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Case Studies

# From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College



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# Moises and Grady—A Case Study

## A supported and well-executed path to college

Securing admission to the right college and figuring out how to pay for it is a daunting and time-consuming process for even the most committed students, but the right road map and consistent support can make the difference between success and failure.

Two remarkable young men, Moises and Grady,<sup>1</sup> took this challenge on together, and their stories illustrate just how much effort is required for students to translate high aspirations into college attainment. They also illustrate that, in addition to academic qualifications and personal determination, students need strong parental support combined with structured support from high schools to undertake an extensive and effective college search. These best friends, the pitcher and the catcher on their varsity baseball team, were two of only five students in our longitudinal study of 105 students who left high school qualified to attend a very selective college, conducted a thorough college search, and then enrolled in the college of their choice.<sup>2</sup>

While these two young men were best friends, they were opposites in many ways. Moises, a first-generation Mexican-Puerto Rican, is easy-going with a confident smile that lights up a room. Grady is a driven and reserved African-American teen from a supportive family who rarely smiles and speaks with the precision of a network news anchor. Moises, despite his academic performance, says he is “*guilty of perhaps slacking off a little more than I should.*”

Grady, on the other hand, was so intensely focused that his friends worried about the pressure he put on himself to succeed. Both young men shared a commitment to education and had dreamed of going to college for as long as they could remember. While neither student had parents who graduated from college, their families expected their sons to attend college. Both students also had parents who worked in professional settings and knew how to work their social networks for important information about college, and Grady had two brothers who had gone on to four-year colleges.

Their drive to attend college started with the decisions they made early in high school. They chose to attend Kahlo High School (see *What a Strong College Culture Looks Like*, p.62), a high school with a record of sending graduates to good colleges, and applied to the rigorous International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Both students graduated in the top 10 percent of their class. Moises achieved a 4.6 weighted GPA and a 25 on the ACT; Grady achieved a 4.0 weighted GPA and a 27 on the ACT. This hard work made them eligible to attend a very selective university. It also distinguished them nationally from other top students. They both knew their hard work made them attractive college applicants.<sup>3</sup> As Moises explains:

“I know I can get into 95% of the colleges that I want to go to. But I want a full ride, or at least partial.”

For Moises and Grady, the push for high qualifications was not only to get into good colleges, but to make sure that they could afford it. Grady said he wanted to attend a

“really good school, because they have a lot of money to offer, because they have so many alumni that are making a lot of money.”

### Junior Year: Beginning their College Search

Like other successful students, Moises and Grady started making a college list in their junior year. They decided that they wanted to attend a first-rate college together where they could play baseball. They picked Stanford and Rice as their top choices, selected after watching the College World Series. They were impressed by the baseball teams and researched the schools’ academic

reputations. Not surprisingly, each student's college list expanded considerably when they began receiving information from colleges attracted by their high ACT scores. Moises was contacted by recruiters at Dartmouth and invited for a free summer visit. Grady also started exploring the University of Michigan because he and his father were fans of the football team.

### Summer Junior Year: Campus Visits

During the summer after junior year, successful students such as Moises and Grady start to hone their college preferences by visiting campuses. At the end of junior year, both young men hoped to take college trips to California and Texas. Neither student was able to visit any schools in California, but Moises and his family did visit Louisiana and Texas, taking a summer trip that included visits to Tulane, Rice and the University of Texas. Moises fell in love with Rice, because the tour made him feel at home. By contrast, he felt intimidated by large campuses and found the University of Texas too chaotic. Grady wasn't able to go on any college tours over the summer, and instead he spent his time contacting college representatives. By the end of the summer, Stanford and Rice were still at the top of Grady's list. He also was seriously considering the University of Michigan, the University of California-Berkeley, the University of Texas, and the University of Illinois.

### Senior Year: Applications, Prioritizing Colleges, and Financial Aid

Senior year is the time to kick the college search into high gear, so Moises and Grady started zeroing in on favorite choices and began working on their applications. For both young men, senior year was the time to sort out what they really wanted out of college. Moises wanted the best of both worlds: a great academic program and a top-ranked Division I baseball team. In the fall, Moises applied early to Rice. Recruiters from a few smaller colleges called offering him admission and special scholarships.

Grady decided early in his senior year he did not want to pursue baseball in college, and instead concentrated on schools with top-notch business programs. Grady's list—which he divided into sure-thing

schools, good-match schools, and reach schools— included four California and two Texas schools.

Both young men relied on at least one adult at their school for one-on-one support as they made these critical decisions. Grady discussed his college list with the school counselor, whose office he visited every day during lunch so that he could get some work done in quiet. Moises looked to his baseball coach for guidance:

“My coach is probably the biggest person who has made college an important part of my life... he is trying to give [the baseball team access to] many programs to get us noticed by colleges.”

Grady and Moises made college applications their highest priority, but it was a daunting task. They worked on applications during lunch and sometimes class. They wrote different essays for each application. They provided recommendations even when they were not requested. Moises proofread all of his recommendations, and when dissatisfied with the grammar of a math teacher's recommendation, promptly corrected the mistakes and returned it to her so that edits could be made before the recommendation reached his colleges. (See *Moises and Grady's Road to College*, p. 30.)

By February 1, Moises had mailed off applications to ten colleges nationwide. By this time, Grady had completed six applications, and the University of Michigan was his top choice. When asked why, Grady said Michigan offered one of the strongest business schools in the nation and a loyal, committed alumni base, which he saw as particularly important for his future:

“If I have to take out loans or whatever, I'll pay it back. Because if I go to a good school like University of Michigan, it'll get me into doors where I can make money coming out of college.”

Kahlo High School emphasized the necessary steps needed to finance college. While working on their applications, Moises and Grady also made sure they completed their FAFSA, scholarship, and institutional aid applications. They understood that a key step in the college application process is financial aid, and their high school emphasized this part of the process.

### Finishing Senior Year: Making their Final Decisions

When Grady and Moises received their spring acceptance letters, there was mixed news about their top-choice schools. Grady was admitted to the University of Michigan, but Moises did not get into Rice. Grady was not accepted to Stanford or Rice, but with those few exceptions, both young men were accepted everywhere else they applied.

While Grady was committed to Michigan, the \$40,000 price tag was a deterrent.<sup>4</sup> He and his parents had visited the campus, and everyone was excited for Grady to attend. He received federal financial aid but no other institutional aid. In the end, Grady and his parents decided that the significant burden of loans was a worthwhile trade-off for attending one of the best business schools in the country. Grady estimated he would be in debt at least \$60,000 upon graduation from college, but he believes the university will offer him the tools and resources he needs to pay this debt in the future.

Moises had a difficult decision to make, weighing his options among colleges and the financial aid packages they offered. He was offered a full ride to Truman State University in Missouri. He visited the University of Illinois and the University of Michigan but decided that both campuses were too large. His visit to a small, in-state liberal arts school was definitive.<sup>5</sup> He immediately felt at home and got personal attention from the baseball and soccer coaches and the admissions staff. After a day visiting the campus, Moises felt completely comfortable, easily finding classes he wanted to visit and giving directions to other prospective students:

“...there were two students from [a different CPS] high school and they were like, ‘Do you know where the admissions office is?’ and I was like ‘Actually I’m just a prospective student touring but...yeah I do.’ So I’m already getting the hang of it.”

Moises decided to attend this school despite not receiving as much financial aid as he hoped:

“They are giving me \$40,000 all four years, but it’s still going to cost me about \$20,000 a year, so I am trying to get it down to at least \$15,000. Truman was giving me the most, like \$12,000 a year. Michigan is giving me \$20,000 over four years...but that was pretty good because U of I only gave me \$4,000 for four years.”

### Success with a Caveat: Thriving at College but Stretched Financially

Moises and Grady ultimately ended up achieving what would be for many CPS students an unattainable goal: they finished high school highly qualified for college and they enrolled in good colleges, an alarmingly rare outcome in CPS, especially among minority males. Their ACT scores placed them in the top 10 percent of national test-takers and they graduated at the top of their class. They had the family and school support needed to apply to a wide range of colleges and ultimately ended up in colleges that matched their qualifications and offered them the college experiences they desired. At the same time, their college decisions would stretch them and their families financially.

