Kevin spotted Chris Rock, a fellow Brooklynite. (The comedian's career took off after superstar Eddie Murphy befriended Rock and became his mentor.)

Jacobs brought Kevin to his office and introduced him to colleagues, and they attended a fall benefit for iMentor. On the 42nd floor of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, guests soaked up the view of Central Park on an October day when the foliage was bursting with color. "It was like artwork to me," says Kevin. "It was beautiful."

A year or so into the pair's relationship, Jacobs changed employers, taking a job that more closely aligned with the way his world view had evolved since becoming a mentor. He left the institutional world of hedge funds to become a financial adviser at Morgan Stanley. Today he consults with individuals and families, doing work that is "more relationship-driven, educational and personally rewarding."

Asked to consider whether being a mentor to Kevin influenced his career change, Jacobs concedes that "there's a strong correlation." In both endeavors, he "wants to have the other individual's best interest at heart and to make sure they get the best guidance. ... It's very much in line with what I'm doing with Kevin."

'We'll be friends forever'

Life is good. So what's next?

Kevin plans to continue taking classes at Medgar Evers College, earning college credits for two years before transferring to a SUNY institution. After that, he's unsure. At the moment, he's considering a career in software engineering. Wherever he goes, he'll take with him lessons learned from Jacobs: "Perseverance. Dedication. Determination. Patience. Consideration. ... Everything I do now, I put in 100 percent," he says.

Will he and Jacobs stay in touch? "I think we'll be friends forever," Kevin says. "He's like the big brother I never had."

For his part, Jacobs says being a mentor to Kevin has been "hands down, one of the best experiences I've been involved with. ... I've helped Kevin grow and become the person he's meant to be. ... He's much more accountable and focused. ... It's been more rewarding than I ever could have imagined.

"He's like the little brother who actually listens to me," Jacobs says.

Helping Kevin has also helped Jacobs. "It's a two-way street. There's a lot of learning and growth that goes on for both of us. We both benefit. ... Going forward, the commitment to giving back will always be a part of my life." ●



Near-peer mentors

mean it when they

say: 'I've been there'

When a young woman returns to a place of painful experience — bullying, debilitating shyness, financial problems and low self-esteem — there are bound to be strong emotions. For Erica Elder, who came home to Bassett High School in southern Virginia last fall to be a college adviser and mentor, the first day back was, well ...





College adviser Erica Elder confers with seniors Orin Bye (far left) and Austin Wright at her alma mater, Bassett High School in southern Virginia. Elder, a recent graduate of the University of Virginia, returned to Bassett recently to serve as a near-peer mentor for an organization called the College Advising Corps.



Erica Elder (center) confers with her College Advising Corps (CAC) colleagues (from left) Joy Pugh, Nicole Hurd and Kevin Anselmo. Hurd, CAC's founder and CEO, says: "The job of an adviser is to be a messenger of hope," to help low-income, first-generation students "fulfill their potential through education."

"At first it was really weird, walking into school as faculty," Elder says.

Three years after earning a high school diploma from Bassett, Elder had returned a different person. For one thing, she had a bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia. Simply being accepted into one of the nation's most prestigious universities defied every expectation she'd had for herself only a few years earlier. At the time, mired in desperation, she couldn't conceive of graduating from an elite university in three years. And the notion that she would come back to help kids not much younger than herself to defy similarly low expectations would have been, in Elder's words, weird.

"I really wanted to go to college, but I felt too stupid," says Elder, recalling her outlook for much of high school. And yet she succeeded, largely because a kind and competent mentor told her that she could — and showed her how. "He helped me a lot. I needed somebody to tell me I could go to school," says Elder.

She is one of nearly 400 young men and women on the front lines of the College Advising Corps, a fast-growing "near-peer" mentoring program. Founded in 2005, CAC recruits and trains recent college graduates and embeds them in high schools across the country with high concentrations of at-risk students. CAC has two primary missions. The first is to increase the number of low-income, first-generation and underrepresented students entering and completing college. The hope is that they will "fulfill their potential through education," says Nicole Hurd, CAC's founder and CEO. "The job of an adviser is to be a messenger of hope."

Students who are not from college-going families or communities frequently fail to meet educational goals because they lack experience with the process. Near-peer mentors — that is, individuals of similar age, ethnicity and socioeconomic status who have "made it" in college and beyond — are particularly well-suited to helping these at-risk students.

