

## **QuestBridge's Experience in Recruiting High-Achieving, Low-Income Students**

April 2013

### **Introduction**

The recent release of two new studies—one by Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery, “The Missing ‘One-Offs’: The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low Income Students” (2012), and the second by Hoxby and Sarah Turner, “Expanding College Opportunities for High-Achieving, Low Income Students” (2013)—has sparked increased attention to the issue of high-achieving students from low-income families not applying to or attending the most selective colleges and universities, despite it being affordable for them to do so.

QuestBridge has had many years of experience working on this issue, as our work focuses precisely on the problem Hoxby and Avery articulate. The authors show that “the vast majority of very high-achieving students who are low-income do not apply to any selective college or university.” In addition, they find that “these low-income students’ application behavior differs greatly from that of their high-income counterparts who have similar achievements.”

It is our goal to increase the number of high-achieving, low-income students who attend selective colleges. We want these students to aim high and take advantage of opportunities in higher education that they often do not know exist. Our experience in student recruitment has shown that it *is* possible to reach these students and change their college-going decisions and, ultimately, the course of their lives.

### **Outreach Methods**

QuestBridge operates two primary programs for high-achieving, low-income high school students: the College Prep Scholarship for juniors and the National College Match for seniors. Through these programs we hope to encourage students who are academically qualified for highly selective colleges to apply to these institutions by providing them with the knowledge, resources, and support they need to do so.

The College Prep Scholarship educates students and prepares them to be successful applicants to top colleges. The awards given through this program are designed to not only provide students with a fuller understanding of financial aid and the college opportunities open to them, but are also meant to make them stronger applicants by giving guidance they may not otherwise receive (for example, advice on taking tests and presenting themselves effectively on an application).

The National College Match is a unique early application process through which students can apply to multiple QuestBridge partner colleges at once. A particular benefit of the College Match is that students use our custom-designed college application, which unlike most applications

provides room for students to discuss obstacles they have overcome, explain in detail their family background, and also includes in-depth financial information. The goal is for our applicants to understand that they can receive substantial financial aid from these colleges, thus making attending the college financially feasible. We currently partner with 35 of the most selective colleges and universities in the country, all of which meet full financial need. (See <http://www.questbridge.org/partner-colleges/overview-listing> for a full list.)

A large part of QuestBridge's work is focused on recruiting students to apply to our programs and through us, for admission and financial aid to top colleges like Yale, Stanford, or Amherst. Our outreach for each program includes a major mailing campaign and a large e-mail campaign to students we believe are high-achieving and low-income, based on available data and referrals. These communications emphasize the opportunities available to them at selective colleges, and explain that they can likely attend such a college on a full scholarship. (The mailing campaign we conduct is in many ways similar to the experimental ones used in Hoxby and Turner's study.) In addition to this outreach directly to students, we contact teachers, counselors, and community-based organizations by mail and e-mail, and also involve past program participants who are now students at our partner colleges in outreach efforts (these students are known as Quest Scholars).

The scope of our mailing and e-mail campaigns is national and quite large. In 2012, across our two programs, we contacted nearly 232,000 students, educators, and others by mail, and over 364,000 by e-mail (with overlap between the two groups so that many received both a mailing and e-mail). We have found this outreach to be quite effective: for the 2012 College Match, 48% of respondents said on the application that they heard of us from a QuestBridge mailing or e-mail, with the next highest category being 30% from a teacher, counselor, or school staff member (applicants could select as many options as applied to them).

## **Our Results**

In 2012, our outreach resulted in 5,349 applicants for the College Prep Scholarship, with over 3,000 selected as College Prep Scholars. For the College Match in 2012, we had 9,577 applicants and selected about 4,500 students as finalists, meaning we believed they were academically strong applicants to our partner colleges and met our financial need qualifications. Of the finalists, 383 students were admitted to a school with a full four-year College Match scholarship, and we anticipate that more than 1,600 additional students will be admitted through the regular decision process in the spring of 2013. In 2011, we had 321 students admitted through the College Match process and approximately 1,650 students admitted through regular decision. Each year we have found our applicants as well as our finalists and matches increasing, indicating that we are continuing to grow the number of qualified applicants we find.

Hoxby and Avery (2012) show that the high-achieving, low-income students who do apply to selective colleges ("achievement-typical" students) are more likely to be geographically concentrated and live in large urban areas, while those who are qualified but don't apply

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("income-typical" students) are less likely to live in urban areas. They note that 70% of the achievement-typical students are concentrated in only 15 urban areas.