Despite having the qualifications and characteristics that should have made them among the most highly recruited students in the nation, neither received a strong aid package from their top-choice colleges. However, because Moises and Grady and their families placed a high value on education, they were willing to make the sacrifices needed to pay for college. Ultimately, they both wanted to take full advantage of the doors opened by their hard work and academic qualifications, and attain their aspirations of receiving a degree from an elite college. Both young men made a successful transition to college; they enrolled in the schools they had planned to attend, moved into dorms, found clubs and extracurricular activities that suited them, made new friends, and delved wholeheartedly into their new academic careers with the same ambition and eagerness that made them each such a success.

*Endnotes for this case study can be found on page 65.*

# Maribel—A Case Study

## Working hard to what end?

Why would a student who loves learning and who aspires to complete a college degree decide not to attend college at all? Maribel illustrates many of the themes we observed in our interviews with students in our longitudinal study who decided not to attend college.

Maribel,<sup>1</sup> a hardworking Mexican-American student, immigrated to America in grammar school. She loved learning and cared deeply about her performance in her classes. During her academic career at Ellison High School, Maribel learned how to ask for help, manage a busy schedule, advocate for herself, and prioritize school above all else—all qualities that would make her a successful college student. Despite working at a fast-food restaurant 30 hours a week, Maribel typically spent more than three hours every night finishing her homework and earned the qualifications to attend a somewhat selective college. In her junior year, Maribel's English teacher commented:

“She is an EXTREMELY hardworking student. She struggles with her language skills both verbally and in her writing—but she is resilient. Though she is behind academically, I believe she could be capable of making the jump from going to a two-year college to a four-year college. A brief story about her: An [Illinois political figure] was [at an event] not too long ago. She went up to him, introduced herself, and told him she needed a job. He took her phone number and someone in his office contacted her. This story exemplifies the kind of determination she has!”

Maribel's goal was to be the first in her family to graduate from college. Her brothers had struggled in school. Although her parents supported the idea of college, they were not actively engaged in the college search and application process. She said she talked to her family about her plans: “*They say that if I go I will stay [in college]. Not like my brother. He went and after one semester left.*”

### Junior Year: Thinking About College, Worrying About the ACT

Like many students, Maribel struggled to understand the process by which students search for, apply to, and enroll in college. Yet, unlike many students, she was keenly aware of the importance of performing well in high school. She observed: “*It's important to learn more in high school, so that you can prepare more for college.*” Her academic preparation for college went beyond her coursework; she participated in a program that allowed her to earn college credit by taking a class in business administration at Northwestern Business College.

Maribel was very worried about the ACT. She borrowed an ACT prep book from the library and took an ACT prep class on Saturdays.

“We took a pretest and I got a 13. Oh my God, I was feeling horrible, but I know I can try and get at least an 18 or 19. I'm praying and studying more.”

Unfortunately, Maribel's prayers weren't answered; she scored 15 on the ACT. She received a higher score of 18 on the science subtest, but she was still devastated by her overall performance. She was intent on improving and, attributing her higher science score to intensive test preparation, she planned to study the ACT book all summer:

“I was expecting more but when I got the results . . . I feel like crying. The reading was hard. Oh my God, the reading was hard and boring. [For science] . . . that book said, ‘Read the table first, then go to the question, then read the passage.’ So I did that and science was my highest.”

Maribel stated that her main goal for senior year was to get good grades “*so I can go to a good college . . . and get an 18 on my ACT.*”

### Summer: Working and Exploring the City

By the end of the summer, Maribel looked ready to return to school and accomplish her goals. She had a productive summer, working full time at O’Hare Airport. She also spent two weeks visiting Chicago museums as part of a cultural program at her school. This program gave her the downtown experience and cultural exposure she craved.

### Senior Year: Releasing Her Dream

Suddenly, when Maribel returned to school in the fall, she stopped talking about her college dream, though she remained committed to her schoolwork. She performed well in her classes, and she brought up her weighted GPA from a 2.96 to a 3.18. Despite this investment in school, she announced that she didn’t want to go straight to college: “*I’m going to wait one year to have my money, ’cause I don’t want to work and go to college at the same time ’cause it’s too hard.*” She decided to work in a downtown office to make money for college.

It’s hard to understand why Maribel decided to give up on the idea of college, but her decision may have been shaped by several factors—including some of the same factors that we found influenced many of her peers to attend a two-year school. First, her performance on the ACT made her doubt her ability to gain access to college at all. She felt that her ACT scores made her ineligible for college, and she didn’t realize that, given her high grades, colleges might overlook her low ACT score.

Also, several of her teachers seemed to support her decision to delay college. While she never talked to a counselor, she did talk to her shop and French teachers:

“I talked to my teachers and they told me just wait a little bit ’cause after high school . . . the colleges are getting crowds of all the students. So you just wait some to gain more money.”

Finally, Maribel simply didn’t know how to pay for college. She knew she could get a job, given her work experience in high school, but she felt that working full time and going to school would be too much. She never talked to anyone about financial aid options, and she couldn’t answer any questions about applying for aid or filling out a FAFSA. While the whole postsecondary process—how to apply, knowing her college options, and applying for financial aid—overwhelmed Maribel, it was her wariness about the cost of college that sealed her decision. She explained:

“I went to this field trip at Wright College . . . a college fair. So I met one of the teachers from Wright College and he gave me a sample like how much it cost, the application and all this stuff. Then [my parents say], ‘Well, we’re not having enough money for your college.’”

At least one teacher tried to persuade her to go to college, but to no avail:

“They tell me, ‘Do not work, just go to college,’ like get a lot of student loans. But I don’t want student loans. I will pay them my whole life . . . [it costs] \$3,000 a semester for Wright College.”

Despite this decision, Maribel worked hard all year in her classes. She loved her history class, for which she wrote papers on immigration issues and completed a PowerPoint presentation on Latin American gangs in the United States. She took another course at Northwestern Business College for college credit and completed her senior research paper for her English class, all while working nearly 30 hours a week. Maribel’s English teacher described her as:

“The quintessential sweetheart . . . who tries really hard to be perfect and correct. She wants very much to succeed.”

Maribel left high school not yet having a downtown job but with plans to save up her money, eventually enroll in Wright College, and hopefully transfer to a four-year college.

# Jennie—A Case Study

## Paralyzed by the fear of choosing the wrong college

Why do some students take themselves out of the four-year college planning process? Does this only happen to students with low grades and test scores? Jennie, a student with strong qualifications for college, shows some common features of college aspirants who made an early decision to attend a two-year college.

Making the right choices about college can seem like a terribly risky venture, even for very smart young people. Jennie,<sup>1</sup> a Chicago-born Latina, is an extremely bright, hardworking student who completed a rigorous IB program at Silverstein High School. She was a candidate for 12-year perfect attendance, maintained a cumulative weighted GPA of 3.84, and scored 21 on the ACT. Jennie was also involved in cheerleading, drama, science club, debate team, and the National Honor Society. She was thinking about majoring in theater in college, but she also considered law. She seemed a little embarrassed by her career preference, saying, *“This may sound stupid, but I want to go into acting.”*

Jennie lived with her mother, father, and older brother. Although her parents never attended college, her older brother attended a local community college, and several members of her extended family had some college experience. Her parents supported her college goals and consistently pushed her to attend a four-year college.

### Junior Year: Searching for the Right Path

Managing the college search process left Jennie feeling overwhelmed and confused. The whole process seemed risky and stressful. She worried incessantly about college costs and feared she would waste her family’s money if she ended up in the wrong college. Like many students, she was also convinced she needed to decide on a career before she could make a college list. These two ideas contributed greatly to her stress in searching for the right college:

*“That’s pretty much how you’re spending the rest of your life . . . so I find it’s a pretty big decision.”*

Jennie experienced “sticker shock” when she considered the costs of four-year colleges. Her father was paying for her brother to attend a community college, and Jennie knew that those costs would pale in comparison to the costs of the four-year schools she considered attending. She feared further burdening her family financially:

*“They are only paying because it’s a good community college. It’s only \$6,000 a year . . . compared to some of the other colleges, that’s nothing.”*

Jennie also seemed to lack any broad understanding of the kinds of colleges to which she could apply. The only college she mentioned was Columbia College (in Chicago, a nonselective four-year school), because she had seen a presentation by college representatives at her high school and learned that Columbia had a fine arts program. Jennie wasn’t talking to anyone at her school about the search process, although she said her counselors stressed the importance of the ACT. The science club visited the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, but Jennie said she didn’t like the campus.

