

# College for All?

■ BY LORI CHAJET AND SIERRA STONEMAN-BELL

*...When we first began the Youth Leadership Practicum  
The students didn't have a clue  
On applying, paying, finding the right college  
And who would help them through.  
That's why we put this book together for you.  
It's true that applying for college itself is a pain.  
It drives you insane  
Kills most of the blood cells in your brain.  
I want students to use this guide  
That was gathered from college students, my peers and I  
To help them apply...*

— Juan Medina, Youth Leader



PJBF

It was with this poem that one of the Youth Leaders opened up the final presentation for the Institute for Urban Education's (IUE) Youth Leadership Practicum, funded by Bank of America and the Teagle Foundation and housed at Eugene Lang College. Speaking to an audience that included the college students who co-facilitated the program, representatives from their high schools, and the Director of Admissions of Eugene Lang College, the Youth Leaders shared what they had learned throughout their eight sessions exploring the college search and application process. These eight students—four male and four female, black and Latino, mostly juniors in high school, and all the first in their families to pursue a college degree—came together to ask, and answer, their own questions about college. The participants, all of whom were already taking leadership roles within their own schools to help other students to see college as an option for themselves, applied

for this opportunity to both further their understanding of the college process and earn two college credits upon completion.

While all of the Youth Leaders had aspirations to attend college, like many other first-generation college-bound youth, they had little idea of what it would take to get there or what it would be like when they actually began. The goal of the Youth Leadership Practicum was to provide a space where they could use an inquiry-driven process to explore the college process with the guidance of college students who, themselves, had recently been through it. Furthermore, it was to create a youth-to-youth resource guide that would help other first-generation college-bound students get to college.

Although nationwide, schools and community-based organizations are encouraging students to apply and go to college, few institutions are confronting just how challenging the process

is for low-income students who will be among the first in their families to attend. While middle-class students coming from college-educated families have been hearing and learning about college most of their lives, first-generation college-bound students are often just being introduced to the landscape of higher education when they enter their final years of high school. With limited knowledge and support, they often trudge through the cumbersome process in need of more help than they are able to find. In a 2005 survey of New York City high school students, the Urban Youth Collaborative reported that while upwards of 90 percent of respondents planned to go to college, over 60 percent said they were never, rarely, or only sometimes able to see a guidance counselor when they needed to or to get help at school when they had questions about college.

The schools that are most committed to ensuring that all of their students attend college work hard to address their students' needs; however, when it comes to the college search and application process, even the best of these schools often forget what they know to be most important to teaching and learning. Rather than using student-centered, in-

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Lori Chajet ([lori.chajet@gmail.com](mailto:lori.chajet@gmail.com)) is a professor at Brooklyn College and is a Senior Consultant with the Urban Youth Collaborative's Student Success Center Initiative. When she wrote this article she was Acting Director of the Institute for Urban Education.

Sierra Stoneman-Bell ([sierrasb@gmail.com](mailto:sierrasb@gmail.com)) is the Associate Director of the Institute for Urban Education. She designs and runs innovative college readiness programs for New York City public high school students.

quiry-driven, experiential approaches, they resort to *telling* students what they need to know and then expect them to follow the necessary steps to get into college. The result: many low-income students blindly follow a rote college application process rather than taking control of it themselves. Without the knowledge needed to make informed choices, many end up at colleges that do not meet their needs or expectations; others, after realizing that they never fully understood their financial aid packages, are unable to make their first payment and never begin; and still others, despite their desire to attend, never complete the application process.

The Youth Leadership Practicum was designed to address these concerns. Housed at an institute at a private college, which provides access to university resources to share with public high schools in hopes of better bridging the transition from high school to college, the program emphasized three core practices: inquiry, youth leadership, and exchange between first-generation college-bound students and first-generation college students. Working with youth from the Urban Youth Collaborative's Student Success Center at Bushwick Campus High School and East Side House Settlement's College Preparatory and Leadership Program at Mott Haven Village Preparatory High School, the program engaged high school students as youth researchers exploring the college application and college-going process. The ultimate goal was to create something to bring back to their own schools that could help other students like themselves realize their aspirations to go to college. Doing their exploration alongside a committed group of college students, many of whom were also the first in their families to attend, the high school students received critical support and a model of how to enact agency to overcome obstacles in their paths. Sessions were spent exploring different college campuses, engaging in the application process to understand the challenges and frustrations, and investigating how students can meet the costs of college in an era of rising tuition and declining grant-based aid. Throughout the process, the Youth Leaders documented what they learned, as well as what they felt, and then created a youth-to-youth

resource guide that, unlike most college guides, speaks directly to the needs of first-generation college-bound students. They titled it: "*Oh No! I Have to Apply to College!*" *How to Make the Process Less Scary*.\*

This article offers a glimpse of the program in practice, presents the voices of Youth Leaders, and provides examples of how the Youth Leaders translated their findings for other young people. The examples illustrate how youth take ownership over the college process when given the opportunity to direct their own learning, connect to college students who can speak to their concerns, and define and confront the complexity of the college-going process.

