

EDUCATION WEEK

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Aspirations, Achievement, Admissions

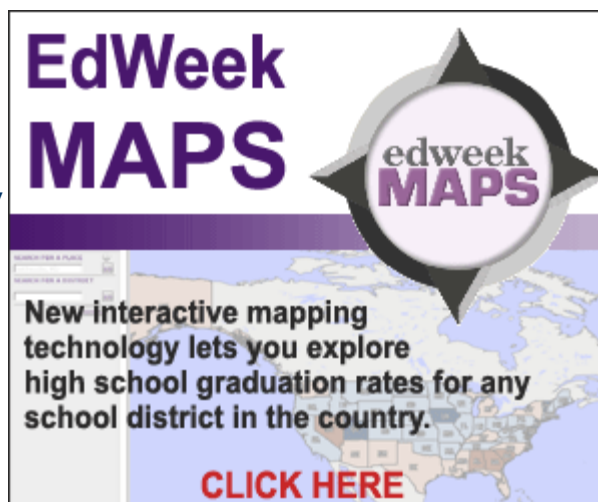
One of the most important tasks of helping young people envision themselves reaching college is simply to demystify the experience.

By Herbert F. Dalton Jr.

Michele Harris, a guidance counselor at Wadleigh Secondary School in the heart of Harlem in New York City, has a master's degree from Hunter College, where she graduated magna cum laude. But on a recent morning, when it came time to "inspire" a classroom of 9th graders to begin preparing for their own journey to higher education, her presentation was mostly about failure.

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"I told them I was a lousy student in high school," she remembers. "I didn't work hard, and I didn't really believe I'd accomplish anything even if I did. I had problems at home that led to problems at school, and I frankly couldn't wait to escape from both."

Ms. Harris then admitted that, at first, there did not seem to be any reason to look back. Tapping into her natural ability as a hairstylist, she was soon able to find employment and independence from the not-so-happy childhood in which higher education was neither an attractive nor attainable goal. Unfortunately, that financial success was marred by an inner voice that chastised and saddened, becoming louder and more insistent as the years went by.

"I was still hearing that I was 'the dumb kid.' I heard it because it's what I had always told myself. But somewhere deep down, I didn't *completely* believe it. Of course, with what happened next, I easily could have."

At this point in the presentation, Ms. Harris opened up a scrapbook, with her first college research paper as exhibit No. 1. The grade—an F—was prominently marked. Passing the paper around the room, encouraging the students to look closely at the "really mean note from the professor" alongside the grade, she spoke forthrightly about the humiliation she had suffered ... and about the anger that it had inspired. It was an anger that forced her to surmount that obstacle and many, many more, as she forged a path to a future that only gradually seemed within her reach. The story of her eventual—and extraordinary— success in

college came at the end of her presentation, becoming even more believable to the students at Wadleigh by Ms. Harris' revelation that she had begun her journey from a similar place.

In describing these obstacles and how she surmounted them, Ms. Harris admirably fulfilled her mission for Early College Awareness Week, a recent multistate event that required teachers, counselors, admissions officers, college presidents, and one state governor to step out of their own worlds and into the lives of young people from economically disadvantaged urban and rural environments. Their mission: to provide a missing link in the chain of events that must take place in order for these students to make it to college. A link that I believe can only be forged with a fundamental shift in the way that we inspire and prepare young people from these communities to succeed.

I say this as a former college-admissions officer, and as someone who has spent much of the last 12 years examining the myriad factors that lead students from underserved communities to success in high school and advancement to college. I know that most of the factors that may hold these students back—troubled home lives, insufficient early education, negative peer pressure—are the focus of countless initiatives and endless discussion. And I believe that ending social promotion and holding disadvantaged students accountable for achievement are positive steps for preparing them for college. But between the endless fretting over obstacles and the demands that these students overcome them "no matter what," I also believe we pay too little attention to the one equally important factor in the equation: ensuring that these students understand that they have a *place* in college, and sparking the absolute will to get there.

Which is why this was such an important message for each of the "goodwill ambassadors" who built on their own experiences to make connections to these students during this recent weeklong event. While Michele Harris was describing her brave but nerve-racking decision to ask the teacher who gave her an F for an explanation of how she might improve, her colleague Reginald Richardson stood at the front of a nearby classroom wearing his graduation cap and gown, passing around his diplomas from Howard University and Harvard University, and discussing the meandering path that took him from political science to a law degree to a final decision to teach social studies. In rural Vermont, Gov. Jim Douglas talked with elementary and middle school students about the mathematics and computer skills needed for careers in that state's dairy and manufacturing industries. And amid "fight songs" and college banners that filled the hallways of a Richmond, Va., middle school, undergraduates from several nearby universities talked about the importance of planning for college from an early age.

