

U.S.

Bringing the Dream of an Elite College to Rural Students

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS MAY 21, 2017

SAMPSON COUNTY, N.C. — The first time Nyreke Peters met the new college adviser at his rural high school, he was skeptical. Other adults at Hobbton High School spoke with the same Southern accent and shared an easygoing familiarity that came from having gone to the same schools and having spent their lives in the same county.

The adviser, Emily Hadley, was a determined recent college graduate from New Hampshire who seemed bizarrely interested in his future and pressed him to think beyond the confines of the sweet potato and hog farms.

Mr. Peters, a senior, had his sights set on the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but she persuaded him to apply to Middlebury College, an elite institution in Vermont that he had never heard of.

A few months later, to his astonishment, he was admitted. A scholarship fund from Sampson County, a little more than an hour's drive south of Raleigh, N.C., paid for him to visit, and he decided to attend.

“Miss Hadley, she’s from up North, and she knew all the schools,” said Mr. Peters, a snare drum player in the marching band who lives with his grandparents. “She pushed me to apply here, apply there.”

Ms. Hadley is part of a nonprofit organization, and a movement, trying to break down the social, economic and psychological barriers that keep low-income rural students from having a shot at the elite range of the American dream.

Most low-income students rely on their parents for college advice, and many of

them end up going to colleges that are less rigorous than they can handle, the research shows.

Her organization, the College Advising Corps, places recent graduates in public high schools for two-year stints as full-time college advisers, where they make up for a widespread scarcity of college counselors and bring their own recent experience to bear on the college application process.

The cause has attracted support from self-made philanthropists who identify with high-achieving students — “the Horatio Alger crowd,” as Nicole Farmer Hurd, the advising corps’s founder, puts it — like Michael R. Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York and a billionaire businessman.

Some critics say that these efforts are too focused on transforming the lives of the most brilliant tier of low-income students. What about the students who are merely competent? Others say that steering all the smart teenagers to a few elite colleges may be good for those particular students, but may worsen the social and economic stratification of American society — there will be no more small-town philosopher-car mechanics.

“It would be better if the pecking order were not so clear, and the widest talents were more evenly distributed across all kinds of institutions,” Gary Burtless, a labor economist and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said rather wistfully.

Dr. Hurd, a former dean of fellowships at the University of Virginia, founded the corps in 2005 with 14 advisers in Virginia. It now has about 600 advisers in as many schools across the country, 182 of them in rural areas, and a budget of \$34 million, raised through private philanthropy, state and federal funds.

The organization works in partnership with 24 selective private colleges and flagship state universities, like Duke, Texas A&M and the University of California, Berkeley, which recruit the advisers, train them through their admissions and financial aid offices and supervise them. The advisers are placed in schools through agreements with district administrators and principals.

Though their salaries are modest — \$25,000 to \$30,000 — they receive about \$11,500 in loan forgiveness for their undergraduate debt or their future education.

Many of the advisers resemble the students they seek to help. Most of them are black or Hispanic or from low-income backgrounds.

Over two spring days, Dr. Hurd, the founder, toured schools in Sampson County to debrief the corps members. She drove through brilliantly green fields, past a cotton gin, trailer parks and unpainted houses out of a John Grisham novel.

At Hobbton High School, Stephanie Goethie, the only professional counselor for 540 students, said that other priorities — a suicidal student, for instance — could easily distract her from college applications. For help, some students turn instead to drama or band teachers, pastors and parents. Having Ms. Hadley, the adviser, there “does increase the equity,” Ms. Goethie said.

Ms. Hadley, 23, a 2015 Duke graduate, said it was hard to make students see the value of a college degree when their parents relied on odd jobs, food stamps or disability benefits and they could improve the situation immediately by making \$500 a week as field workers. “What happens in 10 years when your back gives out?” she tells them.

Their parents, she found, were not always on her side.

“A lot of their parents view them as young adults, capable of making their own decisions,” Ms. Hadley said.

Many students did not understand the basic mechanics of going to college. They thought that all they had to do was sign up the day before classes began, she said.

The corps is experimenting with sending personalized text messages about college to parents and students, reminding them about deadlines and urging them to make appointments with their counselor. But Ms. Hadley was skeptical.

“A lot of the kids have burner phones,” she said. “They run through them in three months.”

Or they run out of data midway through the month.

Dr. Hurd said she did not understand why more than 90 percent of Ms. Hadley’s students had applied to college, but only about half had submitted federal financial aid forms.

Some parents are embarrassed to reveal their incomes or suspicious of authority and what will become of their private information. Family strife also gets in the way. “A lot of the kids are in really funky living situations, and they haven’t decided whether they want to reach out to their parents,” she said.

Some of her students are much brighter than their low scores on standardized tests like the ACT suggest, Ms. Hadley said. But colleges judge schools by the numbers, and with only a handful of high-scoring students, Hobbton does not attract many college recruiters.

“I get it,” she said. “I don’t have anybody with more than a 30 on the ACT this year. It’s still hard to get kids options when they didn’t blow it out of the water on the ACT.”

But, she added, “How do you get from a 26 to a 30 when you can’t afford test prep?” It is difficult to get students to attend test-prep sessions at school, and free online services do not work well on mobile phones, she said.

One university that many students here have heard of is Liberty University, the Christian college in Lynchburg, Va., founded over four decades ago by the evangelist Jerry Falwell Sr., where President Trump recently gave a commencement speech. But Ms. Hadley said she worried that the university would not prepare students for the wider world. “I tell them, if you go to work in a different environment, there’s a chance you’ll come across somebody who has a different view of a Liberty degree,” she said.

At nearby Midway High School, the students say “Yes, sir,” and “No, ma’am,” and one women’s restroom has a sign that says, “Wash your hands & say your prayers ’cuz Jesus & germs are everywhere.”

But the value of good grades is not as ingrained. Mariesha McAdoo, a first-year advising corps member from Duke, said it was “heartbreaking” when students came to her with low grades and test scores and it was too late to go back and fix them.

“A lot of the kids here are just average,” Ms. McAdoo told Dr. Hurd recently as they were discussing her success rate of getting students into top colleges. “We don’t have a lot of those kids getting the full-ride scholarships.”

Ms. Hadley said many of her students thought college was only for the wealthy. “They’re surprised when I don’t have money for the vending machine,” she said.

She has made progress. The college enrollment rate at Hobbton went from about half the senior class when Ms. Hadley arrived two years ago to 59 percent last year, and is projected to reach 77 percent this year, though she expects the final number to drop as students find summer jobs and decide to keep working rather than go to college.

Mr. Peters, the senior at Hobbton, wrote his college essay about what it would feel like to go back to his high school in 10 years as a Middlebury graduate.

He would tell the future Hobbton students that he used to worry that his friends would find out he had spent a summer “living in a hotel paid for by some government program that helped families who could not afford to pay rent.”

Then he would add: “All I can say is look at where I stand. I am a college-educated man of color. I am a musician who composes music for high school bands because that’s where it all begins.”

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