### Fall Senior Year: Overwhelming Confusion and Anxiety

In her senior year, Jennie’s college search never really got off the ground. Her college application activities were unfocused and disorganized, which left her feeling incredibly anxious. Jennie gathered some college information on her own. She attended her school’s mandatory college fair and received some emails from colleges, but she lacked any guidance on how to structure an organized search for four-year colleges. She talked often with family members about the strengths



and weaknesses of various community colleges in the area, even as they were discouraging her from attending a two-year school. She relied largely on the Internet for information, and she became interested in DePaul University after learning about its theater program on a website. She thought DePaul was a good fit because she could fall back on other majors if drama didn't work out. Jennie seemed paralyzed in searching for schools, and by fall of senior year she reported that she had not talked to a single teacher or counselor about her plans.

"I have no idea. I want to go to college, but I'm at the point [where] I don't know what I want to be. I don't know what I want to do."

### Winter Senior Year: Finding a Low-Risk Solution

Jennie did apply to DePaul, but she decided early in the winter of her senior year that it would be best to start off at Moraine Valley Community College. The sudden decision to go to a two-year school was a fairly common phenomenon, especially for students at Silverstein, even for students with strong college qualifications like Jennie's (see *A Qualitative Look at Students Who Became "Early Two-Year" College-Goers*, p. 39). Jennie just didn't know what to do with her life:

"Figuring out what I want to do, that's my problem . . . I might as well just go to a community college . . . Everyone kept telling me, 'You don't have to worry the first two years about what you want to do, because it's all the same [classes].' I just have to make sure the credits will transfer."

Jennie's family was unhappy with her decision to attend a two-year college:

"[My mom and brother] say that I worked too hard these four years with IB, and I can do better than that. But I don't know. I say, I'm saving them money."

### Spring Senior Year: Sticking with Her Plan

Jennie's father was paying for his older son to go to community college, and Jennie was insistent that she not take out any student loans. She ultimately was accepted to DePaul, but she completely ruled out that idea when she saw her financial aid package included \$10,000 in loans.<sup>6</sup> Her father finally relented: "*My dad didn't want to do any of the loans.*" It is unclear whether Jennie ever filled out her FAFSA. Her acceptance letter from Moraine Valley asked her to complete a financial aid application, but she still couldn't answer questions about financial aid. She couldn't say for sure whether or not she had filled out a FAFSA, and she couldn't describe what the process entailed.

At the end of senior year, Jennie admitted that her college application process could have been better guided and executed. She said part of the problem was that she was pushed by her teachers to complete her highly challenging culminating projects for her IB coursework, but nobody at school pushed her to complete her college applications. In fact, Jennie never spoke one-on-one with a teacher or counselor about her college plans:

"I needed to be pushed more. In the IB program, with all the homework and everything else, I was more focused on that than trying to apply for college. [Applying to colleges] would be on my weekends if I had time."

By the end of her senior year, Jennie wasn't sure she had made the right choice to attend Moraine Valley, but at least it was a choice that didn't seem risky. By the fall after graduation, Jennie was enrolled at Moraine Valley, though she was worried she might have to transfer to one of the City Colleges of Chicago due to cost. Even though she said that college was easier than high school, Jennie said she was enjoying her classes, professors, and college experience at Moraine Valley.

# Sabrina—A Case Study

## The easy road doesn't always lead where you want it to

What happens to students who leave high school with a clear plan for attending college but never enroll in the fall? Sabrina, a highly qualified student, shows how becoming too focused on one college option can pose a problem over the summer.

When faced with the daunting task of applying to very selective colleges, even the most highly qualified students can stumble. Sabrina,<sup>1</sup> an African-American student with a kind and easygoing nature, had her pick of colleges across the country. She graduated from Kahlo High School with a 25 on the ACT and a weighted GPA of 3.77. Sabrina always chose the most challenging courses, while also working 30 hours a week. She planned to attend college and pushed herself academically.

### Junior Year: Schoolwork and Grand Plans

In her junior year, Sabrina was thinking strategically about how to impress colleges. She focused on her ACT scores and her classes, and she planned a rigorous course schedule for senior year. She was disappointed with her ACT score of 25 because she was shooting for a 27 or 28. She considered retaking the test but worried about a lower score. Although she described several courses as easy, Sabrina was engaged in her classes, particularly algebra/trigonometry and honors British literature. She loved learning how to improve her writing:

“[The teacher] gives us essays, maybe one or two a week, so you keep writing essays, and she keeps correcting them. By the end of the year, I really think I'll be prepared for college.”

Despite earning such high grades, Sabrina always felt she needed to work harder. She admitted she worked harder in more challenging classes and craved the rigor of AP courses. She knew that AP courses would give her an advantage in the college admissions process and help her earn college credit: *“I feel that it's steering me towards college. When I go into college*

*next year with all those AP classes, I think I'll start off a semester ahead.”*

Sabrina lived with her mom and sisters, who fully supported her college plans. Her older sister helped her select colleges and pushed her to complete applications on time. Her mother was equally involved in the process. Sabrina knew she was qualified to attend almost any college in the country and never limited her search. She described her ideal college as one with a large campus, and she preferred to attend college with a friend. However, Sabrina wanted to keep her options open. Sabrina's older sister had graduated from the University of Illinois, and Sabrina expressed some interest in that school. But because Sabrina wanted to expand her horizons, she did not rule out leaving the Midwest. Both she and her mother felt it was an important part of the college experience to leave home for a new and independent experience. By the end of junior year, Sabrina planned to apply to three Illinois schools, along with New York University, Duke, the University of California–Berkeley, and Yale, *“just to see if I can get in.”*

### Fall Senior Year: New Direction for an Exciting Search

Sabrina's college search changed in a significant way when her school nominated her for a prestigious four-year, full-tuition scholarship for urban students. The scholarship, which sends students to some of the nation's most esteemed colleges, also provides an extensive pre-college preparation and leadership training program. For Sabrina, this meant a new direction for her college search—a new list of prestigious schools to consider and the possibility of a free education.

As she moved on to the second round of interviews for the scholarship, Sabrina focused on the schools she could attend with the scholarship. Her favorite

was Pomona College in California. Over the summer, she visited a friend who was attending Pomona on the same scholarship and fell in love with the campus. Still, she had not ruled out applying to Duke and Yale.

Sabrina's life changed in another significant way when she got a new job that required her to work six days per week and commute up to two hours each way, leaving little time for her schoolwork. Her intense workload may have stemmed from needing to feel financially independent from her family. A teacher commented that Sabrina may have felt obligated to assume "emotional and physical responsibilities at home," causing Sabrina to choose to work long hours at her job and thereby escape those responsibilities. Sabrina embraced the challenge of her rigorous course-work, but faced incredible pressure balancing work and school demands. Sabrina's college applications seemed to suffer the most:

"When I get home, it's like 12 or 1 in the morning and I'm not thinking about my college applications. I'm thinking, 'Oh, I got to go to school tomorrow, let me do some homework.' And then do it all over again the next day."

By early November, Sabrina had gathered applications. She was thinking about her essays, but she hadn't started working on them. It is unclear how much she utilized her counselor; Sabrina's opinion about her helpfulness changed across interviews. Moreover, it seemed she had no adult ally to assist her in navigating the college search process. She worried about finding time to get all the essays done, and she wondered how she would respond to some of the less traditional essay prompts: *"One essay is like, 'If you were a color, what color would you be?' What if I said the wrong color? What if I chose gray, and [the college] thought, 'Oh, that's bad.'"*

Sabrina pinned all her hopes on the scholarship, which would mean no more agonizing about applications and college costs. She would only have to complete one application, to Pomona, where she would have automatic admission and full financial aid to a school she knew she'd like. Sabrina put off working on other applications and waited for news of the scholarship, which she expected in mid-December.

