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After Affirmative Action

Educational outreach programs help minority students onto the college track

By Pamela Burdman

Watsonville, California

UNDER THE BAKING SUN in the courtyard of Alianza Elementary School, Cynthia Fernandez revealed her dream of becoming a doctor or dentist. Occasionally sliding from English into Spanish, the demure ten-year-old recalled the university visit that helped plant her aspiration -- and surprised her migrant worker parents, who had hoped she would become a supermarket cashier.

It began when Cynthia's class read a Spanish/English book called Kids Around the University, and she was impressed to learn that women can be scientists. Then they visited the University of California at Santa Cruz: "I saw many exciting things, a lot of things you can do when you get big," Cynthia said.

Cynthia's teacher, Ken Konviser, said the visits to UC Santa Cruz and nearby Cabrillo College seemed to transform his entire class of fourth and fifth graders. Few of the youngsters' parents speak English, and none are college grads. "You could almost see it with your eyes, a big change in perspective, a radical paradigm shift in terms of who they think they are and where they think they're going," said Konviser.

Cynthia doesn't know this, but her visit to UC Santa Cruz might never have happened -- and her medical ambitions might never have been kindled -- were it not for California's elimination of race-conscious admissions policies nearly five years ago. Since then, the University of California has more than doubled its budget for pre-college programs, such as the one that brought Cynthia to UC Santa Cruz, to more than \$150 million. Last year the university appointed former Santa Cruz Chancellor Karl Pister to a new Vice President for Educational Outreach position.



Watsonville, California, teacher Ken Konviser thinks outreach efforts have broadened horizons for his fourth and fifth graders.

In this brave new race-blind world, students like Cynthia are targeted for reasons other than race (typically they represent the first college-going generation in their family, or are students at low-performing schools), but many are minorities. The belief is that the programs, by emphasizing partnerships with K-12 systems that start in the early grades, will eventually bring more minorities into the college pipeline.

That is a goal that the University of California's Board of Regents wasted little time pursuing. In the same vote that struck down preferences at the nine-campus system, they resolved to seek "new directions and increased funding...to increase the eligibility rate of those disadvantaged economically or in terms of their social environment."

They also vowed to "achieve a UC population that reflects this state's diversity through the preparation and empowerment of all students in this state to succeed." If the outreach experiment succeeds in making UC a mirror of the state's diversity, Regent Ward Connerly, who led the drive to end racial preferences, and his allies will consider themselves vindicated.

Not only do the anti-affirmative action regents find outreach acceptable, several of them have become active supporters. "This is near and dear to my heart," said Regent Meredith Kachigian, a Republican appointee to the board. "Getting rid of affirmative action forced us to put our attention where it should be -- on getting all students ready for a college education."

It won't be an easy task, but elsewhere around the country, as public universities in several states are in various stages of the transition to race-blind admissions, similar ideas are surfacing:

Three years ago, retired Duke University historian John Hope Franklin, the leader of President Clinton's advisory panel on race, called for more programs that prepare low-income and first-generation students for college, stressing the importance of promoting diversity without racial targeting.

Last year, Lieutenant Governor Rick Perry of Texas, another state that no longer employs racial preferences, directed the state senate's education committee to study K-16 partnerships that help students prepare for college. A 1996 federal court ruling ordered Texas campuses to end preferences.

Universities in Washington state stopped using racial preferences after an anti-affirmative action referendum passed in 1998. In addition to seeking state dollars for outreach programs, the flagship University of Washington has received a \$9.7 million federal grant to run tutoring and support programs for middle school and high school students in the Yakima Valley, an area with a high proportion of American Indian and Latino students.

And last year, after a conservative legal group began scrutinizing its admissions policies, the

University of Virginia stopped giving black applicants extra points -- instead considering race as part of a "holistic" review. At the urging of its Board of Visitors, the school is seeking \$1.5 million from the state to bring promising minority and disadvantaged students to campus twice a year starting in the eighth grade.



New University of California outreach programs target elementary school pupils like Cynthia Fernandez, who hopes to become a doctor or a dentist.

"The universities never used to talk like this," said Ronald Stevenson III, founder of Break the Cycle, a math tutoring program for elementary school students. "They're helping us now like never before." Stevenson's program struggled along for more than ten years until UC Berkeley embraced it as part of the Berkeley Pledge outreach program.

