Mastering the “Hidden Curriculum”

How some colleges help first-generation and low-income students succeed

A new student heard a classmate mention choosing a gift from a bridal registry for a friend. “What the hell is a bridal registry?” she wondered. As she tried to choose courses, she had to visit the library to explore what unfamiliar subjects were, before registering—painfully aware that fellow freshmen “had gone to high schools that sounded more like mini-colleges, with library buildings of their own and sophisticated electives” and AP courses that enabled them “to leapfrog ahead” of her introductory selections. “Maybe I just wasn’t as smart as they were?” She certainly wasn’t as mon-eyed, as the weekly letter from her grandmother, containing a dollar bill, reminded her. Over time, she recalled,

I came to accept during my freshman year that many of the gaps in my knowledge and understanding were simply limits of class and cultural background, not lack of aptitude or application as I’d feared. That acceptance, though, didn’t make me feel less self-conscious and unschooled in the company of classmates who’d had the benefit of much more worldly experience. Until I arrived...I had no idea how circumscribed my life had been, confined to a community that was essentially a village in the shadow of a great metropolis....I was enough of a realist not to fret about having missed summer camp, or travel abroad, or a casual familiarity with the language of wealth....The agenda for self-cultivation that had been set for my classmates by their teachers and parents was something I’d have to develop for myself.

That was at Princeton in 1972, as Sonia Sotomayor depicted her student self in her memoir, My Beloved World. Develop herself she clearly did: she is now an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Four decades later, at Princeton or almost any other elite college, Sotomayor’s experience likely would have unfolded similarly. Having diversified their student bodies by race, gender, ethnicity, and nationality since...
the 1960s, highly selective universities began scrambling to address the one glaring omission that remains. After largely outsourcing the education of low-income and first-generation students to public institutions, they have made stronger efforts during the past decade to enroll academically strong students whose family incomes and K-12 preparation resemble Sotomayor’s—far from the resources available in America’s best suburban systems and prep schools. And most recently, these elite institutions have begun to recognize that gaining admission is only the first challenge many such students face.

Although first-generation and low-income status often overlap, not all FLI undergraduates (to use Princeton’s acronym) have come from under-resourced secondary schools. Anthony Jack, a Junior Fellow who will join the Harvard Graduate School of Education faculty, distinguishes those who attended superb magnet schools or won scholarships to, say, Exeter, from those who did not (see “Aiding the ‘Doubly Disadvantaged,’” September-October 2016, page 11). But beginning undergraduates who attended the weakest public schools, urban and rural—lacking AP courses or calculus, science labs or instruction in writing—may now find even greater disparities than Sotomayor encountered. That is another reflection of widening American socioeconomic inequality in the intervening decades (see “The College Chasm,” page 50).

The best evidence that Sotomayor’s anecdotes resonate today comes from Rachel L. Gable, Ed.D. ’16, in her doctoral dissertation, “Pathways to Thriving: First- and Continuing-Generation College Student Experiences at Two Elite Universities.” Forty years after Sotomayor’s affirmative-action cohort, Gable surveyed Harvard and Georgetown sophomores about their academic preparation compared to peers. First-generation students were more than twice as likely to feel less prepared than continuing-generation students (with college-educated family members). And by their senior year, after encountering higher-level concentration courses and independent work, that gap widened: 57 percent of first-gen students felt less prepared than peers, versus just 20 percent among the continuing-generation cohort.

How, then, do colleges that admit such students help them thrive once they arrive on campus—for many, their first trip away from family and home? Some institutions offer late-summer orientations. Others have multiweek academic immersions—accompanied by guidance about university norms.
such as office hours and seeking academic help, and discussions about being a first-gen or low-income student surrounded by wealthier peers and legacies. Increasingly, such programs precede matriculation and continue through the undergraduate years.

This past summer, Harvard Magazine visited such efforts at Yale, Georgetown, and Princeton. The following account reflects reporting in the period between Harvard’s decision last winter not to initiate such a program (see harvardmag.com/firstgen-17) and College dean Rakesh Khurana’s August note to upperclassmen disclosing a 2018 pilot pre-orientation program aimed at “building community and fostering a sense of belonging among students from historically marginalized communities.” A September Harvard summit on “academic inclusion” in higher education, reported at harvardmag.com/inclusion-17, also addressed these issues.

“A place I could see myself in”

“THE ACADEMIC PART was not that much of a worry,” said José López. “I knew the academics would be difficult and challenging.” As one of four children of Mexican-immigrant parents living in a studio apartment in downtown Los Angeles, on a family income of less than $20,000, his concerns were about “looking forward to making it a place I could see myself in.” For López, a first-generation student, the path toward belonging was an invitation, after he gained admission, to attend First-Year Scholars at Yale (FSY): a five-week summer experience on campus combining coursework with introductions to the community and its resources that turned out to be “a really big deal.”