### Winter Senior Year: **Crushing News, Grabbing a Lifeline**

Sabrina didn't receive the scholarship, leaving her no fallback options for college. While trying to work nearly full time and succeed in rigorous courses, Sabrina's long list of schools disappeared. She then scrambled to find time to complete a few applications to state schools. Ultimately, Sabrina was unable to balance her class assignments, college applications, and work schedule:

"I'm being lazy. I just keep seeing those essays. I'm like, OK, I'm gonna get back to that! And then . . . I just feel like I don't have enough time in the day."

By February, Sabrina had stumbled into a new plan. A liberal arts school in Florida sent her a letter of acceptance and offered her a full-tuition scholarship, and Sabrina jumped at the opportunity.<sup>5</sup> The university was an attractive option, since it did not require an application fee, essay, or recommendations. Sabrina used the Internet to "tour" the campus and "watch" a class, but she never visited the school. She talked about completing other applications, but never followed through. Sabrina had a new college lifeline, and so she focused exclusively on this plan.

### Spring Senior Year: **All Her Eggs in One Basket**

Sabrina had been accepted with a full scholarship to the Florida school without applying.<sup>7</sup> She finally filled out her FAFSA in the spring because it was required for her scholarship. She also applied for several scholarships late in the year, but she was counting on the university's scholarship.

Unfortunately, in the months after graduation, the school rescinded her scholarship, ostensibly because she received a D in her journalism elective her final semester. Sabrina had applied to no other colleges and never seriously pursued other financial aid. She was out of options. In the fall after graduation, Sabrina began a new retail job downtown and it appeared she had no further plans to attend college the next year.

# Marco—A Case Study

## How students get lost over the summer

What happens to students who leave high school with a clear plan for attending college but never enroll in the fall? Marco demonstrates that even students with stellar college qualifications and a strong drive to complete a thorough college planning process are at risk of their plans falling through over the summer.

Marco<sup>1</sup> is an intelligent young man who completed the IB program at Ellison High School. A first-generation Mexican-American student, he was among the top five students in his class with a weighted GPA of 4.05 and a 25 on the ACT. Marco participated in a prestigious citywide fellowship that allowed students to travel to different states to develop new ideas for leadership programs in the Chicago Public Schools. Marco easily earned the respect of his teachers. His English teacher described him as:

“. . . an exceptional young man. I am confident he is motivated enough to be successful in all his endeavors. While working with him for two years, I have found him to be one of the most considerate and genuinely kind people I have met.”

### Junior Year: Great Ambition

Marco's ambition to attend college never flagged, from the first interview to the last. He wanted to study engineering, and he planned to apply to Purdue University, Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. Marco was so committed to getting a college degree that he was willing to attend college in Mexico if he couldn't get enough financial aid to attend college in the United States.

Marco was a highly engaged student who always felt challenged and supported by his IB teachers. He also felt they gave him good guidance about his future. He made his college list by asking his teachers about the best area schools for engineering, and he then confirmed their advice with his own Internet research.

Marco set high expectations for his senior year: He wanted to achieve a 27 on the ACT, finish his college applications by fall, and receive an IB diploma—the equivalent of one year's worth of coursework at most colleges and a rare feat for students at Ellison. Though Marco's ACT score was the highest in his school, he was dissatisfied and planned to take the test again. Like many IB students, Marco was worried about the volume of work he faced in the fall. The IB program requires students to complete a body of work throughout senior year, including written projects, oral presentations, and culminating exams. For this reason, Marco planned to complete his college applications over the summer and submit them as soon as colleges started taking applications, which he expected was in early fall. He detailed this strategy: *“I should get all my acceptance letters or rejection letters by October or November, so I can spend the rest of the year just looking for scholarships and financial aid.”*

### Fall Senior Year: Executing the Plan

At the start of senior year, Marco was working diligently on his college applications and nearly done with several that he planned to submit to meet a November 1 priority admission deadline. Though he was less certain about his plans to study engineering than he had been the year before, his first choice was now Georgia Tech, which he had heard about from a coworker. Marco thoroughly researched each college with visits or calls to admissions staff. He knew what he liked about each school, as well as the qualifications for admission.

Marco's mother was very proud of her high-achieving son and excited about his plans to become an engineer. Marco said his mom would worry if he went to college

out-of-state, but she would support him: “*She knows I’m going to do fine at school.*” When asked about support at school, Marco again said that he frequently talked about college with his teachers: “*They guide me toward the school that’s going to be best for me.*” However, Marco hadn’t spoken to a counselor; in fact, he didn’t know who his counselor was.

### Winter Senior Year: Losing Steam

In winter of senior year, Marco was on track with his college applications but uncertain about his major and career. He became interested in medicine because a few friends at work were in medical school. He thought he would like that kind of major and career. Marco submitted applications to five Midwestern schools, ultimately deciding that Georgia Tech and Texas A&M were too far away.

Marco encountered two barriers to his college plans during winter of his senior year. First, he felt he had to focus almost exclusively on his IB coursework and exams. Second, he had a very hard time figuring out what to do about financial aid. He had looked at the FAFSA but had yet to fill it out as of February, explaining that he felt very confused about how to organize both his and his parents’ taxes. Marco was diligently saving money from his part-time job and seeking independent scholarships. He said his college selection would be determined by cost, but he still was not sure about his top choice.

### Spring Senior Year: A School Out of Nowhere

By the end of senior year, Marco had decided to attend the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), one of the best-rated engineering schools in the state. This was the first time he had mentioned the school, which “*popped out of nowhere and gave me a full ride.*” He planned to study either computer or aeronautical engineering. Marco also was accepted to Loyola, DePaul, UIC, and the University of Illinois. Northwestern’s initial acceptance was rescinded based on his first-semester grades, which Marco said was not a big deal because Northwestern was out of his price range. Marco said IIT offered him the best aid package of all his schools: “*IIT was giving me \$32,000. I just needed*

*8 or 12 more, so I’m getting that from FAFSA or [a] student loan.*”<sup>8</sup> However, he also mentioned that he was “still working” on his FAFSA. Marco hadn’t ruled out attending Wright City College for two years and then transferring to a four-year college.

### After Senior Year: Not Taking the Risk

Marco never enrolled in IIT. Instead, he decided to attend Wright and hoped to transfer to Northwestern after two years. Marco explained that he did not want to attend an engineering-focused school because he was uncertain about studying engineering.<sup>9</sup> When contacted in the fall, Marco had stopped attending classes at Wright because it “*didn’t feel like college.*” He decided to take a year off and reevaluate his plans for college, hoping to enroll in a four-year college the following fall.

It’s hard to understand why such a bright and enterprising young man would decline a full-tuition scholarship at a competitive four-year college to attend a community college. Yet, in retrospect, a few things stand out from his interviews. First, like many first-generation college-goers in the study, his college choice was intractably linked to his career interests. When he became uncertain about his career interests, he became convinced his college choice no longer made sense. Second, while he was offered scholarship money from IIT, he did not appear to have adequately completed his FAFSA and other financial aid paperwork, which might have jeopardized his scholarship or left him in a position of not being able to cover all of the expenses of a college education.

Finally, while he counted on his teachers for support and information, Marco appeared never to have had an extended conversation with any adult about his college plans. He never discussed with a supportive, knowledgeable adult his confusion about certain aspects of postsecondary education—how college majors relate to career choices, how to fill out a FAFSA, and possible classroom differences between four-year and two-year colleges. For many students, having to choose one college out of a field of thousands feels too risky. For Marco, facing these three obstacles in combination left him unable to make any choice at all.

## Chapter 2: Case Study Endnotes

- 1 All names of students and high schools in the case studies in this report are pseudonyms.
- 2 For more information on how the qualitative study was conducted, see Appendix B.
- 3 Both students' ACT scores placed them above their minority counterparts who graduated with high class ranks. The ACT average score is 19.2 and 20.9 for African-American and Latino students, respectively, who graduated in the top quarter of their class in 2005. See ACT 2005 National Score Report, data tables, available online at [act.org](http://act.org).
- 4 Although Moises and Grady appear to have an excellent understanding of financial aid and the aid packages offered to them by different schools, it is important to note that all reports of financial aid packages in the case studies in this report are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college.
- 5 In some cases, such as those of Moises and Sabrina, revealing a student's college choice would compromise his or her anonymity. College choice is kept confidential in these cases.
- 6 All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college. Jennie, for example, might not have actually properly filed her FAFSA, making it unclear what that \$10,000 in loans actually refers to.
- 7 All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college.
- 8 All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college. It's possible, for example, that Marco reported an offer of a large institutional scholarship, but hadn't actually received his Financial Aid Award Letter yet.
- 9 What Marco might not have known is that IIT offers a variety of majors outside of engineering, including biology (as well as many other sciences that could've prepared him for medical school), English, liberal arts, and business.
- 10 Though none of these schools are selective enrollment schools, one did have a long-standing legacy of sending many students to college.
- 11 For more information on these measures, see *How We Measure High School College-Going Culture*, p. 45.

