

New Plan to 'Disrupt' College Recruitment

Silicon Valley nonprofit says one goal is to help build a deeper talent pool for American corporations

By **JIM CARLTON**
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PALO ALTO, Calif.—Investors here have gleefully trumpeted technology's disruption of everything from transportation to entertainment. Now, they have a new target: college admissions.

A group of Silicon Valley's top venture capitalists have been quietly pouring resources into an education nonprofit that boosts the number of low-income students at the nation's top colleges.

Part of their interest, they say, is to help build a deeper talent pool for American corporations, especially in jobs requiring training in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, so-called STEM skills.

The investors, who include [LinkedIn Corp.](#) co-founder [Reid Hoffman](#), have contributed financial and advisory support to QuestBridge, conceived in 2003 to connect disadvantaged students with elite colleges that pay a recruiting fee for the services.

The service has spread to 35 mostly private colleges, including Stanford University and Yale University, and helps place about 2,000 low-income students from an applicant pool that now tops 10,000 a year—one of the largest such programs in the country.

"I am attracted to organizations with potential massive scale, disruptive potential and sustainability," Mr. Hoffman said in an email. "QuestBridge has all three of these features."

America's top schools have billions in financial aid available, but it often goes to low-income students they identify in the nation's most populous urban areas. Admissions directors are



PRESTON GANNAWAY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

QuestBridge founders Ana and Michael McCullough (from left) along with Tim Ferriss look on as investor James Joaquin shows them a new photo app which he's invested in. The group was together at Greylock Partners, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist firm in Menlo Park, Calif., in April. At far right is Elisa Schreiber, a marketing partner with Greylock.

rarely able to visit smaller cities or rural areas, said Michael McCullough, who founded QuestBridge with his wife, Ana, and is now a partner in a medical-investing firm.

"It's not intuitive to [a disadvantaged] kid that an Ivy League school would give them a quarter-million dollars," said Dr. McCullough.

The McCulloughs created a network of recruiters, including high-school counselors, to help identify a pool of gifted, disadvantaged students. QuestBridge began contacting the nominees.

"It seemed too good to be true and I thought it was a scam," Francisco Guzman, who grew up in a low-income household in Elizabeth, N.J., said of when he first received a QuestBridge application by email. He landed a full scholarship to Stanford, and the 25-year-old is



MICHELLE LE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
Francisco Guzman, a Quest Scholar and a senior product designer for Instacart at his office in San Francisco in April.

now a senior product designer for an Internet startup in San Francisco.

In addition to referrals from high-school counselors, students find out about QuestBridge in various ways, including from friends who have heard of the program and through the Internet.

Students fill out online applications, and finalists are chosen by QuestBridge based on factors including academic performance, financial need and personal experiences such as having to work while attending school to help support their families. The list of finalists is sent electronically to participating colleges for their selections.

QuestBridge has attracted support over the past five years from venture capitalists including Benchmark Capital general partner Matt Cohler, and David Sze, John Lilly and James Slavet of Greyllock Partners.

Prominent angel investor and author Timothy Ferriss and biotech investor and author Juan Enriquez are also in the group, which contributes cash and advice to QuestBridge. They have remained largely quiet about their roles in the program until now.

Mr. Hoffman said a QuestBridge program launched in 2010—offering enticements like laptops to targeted groups of high school juniors who submit their academic information early—“could really move the needle” in ending that gap at the top colleges.

Under the pilot initiative, called Quest for Excellence, the nonprofit has gotten partner

investors to help fund the scholarships to widen the pool of students applying to colleges later.

An anonymous donor helped sponsor a scholarship competition for gifted Native American juniors that resulted in those applicants jumping from 34 in 2010 to more than 350 a year later, QuestBridge officials said. Another scholarship begun in 2012 targets low-income, gifted New York students and was initially funded by the Heckscher Foundation. The number of those applicants rose 50% in one year.

Among QuestBridge’s long-term plan is to create an internship program. Companies would pay to gain access to its student database to fill positions that often lead to permanent jobs.

“The only thing corporations want when looking for college graduates, beyond a diversity goal, is the best and brightest and most ambitious people they can find,” said Mr. Cohler, who was an early investor in [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#). “And a lot of times those are people who come from less advantaged backgrounds.”

A 2006 analysis by Georgetown University researchers found just 5% of all students at the most selective schools came from the lowest economic quartile, while 70% were from the highest.

In a 2012 research paper, economists Caroline Hoxby of Stanford and Christopher Avery of Harvard University suggested that many low-income students don’t apply to the better schools because they lack necessary information or encouragement.

Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., accepted 22 QuestBridge applicants in 2008; last fall, that number increased to 70, representing 10% of its freshman class, said Art D. Rodriguez, dean of admission and financial aid.

“Their finalists are coming from outside the 15 major metro areas,” Mr. Rodriguez said. “We weren’t reaching them because we weren’t traveling there.”

With up to an estimated 35,000 gifted, low-income seniors graduating from high school each year, Silicon Valley investors say they want to help QuestBridge capture more students.

“Most people who are fighting the Goliath of education do so in a very scattered fashion,” said Mr. Ferriss, the angel investor. “I feel like Michael and Ana have found the Achilles tendon, and they know exactly where to cut.