

by Tom Robinson



THE RIGHT
 RECRUIT'S
 FROM THE

WRONG



Students share a moment with friends at the César E. Chávez Center for Higher Education at Cal Poly Pomona.

The purpose of the center is to increase the outreach, recruitment, graduation, and cultural pride of Chicanos/Latinos at the university and to support all students in their efforts to become multiculturally competent.

SIDE OF THE TRACKS



The KIPP 3D Academy functions as a public charter school, serving middle-school students. It provides them with the knowledge, critical thinking, and character skills required to prepare for the rigors of competitive high schools, colleges, and the world beyond.

OLLERGE AND university admissions officers can find new students in the pool of 16 million lower-income, often neglected and sometimes maligned young people aged 16-26. Currently, 53 percent of Americans earn some degree or credential after high school, but that figure drops to 25 percent for low-income students.

Should well-intentioned recruiters and financial aid officers serve this underserved segment of the population as a good impulse or act of social consciousness? Well, yes. Disadvantaged kids *should* have the opportunity as their well-to-do suburban counterparts. However, there are also practical reasons why these candidates should be on your prospect list.

The nation needs them

The U.S. Department of Labor has estimated that between 2006 and 2016, the United States will need to fill 29 million positions that require some college education. Meanwhile, for the first time since the government started keeping records, the average education level of U.S. workers is expected to decline. Jobholder growth over the next two decades will re-

quire population groups that our education system has often neglected.

Twenty years ago, the United States was first in the world in the percentage of adults 25-34 with a college credential. Today, the U.S. is tenth and declining.

In a 2005 report by Achieve, Incorporated 45 percent of employers said their employees who recently entered the workforce would have a hard time advancing beyond entry-level positions. They lacked reading and math skills and they also exhibited a lack of problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

Educating low-income students is also good for society. The Center for American Progress asserts that education is the essential ingredient necessary to break the cycle of inter-generational poverty. A 2006 study identified the education level of parents as the single most important influence, more important than race, head of household status or income.

You need them

Many colleges struggle to meet their self-imposed diversity goals or mandates. America's low-income population is largely Hispanic or African American. They bring to campus both cultures and perspectives that can enrich the academic and social experience of all.

Any student aspiring to become a



Two Teach for America alumni, Mike Feinberg (pictured, right) and Dave Levin, launched an intensive 5th grade program at Houston's Garcia Elementary School 16 years ago. Their students' academic success and interest in



Learning inspired the pair to found the KIPP (Knowledge & Power Program) Academy in Houston. With financial support from Don and Doris Fisher, founders of GAP, they plan to open 100 KIPP schools.

successful manager will have to supervise the most diverse workforce in U.S. history—four generations deep, with multiple ethnicities and differing work ethics. Early exposure to heterogeneous populations is an essential part of modern-day career preparation.

Where are they and what are they doing?

There are 16.3 million 16-26 year-olds in low-income families. Just over a quarter (4.2 million) of them are already enrolled in a two- or four-year institution or have some college, but no degree. Twelve percent (2 million) already have an associate degree, but are not currently enrolled. Seventeen percent (2.8 million) are in high school. A third of them (5.4 million) are in the workforce part- or full-time, with no college credits and with or without a high school diploma or GED. The remaining 12 percent (1.9 million) are either in jail or otherwise “disconnected.”

However, access to college is merely part of the challenge

About two-thirds of high school seniors enroll in higher education in the fall following their high school graduation. Enrolling in college, however, is no sign of academic preparation. In fact, The New America Foundation writes “the nation’s education system is remarkably adept at moving students through the academic pipeline with little accountability. Most community colleges admit every student who applies, and more than three-quarters of college freshmen attend universities with low admissions standards.”

Nearly a third of all incoming freshmen, which includes 42 percent of first-year students at public community colleges, require remediation. Just one-third of these poorly prepared students will enroll in a remedial course, complete it and pass the exam required to move on to a college level course.

