

# Shaping a college-bound life not as easy as it sounds

Simply setting a goal of getting students to enroll in college is insufficient; schools must focus on relationships, academic preparation, and school rituals that allow for multiple pathways of postsecondary success.

**By Karla Scornavacco**

**O**n the last day of the 2007-08 school year, a mix of white and Latino Western High School's seniors sat on the stage in three neat rows near a poster that declared, "Investing in America's Future." Behind the podium and under the auditorium's stage lights, they offered a human backdrop for the speaker's anticipated appearance on national television.

Then-presidential candidate Barack Obama opened his speech by talking about the seniors in a way to which I had become accustomed that school year: These were students who defied the odds, applied, and were admitted into four-year colleges. Western High School had a high percentage of students living in poverty and, before the district's reform efforts, a staggering dropout rate.



“It’s an honor to be here,” Obama said. “Just three years ago, only half of the high school seniors who walked the halls of this building were accepted to college. But today, thanks to the hard work of caring parents, innovative educators, and some very committed students, all 44 seniors of this year’s class have been accepted to more than 70 colleges and universities across the country.”

The woman to my left said, “That’s impressive!” as she clapped her hands and cheered loudly.

When viewed in terms of the national trend to make universal college acceptance a central goal in efforts to reform high schools, Western High School’s college admission rate is indeed impressive. The school’s success is particularly noteworthy considering that only about 19% of all adults living in the district have a college diploma, and only 80% have a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). These students, sitting on the stage behind the then-Presidential hopeful Barack Obama, were examples of high school graduates positioned to accomplish something that most of the district’s residents had not yet done: enroll in and graduate from college. The students were also symbols, not just of this high school’s success in promoting college for all, but of the educational possibilities that Obama implied could be realized if he were elected president.

I spent a year at Western High School (a pseudonym) in Colorado delving into the lives of three young men — Diego, Carlos, and Kyle — to learn more about how a school shapes a student’s college-bound identity formation. Like their classmates, none of these male teens had a parent who had attended college. Early in their high school careers, each of them said they planned to drop out of high school. But then they found themselves in a high school that shifted course and announced its goal of ensuring that graduates went to college.

Western High School opened in August 2005 after the school district broke its large high school into six small-by-design schools. Ensuring that graduates went to college was one of the school’s primary goals.

In most public high schools, socialization into the college track is done through course selection. However, at Western all students take the same classes, and there is no tracking system. Western required students to take an ACT preparation class offered by one of the largest test-prep companies in the nation and required them to apply to at least three colleges, including one four-year university. The school constantly reminded students to see themselves as college-bound. A map in a school hallway displayed their photographs linked to each college where they had applied. Teachers consistently evoked a concept of college when talking to them in class, and the principal initiated a school ritual at the weekly senior meeting in which a student climbed a ladder and signed his name on a banner as a celebration of being accepted to college.

While so much of our national identity has become wrapped up in believing that everyone can and should attend college, the reality is more complex. Schools have elevated the expectations for low-income and underrepresented students, but they haven’t always looked deeply enough at the web of relationships and resources required to make college a necessity or reality for all students.

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## Diego's pride and pursuit for autonomy

When I met Diego during his junior year, he wanted to go to a community college. By Obama's visit in 2008, however, Diego was caught between feeling "burned out" on the "idea" of college and a personal recognition that college is indeed a "good goal to have." For three years, Diego's teachers had been telling him that he and his classmates would be applying to at least three colleges and that with hard work and support they all would have the option of attending a four-year university.

"I am so like burned out on scholarships and hearing about how much I'm going to have to pay and hearing like all like everything that goes with college," he said during in an interview, "that it gets so you hear it so much, and you see it so much. Like you see like all that stuff around our school. And I know it's a good goal to have because most people don't even graduate high school, so to be able to have a goal to graduate and go to college, that's like just a bigger deal." During this late spring interview, Diego said his postgraduation plans included a community college, not the four-year university to which he had applied and been accepted.

"I just had to get accepted to a four-year college . . . the community colleges counted but not as a university. I just did it so that I could be considered accepted to a four-year college," Diego said.

Diego's relationship with the "idea" of a four-year college was complicated, manifesting itself in different ways in various contexts. Although he told me that the college that accepted him was "not even a real university," he offered a different version of the school in the opening letter to his readers for his final senior portfolio. "The thing I am proud of most is getting accepted into a four-year university. This fills me with joy because I never thought I would make it to my senior year, much less a university," he wrote. In this official realm of school discourse, his acceptance not only evoked powerful, positive emotions in him — pride and joy — but also earned him a higher standing in other people's judgments of him.