Now a junior and a residential counselor for the 2017 FSY cohort, this summer López saw some of what he learned reflected in them: “It’s very tempting for them to ‘present’ themselves and not be honest” about their backgrounds as they try to adapt to their new circumstances—an adjustment that can “take a lot of energy, emotional and mental.” Embedding in FSY, he said, enables participants to share what a student in 2013, the inaugural year, called “an invisible kind of identity.”

For John Kauffman, another residential counselor, the academic menu—a for-credit, summer-school version of the freshman writing class, plus advising on quantitative studies—“was by far the most important aspect” of FSY. In his rural high school, outside Chicago, there was “no one to ask” about Ivy League expectations (few students had ever enrolled), and long writing assignments were three pages (with little, if any, revision). Freshman fall, he elected to pursue Directed Studies, Yale’s reading- and writing-intensive Western Civ. immersion. Absent FSY’s course in “what it meant to write a college-level paper,” Kauffman, now a junior, said, “I would not have been able to survive D.S.”

Sophomore Hannah Nikole Almonte, born in the Philippines and raised in California, came to New Haven already confident about her reading and writing. For her, the workshops and “dean’s time” (conversations about issues the students would encounter and resources available to them) were the central FSY experience: learning to “deal with people from a different socioeconomic background” and “how to have conversations in suites” as a freshman. This past summer, she served as a tutor for ONEXYS, the online quantitative-reasoning course Yale has added to FSY—effectively doubling students’ class load, but a useful preview of the academic multitasking to come.

These stories align with two Yale College aims that converged in FSY. More than a decade ago, according to Burgwell Howard, senior associate dean and associate vice president of student life, planning began for two new residences and a 15 percent expansion in undergraduate enrollment—including more students who “have the intellectual acumen” but lack the preparation that comes with attending “Andover or Dalton.” Conversations with undergraduates and alumni from first-gen and low-income backgrounds identified two focal points for such students’ success: familiarization with college life to minimize “culture shock,” and classes to bridge the academic gap between their high-school and college courses.

Jeremiah Quinlan, dean of undergraduate admissions, described the transition to college as a challenge for every student, all of whom therefore undergo orientation. A subset of 160 or so students take ONEXYS off-campus, to prepare for quantitative courses, and atop the pyramid is FSY, which enrolls 60.

President Peter Salovey and Quinlan, who both took office in 2013, have directed a shift in Yale’s “standard demographics,” increasing the share of matriculants eligible for Pell grants by about five percentage points. “We cannot make these changes without supporting the students once they get here,” Quinlan continued. Once applicants are accepted, he and his staff review “the highest [financial] need students who went to high schools with lesser course offerings” to determine whom to invite to FSY.

Would they come? Howard noted practical obstacles: the students are being asked to leave their families before the fall term; they lose summer income; travel logistics may seem daunting. Yale accordingly helps to arrange the travel and covers travel and living expenses, eliminates the summer income requirement from financial-aid packages, and conveys the program’s seriousness by conferring full credit for the writing course. (None of this is cheap: Howard said the annual cost was in the six figures.)
Nicco Mele owes a lot to the Internet. The new director of the Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy grew up across Asia and Africa—the son of two foreign-service officers—and first connected with American culture by checking baseball scores online. When he learned his future mother-in-law “had lived in the same house in South Orange for 35 years or something, [it was] the most exotic thing I’d ever encountered.” After majoring in government at William and Mary, he joined the rapidly expanding online organizing scene at Common Cause; he also worked on Howard Dean’s presidential campaign, and later, on Barack Obama’s 2004 Senate campaign. His wife, Morra, founded Women Online, a marketing organization that has worked with both Hillary Clinton and Obama. But instead of diving deeper into a career in politics, Nicco found satisfaction in a “selfish love of learning” by landing teaching jobs at Johns Hopkins and HKS, thanks to his expertise in the intersection of the Internet and politics. This expertise later drew him west to join the Los Angeles Times as deputy publisher in 2015. As one of the self-proclaimed earliest forecasters of Donald Trump’s success (he says it with sorrow, not schadenfreude), Mele has turned to the Internet once again to connect with the American public in what he calls “an extremely uncertain future” for democracy. The Shorenstein Center will play a critical role in preventing the rise of fake news, he claims, by helping audiences become smarter consumers of information online. The biggest challenge will be innovating to keep both sides of the political aisle engaged. “I’ve always been an entrepreneur. If I weren’t at Shorenstein, I’d still build some kind of business in the media space.”
male Latinos in the sciences,” he’d felt pressure to proceed, sacrificing his passions for music and education. (Gable’s research revealed that first-gen students had greater difficulty choosing an academic field—for diverse reasons, like López’s.) Yet his continuing engagement with FSY and with friends from the program has helped put his choice into perspective and encouraged him to redirect it. He has added education courses to his studies, to prepare for work in schools—perhaps in his home community.