At some postsecondary institutions, more than 90 percent of first-time freshmen need remedial classes before enrolling in courses that count toward their degrees. Remedial courses are offered at 99 percent of public two-year colleges and more than 75 percent of public four-year institutions.

The higher incidence of remedia-

tion among low-income students likely contributes to these same students graduating at much lower rates than their wealthier counterparts. Only 20 percent of students from families with incomes below \$25,000 graduate with an associate degree or higher. Compare that with more than three-quarters of students from families earning more than \$75,000.

While two-thirds of U.S. high school graduates enter college, only half graduate within six years. That number drops to 25 percent for low-income students, and to 20 percent for African American students. Nationally, among every 100 ninth graders who enter high school, just 18 will finish college within six years.

Two sizeable foundations, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and The Lumina Foundation, have chosen to focus on two-year public institutions to address the problem. But success within the lower-income population need not be limited to two-year schools.

The two Cal Polys

Take the case of the two California Polytechnic Institutes. The academic programs of both look somewhat similar. Yet their student populations are quite different. Cal Poly San Luis Obispo is located in a charming town on the Pacific coast, and its campus is mostly residential and 65 percent white. Cal Poly Pomona, situated east of Los Angeles, serves commuter students 70 percent Latino and African American, many of whom are lower-income and first-generation.

“We started life as a two-year feeder to Cal Poly in 1938,” says Pomona president Michael Ortiz. “Eight years ago we became our own institution. San Luis Obispo has a higher admissions standard. Pomona is more accessible. If you raise the bar, you get more applications from the quality students. But their diversity has suffered as a result of it.”

Meanwhile, Pomona has had a respectable track record with underserved students:

- While ranking as the 6th most ethnically diverse campus in the nation, Pomona sports a graduation rate that’s noteworthy throughout the western states.

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KIPP Gaston (NC) College Preparatory is preparing to graduate its first high school class. 100% of seniors have been accepted to colleges and universities including UNC-Chapel Hill, Wake Forest, Tulane, Georgia Tech and Spelman College.

- Pomona ranks 24th among the nation's private and public campuses in awarding the most bachelor's degrees to Hispanics.
- Pomona ranks 88th in the nation in awarding the most master's degrees to Hispanics.
- Pomona's 81 percent freshman retention rate ranks 8th among western public campuses.

San Luis Obispo enjoys the highest retention rate in the west (90.5%) and a graduation rate of 68.3 percent. James Maraviglia is assistant vice president for admissions, recruitment, & financial aid at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. He is optimistic about increasing underserved enrollment. "We received 3,661 applications from schools with historically low numbers of college-going students, a 17 percent increase."

Knowledge Is Power Program

Another notable effort places an emphasis on starting early. Former Teach for America instructors Mike Feinberg (pictured, left) and Dave Levin (pictured, right) founded the



Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). They were recently awarded the prestigious Charles Bronfman Prize for establishing a national network of tuition-free, open-enrollment, college-preparatory schools where they demonstrate that it's possible to close the achievement gap in low-income communities.

Ninety percent of KIPP's students are African American or Latino, and 80 percent are from low-income households. What began in Houston fifteen years ago, now includes 66 schools in 19 states and the District of Columbia, serving 16,000 students. They expect 100 schools by 2011.

As early as elementary school age, students and their parents sign a contract for a rigorous schedule that starts at 7:25 in the morning and goes to 5:00 in the afternoon. Add some Saturdays each month and an extra month of school in the summer. In addition to academics, students are taught work ethics and commitment to others. Teachers make extraordinary commitments as well, including being available by cell phone 24/7 should students be struggling with homework. The school's motto is "No shortcuts. No excuses."

KIPP's college matriculation rate is above 80 percent. Alumni of the Houston KIPP have been admitted to 180 colleges and universities including Wellesley, Columbia, Stanford, Georgetown, Vanderbilt and Penn.

- After four years at KIPP, the average

KIPP student jumps from the 31st to the 58th percentile in reading and from the 41st to the 80th percentile in math, according to national exams.

- Among KIPP eighth grade classes, 100 percent outperform nearby school districts in math, and 94 percent in reading and English language arts.
- 100 percent of KIPP high school classes outperform nearby school districts in significant English Language Arts and math measurements.