The ensuing discussion with the students showed that many were being asked to think about these steps for the very first time. Through questions such as "What is a major?" and "What is a bachelor's degree?" and "How long does it take to get one?" the students made many of the day's ambassadors realize that one of the most important tasks in helping young people envision themselves reaching college is simply to demystify the experience.

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They also realized the urgency of doing so. By 9th grade, most children of college-educated parents are already well aware of the

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role of the PSAT, the SAT, Advanced Placement courses, extracurricular activities, recommendation letters, and all of the other factors at play in the admissions process. They know this because, in the words of Ms. Harris, the guidance counselor, "they've been told from Day One that they're going to college, by parents who have been planning for it for years."

They also know it from the sheer magnitude of glossy, colorful, multimedia recruitment and informational materials that tend to be most accessible to middle-class homes. They have seen detailed rankings and descriptions in *U.S. News & World Report*, *The Fiske Guide to Colleges*, and other publications that are familiar to parents who have been thinking about their children's higher education options for some time. They have received direct mail targeted especially to the ZIP codes and student demographics most apt to reach the most promising applicants. From their own bedrooms, they have toured interactive college and university Web sites that offer virtual tours of leafy campuses and checklists of criteria for admission they are well on their way to meeting.

Unfortunately, these guideposts tend to be far less useful to children whose parents lack the experience to help them plan for the journey. And although hard-working individuals like Ms. Harris can be very helpful, the ratio of students to guidance counselors in virtually every school makes it unlikely that one person can provide the sustained, personal assistance that most students need. From signing up for the challenging courses needed for selective colleges, to choosing the extracurricular activities that strengthen their qualifications, to managing the dizzying array of financial-aid options, the multiyear road to college is too complicated and arduous for most students to travel on their own.

For thousands of students without such assistance, help may be close at hand. With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Vermont-based nonprofit group I lead, Foundation for Excellent Schools, has begun a nationwide search for 100 K-12 schools and 100 higher education institutions that will work together in one-on-one partnerships to reach at least 100 students who are in need of personal connections and guidance in each of the schools. To nurture aspirations, spark achievement, and foster college admission, the partnership will enable as many as 20,000 young people to benefit from six key activities during the next three years, including:

While all of these activities will work together to open up opportunities, I have no doubt that the ultimate impact of the effort will be to ensure that more young people discover the potential within themselves. And fortunately, many are already well on their way. At Wadleigh, where Ms. Harris' students were asked to write essays on "What college means to me," 7th grader Ivory Kennedy summed up the day's message perfectly with her determination to persevere and succeed despite any setbacks that might come her way.

Early-awareness workshops, to ensure that 6th through 9th graders and their families better understand the criteria for admission to college and the many doors that are opened when students earn college degrees. Built around the model established by Early College

Awareness Week, which will now become an annual event, these workshops will take place on an ongoing basis to encourage awareness and aspirations for a sustained period of time. *Student-to-student mentoring*, whereby undergraduate college students form one-on-one partnerships with K-12 students, high school students mentor middle schoolers, and middle school students mentor those in elementary school. By encouraging achievement and nurturing aspirations, these relationships will urge young people to continue taking the steps needed to reach and succeed in college.

Admissions and financial-aid information programs, through which higher education representatives will illuminate the many opportunities to receive extra help in paying for college.

Campus visits, shepherded by college students from similar backgrounds, to enable students to experience campus life firsthand.

Direct college-application assistance, through which students and young alumni from partnering colleges work with high school seniors to complete college applications.

Job shadowing and career-awareness activities, through which seniors from high schools participating in the program visit corporate partners to learn about and experience careers in business and industry.

"So now I have a chance to go to college," she wrote. "That makes me happy. Even if I don't succeed the first year I will keep trying and trying. Hopefully I can present my degree to my family and show them that I made it because I have high standards and beliefs. Besides, if I want to be the first African- American to find a cure for cancer, I have to attend college. I can do it, and others can too."

With a leg up from a mentor and the confidence to march forward, I have no doubt she'll succeed.

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