Some statistics about our 4,500 finalists from the 2012 College Match cycle—a group comparable in academic ability and income status to the high-achieving, low-income students in the two studies—help to show that the students we reach are a geographically diverse group representing a large portion of the United States. The finalists represent 2,717 high schools, 90% of which are public or charter schools. Just over half of the finalists described their hometowns as suburban, while a third said they live in urban areas and 15% in rural areas. If we look at the same 15 urban areas as Hoxby and Avery, we find that only 33% of our 2012 finalists came from those areas. This suggests that QuestBridge's outreach is reaching large numbers of students who would otherwise be "income-typical" and would likely have not applied to highly selective colleges.

In addition, our finalists came from 785 counties (a quarter of the counties nationwide); of these counties, the 15 with the largest number of finalists account for only 35% of the group, while all the other counties each have less than 1% of finalists. In fact, 382 of the counties (almost half) had only one finalist each. This shows the degree to which our successful applicants are dispersed across the country.

Backing up this data is the feedback we often receive from our partner colleges that our program connects them with many students who they otherwise would not see, including students from high schools that have never sent applicants to their college before.

Responses from annual surveys of finalists and matched students also provide evidence that we are changing students' decisions about where to apply to college. In a survey of finalists from the end of the 2011-12 application cycle, 43% of respondents said that prior to their first contact with QuestBridge, they were only "somewhat familiar" with the college they will be attending, and 33% said they were "not familiar" with the college. In addition, 77% of respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed that QuestBridge helped them to understand the level of financial aid they would receive from selective colleges.

Many students express sentiments similar to the following:

*"Before QuestBridge, I thought that I would go to any college that my family could afford. Based on my family's economic situation, that probably would have meant that I would have gone to the community college or school that offered the biggest financial aid package. I definitely would not have gone to my dream school, but rather the school that offered the most and was more convenient. I never would have even considered applying to any top university."*

Ashley Washington  
Macon, GA  
Brown University

*"Before QuestBridge, I had no realization that an education from a top-notch college was even attainable. I had set myself on attending a state school, somewhere within my financial grasp."*

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*When I received the e-mail from QuestBridge during my junior year, I avidly scrolled the pages of QuestBridge[’s website]. The pre-described boundaries I had set for myself shattered; I had nothing stopping me from attaining this myth, this American Dream.”*

Eduardo Avalos  
Santa Ana, CA  
Williams College

## **Conclusion**

QuestBridge fills a clear need by serving as a bridge between highly selective colleges that would like to increase their socioeconomic diversity on the one end, and academically talented and motivated students who, due to an array of circumstances, might not consider applying to these colleges on the other. Our role in bridging this gap is to provide students with the knowledge and support they need to see these colleges as a possibility, and in particular it is our understanding of their unique backgrounds and challenges that enables us to help them effectively.

One of the benefits of our program is that by partnering with a large number of selective colleges, we gain “economies of scale” in our outreach that an individual admissions office does not have (reflecting a conclusion Hoxby and Turner reach as well). The economies of scale include the fact that sending one mailing to a student introduces them to 35 different colleges; in addition, because these schools represent many parts of the country, it is likely a student will recognize at least one of the schools, want to learn more, and then become aware of schools they had not previously known.

We are able to reach a large population with a small staff by engaging in large-scale yet targeted communications so that as many students as possible have the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about where to apply to college. In addition to our mailings and e-mails, we utilize, in a variety of ways, a vast network of Quest Scholar ambassadors, admissions officers, and a growing group of educators who provide essential word of mouth outreach. The College Prep Scholarship program, and in particular our College Admissions Conferences, is one important way to reach students as they are beginning to focus on applying to college. Nearly 1,000 students, along with their guests, attended one of three conferences held at our partner colleges in 2012, where they met admissions officers and Quest Scholars, and attended workshops and presentations. The Quest Scholar Network is another essential component of our outreach efforts, as we rely on Quest Scholars all over the country to reach out to students like them about the possibility of attending a top college as a low-income student. The existence of the Quest Scholar Network is also an important part of showing high school students who may have never traveled far from home that they will have a support network on campus.

While we are confident that our efforts are successful in helping students navigate the college admissions process, we recognize that there remain many students who are not receiving the guidance and advice they need. We are excited to continue to expand our work so that we can reach more of these students and make a difference in their decisions about college.