Co-founder Mike Feinberg minces no words about the poor performance of the U.S. educational system. "People point the finger and say 'we need to fix high school' or 'it's the fault of elementary school.' The answer is all of the above. And higher education needs to see itself, not as an island, but as part of the continuum of education."

Lower-income students simply need more care and nurturing. "When the kids come to school, there are 101 daily challenges that can get in the way of their learning and succeeding in school and in life," notes Feinberg. "So we need 101 daily solutions. We widen our sphere of influence so that whatever challenges KIPP's students and families face, we can help them directly, or we can find others in the community who will."

He stresses "onboarding," the means to assure a successful transition from high school to college. "What needs to happen during the first three minutes? Then the first three hours and the first three months... and don't stop until they graduate," Feinberg explains.

Joseph Miller, who runs Houston KIPP to College, says Houston area colleges have been helpful, inviting kids and families to stay overnight to get a sense of what college is like, and how they differ from one another. But there is a lot more to be done.

Opportunity comes with responsibility

Evidence is mounting that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can and do succeed in college and in careers. Colleges and universities who want to recruit them must accept some responsibility for helping to rewire the system to assure that high

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school graduates are college-ready. Those campuses must also accept the additional work that accompanies less-prepared, first generation and culturally diverse students, many with language barriers. That means providing psychological support services throughout their four years, continuous academic and career counseling, and more thoughtful onboarding up front to facilitate the transition. ■

Editor's note:

Much of the statistical data reported here was retrieved from "Post Secondary Success" published by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (www.gatesfoundation.org) and "Bridging the Gap: How to Strengthen the PK-16 Pipeline to College Readiness" published by the New America Foundation (www.Newamerica.net).



Students studying in the African American Student Center at Cal Poly Pomona. With a 70 percent minority and underserved population, the university has robust support programs for Native Americans, Asian and Pacific Islanders and the César Chávez Center for Hispanics (shown on pages 30-31).



Karina Medina: Superstar

KARINA MEDINA is a shining example of what the Knowledge Is Power Program can accomplish.

Karina joined Houston KIPP just before she entered eighth grade. "I struggled through summer school overwhelmed by the new environment," she recalls. "The school was very different than those I was used to, where behavior was the main concern and not the academic work. She planned to drop out, but school principal Sam Lopez spent two hours on the phone with her and persuaded her to stay, even if it meant repeating some grades. Although she was concerned about being 20 years old when she graduated from high school, Lopez convinced her that making it to college was more important.

During several "field lessons" as KIPP calls them, she visited campuses like Penn, Harvard, Columbia, and Stanford. "That introduced me to the idea that I too could go to a great college."

Upon completion of middle school, she attended an all-girl, Anglo private school in Dallas. She was struck by the difference that family income makes. "I went home for spring break; they went on cruises to the Bahamas."

While proud of her heritage, she is nonetheless sensitive about her background. "Being Hispanic, it's like I have a big sign on my forehead 'I need financial aid.' Yes I do. But what does your school have to offer me academically?" Karina's first choice for college was Baylor, where she received a \$9,000 grant offer, leaving her with an untenable \$25,000 annual balance. St. Louis University's Texas recruiter Chris Blackwell approached her with academic programs that were of interest to her, and only later brought up financial aid.

Since Karina was the first person in her family to go to college, the admissions and application process was daunting. Joseph Miller, head of KIPP to College, met with her Spanish-speaking parents, to explain in Spanish the admissions and financial aid process and help with the FAFSA application. Chris Blackwell arranged a Spanish speaking rep at St. Louis University to talk with her parents as well. Lopez, Miller and Blackwell remain in touch with Karina and help her parents file FAFSA updates.

Karina is now a junior with a 3.3 GPA, seeking a B.S. in Nursing. With grants and other aid, she expects her student loan debt to be about \$18,000. As a nurse, she expects that to be manageable. She earns extra money for books and food, teaching in an after school program at a community center in St. Louis. ■