# Clara—A Case Study

## Making her hard work pay off all by herself

Can it be assumed that smart, motivated students can manage the postsecondary planning process just fine on their own? Clara shows that, when it comes to college planning, even the best students in a school can go almost unnoticed by adults.

From the first semester of her freshman year until the day she walked across the stage at graduation, Clara<sup>1</sup> was the one of the top students in her class at Ellison High School. She graduated from the IB program with a weighted GPA of 4.7 and an ACT score of 24. Her stellar high school performance afforded her the opportunity to attend not only a very selective school but almost any college or university in the country. Clara's teachers confirmed her academic ability. Her English teacher described her as: "A rare individual. The only problem or weakness I see in this student is the pressure she places on herself." Her math teacher said: "She has extremely high expectations of herself and has a strong work ethic that allows her to meet her high standards. At the same time, she always helps her peers." Clara was a prolific writer of fiction and poetry, for which she won numerous awards, including some scholarships. In the minds of her teachers, peers, and family, there were few doors not open to this remarkable young woman.

Clara lived with both her parents and younger sister. Although Clara's parents, who are of Puerto Rican descent, had virtually no experience with college, Clara made it clear her mother was her greatest ally in college planning. Clara's mother insisted that Clara attend a "good school," but neither Clara nor her mother was sure what schools are considered "good."

### Junior Year: An Active but Uninformed College Search

During the spring of her junior year, Clara was clear about her intent to go to a four-year college but had a hard time describing her ideal college. She did, however, know that she wanted to stay in Chicago so she could continue to live at home and that she preferred a small college. And while Clara had never taken an art class

in high school, she wanted to study art and design. When asked why she said:

"I'm not really sure what [graphic design] consists of. I just know it's like you're designing. There's this website and you make your own pages with all these codes, and I did it and I liked the results. And that's why I really want to go into graphic design."

By the end of junior year, Clara's plan was to study art or design at a school where she could take a variety of courses. A teacher had encouraged her to attend a more comprehensive college than an art and design school. Clara liked this idea because it would allow her to experiment with different kinds of courses. In the end, though, her list of colleges was the same as many of her less-qualified peers, including schools like Northeastern Illinois University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Loyola University. Clara wasn't excited about attending any of them.

### Summer: Doing Her Research Campus by Campus

Clara's mother was as active as Clara in the process of college search and selection. Every time Clara mentioned a college that she was interested in attending, her mother insisted on driving to the campus for a tour and even sitting in on classes. Clara and her mother visited several colleges over the summer, and Clara completed a week of classes at the Illinois Institute of Art.

### Fall Senior Year: Making Up Her Mind

In the fall of her senior year, Clara continued a college search that was extensive, but not well directed. Clara spoke casually with her teachers about her college plans, but she had not spoken with a counselor or had a

serious conversation about her college choices with any educator at her school. Clara reported an incident in the counseling office when she was trying to figure out the difference between official and unofficial transcripts:

“Everyone’s so grouchy . . . in the [counseling] office. I guess I can understand, because they wouldn’t remember one single application, but I don’t know . . . they could be more approachable.”

Clara invested significant time and energy in completing applications to about eight schools. Many of Clara’s peers in the IB program struggled to balance the demands of rigorous IB culminating projects and the college application process. Clara got everything done on time—even submitting applications for Loyola and Columbia College in Chicago (a nonselective four-year college) by the priority deadlines—without her school work suffering. In the fall, Clara said she planned to attend Columbia “*for sure*.” She toured the school, enjoyed the atmosphere and downtown location, and knew she could study graphic design.

#### Winter Senior Year: Changing Her Mind

During her winter interview, Clara said she changed her mind and decided to “*definitely*” attend Loyola, again based largely on having toured the campus and sat in on a class there, which she enjoyed. She was accepted to Loyola and Columbia, and Loyola offered her a merit-based scholarship to cover some of her tuition. Though Clara had no problem completing her college applications, she was overwhelmed by the process of applying for financial aid. She was familiar with tax documents because she helped her parents complete their forms, but she was confused by certain questions on the FAFSA. Clara was confident she’d figure it out and complete her financial aid applications by April or May. She never met with a counselor.

#### Spring Senior Year: Changing Her Mind Again

Clara changed her mind about which college to attend one more time before graduation, and finally planned to attend a small, in-state liberal arts school ranked as somewhat selective.<sup>2</sup> Spring of her senior year was the first time she ever mentioned this school:

Interviewer: [That school] is not on this list. Last time you said Loyola, UIC, and Columbia . . . [laughing] What happened?

Clara: [Laughing] [My mom and I] passed by the school, and I’m like, ‘This is a nice school. What is that?’ So my mom started looking up stuff. She [told me], ‘I think you’d like this school.’ And so we looked at it, the web page and then we signed up for the tour. I really love this school.

Clara was one of the top five students in her graduating class, but she never considered applying to a very selective college. Apparently, no one steered her to one either. Her teachers recognized that she was a remarkable young woman, but she never spoke to a counselor and never seriously discussed her plans for the future with any adult at her school.

Not surprisingly, Clara was accepted at all the institutions to which she applied. Though her confusion over financial aid looked like it might have been a serious stumbling block when she discussed it in February, Clara ended up figuring out financial aid, presumably with the help of her new college, and she did end up receiving enough federal, institutional, and private scholarship money to make her college education affordable for her and her family.<sup>3</sup> Clara’s IB coursework and test scores helped place her into advanced freshmen courses at her college. In the fall, she was thoroughly engaged as an English major and very happy with her college choice.

With the help of an exceptionally involved parent, Clara managed to find her way to a school that made her feel at home, took care of her as a first-generation college student, and promised to support her academic ambitions throughout college. It is also apparent that this choice was arrived at through no small amount of luck, with Clara and her mother accidentally happening upon a college that proved a good fit for Clara. With such limited guidance from her school, it is easy to imagine how Clara’s story might not have had such a positive ending.

*Endnotes for this case study can be found on page 96.*



# Sakaarah—A Case Study

## The path to finding the best “fit”

What is the difference between college match and college fit? Sakaarah provides an important example of how thoughtful, qualified, and well-supported students think about finding a college, considering match to be one, but not the only, component of college fit.

Sakaarah<sup>1</sup> knew exactly what she wanted from a college: a full-tuition scholarship and a strong premedical program. A future physician, Sakaarah is a bright African-American teenager who completed Kahlo High School’s rigorous IB program. She maintained a weighted GPA of 3.5, earned an ACT score in the mid-20s, and stayed active after school playing softball, launching a dance group in her community, and volunteering at a local nursing home. As a well-rounded, academically strong candidate, Sakaarah had access to attend at least a selective college. She stressed that she always strived for the best grades, starting when she was a preschooler, and she put the same effort into her college planning.

### Junior Year: Already on Target

Sakaarah’s list of colleges was more extensive than those of her peers, including Northwestern University, Iowa State, the University of Michigan, Washington University in St. Louis, and the University of Chicago, all colleges known for producing students ready for medical school. Adults at Sakaarah’s school expected her to succeed. When asked if her teachers knew about her future plans, she responded, *“Everybody knows I plan to be a [doctor], especially my biology teacher; that’s why she pushes me so hard.”*

Sakaarah understood that the road to such a strenuous career was long and challenging, but she also knew she had the ambition and support needed to get there. Sakaarah’s family invested a great deal of hope in her success after graduation and was very supportive of her plans to study medicine. In addition to tremendous support from her parents, she received guidance from an aunt and other family members who had attended college. Her aunt steered her toward Northwestern, her alma mater.