"What seem like little process barriers (filling out financial aid forms, understanding the admissions calendar, applying for scholarships and fee waivers, visiting college campuses, etc.) become huge because students don't know how to navigate the process," Hurd says. "The power of the model is having near-peer advisers saying, 'If I can do it, you can, too.'"

Students who come from outside the college-going mainstream face an uphill climb to postsecondary success regardless of intelligence or their ability to do college-level work. Only about 3 percent of students attending the country's 140 most selective postsecondary institutions are from families in the bottom fourth of the income scale. When those students graduate, CAC comes calling, actively recruiting them as mentors. Nearly three-fourths of CAC advisers are from underrepresented populations; 32 percent are African American, 30 percent Latino, 63 percent Pell Grant-eligible, and 54 percent are the first in their families to go to college.

College Advising Corps

The program: In 2005, the University of Virginia created the College Guide Program to address the growing gap in college access for low-income, first-generation and underrepresented students. Early success attracted financial support, and the program expanded to become the National College Advising Corps. Taking a "whole school" approach, College Advising Corps (it has since dropped "National" from its name) recruits recent graduates from partner universities and assigns them to underserved secondary institutions. Advisers supplement overworked school counselors.

Mentors: The program's 375 near-peer advisers resemble the students they mentor. Most advisers were the first in their families to attend college (54 percent) and were eligible for Pell Grants (63 percent). The majority are also people of color (69 percent).

Commitment: CAC advisers sign up for a two-year commitment. Before mentoring students, advisers complete a rigorous four- to six-week training program.

Scope: The program serves 128,000 students at 425 high schools in 14 states. CAC's expansion plans call for serving 1,000 high schools and 300,000 students annually within five years.

Funding: The program's university partners pay approximately 60 percent of program costs through grants and funds raised by staff; CAC covers 40 percent.

Success: At schools served by CAC, college-going rates increase by 8 to 10 percentage points. In North Carolina, 88 percent of students who graduated from CAC schools and went to college returned for their second year, according to preliminary results from a recent study. The persistence rate for all UNC-system schools is 82 percent.

"They really understand the barriers because they made it to the finish line themselves under similar circumstances," Hurd says. "Research shows that the most influential people in a young person's life are their peers. The messenger matters."

State-specific training

Before beginning her two-year assignment as an adviser at Bassett High School, Elder underwent four weeks of intensive training at the University of Virginia, which serves as CAC's chapter headquarters in the state. The program's structure ensures that it has at least one university sponsor in each of the 14 states where it now operates. "Our training is very state-based," Hurd says. "Getting into college in Virginia is very different from getting into college in Texas."

CAC's summer training program encompasses topics from college essays and financial aid to SAT/ACT preparation and personal finance. Trainees visit colleges throughout the state, meeting admissions officers they can turn to later, when students encounter problems. By the end of the month-long training, advisers learn that "their best resource is each other and former advisers," says Joy Pugh, director of the Virginia CAC. A local philanthropic organization, the Harvest Foundation, has covered the cost of CAC and advisers in Henry County since the program's inception.

Elder was as ready as a newly minted mentor could be when the first student seeking help walked into her new office. Naturally, she recalls, "I immediately got nervous." The student, a senior, insisted that he wanted to study criminal justice at a four-year institution, making clear his aversion to community college. Asked about his grades, the young man avoided giving a straight answer. Elder knows from personal experience that it's usually not an indicator of high academic achievement "when students say they can't remember their grades."

Elder learned that the student's GPA wasn't good at all, and like many of the school's seniors, he hadn't taken the SAT or the ACT. "I was going to have my first hard conversation," she says. Growing up in Henry County, on the North Carolina border, Elder knew about hard conversations.

The county is home to Martinsville Speedway, the only NASCAR track in continuous operation since the racing circuit began in 1948 — back when the region had been a thriving, twin-engine industry town. Bassett Furniture was at the center of what was then a booming furniture industry; area textile mills were humming. All of that changed long before Erica Elder came of age. Today, the furniture trade is a shadow of its former self, and shuttered apparel factories dot the area landscape. In 2003, even the local minor league baseball team, the Martinsville Astros, left town, relocating to Greeneville in 2004.

"My dad was always changing jobs," Elder recalls.