April Ruiz, dean of FSY and of the Hopper College residence (and a first-generation, low-income Yale graduate), said the cumulative effect was to give students the sense, “I am not weird.” Combining an “intentional academic component” with the equally “intentional creation of community,” she said, helped such students adapt to utterly new circumstances. Her weekly conversations with FSY students explored what it would feel like to balance four demanding college courses to his studies, to prepare for work in schools, to redirect it. He has added education courses to his studies, to prepare for work in schools—perhaps in his home community.

Ruiz’s predecessor, Howard said of those challenges, “Students should never struggle alone.”

“Roadblocks are not deficiencies”

If Yale is newly committed to supporting undergraduates from under-resourced high schools, Georgetown established the playbook.

• In 1968, amid the country’s convulsive urban traumas, it launched an effort to enroll and support underrepresented students—the forerunner of its Community Scholars Program (CSP), a summer academic immersion, like FSY, for 75 students.

• A Georgetown Scholars Program (GSP), launched in 2005 (a response to the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative and other well-endowed schools’ aid enrichments), increased...
means every woman should have a right to the full array of reproductive health services, including birth control, screening for reproductive disorders, and abortion rights.

“There has to be recognition, when community outreach is being done,” she said, “that the history [of the field] is not ignored. Because of that history, public health needs be to attentive to the diversity of its workforce, needs to be attentive to the fact that the philosophy of public health is that it’s a social movement that is designed to optimize maximum human potential at a population scale, that it is about honoring individual human rights.”

― Marina Bolotnikova
teachers discussed reordering the readings to better promote students’ writing gains. One happily reported that students had begun coming to office hours, another that the “crestfallen” response to a low grade on a paper had been succeeded by acceptance (“The standards are the standards at Georgetown,” as a student put it) and moving on. In general, as Matt Pavesich put it, CSP students are “less polished” than other entering students, but they exhibit “greater willingness to take risks as writers” and learners—a trait the whole faculty team seconded.

Outside the classroom, academic support extends to organized study groups, seminars, and workshops on resources on and off campus (internships, research opportunities, and study abroad). CSP upperclassmen serve as mentors: some are residential advisers during the summer, like their FSY counterparts at Yale. School-year attendance at advising sessions and academic workshops is mandated. Omaries Caceres, a sophomore from Clearwater, Florida, described the requirements as direction on acquiring “tools that really help me succeed”: study skills, test-taking, going to office hours, networking, and budgeting.

Academic progress is paramount, but the confidence necessary to achieve it stems as well from an encompassing suite of co-curricular activities, most shaped by the students themselves. The myriad current programs range from email outreach from the program staff and socializing to student-led GSProud events that embrace an identity as lower-socioeconomic-status members of a campus where much greater affluence prevails.

Meanwhile John Wright, assistant director of the counseling and psychiatric service, is available to consult directly with students, waiving wait times for appointments, meeting confidentially outside the counseling center, and serving as a “community psychologist” to discuss immediate issues or unaddressed family traumas that may hinder academic success. During the summer CSP program, he introduces these ideas in chats about “thriving in your first year.” His school-year workshops address adjusting to a new community, returning home for the holidays, and coping with pre-exam and other stress. Given students’ lim-
limited prior access to such resources, or reluctance to use them ("We don’t talk about mental health in our communities," one student said), Wright’s work is a core investment in what one dean called Georgetown’s “wraparound” care for them.

That commitment has spread. A provostial query turned up hundreds of faculty and staff members who were first-generation college-goers and allies. In late September, the day after a formal “induction ceremony” for first-gen students, the faculty and staff supporters donned T-shirts identifying themselves—making the first-gen campus community even more visible.

Such measures “empower students to see that roadblocks are not deficiencies,” as Foy put it. Students reported that Georgetown’s resources were their first, or only, channels for such guidance; they affectionately described Foy, Bishundat, and others in parental terms, and their student peers as family. Sophomore Hashwinder Singh, from Tacoma, putting his fingers together, said “My family and I were like this. I didn’t have anyone but my family.” Despite confidence in his academic skills, “I was so scared to come to Georgetown”—so the CSP community was a lifeline.