Sakaarah herself had an eloquent answer to the question of why she wanted to go to college:

“Without knowledge, you have no power. I know it sounds cliché, but that is the truth. No one can ever take knowledge away from you . . . [without] that, you will never prosper. I will still be stuck in the same mental [place as] high school, and that’s not good for the future . . . once you get older, you need to open your mind and broaden your horizons . . .”

Sakaarah thought carefully about finding a college that was a good fit for her, and she considered any college a realistic option, given her qualifications. This meant, however, that she would have to do a lot of investigating on her own. Sakaarah was very clear about her desire to attend medical school and achieve a specialty in obstetrics. She wanted to attend a college known for its strong premedical program and conducted extensive research using a college guidebook. She describes her research process:

“I have a huge brochure of all the colleges in the United States. The majority of the colleges that are in the brochure send me letters, and the ones that don’t send me letters I call the number in the book and talk to people that actually go there and then they email me and I email them back. Then they give me brochures and DVDs with information on it about their school, like a virtual tour.”

### Summer: Careful Research and Attention to Detail

Though Sakaarah worked full time over the summer, she still made time for her college search. She toured Northwestern and the University of Illinois at

Urbana-Champaign, and at each institution, she strategically chose options that allowed her to experience the school's premedical programs. She didn't have time to visit out-of-state schools; instead she completed "virtual tours" of the out-of-state colleges she was interested in attending. She also retook the ACT.<sup>4</sup>

### Fall Senior Year: Executing the Plan

By fall of senior year, Sakaarah had completed applications to the University of Michigan, the University of Illinois, and Washington University (her top choice). She also planned to apply to at least three more schools, including Northwestern and Iowa State. She carefully completed her applications and knew which schools required essays, personal statements, or writing samples. She secured recommendations for most of her applications. Because she felt it would reflect well on her as a premedical applicant to have a recommendation from a chemistry teacher, she reconnected with her former chemistry teacher who no longer taught at Kahlo.

### Winter Senior Year: Already Accepted, Working on Money

By February, not only had Sakaarah finished all her applications but she already had been offered several acceptances. She'd also already been offered full-tuition scholarships from several historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), including a small HBCU in the South, which she described as her "Number Two" school.<sup>2</sup> She was accepted to her top choice, Washington, and was waiting to hear from Northwestern and Michigan. Sakaarah recognized that some students instinctively jump at the first scholarship offered, but she wanted to make an intentional college choice based on more than just money. She knew she had given herself the best access to aid possible; she had filed her FAFSA by February and was well informed about the different kinds of federal, institutional, and scholarship aid she could expect to receive. She also knew that it was important to wait to hear from all of her schools before making a decision. She hoped to find a school that would support her financially, but also fit her personal, academic, and social needs. Because Washington did not offer Sakaarah a lot of scholarship money, she was increasingly leaning toward the small HBCU:

"[The HBCU] has a small campus, but [there's] still so much to do. They have just about every sorority, fraternity, and club. And my cousin, she's a graduate [of that school], and she really, really liked it. I visited her a couple of years ago, and I liked it then . . ."

This school grabbed Sakaarah's attention because she could excel academically and get the personal attention she needed to realize her dreams. Sakaarah said, "I like the atmosphere and the people and the class structure. I work better when I get one-on-one from teachers, so that's what I was going for."

### Spring Senior Year: Reinforcing Her Decision

After visiting the HBCU with her mother over spring break, Sakaarah was completely sold. She loved the campus, and in the end, she received a full-tuition scholarship.<sup>5</sup> While visiting the campus, she also sat for a personal interview, a requirement for a specific institutional scholarship she was eventually awarded. After staying in the dorms, talking to students, and visiting classes, she became convinced this was the place for her. The school also fell in line with her professional goals, because of its track record of sending black college students on to medical school:

"They graduated the most black doctors, so that's a plus. And the teachers are pretty much like our teachers here—they're crazy. I was in one class and the girl didn't come to that class, so the teacher took the whole class to her dorm room and woke her up."

As of her freshman year, Sakaarah couldn't have been happier with her choice. She was taking as many classes as possible, earning nearly all As, holding down a part-time job at her school's library, and participating in a hospital internship. She has met several nurses, doctors, and other practitioners in the hospital's obstetrics unit, and she is using their expertise to consider many different routes towards a career in that field.

When it came to her college search, Sakaarah did not limit her options to colleges in the area or those she heard about, nor did she become consumed with attending the most prestigious university. Instead, Sakaarah found a home in the college that fit her best.

# Javier—A Case Study

## When schools talk about college, students listen

How closely do students listen to the messages schools convey about postsecondary education? Javier, a quiet teen with a strong drive to attend college and excellent academic qualifications, illustrates how first-generation college-goers depend on their schools to provide postsecondary guidance.

A Mexican-American student born and raised in Chicago, Javier<sup>1</sup> graduated from Silverstein High School with a 3.95 weighted GPA and a 21 on the ACT, earning him access to a selective college. Javier—with an easygoing nature and genuine desire to learn—thrived in the classroom. His teacher described him as “very gifted . . . his reading, writing, and composition skills are superior. He is focused, motivated and a true pleasure to have in class.” Like many other well-qualified students, Javier managed to apply to multiple colleges, but without guidance, this wasn’t enough to ensure he would consider colleges that matched his qualifications.

### Junior Year: Seeking the Right Information

Javier and his entire family expected that he would attend a four-year college. He believed college would make life easier. Javier’s drafting teacher, a former architect, often talked to the class about college requirements and deadlines. Javier was very invested in this class and spoke at length with his teacher, who provided him with career guidance, including information about internship opportunities. From that point on, Javier was set on becoming an architect.

Javier chose a rigorous senior year course schedule to prepare to attend a four-year college. He enrolled in AP English and honors college algebra.

“I chose math because I just couldn’t see next year without math, I would be all confused the first year of college. I think colleges are looking for the students that take challenges.”

Javier also participated in a program in his junior and senior years that allowed him to earn college credit

by taking a computer information technology class at Northwestern Business College every Saturday morning. At the end of junior year, Javier started researching colleges on the Internet, but his college search was limited to schools he heard about on television or who sent him information.

### Fall Senior Year: Confused Search, Diligent Applications

Javier returned to school from summer vacation and continued to struggle to understand how the college search process worked. Applying to college was new territory for him and his family, so he needed all the help he could get: “*I don’t know anything about college, so information is information.*” He listened intently to his teachers as they shared scholarship information and important deadlines, but they never talked to him one-on-one about college. As advised, he retook the ACT and improved his score from a 19 to a 21. He never spoke with a counselor about his postsecondary plans. He explained:

“She doesn’t talk to us individually. We could go talk to her, but . . . she’s always busy.”

Even without personalized help, Javier eagerly participated in the college search process with what limited information he had. He now planned to study computer engineering and diligently researched application deadlines and admissions requirements on the Internet. However, he still was only able to identify a few college possibilities and couldn’t answer why he believed those schools would be a good choice for him.

Despite his lack of information, Javier was ahead of the game with his applications. By November, he had already applied to three schools, all far below his

match: DeVry University, Robert Morris College, and Northwestern Business College. Javier continued to attend classes at Northwestern Business College and was rewarded with an \$11,000 scholarship for completing the program and having a GPA over 3.5.<sup>6</sup> This would cover the bulk of his tuition, but he would still be responsible for a few thousand dollars. Even with the scholarship, he was still concerned about paying for college. He believed that the bulk of his tuition should be paid for through independent scholarships, so he put great energy into searching the Internet for scholarships. Javier also expected to take out loans but hadn't begun to make sense of how to do this. When he spoke to his mother about tuition, she told him not to worry about the cost, but he still saw it as a barrier:

“[My parents] told me...money isn't an issue, but I think it is. So I'm trying to pick a college that would make it easier for my family.”

Javier would be the first in his family to pursue higher education. Although his parents couldn't offer specific advice as he searched for colleges, they always supported his decision to attend college.

### Winter Senior Year: Now What?

By February, Javier was at a standstill. He hadn't researched or applied to any additional colleges. All three colleges he applied to had accepted him, but he was ambivalent about which he wanted to attend, even though Northwestern Business College had offered him a scholarship. He put the college decision on the back burner while he waited for his parents to finish filing their taxes so he could complete the FAFSA. He figured he'd decide after the financial aid letters arrived.