She had challenges of her own. As a freshman at Bassett, Elder "had really low self-esteem. ... I was just trying to

In addition to helping students, Nicole Hurd says, CAC aims to create "a transformative experience" for the mentors during their two-year commitment as advisers. "They're not the same people after two years," Hurd insists. "It's awesome to watch how much they grow."





get by, but I was really good in math and science," she says. She aspired to college, dreaming of Harvard, maybe Yale. "I had been looking at colleges since middle school ... looking but not really understanding. I heard you had to be rich to go to college."

The Elders weren't rich. To help with expenses, young Erica worked the snack bar at the Roll-A-Bout Skating Center. At one point, the Elders considered moving to Richmond, where they had relatives, as a way to save money. "It was devastating," recalls Elder, though at least she said she'd "gotten to a point where the bullying had finally stopped."

Despite the upheaval, she moved ahead with the college process, taking the SAT in her sophomore year. "I did terrible on it," she says. Subsequent attempts yielded little improvement. She attended a youth fair and had a discouraging encounter with a man at the "college options" booth. The stranger, someone Elder presumed to be a person of authority, asked Elder about her college plans. She mentioned some state institutions she was considering — the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, Ferrum College, about 40 minutes north

of Bassett. He asked about her SAT scores, which she divulged. "He was like: 'There is no way you can go to college right out of high school,'" she recalls. "That wasn't good at all. I immediately assumed I couldn't do it."

Elder shut down. She avoided the high school's guidance counselors and sought what seemed a more attainable career path. "The military is big around here," says Elder, so she took the Armed Service Vocational Aptitude Battery. "I did really well."

Distrust of 'experts'

It was here, at this crossroads, that Elder met Ethan Jorgensen-Earp, a CAC adviser who had been assigned to Bassett High School to help students like her. At first, she was leery of him. "I didn't want to talk to any other 'experts' about college," says Elder. "I was ashamed of my (SAT) scores."

When they finally met, Jorgensen-Earp "was friendly ... he gave me direct eye contact, he listened to what I had to say," she recalls. He assured Elder that her scores



Returning to Bassett High School has given Erica Elder the opportunity to reconnect with people who helped her along her own path to college success, including teachers Ann Blankenship (left) and LaDonna Varner.

weren't that bad. "I immediately felt comfortable with him," says Elder. She relented and told him her scores. He expressed confidence that Elder's SAT scores were good enough for her to get into some of the colleges she was considering. She had a good GPA. "Just him telling me that I could do it" changed her outlook — and her direction, Elder recalls. She began the college-application process.

The emotional roller coaster ride continued when she submitted her FAFSA and learned that her family's estimated contribution was much higher than she had expected. "I was like: 'Here we go again. I can't go to school.' I almost cried. Hearing anything about money automatically made me sad."

Jorgensen-Earp helped quell that despair. He met with Elder's parents and explained options for paying education expenses. They formulated a plan that would allow their daughter to attend the University of Virginia without imperiling family finances. Elder, whose younger sister is now enrolled at Virginia, graduated with total student loan debt of \$13,000.

Having received so much help from her mentor, Elder wanted to pass it on. That's how she ended up back in Bassett, preparing to have that "hard conversation" with a student who lacked the grades to attend a four-year college straight out of high school. Elder, who has been trained to help students find colleges that are good fits — academically and socially — told the young man about a guaranteed transfer program that would assure him admission to his college of choice if he attended a community college for two years and posted a 2.8 grade point average. "He was fine with that," Elder says. "That experience gave me the confidence to talk to more students."

At other times, she tells students to aim higher. Austin Wright, a fourth-generation south Virginian, had decided to go to a community college close to home, even though his GPA and test scores were excellent. "Around here, leaving your parents is a big deal," says Elder, who encouraged Wright to broaden his college choices. "She pushed a little bit," admits Wright, who applied to Radford University, 90 minutes northwest of Bassett, and East Tennessee State, three hours west. "Whatever I needed to know, she was there to help."

Elder makes presentations to groups of students and counsels them individually. She attends after-school sports events because advisers are most effective when they are "completely integrated into the community," Hurd says.

Elder also helps Bassett's overworked guidance counselors keep up with a demanding workload. Simply filing paperwork to waive fees for SAT and ACT tests is a challenge when 60 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. "It is almost impossible for a school counselor to register that many students alone," says Shekila Yralux, the senior counselor. "She helps me to offset that. We work really well together as a team."