In that sense, said Dean McWade, CSP and GSP and PEP do exactly what Georgetown intends: they welcome cohorts whom the university wishes to educate, but who lack “cultural capital through no fault of their own.” At the same time, she said, first-gen and low-income outreach to the broader community helps “educate the faculty about who’s in front of them these days,” as the student body evolves. For Charles Deacon, who admitted them, the stakes go far beyond the pipeline from recruiting through enrollment; the outcome overall, he said, is about first-generation students being successful.

“I’m here to help you grow”

Princeton, of late, has focused its energy and resources on an unequaled scale, bringing every element of programs for first-generation and low-income students’ success into an integrated whole, with thoughtful preparation for their academic, co-curricular, and social lives on campus. Long perceived as elitist, it has moved aggressively to change the reality: from a minimal 7 percent of students eligible for Pell grants in the class of 2008 to 22 percent in the class of 2021 (likely leading the Ivies; the first-gen cohort has increased from 6 percent to 17 percent). It hosts the Leadership Enterprise for a Diverse America summer institute for promising low-income high-school juniors, and recruits heavily among them. A planned 500-student expansion could enlarge this cohort, among its aims is making “a concerted effort to identify and attract more students from low-income families and ensure these students receive the support they need once they are on campus.” For the first time since 1990, it is also accepting transfer students for 2018—and explicitly encourages applications “from students from low-income backgrounds, community college students, and U.S. military veterans.”

Compared to its past profile, “Princeton is different,” said Khristina Gonzalez, associate dean of the college and director of programs for access and inclusion—but making admissions more accessible does not ensure “equity of access to the resources once you arrive.” Unlike legacies (and perhaps continuing-generation students generally), for whom “implicit knowledge, passed down generationally,” leads seamlessly to fellowships, research opportunities, study abroad, and so on, newcomers to...
higher education have no roadmap to this “hidden curriculum.”

That was certainly so for the young Sonia Sotomayor. But a twenty-first-century Sotomayor might be welcomed by Gonzalez to the seven-week summer Freshman Scholars Institute (FSI). If not among the 80 students invited for FSI, she might participate in an online version, and then, once enrolled, join the Scholars Institute Fellows Program—also led by Gonzalez, with associate director Nimisha Barton. (SIFP is a four-year series of workshops, faculty mentorships, and other experiences that extend the FSI immersion and broaden it to all similar undergraduates throughout their Tiger years. Underscoring its interest in such students, Princeton’s materials for applicants highlight first-gen students and faculty, and describe SIFP.)

Together, since 2015, drawing on their common experiences through their Ph.D. degrees and as Princeton writing teachers, Gonzalez and Barton have scaffolded opportunities that help all first-gen and low-income undergraduates adapt to their new surroundings, take responsibility for their education, train for leadership, and make the most of the university’s resources. Alongside coursework, FSI has seeded extracurricular learning: students receive “Bingo Plus” cards on which they must check off attending sessions about the undergraduate research office, nutrition and wellness counseling, fellowships advising, the writing center, and many other resources.

FSI, like Georgetown’s summer immersion, dates to the late 1960s, when Princeton began orientations for minority students prospectively interested in engineering. It now incorporates two courses: “Ways of Knowing” (WK), a sort of interdisciplinary analog to Harvard’s freshman Expository Writing, with close writing and reading; and since 2015, one of three purpose-built quantitative or scientific offerings: a foundational engineering lab; a life-sciences research course; or a course in data, visualization, and quantitative methods. (Each confers full credit; students know the stakes, learn about college grading, and earn breathing room during subsequent se-
A student said the course helped him and his peers “wade into the water before we get taken by the undertow.”

er, not what you think an ideal childhood should be.” Yet even facing new intellectual demands and a full FSI schedule, she said, “It’s the most relaxed I’ve been in a while.”

Once back to business, Raffety guided students toward their reading of diverse critics’ approaches to Morrison’s novel. Watch what “scholarly moves” they make, she counseled—drawing on the text, or using outside sources—so they could plan their own work as incipient Princeton scholars.

In the biology class, organized around a problem in serotonin signaling, Heather Thieringer circulated among benches where pairs of students in lab coats worked together, offering comments, but not lecturing. When one asked whether she should be adding something to her C. elegans (roundworm) sample, Thieringer answered neither “yes” nor “no,” but as a scientist: “It depends on your research plan.” Besides offering many of the students their first lab experience, she said, she aimed to pilot a research-based approach for Princeton’s introductory molecular-biology courses—one of many examples of applying FSI instruction to the college at large. (Her co-instructor, Geneva Stein, is assistant director, undergraduate learning, for the McGraw Center for Teaching & Learning: a direct connection to Princeton’s home for enhancing pedagogy and the curriculum, and strengthening student study skills.)