### **Inquiry and Exchange**

On visits to a small private college in New York City and a large public one, the Youth Leaders walked the halls taking notes on what they observed, collecting fliers and school newspapers, and talking with students. They sat in on classes and talked with professors and administrators asking question after question. To admissions officers, they asked about application requirements, the weight of SAT scores, the importance of diversity, and more specifically: "Why do you reject applications?" To faculty, they asked about class size, their relationship with students, and how much homework they give. To students, they asked about everything from food in the cafeteria and parties, to their favorite classes and what makes them "feel comfortable" at their college.

The Youth Leaders' observation notes revealed the issues that were most important to them, including diversity, cost, and classroom practice. At the small private college they noted: *small classes; a lot of whites; students and professors are really friendly; expensive food; \$40,000/year; good class conversation; relaxed community; artistic walls; students talk more than teachers*. When asked to describe how they felt, what they liked and what they didn't like one student wrote, *I feel protected*, another, *I feel alone—isolated*, and another, *I feel familiar in this learning environment*.

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\*The full youth-to-youth resource guide can be viewed at the Participatory Action Research Collective website: <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/projectcssb.htm>.

At the large public college students' observations touched upon similar issues but revealed how differently they played out there. Students noted: *very racially diverse; 150 different languages spoken on campus; extremely low tuition, lunchroom food is great; lots of kids running to class; lots of events; the classrooms are big, the professor was over-talking; students don't ask questions in class; crazy schedules*. Several concluded that they liked the diversity and the location of the school; others agreed that the campus reminded them of their high schools but disagreed about whether that was a positive thing; and none liked how large the classes were.

At the end of each visit, the high school students talked with the college students about what they had learned, what they thought and felt, and how the experience had changed their thinking about college. Not surprisingly, at the small private college the topic of diversity quickly surfaced. One Latina high school student voiced her discomfort with the small number of black and Latino students she saw and said she wanted to be in a diverse school where there were people like her. While all agreed that diversity was important to them, the college students offered a more nuanced view. A first-generation Latina college student shared her own uneasiness transitioning into a majority white environment but explained that the small, interactive classes outweighed her concerns.

At the large public college, where the visit was not designed or facilitated by students at the college but rather by college administrators, the conversation highlighted a different issue: how hard it is to get a real sense of a college when you limit the visit to talking with official representatives. After meeting with two deans and the student-body president in a formal board room, followed by Q & A with an admissions tour guide, the Youth Leaders expressed frustration that they were not getting candid views of the school. One commented, "People were just saying good things about the college and not sharing the negatives." Another expressed outrage that even when she asked the admission representative to share "the worst thing about the school," she still could not get a satisfactory answer.

Through these visits and exchanges

with the college student facilitators, the Youth Leaders were able to confront the complexities and realities of their own college search process and see how important it is for them to *explore* and *question* for themselves. To translate what they learned and help their peers engage in their own self-directed process, the Youth Leaders created a section in the resource guide called “Finding the College that’s Right for Me.” In it, they encourage high school students to take an active role in the college search process and provide them with tools. Outlining the best way to conduct a college visit, the Youth Leaders advise against college-sponsored tours and instead tell students: *Decide what you want to see when on campus; Talk to at least 2 students to get the real scoop; Meet at least one administrator and ask questions; Write down what you see, feel, and hear as you go.* One tool they designed is a College Rating Sheet (see excerpt in figure 1).

The message the Youth Leaders had internalized and were sending to other students: Choosing a college is a personal process—don’t let someone else do it for you!

### Information Discomfort

The Youth Leaders sat scattered throughout the computer lab in the library at Lang College—each one paired with a college student or IUE staff member—working through the Common Application online. Within moments of logging onto their computers, a steady stream of questions began. There were questions that focused on understanding the language of college admissions: *What is a first-year? Need-based financial aid? What are TOEFL scores? CEEB/ACT codes?* And then questions to help them figure out if and where they belonged in college: *What if I don’t have a Social Security number? What if I don’t know what I want to major in? Do I have to put all of my siblings down—even if they did not go to college? Should I put my father’s name even if I don’t live with him?*

And then there were the frustrations—everything from the computer not accepting their birth date because they did not follow the required format. As one student belted out, “Why do you care about my parents and family so much when it is about me?!” The college students did their best to answer all of

**Figure 1. College Rating Sheet Excerpt**

#### ENVIRONMENT

- What are people doing?
- How are people dressed?
- Do I see professors outside of class talking with students?
- Are the students happy? Stressed?
- Are people smoking?
- Is the location urban, suburban or rural?
- Is it noisy or quiet?
- Do I feel comfortable?