The outreach umbrella includes a wide range of programs: Some motivate students to go to college, and advise them on how to get there; others, like Break the Cycle, supplement the school curriculum with tutoring; still others mentor and train teachers in anything from classroom management to writing instruction.

Such efforts have been around in earnest for at least 25 years, and, as Santa Cruz Vice Chancellor Francisco Hernandez likes to point out, UC began dabbling with outreach even earlier. Back in the 1970s the university briefly ran a "fifth class" beneath the freshman (or fourth) class to help students, including a significant number of Hispanics, to prepare for the university's entrance exam.

Despite more than two decades of experience with the current outreach programs, however, their effectiveness is not well established -- partly because few studies have been conducted, and partly because even when they are conducted, outcomes are difficult to measure. Even those programs that appear successful are often hard to replicate, because it is not clear why they work.

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"The evaluations are often puff pieces about how many kids went on to college, but there's no comparative evaluation, no use of control groups, so you don't know what happened to kids who didn't get the treatment," said

Michael Kirst, a professor of education at Stanford University who has researched outreach programs, including UC's.

Cliff Adelman, a senior researcher at the U.S. Department of Education, agreed. "You can't disparage those efforts," he said. "But when you ask what they add up to in terms of national impact, the highly successful programs are still 'creaming'" students who were already likely to succeed.

In a longitudinal study of 1982 high school graduates who were followed for 11 years, Adelman found that 60 percent of students who had participated in college prep programs entered higher education, compared

to only 50 percent of other students. But when it came to finishing their degrees, the students who had participated in outreach programs were no better off than the others.

One of the programs Adelman studied was the federal government's Upward Bound program, a model for many other outreach programs. "The turnover rate is horrendous," he said. "You add up the total hours the kids are spending, about 250 hours, and it looks pretty decent. But when you ask what's being done with the time, the number-one objective is the development of social skills. Social skills may help you get into college, but they certainly aren't going to help you get out."

These dubious successes have given rise to new approaches.

One involves partnering with entire schools to improve overall school quality instead of tacking on programs to help individual students after school, on weekends or during the summer. Unlike Upward Bound, the U.S. Department of Education's new GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) program focuses on middle schools, and requires universities to form partnerships with schools and community organizations.

Partly in response to a study by the research group Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), UC's outreach plan also reflects this new thinking. "The University can only accomplish its goal of enrolling and graduating increased numbers of well-prepared disadvantaged students if it does not focus exclusively on offering life rafts but also helps to save the ship," wrote the authors of the PACE report.

The system's outreach goals, drafted by a university task force and later adopted by state legislators, focus not just on students in outreach programs (those with life rafts) but also revolve around some 60 high schools with low UC-going rates (sinking ships) and their feeder schools. Most partner schools have high percentages of minority students.

But UC's goals go beyond helping students on to higher education; they entail making the students eligible to attend UC.

The university aims to double by 2003 the number of partnership school graduates and outreach program participants who meet the system's entrance requirements, and to increase by 50 percent those who are competitive enough to be admitted to the highly selective Berkeley and UCLA campuses. The state legislature endorsed those goals when it augmented the university's outreach budget by \$38.5 million.

Given the university's stringent entrance requirements, reaching those goals would mean bridging a well-documented school achievement gap between whites and Asians on the one hand and blacks, Latinos and Native Americans on the other. It is that gap that made racial preferences an issue at UC in the first place.

Nearly 80 percent of students in California who perform in the bottom quintile statewide are underrepresented minorities. In 1996, just 3.8 percent of Latino students and 2.8 percent of black high school graduates had the grades and test scores to qualify for UC. That compares with 12.7 percent of white students and 30 percent of Asian Americans. And with so few students qualifying on the undergraduate level, it becomes even harder to recruit substantial numbers of blacks and Latinos into professional school.



Katy Stonebloom and some of her elementary school pupils prepared "Kids Around the University," a Spanish-English book that tries to inform students from low-income and minority families about college.

Changing those eligibility rates has been elusive, particularly when the state remains among the bottom ten in per-student spending, and ranks lowest nationwide in the number of high school counselors per student.

The difficulties were evident when UCLA outreach officials met with teachers, counselors and principals from eight Los Angeles inner-city high schools at an all-day conference last fall. The district announced a new plan to monitor the schools to make sure promising students are taking college-prep courses.