In “Foundations of Engineering,” Claire Gmachl, Higgins professor of electrical engineering, oversaw FSIers diligently designing and building bottle rockets. She, too, had an ulterior motive for teaching the course, for the third consecutive summer: to find ways to accelerate the progress of first-year students lacking AP math and physics into
or pre-orientation preparation. Members of Harvard’s First Generation Student Union advocate a summer bridge or pre-orientation preparation.

John Harvard’s Journal

Progressing through a tricky formula—with none of the ethnic self-segregation that sometimes arises in other campus settings.

There is early evidence that all this careful work pays off. Gonzalez cited a post-FSI survey indicating a 26-percentage-point gain in students’ confidence in asking questions in class, a 24-point gain in talking to a professor, and more than doubling in confidence in their ability to write course papers. Overall, students reported a 31-percentage-point gain in confidence in their ability to have an academically successful freshman year.

Plenty of upperclass peers reinforce that growing optimism. As at Yale and Georgetown, they serve as residential advisers during the summer. At Princeton, they may also be summer “course fellows,” running sections and mentoring students. Those fellows are not only “approachable near-peers,” as Keith Shaw, director of transfer programs, put it, but also trained educators: FSI alumni and others who choose to become “institute fellows” through the SIPF program benefit from regular, structured instruc-
tion in classroom teaching and pedagogical strategy within the McGraw Center. Their presence gives the FSI students immediate access to a multiyear cohort of Princeton undergraduates, many with backgrounds similar to their own, enabling informal connections and conversations.

The fellows also conduct academic-year workshops for students, coordinated by Barton, on myriad aspects of that “hidden curriculum” on campus (how to apply for fellowships, participate in a section, write a research proposal, and master the intangibles, like speaking “prof-o-saurus” during casual conversation or office hours) and beyond (how to network, prepare a résumé, and manage finances). Volunteer faculty members help them substantively, and often participate in the sessions.

Barton has outlined a four-year sequence of experiences that help students choose concentrations, prepare for thesis research, and identify and pursue postgraduate plans. The fellows gain confidence and leadership skills that have increasingly propelled them, Gonzalez reports, to positions of leadership across campus—an outcome strongly supported by her peers at Georgetown and Yale.

What might students learn from this welter of experiences? According to senior Jessica Reed, “You are forced to learn to ask for help, and you are forced to collaborate”—lessons about learning that might well apply to undergraduates everywhere.

How might Harvard and other colleges best address the needs of the students they are admitting from under-resourced high schools and families constrained in means? Is a five-day pre-orientation meaningful? Do certain students need a multiseason bridge program? Are there needs extending throughout the undergraduate years?

Rachel Gable, now at Virginia Commonwealth University’s global education office, said her research in Cambridge and Washington, D.C., persuaded her that different institutions could pursue distinct approaches suited to their cultures. Georgetown’s centralized programming reflects both its Jesuit tradition of service and what she called a “multicultural” theme, extending back a half-century: a recognition that groups of people differ, and are best served by devising programs tailored to their needs. Harvard has what she called a “liberal” approach, in the classical meaning of the word: each individual is to be treated as an individual. Thus, its preference for what she termed “capillary” programs and resources, such as enhanced peer advising and training for academic advisers who are available to all students, in the expectation that each will benefit in personally suitable ways.

Evangelists for substantial, centralized programs—Foy at Georgetown, Princeton’s Gonzalez—argue that their efforts focused on cohorts of first-generation and low-income students will, over time, spread across their communities, changing their cultures. Whether the programs are “capillary” or narrower in focus, faculty members agree that virtually all students today could benefit from efforts to highlight the co-curricular and soft skills that contribute to every student’s academic performance, and impel improvements in teaching. To the extent that these initiatives derive from admitting more economically diverse students and assuring that they can thrive once on campus, they of course promote more inclusive interactions among undergraduates whose life circumstances vary more widely than ever before. So far, no campus appears the worse for trying.

~JOHN S. ROSENBERG

“Disappointing” Endowment Returns—and a Protracted Restructuring

Endowment Returns—

On September 19, Harvard Management Company (HMC) CEO N.V. Narvekar reported an 8.1 percent investment return on endowment assets during fiscal year 2017, ended last June 30, observing bluntly, “Our performance is disappointing and not where it needs to be.” Although the positive return (after investment expenses) reverses the prior-year negative 2.0 percent return, HMC’s gains substantially trailed peers’ reported results. Taking into account the

Reprinted from Harvard Magazine. For more information, contact Harvard Magazine, Inc. at 617-495-5746