Although Diego told me and the panelists in his Senior Passages Presentation, an end-of-school-year public ritual in which students presented themselves to a public audience, that he intended to go to college, he did not enroll in college.



## Carlos: Crown prince or disenthralled rebel?

A local newspaper article featured Diego's classmate Carlos as a promising student who once "did not consider the possibility of college ... and is now applying to places like Yale and Harvard and getting recruitment letters from MIT and Brown."

Carlos was the epitome of the school's mission and goal — except that his behavior infuriated teachers multiple times during the year and worried the administration. Carlos missed class, walked out when angry, and talked back to teachers more times than any teacher wanted to handle in a day. His humanities teacher said, "You know what, I don't buy into this whole thing that Carlos Perez is the greatest thing to walk into this school." Others might believe that but he did not.

Carlos did indeed receive special treatment from administrators. The principal called Carlos "wicked smart." He arranged for Carlos to take a private SAT course since his standardized test scores were higher than most of his peers but not "yet high enough" to reflect "his actual, raw talent," according to the principal. The principal and the college counselor excused Carlos from math class (and periodically other classes) so he could tutor middle school students and lead a Latino male student group as a way to keep him involved and build his leadership skills.

Carlos attributes much of his success and persistence in school to relationships with his administrators. "When I was back in high school in 10th grade, that's when [assistant principal] began taking me out for lunch," he said in an email during his first semester at college. "Also I remember not being on good terms with the security guard at that school, but [the assistant principal] would typically try and work things out with me and him rather than just suspend me."

At the time of Obama's visit, Carlos had earned a prestigious scholarship that offered to pay his tuition at any college in the country, but he also had not been accepted to 12 of the 14 schools to which he applied. "I am furious at the colleges," said the principal. "They didn't even give him a real look." He added:

Not one of them wait-listed him, not one of them — and I just go from knowing the demographics, the demographic data. I can tell you how many Hispanic males there are in the United States whose families make less than 20-odd thousand dollars a year and get over 700 on their SAT. It's not more than 500 so I just wait until those places will be serious about diversity.

There is little doubt that Carlos' principal gave him this "real look." Whether he provided the same special status privileges to students in Carlos' sophomore, junior, and senior year classes, however, is up for debate. According to Carlos, the school did not. Carlos said:

Many of the Latinos did not receive the same amount of support that I did, especially the underclassmen... if I didn't have the ability to learn quickly (my intelligence), I would have been filtered out. They wouldn't have cared about me, especially not with how I acted in my earlier years.

For Carlos, having the support of a full team of educators who offered a personalized, relationship-driven approach likely led to his graduation. Carlos never attended the elite college that the principal and newspapers seemed to want for him, but he ended up with something that was just as valuable. After receiving a scholarship to a private, local university and eventually earning a master's degree in education, he became a high school teacher in a nearby urban district.

But last year, Carlos left the classroom to study Chinese medicine. "I realized that it didn't matter how good a teacher I was if the students were suffering severely from depression, anxiety, insomnia, or concussions. What I was missing was not more instruction on how to teach but rather some knowledge on how to heal," he said.



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Kyle read his first book as a junior in high school and continued on a quest to read even more horror and science fiction books as a senior.

## Kyle: Sink or swim?

At Western High School, Kyle had made academic improvements and was beginning to reframe his identity as a learner but experienced college at a point in that process that made it difficult for him to succeed. Kyle read his first book as a junior in high school and continued on a quest to read even more horror and science fiction books as a senior. Neither he nor his mother ever thought he would go to college. But, by the time of his Senior Passages Presentation, he proclaimed that he was indeed college-bound. His evidence? The fact that he could write or so he said to the panelists. Another piece of evidence was his admission letter from a local state college.

By the time Obama spoke at the school, Kyle had been admitted into a local university and had decided to take out loans in order to pay for this new future. A couple weeks into his freshman year, Kyle emailed me in response to an inquiry about how he was faring as a college student:

i think id do the work if it wasnt.. hard...

ya.. duh.. umm.. its just a couple of papers stressin me out.. well.. maybe stress isnt the best way to put it,

its just

i sit down

i go to write it

i cant write it

i spend the rest of the night wondering why i cant write it.

like this english paper we had to do, it was a reflectiv paper, i didnt get what that meant exactly, so i stayd after to talk to the teacher and i figurd out what i was gonna write about, so i went to write it, i got 350 words.. and its suposto be 800.. and i wrote everything i could about it..... reflecting isnt what im good at

Contrary to the public messages of his high school, college was not the answer for Kyle. He wrote to me the following week:

and i really dont think i was cut out for college ne ways. i havnt done ne homework for the past 7 years, and i never studyd befor in my life.