The schools, known as the "Super Eight," are Los Angeles' most troubled. And UCLA Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Winston Doby has made them a special priority. But, perhaps in an acknowledgment that the state's numerical goals aren't attainable everywhere, UCLA hasn't dared sign them up as full partners, instead working with a small number of gifted students who take honors and advanced placement classes.

"The challenges in these schools are so great that in the short term I don't think we have the resources to turn the entire school around," said Doby. "Attracting individuals to hard-to-staff schools in very difficult neighborhoods is always going to be a challenge. Getting students to and from school without serious harm is, for some schools, an important objective. Their problems are myriad."

Dorsey High School, predominantly African American, is an example. Of the nearly 2,000 students, close to 400 live in foster care, and some 300 are being raised by grandparents or aunts. Last year, only nine of Dorsey's graduates scored above 1,000 on the SAT test, and just 15 were admitted to a UC campus.

At the Super Eight meeting, Dorsey Principal Nancy Rene voiced the frustration that many administrators were feeling. "Show me the schools where it's working, where people are really successful at overcoming the effects of poverty," she said. "I don't care where it is in the United States, I'll go."

"To be candid with you," said Bob Collins, assistant superintendent for the Los Angeles school district, "it has not been done in this country."

The difficulties in making change on the high school level have given rise to the theory that high school is too late to infect kids with the college bug. Hence, while the federal government used to channel its outreach dollars only into high school Upward Bound programs, GEAR UP begins in middle school. Based on the same solid hypothesis, other programs are starting in elementary school.

"They need to know why they have to learn fractions in third grade," said Katy Stonebloom, one of the teachers who started the Kids Around the University program (KATU). "There's anecdotal evidence that if kids don't get fractions in third grade, they won't get into algebra. If you don't get into algebra in eighth grade, you're already out of that college corridor."

Stonebloom has been taking her elementary school students on field trips to UC Santa Cruz for years, but in 1995 when she tried to find a textbook that taught elementary kids about college, she discovered that such a book had never been written. Determined to change that, her students set about interviewing students, professors and administrators at the university.

In 1996, around the time Stonebloom's students were finishing their book, UC officials were crafting race-neutral policies, and biologist M.R.C. Greenwood was coming on board as Santa Cruz' new chancellor. Greenwood and other administrators, who didn't share the regents' aversion to affirmative action, found themselves cornered by a policy that seemingly asked them to achieve racial diversity while eliminating their only tried-and-true tools for achieving it.

Determined to find new tools, Greenwood was wowed by Stonebloom's students when they came to campus to interview her for their book. "I thought it was fascinating because of the way in which they came to us," Greenwood recalled. "So frequently these things come from the university and we tell the school what they should do. This wasn't top-down. When we saw what they were writing, we thought it was wonderful, so we encouraged the school to do more than just mimeograph it."

Today, with help from the Kellogg Foundation and Bank of America, Stonebloom is on the Santa Cruz payroll and Kids Around the University has been published by the university in eye-catching color. At an ice cream party celebrating its publication, Greenwood gave the students who had worked on the book "certificates of early enrollment" contingent on their completing UC's minimum entrance requirements.

In addition to teaching kids about college life, the six-week KATU curriculum tells them, for example, how the number of math courses they take can influence their future earnings. A corps of teachers has been trained to work with the materials. This year, more than 12,000 children in some 140 elementary schools around the Monterey Bay region will be exposed to KATU. Some students in Merced are using it to help plan the new UC campus that will be built near their San Joaquin Valley city.

The KATU program is part of an outreach operation emanating from UC

Santa Cruz' off-campus Educational Partnership Center that has a multitude of activities going on in area schools.

On a recent Wednesday, for example, the same day Cynthia Fernandez was talking about her trip to UC Santa Cruz, a group of third-graders at Alianza wrote paragraphs about their recent visit to Cabrillo College. "I like the way they typewrite," said Crystal Diaz about the students she met in the college's computer lab. "I want to learn how to typewrite. I want to work in a business -- like being a lawyer or something like that."

Also that day, over in the library at nearby Edward A. Hall Middle School, Santa Cruz graduate Rico Dominguez entertained a group of seventh and eighth graders with his animated presentation about the courses they need to take in high school in order to attend a UC or California State University campus.