CAC's advisers are having an impact. In Virginia, the "vast majority" of high schools with CAC advisers are sending more kids to college, Pugh says. Between 2008



Shekila Yralux, senior counselor to the students at Bassett High School, appreciates having a CAC adviser on hand to help ease what can be a heavy workload. She says she and Erica Elder "work really well together as a team."

and 2012, among graduates of those numerous CAC high schools where the college-going rate increased, that rate went up by at least 2 percentage points — and as much as 14 points, Pugh says. In North Carolina, students from CAC high schools had a first-to-second-year persistence rate of 88 percent during the 2012-2013 academic year. Among students from high schools with no CAC adviser, the persistence rate was 82 percent.

In addition to helping underserved high school students to make good college choices, CAC's other primary mission is to provide advisers "a transformative experience," Hurd says. A survey of former advisers at Virginia high schools found that 91 percent of them gained skills and competencies that assisted them professionally; 92 percent had their next position, whether employment or graduate school, within three months of completing their two-year advising commitment; and 88 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with their next career step. "They're not the same people after two years," Hurd says. "It's awesome to watch how much they grow." ●



Corporate program

matches students

with professionals

On a bitterly cold January day, close to 20 junior-year students perform a monthly ritual, filing into a third-floor conference room at Boston's Madison Park Technical Vocational High School on Malcolm X Boulevard in the city's Roxbury neighborhood. Meeting them here are young professionals from Ernst & Young (EY) who've abandoned their cubicles for a few hours to lead a team mentoring session with low-income, first-generation students who aspire to go to college.





Alexandra "Allie" LeBlanc (right), a 26-year-old EY employee, works with Cesarina Ruiz-Lara, a student at Boston's Madison Park Technical Vocational High School. LeBlanc, a Fordham University graduate, said she volunteered for EY's College MAP program after conferring with a colleague "who lit up talking about it."

Mentors and mentees are young and ethnically diverse, but it's easy to sort them out. The group is cleanly divided along a distinct "suits or T-shirts" fashion fault line. Today, though, the students are the suits, encouraged by their mentors to try business attire on for size.

Brendan Sweet, only two years removed from college himself, leads a discussion about college academics. "First question: What is a major?" asks Sweet, a gray "Ernst & Young" crewneck tee pulled over his Oxford dress shirt. No answer issues from mentees scattered

around the perimeter of the fluorescent-lit, cinderblock room. A kid stares at the pink tile floor. Sweet tries again: "Does anyone know what a minor is?"

To keep things moving, mentors talk about their own majors and minors. Galina McDonnell quizzes the kids on how much education is required to enter various career fields. Yomarie Habenicht asks students to turn in motivational letters they should have written to their senior-year selves. Mentees who finished the assignment get a movie pass. "We want to make sure you guys did



During one of College MAP's monthly group training sessions, EY professional Stephen Beil (right) explains the college-admissions process to Madison Park student Hugo Mateo. Beil and other College MAP mentors also interact with mentees frequently via e-mail, texts and phone calls.

your homework," Habenicht says. McDonnell reminds them of an upcoming SAT prep course offered by Let's Get Ready, which will refund the \$25 course fee to students who attend 75 percent of the study classes. Today's session concludes with students surfing the College Board website for more information about academic disciplines.

The employees who volunteer their time are at the center of Ernst & Young's College MAP (Mentoring for Access and Persistence) program, an in-house, team-based college mentoring initiative that helps underserved kids in Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York and 19 other cities. EY created the program five years ago to encourage "skills-based" volunteerism. "We know from research that when people use their skills, they deliver 10 times the value than when they are doing good in a non-skilled way," says Deborah K. Holmes, director of corporate responsibility for EY in the Americas.

Learning by mentoring

EY fashioned College MAP to align with its corporate culture by encouraging employees to deploy their skills in the areas of education, entrepreneurship and environmental sustainability. The program's benefits flow in more than one direction. By assisting students, volunteers gain skills that help them with colleagues and clients: leadership, public speaking, collaboration, inclusivity and, yes, mentoring, a professional skill that EY's leaders value.

