

Upward Bound gives a crucial boost on the college ladder, students report

PROVIDENCE, RI — High school students from low-income families reported a significant boost to their college motivation and readiness after participating in support programs run by Upward Bound in eight states, the analysis of an online student forum conducted in summer 2008 shows.

In a two-day “College Jam” facilitated by What Kids Can Do (WKCD) and Knowledge in the Public Interest (KPI), 120 participants in the Upward Bound programs testified to the effects of spending several weeks on a college campus with the focused academic and personal supports the program provides.

Students wrote in the forum about the hurdles they faced in preparing for college: family hardships, financial stresses, language difficulties, academic struggles, peer pressures, and particularly the strain of maintaining their focus on college in the midst of these.

Upward Bound mentors and counselors, they said, offered valuable help just in time, closing the knowledge gap in families where no one has yet attained the college degree.

The program “has shown me the fiction and facts of college,” said Gerrod Williamson, who attended UB at the University of Maryland in Baltimore County. It taught him, he said, “how to deal with situations that I could encounter when I actually become a full-time college student.”

The on-campus UB summer residential programs combine with year-round tutoring and practical support to help students take the right tests at the right time, search for colleges with the best fit, and apply for college and financial aid. UB staffers also assist with resources such as books and test fee waivers at critical points in the college journey.

“When I first heard about Upward Bound, I had assumed it was a single year of tutoring and a small taste of the college life,” commented Kristin Zupko, a student in the UB program at Wilkes University in Pennsylvania. “I have never been so wrong in my life.”

Students reported that the experience increased their competence, confidence, sense of belonging, and identity as aspiring college students. It also helped them do better in their high school courses, they said.

“I always used to think that college was how you see it in the movies: parties, drinking,” said Gregory Clark, who attended the University of Arkansas UB program. “But being here has shown me more of what it would really be like. We’ve done some challenging projects that I didn’t think I could do, but I actually did pretty good in them.”

WKCD sponsored the online College Jam as part of its “First in the Family” initiative, supported by Lumina Foundation for Education. In its books, mixed-media slideshows, and web materials for use in high schools and colleges, the nonprofit organization features first-generation students describing their path to the college degree and advising those who follow.

“It’s far more compelling to hear about college from someone who’s just ahead of you in the process,” said WKCD author Kathleen Cushman, who gathers the interviews that appear in the “First in the Family” series.

Two previous College Jams, in winter and spring 2008, also brought first-generation high school and college students online to trade questions and encouragement about getting to college and persisting through the critical first years.

Knowledge in the Public Interest, WKCD’s partner in all three forums, uses Web 2.0 tools to enable and analyze such online discourse, particularly in the field of education. “The students engaged with the online medium with ease and proved to be thoughtful and articulate contributors,” said KPI’s Doris Reeves-Lipscomb.

The June 2008 Jam involved Upward Bound programs at University of Arkansas, Florida International University, Houghton College, University of Maine at Farmington, University of Maryland at Baltimore, Ohio University, University of Southern Maine, Wilkes University, and Virginia Tech. Knowledge in the Public Interest organized the online event and provided facilitation and analysis.

To obtain Jam summaries and other materials and resources, contact info@firstinthefamily.org.