In this email, Kyle associated his struggles as a college student to his past experiences as a student at Western. His revised school identity, expressed here, is a far cry from the college-bound identity he presented in the Passages presentation. In subsequent emails, he also turned to details about his emotional, financial, and academic struggles in college.

However, Kyle continued to see a practical benefit to identifying himself as a college student to other people, especially job prospects. In an email telling me that he was no longer going to write any papers because the process was too difficult for him, he wrote that, “i can still put on job apps that im going to collage.” He planned to continue as a college student but just not as one who fulfilled all the assignments. He ended up dropping out of school with \$4,000 in debt.

The panelists had considered having Kyle re-present as a way to ensure his readiness for college. They also required Kyle to visit the writing center at the college he would be attending in the fall. Even though the panelists’ response to Kyle reveals good intentions to support him, their suggestions were slightly absurd in their attempt to reach for a transformation that cannot automatically occur at the end of senior year.

### The “cool” behind the stats

Western High School succeeded in offering students a new way to identify themselves in the public limelight. This is an outstanding accomplishment that deserves attention because of what it suggests about a school’s ability to shape a student’s sense of himself and his hopes for the future. College admission for all three of these students was a source of pride and an entryway into new possibilities. There was both a symbolic and practical element to these achievements.

The accomplishment garnered the attention of Obama, who later in the fall mentioned them again on national television. Carlos had written to me that Obama’s remarks of the graduating class felt “deceptive” to him because they had ignored his classmates from sophomore and junior years who had dropped out. However, Kyle wrote:

hummm... to tell you the truth... i still dont care about politics...but i think its prity cool when you have a class rank of 40 out of 44 (me) and you still get in to collage.. but ya.. thats about it.

For Kyle, getting into college was “cool,” especially given that his grades were so low in comparison to his classmates.

### Conclusion

Although Western High School received much acclaim for having 100% of its seniors admitted to college, these students’ experiences reveal the complexities such statistics conceal. Kyle, for instance, presented himself as college-bound and was applauded accordingly, but he was not prepared for the demands of academic life in college. The school also privileged four-year universities over two-year community colleges, which likely contributed to Diego’s decision not to go to college at all. On the other hand, the school’s focus on a 100% college admission goal also influenced all three of these young men to graduate from high school, a feat they did not expect as freshman.

More is at stake than just a school’s reputation or a young man’s college acceptance letter — there are people’s feelings of pride, hopes for the future, and convictions about equity and justice. Since these young men graduated from high school, Obama and other leaders have expanded their political rhetoric about post high school success to include community colleges and vocational programs. Given the high cost of college and the cumulative costs of dropping out of school (Belfeld & Levin, 2013), there is increasing emphasis on completing college instead of merely emphasizing college acceptances as was the case at Western High School. For low-income, underrepresented students to access any of the multitude of pathways requires that crucial resources are in place at all schools: relationships, academic preparation, and school rituals that offer students a possibility to redefine who they want to be and what they want to do. **K**

### References

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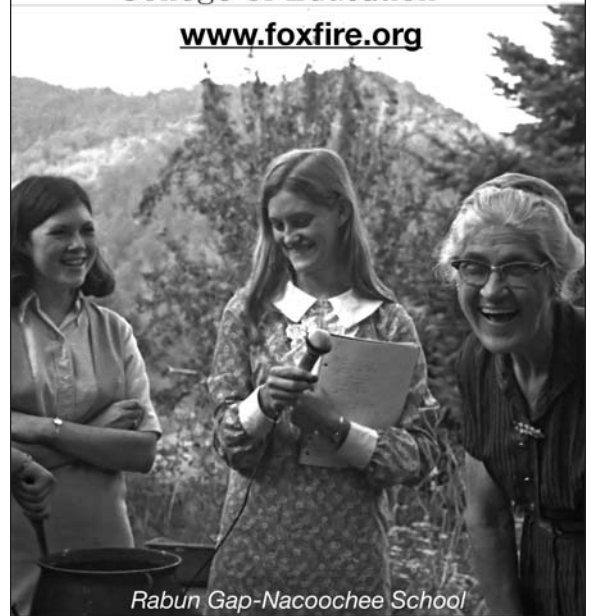
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