Comments:

#### DIVERSITY

- Are the students diverse? Are the professors diverse?
- Do I feel comfortable walking down the hall?
- Can I see myself in a seat in the classroom?



Comments:

#### ACADEMICS

- How many credits do you need to graduate?
- How many classes do full-time students take?
- What kind of classes do they offer?
- What kind of study groups are offered to help students?



Comments:

the questions and offered an empathic yet confident voice—one that showed understanding, held no judgment, and reassured them that, indeed, they too belonged in college.

After working through the “basic” information on the Common Application—an hour that resulted in 48 questions—the Youth Leaders paused to reflect on the process. The first student to speak admitted with exasperation, “If I were doing this at home by myself, I wouldn’t do it!” They were all overwhelmed by the amount of information

being asked, and by the discomfort many of the questions made them feel. They worried about whether their potential would be noticed, that “one thing can mess you up,” and about “the fight you have to put up to get into the college of your dreams.” They were self-conscious about their SAT scores, about having to report summer school attendance, and about their families’ educational paths. After naming all of their concerns, they thought about what other students just like them would need to get through this. “We need a Keludys or a Vicky or

a Brian next to us,” one said, referring to the college student facilitators. Unlike teachers and guidance counselors who often confuse students’ lack of follow-through with lack of ambition, the college students understood first-hand exactly why completing the application was hard for many of the high school students.

To help other students in their schools make it through their own college application process, the Youth Leaders decided to develop a guide that would make other students feel like someone who understood them was sitting next to them to answer their questions and respond to their feelings. The section of the Resource Guide on applying to college opens: *Are you feeling overwhelmed by this whole process? YOU ARE NOT ALONE! Are you feeling stressed out by this whole process? YOU ARE NOT ALONE! Are you feeling self-conscious about your grades, your test scores, or any of the personal information these people are bounding you for? YOU ARE NOT ALONE!* It moves on to explain what the Common Application is, to ask and answer a series of questions organized by the sections of the actual Common Application, to provide helpful tools to complete a personal statement, and to respond to concerns first-generation college-bound students might have when completing applications. (See figures 2 and 3 for examples.)

The Youth Leaders had digested another important message to share with their peers: Applying to college is overwhelming and raises a lot of doubts and emotions for everyone—it does not mean you do not belong in college.

### Mastering the Money Maze

It was a sunny Saturday morning, and the students had gathered to tackle the issue of how to pay for college. The PowerPoint slides went by one after another, listing the categories of financial aid, how to qualify, and the numerous steps in the process. The students listened attentively and, for the most part, silently, while a financial aid expert spoke. Her tone rarely changed; she seldom paused, except when interrupted by questions mostly from college students; and she never acknowledged just how complicated and overwhelming all of this information was.

The mood in the room shifted when

### Figure 2. Excerpt from College Application FAQs:

**What if I don’t know what *major* I want yet?**

That’s OK. It’s good to have an idea of what you’re interested in, but you don’t have to decide on a major before you apply to college. If you are not sure, you can always choose “Liberal Arts” or “Undecided.”

**What if I don’t live with one of my parents or if I never met one of them but s/he is alive? Do I have to put information down for him/her?**

If you do not have an ongoing relationship with one parent you do NOT have to list him/her. It is up to you whether or not you want to include this person. You should only include a parent you feel comfortable including. At the same time, it is good to show that you did not just leave the question blank because you missed it, so you can do one of a few things: 1) put the parent’s name but no other information; 2) explain the situation within “Additional Information”; 3) explain more about the situation within your personal statement. The general rule of thumb is to complete the application as completely and as honestly as possible.

the presentation ended and the Youth Leaders, paired with college students, began to examine the sample financial award letter the financial aid expert had distributed. The high school students began to ask questions: *What does subsidized mean? How do you find a Work Study job? What is the full Cost of Attendance? When do you have to pay back loans? What if you go to college part-time?* They also started to raise concerns and frustrations with the letter itself. *How come it doesn’t list the total tuition for the college anywhere? What does all of this loan information mean— gross and net loan proceeds, lenders, Master Promissory Note?* The college students empathized and made clear there was still a lot they, too, were still figuring out.

Despite the fact that several of their questions had been addressed through the PowerPoint slides, the Youth Lead-

ers had not retained many of the details. It was not until they were given five different sample financial aid packages and began to crunch numbers to determine how much was being offered in grant money, how much in loans, and what was left over, that they began to understand. As the Youth Leaders compared the five packages, they started to make sense of the details, evaluate what makes a “good” financial aid package, and challenge some of their own assumptions about the cost of college. “It’s not always cheaper to go to a public college,” one student said. “Some of these packages look good at first but then you realize they are asking you to take out mad money in loans,” another pointed out. “I didn’t know you could ask for more money if you needed it,” another said repeating what several of the college students told her they had done. And they all realized, to their relief, that the sticker price was not the bottom line.