"Mentoring happens every day on the job," says Holmes, referring to the way EY acculturates and advances employees. "Our learning model is a mentoring model. Knowing how to be an effective mentor is mission-critical for our workforce." College MAP's team-based model also aligns with expectations that employees will learn to work collaboratively with people from diverse backgrounds. "Everything that happens at EY happens in teams," Holmes says.

College MAP is a classic win-win, EY's leaders say. Mentors fit in better and enjoy their work more than peers who don't volunteer. "We have quantitative evidence that employees who are involved in College MAP score significantly higher on all of our measures of employee engagement," Holmes says. "We want them to be proud of working at EY. We want them to recommend EY to their friends. We want them to stay with us if they get an offer elsewhere. Our people who are involved with College MAP are statistically more likely to answer those questions in the affirmative than a matched sample of their peers."

Among corporate mentoring programs that strive to promote college success among low-income, first-generation, at-risk youth, College MAP is emerging as a model. "This is unique in terms of one corporation producing this many mentors across the country," says Leroy Nesbitt, program director at College for Every Student, a nonprofit organization that has helped EY develop and manage the company's signature corporate responsibility program focused on education.

College Mentoring for Access and Persistence

The program: EY's College MAP program helps low-income high school juniors and seniors prepare for a college degree program. Created as a pilot in 2009, College MAP uses a team model to demystify the process of applying to and affording college. In addition, mentors work with students to build persistence skills that keep them on the college track.

Mentors: One-third of EY employees are first-generation college students, including the firm's deputy managing partner. The program's volunteers cross racial, ethnic, rank and generational lines.

Commitment: Mentors promise to volunteer three or four hours each month. In addition to monthly group training sessions, mentors interact more frequently with buddy mentees via telephone calls, e-mails, texts and social media.

Scope: College MAP operates in more than 20 U.S. cities and has plans to expand. College for Every Student, a not-for-profit organization, helps EY manage the program.

Success: More than 90 percent of students mentored by College MAP volunteers are now enrolled at a two- or four-year institution. The program has so far mentored more than 860 students. In the current school year, 360 EY mentors are working with more than 560 high school juniors and seniors.

Back on the third floor of Madison Park High School, mentor Alexandra “Allie” LeBlanc and student Cesarina Ruiz-Lara huddle around a computer monitor. LeBlanc, 26, is from a white, middle-class neighborhood in Concord, N.H. She graduated from high school in a class of 78 people and earned a degree from Fordham University. She has been at EY for a year. She found out about College MAP from a colleague “who lit up talking about it,” says LeBlanc. She jumped at the chance to help at-risk kids. “My college experience was tough enough (even) having all the support in the world.”

Cesarina lives with her father, who brought her here from the Dominican Republic. Cesarina’s mother is still there. The daughter ended up at Madison Park because that’s where the Boston Public Schools sent her. The school’s 1,120 students arrive here from across the city, often without a friend.

