

DIVERSITY IN ACADEME

At Hamilton College, Top Administrators Were Themselves First-Generation Students



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Nancy Thompson (right), dean of students, with a colleague, Allen Harrison (second from left), and three Hamilton students. All were or are the first in their families to attend college.

By Ben Gose | MAY 18, 2015

Eudocia Montiel didn't tell her parents she was applying to Hamilton College. After she got in, she snuck off to a program for admitted students by fibbing that she was staying at a friend's house.

Ms. Montiel knew that her parents, who had immigrated from Mexico and settled in the South Bronx, wouldn't approve of her attending the small liberal-arts college in upstate New York — or any college. As they saw it, their daughter could speak English well and was set to graduate from high school. Why would she want to risk college when so many other local students had left community

colleges with nothing more than debt?

"I 'came out' to them only after I got my financial-aid package, which provided a full ride for the first year," Ms. Montiel says.

Diversity in Academe: First-Generation Students

Check out the rest of our special report on efforts to help this growing group of students succeed.

It's hard for anyone to earn a college degree without some support, but that's especially true for students like Ms. Montiel, who are the first in their families to pursue one. Now a junior at Hamilton, Ms. Montiel was fortunate to find the right college. Several top administrators at Hamilton, including the vice presidents for admissions and development, and the president, Joan Hinde Stewart, the daughter of a Brooklyn steamfitter, were first-generation college students. They know firsthand that the 14 percent of Hamilton's students who are first generation (meaning their parents did not complete a bachelor's degree) must be enterprising to get to college, and just as intrepid to stay and graduate.

Such students get special consideration in Hamilton's admissions process, says Monica Inzer, vice president and dean of admission and financial aid. "The kids our faculty love most aren't the ones with the highest SATs," she says. "They want more of the kids who are grateful and work hard — often those are ones who are first in their families to go to college."

In 2010, Hamilton provided a boost to first-generation students by joining the relatively small number of selective private colleges that promise to be both need-blind in admission and to meet the full financial need of all students who enroll.

Hamilton's website lists the large number of administrators and professors who were first-generation students, and the college invites current students to connect with them. "At a place like Hamilton, you can look around and feel like, 'I'm the only one who doesn't get this,'" says Nancy Thompson, Hamilton's dean of students, who was a first-generation student herself. "That's just not true — a lot of us have learned that 'language' and come to understand it."

Even after one of Ms. Montiel's high-school teachers visited her home to plead with her parents to allow her to go to Hamilton, they still weren't sure — they feared she would become addicted to drugs or alcohol, or end up in debt despite her generous aid package. In an interview, with his daughter acting as translator, Manuel Montiel says he only came around to the idea after Eudocia returned home from Hamilton and proved to be more independent and helpful at home than before. A cook until he lost his job, Mr. Montiel now does maintenance work at the apartment building where his family lives. He hopes other immigrant parents can overcome the fears he had. "Children are here to progress in this country," he says. "The only way to progress is to gain even more levels of education."

Ms. Montiel planned to return home after her freshman year to help pay for college by working at McDonald's or a clothing store. But a Hamilton program called First Year Forward, one of several efforts to help first-generation students succeed, provides career counseling and a \$2,000 stipend for summer internships. Ms. Montiel used the stipend to work as a counselor at a public high school's summer band camp.

Students who break family barriers by pursuing a higher education get special consideration.

Hamilton has known for years that incoming freshmen who bond with other students during preorientation wilderness or service-learning trips are more likely to persist and graduate. But only about half of incoming students typically sign up for such a trip — with many first-generation students opting out, in part because of the additional cost. Starting this fall, all students will be required to take a trip, with financial aid covering the expense for students from low-income families. For first-generation students, the policy change "will provide a social foundation that will serve them well as they get launched at Hamilton," Ms. Thompson says.

Hamilton started the Student Emergency Aid Society four years ago to provide funds to cover special requests from Hamilton's neediest students. Bennett Hambrook, a first-generation student from British Columbia whose father is a concrete worker, mentioned to an administrator that he couldn't afford to return home for spring break or to replace his dying computer. The committee that oversees the fund approved a check worth about \$1,000 to cover those expenses.

"It's not just about access," says Vige Barrie, a Hamilton spokeswoman. "It's about equalizing the experience once students get to campus."

This article is part of:

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