Knowing that the cost of college is a major concern for their peers and that schools often tiptoe around the daunting topic, the Youth Leaders wanted to create a section for the resource guide

### Figure 3. Excerpt from Concerns and Responses: from youth to youth:

**Q: I feel like colleges will think I am not that interesting or am not that involved because I did not do a lot of extracurricular activities throughout high school. Does that matter?**

Not necessarily... if you had a personal reason such as work or babysitting your siblings you may want to explain or discuss it in your personal statement or in “Additional Information.” Remember: anything you do outside of classes counts as extracurricular activities such as community service, food drives, church activities.

**Q: Why do they care about my parents and family when it’s about me?**

Admissions officers want to know more about you and where you are coming from. It helps them understand what supports you have had or obstacles you have had to overcome.

**Figure 4. Excerpt from Paying for College**

**I received a financial package—now what?  
Making Informed Choices: Comparing Packages**

Even after you get into colleges and receive financial aid packages, you still have some work to do! You have to figure out which option is best for you. How do you do this? Compare the fine print! The chart below gives an example of how to compare aid packages from five different colleges. Use this chart to make sense of different types of financial aid—the terms being thrown around—and as a tool for when you start to get your own financial aid packages! Choose wisely—if you have any questions ask a counselor at your high school or at the college.

School	Tuition	Estimated Cost of Attendance (COA)	Grants, Awards, Scholarships	Loans	How much more is needed to cover tuition?	How much more is needed to cover COA?	Do you think this is a good option? Why or why not?
Eugene Lang College	\$30,660	\$48,674	\$26,635	\$9,500	0	\$12,539	
SUNY New Paltz	\$4,350	\$16,300	\$11,625	\$2,625	0	\$2,050	
Long Island University (Brooklyn)	\$21,646	\$27,916	\$3,254	\$24,662	0	0	
Barnard College	\$33,078	\$46,838	\$42,398	\$2,600	0	\$1,840	
Hunter College	\$4,329	\$10,014	\$8,425	0	0	\$1,589	

that would break down the financial aid process and help students allay their fears. The section “Paying for College” opens with a poem, part of which reads: “When it comes to paying for college a lot comes to mind/Money becomes the center of time/Gotta sit down for hours thinking how you going to get those dimes.” The guide proceeds to help other youth do just this. A section on FAQs not only provides basic information on financial aid but also addresses critical questions that college counselors are often unsure how to answer: *How do I fill out a FAFSA if I am in foster care? If I live with a family member who is not a parent? If my parents live in another country?* In a section on misconceptions, the Youth Leaders correct false assumptions such as scholarships are only for straight-A students. They also offer advice: “A lot of people don’t realize that if the package you get is not enough, you can go and ask for more. You won’t always get more—but it’s worth a try. Make a good case to the financial aid office for why you should get more and why they should really want you at their college! **ADVOCATE FOR YOURSELF!!!**” Finally, knowing from experience how

important it is to engage in the material rather than just hear or read about it, the Youth Leaders provide activities to guide other young people through a similar hands-on process. (See figure 4.)

The key lesson learned: Yes, learning about the costs of college and the financial aid process is overwhelming, but a sense of power comes from knowing the challenges ahead.

**Conclusion**

For low-income students, college is often held up as the way to a bright future, but the application process can be an unfamiliar labyrinth that drains students’ confidence and magnifies their fears. Students need meaningful opportunities to explore college for themselves and build a bank of knowledge so they can make informed decisions. The Youth Leadership Practicum is one example of what can result from inquiry-based exploration, student-driven research, and meaningful exchange with college students. The Youth Leaders were able to break down their assumptions, voice their desires and fears, and begin to imagine how they would confront the barriers in their paths. Moving

beyond their aspirations, they faced the complex process of college-going, armed themselves with information, and began to enact the agency they would need throughout their college years. They walked away with many recommendations for their schools, plans for how they would share their new knowledge with their peers, and a newfound ownership of their own futures.

As the critical movement towards preparing all students for college grows, it is all the more essential to listen and respond to the often-silenced voices of first-generation college-bound students and to understand just how trying the college application process is for them. It is not enough to make sure students have the aspirations to attend college; we all—colleges, high schools, and community based organizations—need to work harder to help them realize those aspirations. We can start by dedicating time, as early as 9th grade, to college exploration, developing inquiry-driven curricula, and forging high school-college partnerships that tap into the wealth of resources within higher education. It would take us closer to “college-for-all.” ■