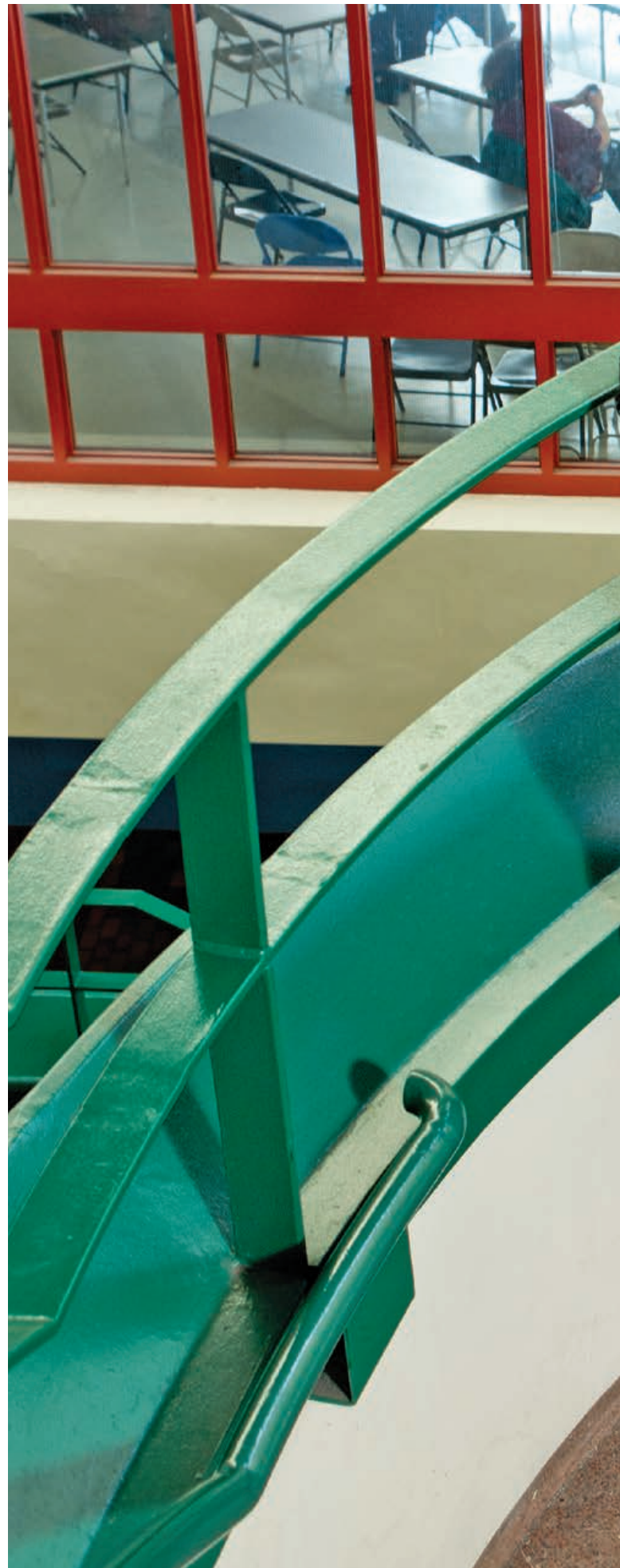
Many of them bring baggage. Forty percent of Madison Park’s students have special needs, twice the average of other schools. English is a second language for 30 percent of students here, and most of the kids don’t have a parent who went to college. With more than 1,100 students on site, the school’s five guidance counselors have their hands full. “We’re a high-needs school,” says Mary Gail Bryan, Madison Park’s director of student support services.

Indeed. Gang activity is common, metal detectors a daily reality. On consecutive days in January, a student and the parent of another child were killed, the latter while closing up a barbershop for the evening. “Our kids have witnessed and been victims of a great deal of violence,” Bryan says.

LeBlanc and other mentors can’t change everything, but they are helping kids clear at least a few hurdles that trip them up. Mentors help with FAFSA forms and college applications; they offer encouragement and promote resilience; they do what they can to keep kids on the college track. The week before Christmas, Madison Park’s College MAP cohort visited Boston College, met with the director of admissions, and received an etiquette lesson from an international chief of protocol. It was an epiphany for Cesarina, who returned home and set a proper table for her family’s next dinner. “It’s not just helping them with college; it’s helping them with their life skills,” Bryan says.

Cesarina credits College MAP mentors with helping her to order priorities and set a direction for herself. “They help me to take the school more seriously,” says Cesarina, who continues to develop fluency in English. “If you don’t study to get more preparation for your future, you don’t get an opportunity. ... I was pretty lost. They helped me a lot.”

When College MAP started at Madison Park, only students with high grade-point averages were invited to participate. Now it’s open to everyone. Demand is increasing, and students are being turned away. “Hopefully next year they can take more kids,” says Belle Moreau, one of the guidance counselors.





Belle Moreau, a guidance counselor at Madison Park, confers with Leroy Nesbitt. Nesbitt is program director at College for Every Student, a nonprofit organization that has helped Ernst & Young develop and manage College MAP, which has become the company's signature community assistance program.

LeBlanc, a corporate recruiter at Ernst & Young, expected the College MAP experience to be rewarding. What she didn't foresee was that being a mentor would change the way she thinks about her job. But now, after seeing firsthand the talented, at-risk kids at a school like Madison Park, LeBlanc's perspective has shifted. She now makes a conscious effort to seek "alternative sources for talent so we don't go straight to Harvard Business School. ... It has forced me to look outside the typical profile."

"Sometimes I feel that (being a mentor) benefits me more than it does them," LeBlanc says. "It really makes me feel good at the end of the day."



Guidance counselor Belle Moreau says more and more students at Madison Park are expressing interest in — and increasing demand for — the College MAP program. In fact, some students had to be turned away this year. "Hopefully next year they can take more kids," Moreau says.

