In Fall 2017, Harvard Magazine explored top universities’ efforts to support first-generation and low-income students. The article focused on initiatives at Yale, Georgetown, and Princeton, recognizing Georgetown as having “established the playbook” for supporting students from under-resourced high schools. Below is an excerpt of the article, reprinted with the permission of Harvard Magazine.

Excerpts from

Mastering the “Hidden Curriculum”

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

by JOHN S. ROSENBERG | NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2017

[..]

[..] RACHEL L. GABLE, ED.D. ’16, in her doctoral dissertation, “Pathways to Thriving: First- and Continuing-Generation College Student Experiences at Two Elite Universities” [..] 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. [..]
[...] 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 grants and reduced loans for targeted low-income students. It encompasses the CSPers and more than 150 undergraduates per class, and has transformed from extended financial aid to a four-year system of fostering first-gen and low-income students' school engagement, leadership training, and other elements of success in college and beyond. They are supported by a five-person staff and alumni have responded with enthusiasm to a $25-million fundraising campaign, for aid and the program itself.

- In addition, GSP students now organize a five-day pre-orientation Preparing to Excel Program (PEP), aimed at entering low-income and first-gen Hoyas (the template Harvard College now seems to be considering).

In August, during this year's PEP, former admissions officer Melissa “Missy” Foy, who launched the GSP, held an audience of first-year students rapt as she exposed their commonest anxieties, beginning with that imposter trope and assuring them, “You are sitting in a seat that was chosen for you.” She then turned to tough love: “For students who are prideful about their writing, it's probably time to get over that.” (But she also recalled a senior-year journalism assignment so egregious her instructor wrote “No!” in place of a letter grade, using her experience to illustrate overcoming an ego-deflating challenge.) Georgetown, she continued, is “supposed to be hard. If it's easy, you picked the wrong college.” Working through their other inner thoughts, she detoxified fears by turning them into community concerns. That emphasis on community runs throughout Georgetown’s embrace of these students. The dean of student financial services, Patricia McWade, who addressed the PEPers, said separately that raising funds for GSP had been one of the greatest rewards of her quarter-century at Georgetown. Charles A. Deacon, the even longer-serving dean of admissions, who just admitted his forty-fifth class, said, “We have their back.”

Through PEP and other channels, the students make unusual connections with the financial-aid representatives who help them manage their scholarships and loans (often without parental help), and their academic deans (who join the PEP cohort for a first-day lunch). Even more directly, charismatic staff members available 24/7, like Foy and Devita Bishundat, who directs CSP, put Georgetown into perspective. Senior Fabienne El-Cid—a GSP student-board member, peer-mentoring co-chair, and former PEP coordinator—said the activities collectively work “wonders in making the campus feel smaller, as you walk around it and recognize faces.”

These forms of soft support, combined with the students’ resilience and drive, are associated with tangible results in the classroom. During a morning session of CSP’s critical reading and writing course, a student volunteered her draft for review—among the hardest experiences for most young learners to endure. Twenty minutes of peer critiques, kindly expressed but tough and extensive, ensued. Their recipient then thanked everyone and said she looked forward to incorporating their suggestions in her revision. Most teachers of undergraduates would testify to how much they would value the kind of learning such give-and-take enables for everyone in a class. (The writing class continues into the fall, with the same teachers,
and students take a second summer course, related to their intended concentration—also for full credit. They register for freshman classes before the term begins, assuring access to their preferred options.)

Achieving such an environment is not serendipitous. In a faculty meeting after that morning class, led by Bishundat, the 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. Omaris 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’ 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.”

[...]

[...] 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 [Khristina] 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 under-graduates whose life circumstances vary more widely than ever before. So far, no campus appears the worse for trying.

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