### Spring Senior Year: A Choice He Understands

At the end of senior year, Javier shifted gears again. His drafting teacher brought in a representative from the Universal Technical Institute (UTI), a local automotive and diesel repair school with an 18-month job certification program. Right away, Javier became very interested in an automotive repair career. After the presentation, Javier asked the UTI representative for his

card, contacted him, and the representative arranged a meeting at Javier's home. During this home visit, Javier filled out the application and was soon accepted. His parents were supportive of their son's decision. Javier never visited UTI, but it seemed like a practical option and he latched onto it.

“I decided to go to UTI because I was more interested in the program, and it's less time. The other colleges would have been three or four years. I just want to get the studies over with and go to work.”

This was the first time an adult sat down and asked Javier specific questions about college and walked him through the steps to apply and enroll in school. UTI also offered the small class size that Javier preferred and would help him find a job while in school. No other college provided Javier with information and attention like UTI.

At that point, Javier decided the cost of the school was no longer a concern. To cover the \$23,000 tuition, Javier would continue to work part-time and was assured that UTI would help him find a higher paying job when classes started. He reported that the school gave him modest financial aid: \$1,900 for books and supplies. He was still waiting to hear back about his FAFSA, and UTI told Javier they would “*check into it.*” It is unclear whether or not he applied for financial aid correctly and why he chose UTI over Northwestern Business College, where he had already received a substantial scholarship. UTI seemed to be a safe choice; he had someone who had taken an interest in his future and personally walked him through the process.

During high school, Javier attended presentations by four postsecondary institutions—the only four schools to which he applied. Javier's college search barely went beyond these four schools and never included even one selective college. Javier is an example of an intelligent, motivated student whose limited information prevented him from completing a thorough search for a match school. A one-on-one conversation with an adult at school who recognized his academic potential could have altered his outcome dramatically, ensuring he at least considered schools he was qualified to attend.

# Franklin—A Case Study

## A successful search with modest qualifications

Does a student have to be highly qualified to thoroughly engage in the college search and application process? Franklin demonstrates that with the right information, strong supports at home, and a drive to attend college, a student with modest qualifications can make a college match—and a successful transition.

A charismatic African-American student at Ellison High School, Franklin<sup>1</sup> graduated with a B average and an ACT score of 19, giving him access to a somewhat selective college. Since many of the colleges in Illinois are considered somewhat selective, Franklin was at an advantage in finding a match school. His thoughtful, extroverted nature brought enthusiasm to his baseball team and a liveliness to the classroom. When asked about his future, Franklin never wavered in his desire to attend a four-year college. To Franklin, success meant some day owning a music production company, and he demonstrated his commitment to this goal by spending countless hours in his cousin's recording studio. He planned to major in business.

Though Franklin was committed to his schoolwork, he did not achieve the highest grades. Teachers and staff at Ellison knew Franklin well and recognized his potential to mature. His English teacher described him as “lively, funny, and creative . . . he very much needs to hear that he has potential, not only in the music world but also academically.” Another teacher nominated him for a leadership program, and Franklin took his role as a leader seriously.

### Junior Year: Ahead of the Game With His Search

Unlike most students, Franklin knew his way around a college campus because he spent many weekends with his brother, a Northern Illinois University student. Franklin liked Northern and could see himself as a student there, but he hesitated to follow in his brother's footsteps.

Thanks to his family's guidance, Franklin never seemed overwhelmed by the college search process, a problem that stymied so many of his peers. In the fall, Franklin started making a list of possible colleges,

including Northern, the University of Illinois, and Illinois State University. He zeroed in on schools that offered a business major and the opportunity to play baseball. Franklin's brother played an important role in his search, and his mother pushed him to attend college outside the Chicago area.

Franklin knew his grades were crucial for college acceptance, and he worked harder in his junior year classes than he had in previous years. He took a business class, improved his writing, and relished the challenge of his AP and honors classes:

“Colleges, they look at that and see [me] getting As and Bs in honors classes . . . and [they say], ‘I think he can do well in a college class.’”

Franklin completed his junior year feeling confident about his achievements and his decisions for senior year. After careful thought, he decided not to take a math class during his senior year; instead, he decided to take a class in which he was sure to earn an A or B in order to keep his GPA high.

### Summer: A Little Work, a Little Play

Over the summer, Franklin spent many hours working on his music at his cousin's recording studio. At his mother's suggestion, he got a job at the library—which he held throughout his senior year and felt strengthened his “*people skills*.” He also attended baseball camps around the Midwest, including one camp at Ohio University. While there, Franklin decided to add Ohio University to his list of possible schools. For Franklin, a pattern was emerging: each college campus he visited made its way onto his college list.

### Fall Senior Year: Relying on Family, Honing His List

In the fall, Franklin carefully narrowed his list. School brochures accumulated, and Franklin diligently read each piece of mail. He fell behind schedule because he spent more time looking at applications than filling them out. He said:

“I’m not going to rush to make a decision. I’m going to apply to many different schools because I don’t want to get stuck and focus on one university and that doesn’t go through.”

Franklin recognized which schools were realistic for him and considered schools he knew matched his qualifications, as well as a few “reach schools.” Franklin was aware that colleges look beyond academic qualifications and also consider a student’s personal qualities. He knew it would be important to portray himself well in his essays.

Despite all of his hard work, Franklin had not spent much time talking to adults in his school. He had not visited his counselor, but he knew he needed to do so to obtain his transcripts. Although he always sought his mother’s counsel, his main source of guidance was his brother who Franklin credited with providing the best advice about how to pick the right school.

When it came to financing college, Franklin was in a better position than many of his peers. Franklin’s mother and brother both were attending college and had experience with applying for financial aid. Franklin’s mother assured him she would handle it, which he reported she did in February. The cost of college never intimidated Franklin; he felt comfortable taking on college loans to attend the school of his choice. He and his mother spoke often about the cost of college, and they both agreed he would attend college no matter what it took. If it took him 30 years to pay off his college debt, he was OK with that. Above all, he wanted to identify a college he could both enjoy and afford.

### Winter Senior Year: Finding His Favorites

Late in the fall, Franklin visited a friend at Southern Illinois University. He immediately felt comfortable

there and added Southern to his list—in fact, he moved it to the top. Because Franklin applied primarily to state schools with less complex applications, he was able to start and finish his applications in January and not miss any deadlines. He worked on his personal statement in his business class and submitted it to his two top schools. Before applying, he had asked both his teacher and mother to read his essay. In total, Franklin applied to seven schools.

### Spring Senior Year: Filling in the Final Details

By the end of his senior year, Franklin had taken all the necessary steps to ensure he would attend college. While he did not always meet priority deadlines, he still applied early enough to gain acceptance to all seven schools. One final campus visit sold Franklin on attending Southern. He liked the environment and location of the university, felt comfortable among the students, liked the business program, and could afford the tuition. By spring, Franklin had already attended orientation, spoken with business professors, and registered for classes. Overall, Franklin felt his high school did a good job preparing students for college, but the responsibility for following through largely fell to the student:

“It was like we couldn’t always rely on them being there to help us through every little step, even though the guidance is good, but still as a student you still have to push forward and get it done.”

Franklin did not know the specifics of his financial aid package but knew he was in good shape.<sup>7</sup> Because he would be the third person in his family enrolled in college, he was offered an aid package that made it affordable for him to attend Southern. At the end of senior year, he had met his goals of graduating on time and getting all As except for one B. By fall after graduation, Franklin was happily enrolled at Southern and active in campus life. He played intramural baseball, joined a business fraternity, and worked at a radio station. Franklin was a rare example of a student who navigated the college process successfully and landed in a well-matched college.

# Amelia—A Case Study

## As hard as a person can work

Can students complete successful college searches and go on to colleges that match their qualifications through personal motivation and hard work alone? Amelia worked as hard as can be expected in pursuit of higher education but still encountered tremendous difficulty on the road to college match.