"In high school, there are honors classes, classes that make you work harder," Dominguez told them. "Does everyone know they're going to college at some point? I'm not saying you're all going to UCSC," said Dominguez. "I'm saying I want you to choose to go to UCSC, choose to go to Cal State, choose to go to Brown, choose what you want to do."

Dominguez' program, the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP) is for students who receive free lunches, whose parents didn't attend college, and who have grade point averages between 2.5 and 3.5 -- students who need some encouragement to stay on the college track.

The message seemed to be getting through. "What I want to do when I grow up is not to work in the fields like my mom and dad," said Alejandra, an eighth grader, after the session.

E.A. Hall Principal Ian MacGregor said he can't tell whether EAOP will help Alejandra escape farm work. "But boy, the kids sure are interested in it," he added. "It exposes them to college. It makes them feel special."

Later that afternoon, MacGregor and Dominguez went to Watsonville High School to meet with math and language arts teachers from the high school and various feeder schools. The teachers split into two groups: math and literacy. Already tired from the school day, they were fed pizza and bottled water, and were paid \$42 for attending the two-hour meetings.

The teachers formed a vertical team, and together with representatives from UC Santa Cruz, Cabrillo College and Cal State Monterey Bay, worked out the nuts and bolts of how to get more students ready for college. At this, their second meeting, the math team members compared notes about what's happening in their schools.



Cliff Adelman, of the U.S. Department of Education, says many outreach programs simply "cream" students who are already likely to succeed.

"Many of these communities have never had a vertical slice meeting before, where there's an opportunity to talk with someone who was teaching your kids two years ago," said Robinson. "We encourage that for the first few meetings. Then they start to take a closer look at the data for their specific schools and do some problem-solving about where the system itself is blocking kids...and where kids need extra support."

The concept, says Kath Robinson, the UC Santa Cruz regional coordinator for partnership schools, is modeled after the successful collaborative between University of Texas-El Paso and El Paso area schools.

Another Santa Cruz program, still in embryonic stages, is using the Internet to bring advanced placement courses to students whose schools don't offer them. KATU, EAOP, the AP initiative and other UC Santa Cruz programs are offered to all partnership schools.

Housing all these projects together at the off-campus Educational Partnership Center involved some rearranging of campus bureaucracies. But, according to the center's director Carrol Moran, now for the first time Santa Cruz outreach workers are working in a coordinated fashion, offering partner schools a coherent array of programs -- rather than being introduced to each other by school officials.

As momentum builds at Santa Cruz, and other UC campuses consider their model, administrators are brimming with enthusiasm. "As we started this I was less hopeful than I am today," said J. Michael Thompson, associate vice chancellor and admissions director at Santa Cruz. "I'm very optimistic about our ability to meet the legislature's goal."

Linda Hutcherson, principal of Washington Elementary School in Richmond, one of Berkeley's partner schools, is also optimistic. About two-thirds of Washington's students are African American, and another quarter are Latino. Three-quarters of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

In recent years, Break the Cycle, an after-school mathematics tutorial program, has helped raise Washington first graders' math scores from the 31st percentile before the program started to the 74th percentile last year. Second graders went from the 15th percentile to the 69th, and third graders rose from the 11th percentile to the 78th.

At a fall Break the Cycle graduation ceremony, the tutors handed out medals and trophies to dozens of students who had spent their after-school hours studying math and taking quizzes. A beaming Hutcherson praised their hard work, saying, "You are going to be the future graduates of UC Berkeley."

UC Chancellor Berdahl would have been shocked to hear that. "Are we going to change through outreach substantially the percentage of underrepresented minority kids who are going to qualify for Berkeley or UCLA?" he asked. "We have to say that's a very long-term and marginal-gain process."

With affirmative action, Berkeley boasted greater racial diversity than the rest of the system: The campus enrolled 23 percent underrepresented minorities, as opposed to 17 percent systemwide. Today, Berkeley is down to 13 percent, and without affirmative action, beating the system average is hardly likely.

The more realistic way to make a difference, said Berdahl, is to steer more students onto the road to college -- whether or not they end up at Berkeley or another elite school. "I think we probably will have a significant impact in terms of changing horizons of opportunity for these youngsters and fostering a sense of personal worth that is important," he said.

Pamela Burdman is a former higher education reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle.

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