Many points of contact

In addition to the group dynamic of College MAP's team model, each mentee also has a buddy mentor. Between monthly group meetings, mentor-mentee pairs talk on the telephone, exchange texts and e-mails, and meet in person. Also this year, for the first time, the program gives mentors the option of continuing to work with mentees who are making the transition to college.

Walter Maya is one of College MAP's first transition mentors. A native of Colombia and the youngest of four children, he was brought here by his single mother. Like one-third of EY's employees, he is a first-generation college student for whom the "college track was bumpy." When Maya arrived, fresh out of high school, on the campus of Jersey City State College (since renamed New Jersey City University), officials told him that he couldn't move into a dorm because he hadn't completed the necessary paperwork. He stayed with his brother in the Bronx, commuting two or three hours a day to attend classes. "That wasn't really sustainable," he says.

After spending much of his first semester of higher education in a car, Maya transferred to Hunter College. There, things worsened. "I got really homesick. I felt lost. I didn't know what to do," he says. With no mentor to help him, Maya struggled. Transferring two more times, he eventually made his way to Northeastern University where, seven years after starting college, he finally earned a degree in accounting.

Today, Maya is an established professional. He mentors Olga Estephanie Menjivar Garcia, who was just 3 when her mother left Honduras and came to the United States "to find a better life for us." More than a decade later, Olga, then 14, joined her mother here. The teen didn't speak English, but she was good at math. She wanted to attend Boston's John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics & Science, but she didn't understand the transfer process, and she didn't ask for help. "I was very afraid. I didn't want to owe anything to anyone. I like to help, but I didn't like to *ask* for help," says Olga, whose self-sufficiency earned her admission to Madison Park.

By the time she was a junior, she had conquered her aversion to seeking help. Olga enrolled in an SAT-preparation course, through which she learned about the College MAP program and eventually met Maya. "I feel like everything is connected. When I ask for help or get involved with other things, I get connected with other people," she says.

A natural connection

Maya and Olga were *simpatico* from the start. Both have roots in Latin America; both have benefited from educational opportunities; and both have struggled to fit in. Early in Maya's career, he was one of the few Latinos at EY, and he didn't always feel included. He admits that



Northeastern University student Olga Estephanie Menjivar Garcia says her mentor, Walter Maya (left), has served as a steady source of support. Having Maya as a mentor “was very inspiring for me,” she says. “He had a difficult time to get to where he is. I was also struggling.” With Maya’s help, however, Olga overcame those pre-college struggles and earned a full scholarship to Northeastern.

some of the isolation was self-imposed, and he’s quick to affirm that the firm’s partners have been “amazing mentors and friends.” Olga says having Maya as a mentor “was very inspiring for me. He had a difficult time to get to where he is. I was also struggling.”

Writing her college essay was “a really difficult time. There was so much I wanted to say, and I really didn’t know how to.” Maya encouraged her to be more personal. He told her about his own essay, a letter in which he explained to his absent, alcoholic father that he had “turned out OK.” Inspired by that openness, Olga wrote honestly about “growing up without my mother and overcoming the language barrier.”

She won a full scholarship to attend Northeastern University, one of 10 students selected from almost 500 applicants to the university’s Torch Scholars Program. During a probationary period, she underwent a rigorous seven-week summer immersion program that tested her ability to perform at a high academic level. Once again, Olga had to prove that she belonged.

The program involved math classes, a seminar and a part-time job. It was “a bit stressful. I was losing confidence in myself,” says Olga, who shared her doubts with Maya via text message. “You’re a smart girl,” he’d text back. “You can do it.” The encouraging words helped keep her going, she says, adding: “I was a little bit afraid of disappointing him.”

She didn’t. Having survived the immersion program, she became a full-time college student. She just missed making the dean’s list for the fall semester, earning two As, one B+ and a C+. This semester, she’s taking Chemistry II, Calculus II, Biology and College Writing. Her academic interest is behavioral neuroscience.

Helping his mentee overcome obstacles has helped Maya to undergo “a complete transformation” in his career. Mentoring had a lot to do with it, he says.

“I’m not just a tax professional,” he says. “I’m an EY employee who is part of the community. ... When I look back on what was missing, the one thing that was missing was community service.” ●



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