An expressive young African-American woman and dedicated student, Amelia<sup>1</sup> was involved in an array of extracurricular activities at Silverstein High School, including cheerleading, mock trial, drill team, and drama team. She was nominated by her school for a prestigious four-year college scholarship, was written up in *Who's Who Among America's High School Students*, raised her own money to travel to Europe with the school's choir, and participated in a selective leadership program that prepares students for careers in law enforcement and public service. In addition to the program's after-school classes, Amelia also was inspired to take courses on society and law enforcement at a local two-year college and became active in her community through volunteer work and attending "beat meetings."

Amelia worked hard in her classes, spending about three hours a night on homework and earning a 3.1 weighted GPA. She took the ACT three times and ultimately received a 20.<sup>8</sup> Her grades and scores qualified her to attend at least a somewhat selective college. Amelia's motivation to attend college was reflected in her attentiveness during class:

"I always sit in front of the class as close to the teacher as possible, so you can hear everything, take down everything, just suck in everything again so that you have no questions . . . I'm motivated, I'm capable of doing whatever [is necessary]."

### Junior Year: Ahead of the Curve

Amelia applied the same intense motivation to her college search as she did to her coursework and extracurricular activities. While the law-enforcement program typically steers students toward completing

an associate's degree for careers in public service, this experience led Amelia to consider a law career. In her junior year, she attended Chicago's biggest national college fair and had already received her PIN for financial aid. She also discussed her interest in becoming an attorney with the leaders from her law enforcement program. Interested in studying criminal justice at a four-year school, Amelia planned to take a law course and a fourth year of math as a senior, both of which she believed would prepare her for college.

Unfortunately, despite her hard work pursuing college plans, Amelia didn't fully understand the concept of law school. When asked what she would need to do *after* college to pursue her law ambitions, Amelia admitted her confusion:

"I would love to become an attorney, but it's just hard, because I don't know exactly where I will find a job after you take a certain class. Do people come and scout you or you do a certain trial and they see how you would fit? I know you need an Associate's Degree, plus your Bachelor's, to even think about being considered a lawyer."

Amelia could have greatly benefited from some guidance on this issue. While she did report spending some time talking with her counselor, she also said it was hard to catch her in her office, and that it usually took about two weeks to get an appointment.

Amelia thought carefully about which schools she would like to attend and finished her junior year with a well-rounded pool of colleges to which she might apply. At the college fair, she learned about Spelman and Georgia Tech, and considered both because she had previously visited family in Atlanta and loved the area.

She also considered Loyola University and St. Xavier College. She had visited St. Xavier—a small Catholic school in the south suburbs of Chicago—and admired its beautiful campus.

### Fall Senior Year: A Flurry of Applications

Amelia displayed her trademark determination when it came time to begin her college applications in the fall. Although her ACT score of 20 was two points above the average for St. Xavier, she retook the ACT twice by the end of October. Amelia knew a student could re-take the ACT twice for free, and she couldn't understand why any college-bound senior *wouldn't* try again. Amelia celebrated her eighteenth birthday by going to an open house at St. Xavier, which still remained at the top of her list.

Amelia was busy completing applications to several schools in the fall. She had already given recommendation forms to several teachers because she wanted to make sure they were done well, stating that, “*Without recommendations, your application is useless.*” She finished her personal statement. She also attended several college fairs throughout the Chicago area and learned the value of talking individually with admissions representatives. At the same time, Amelia struggled to understand the financial aid process, pointing out a puzzling paradox:

“You have to send in your application before you find out how much money you can actually get, so it's kind of like, I'm accepted but then I'm not accepted because I don't know if I could pay for it.”

Amelia knew that she had to complete a FAFSA and already had her PIN. Amelia's mother helped too, tapping her social networks and asking people at work about how to finance college costs.

### Winter Senior Year: Plowing Ahead Amidst Confusion

By February, Amelia had applied to so many colleges she couldn't easily remember them all. She listed 11 college applications and sent a personal statement with every one, even if it wasn't required, because she felt it demonstrated her motivation. She also sent recommendations, checked in with admissions staff, and reached out to

student representatives at most of her schools.

Yet, Amelia remained perplexed. She expressed a new interest in studying child development, but still focused on her plan to become a lawyer without really grasping the necessity of law school. In February, Amelia reported that no one at her school had asked her directly about her postsecondary plans or college applications.

Financial aid proved most vexing. Aware that they didn't understand how to complete financial aid applications, Amelia and her mother attended two financial aid workshops during Amelia's sophomore and senior years. The senior year workshop they attended at Silverstein was focused mostly on how to search and apply for independent scholarships. Despite having attended these workshops, Amelia still did not understand how to request aid from the federal government or the schools she hoped to attend. Although she said she completed the FAFSA, she also said she didn't know that filing a FAFSA required extensive tax form documentation.

### Spring Senior Year: Derailed

While it is unclear whether Amelia properly completed her financial aid forms, she clearly did not receive the college financing she had hoped for. Amelia was admitted to several four-year colleges, including St. Xavier, but she didn't think she could afford to attend any of them. Her hesitation and discussion of aid suggests she didn't know the difference between federal financial aid and institutional scholarships:<sup>9</sup>

“I don't know how much I'm getting for financial aid yet, because I did the FAFSA thing, and . . . some of the schools that I want to go to are not offering scholarships. I'm not really a sports person, so it's like now the schools want to give all the scholarships for sports. If I don't get a scholarship, I've got to see how much financial aid they give me.”

In May, Amelia was still waiting for news of her financial aid and had not committed to attending St. Xavier. Amelia enrolled at Harold Washington City College in the fall after graduation, where in her first semester she took a mixture of noncredit and first-year courses. She found the classes very easy and said college was “*just like high school,*” but with older students.



### Chapter 3: Case Study Endnotes

- 1 All names of students, high schools, and programs in the case studies in this report are pseudonyms.
- 2 In some cases, such as those of Clara and Sakaarah, revealing a student's college choice would compromise his or her anonymity. College choice is kept confidential in these cases.
- 3 All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college. Clara, for example, appeared to have figured out the financial aid process well enough between her winter and spring interview to leverage a strong aid package from her school, though she wasn't able to recall specific numbers.
- 4 Sakaarah's records indicate an ACT score of 22, but she reported receiving a 26 on at least one of her ACT attempts.
- 5 Though Sakaarah appears to have an excellent understanding of financial aid and the financial aid packages offered to her by different schools, it is important to note that all reports of financial aid packages in the case studies in this report are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college.
- 6 All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college.
- 7 All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college. In this case, Franklin delegated his financial aid footwork to his mother, who appeared to have the requisite understanding to effectively seek aid.
- 8 Amelia's records indicate a first ACT score of 16, but she ultimately reported receiving a 20 on at least one of her retakes. An ACT score of 20 would have given her access to selective colleges and universities.
- 9 All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college. Amelia, for example, appears not to understand the complexities of need-based vs. merit-based aid and couldn't clearly answer questions about the financial aid process, making it very difficult to ascertain what the cost of attending various colleges would truly have been for her.



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Consortium researchers spent nearly two years interviewing and tracking the academic progress of 105 students in three Chicago high schools. Each of the ten case studies included in the “Potholes” report tells the story of an individual student but also highlights the difficulties faced by many students in the postsecondary planning process.

“My parents told me to do whatever I want, that money isn’t an issue, but I think it is. So...I’m going to pick a college that would make it easier for my family.”—*Javier, a first-generation college student, lacked strong college guidance from his school and enrolled in an automotive technical school, despite an academic record that qualified him for a selective college.*

“I just keep seeing those essays. I’m like, ‘OK, I’m going to get back to that. And then...I just feel like I don’t have enough time in the day.’ —*Sabrina, a highly qualified student with an overwhelming senior year workload, became too focused on one college option and never enrolled in college in the fall after graduation.*

“I have no idea. I want to go to college, but I’m at the point [where] I don’t know what I want to be. That’s pretty much how you’re spending the rest of your life...so I find it’s a pretty big decision.”—*Jennie, a well-rounded student who earned top grades in a rigorous International Baccalaureate program but made an early decision to attend a two-year college.*

“I’m going to apply to many different schools because I don’t want to get stuck and focus on one university and that doesn’t go through.”—*Franklin, a charismatic student with modest academic qualifications and strong support at home who conducted a thorough college search and landed in a well-matched state public university.*

To read their stories and download the case studies, see: [ccsr.uchicago.edu/potholes](https://ccsr.uchicago.edu/potholes)