

First-generation college students support the next generation of underserved high school students in realizing their college aspirations, and nurture their own professional careers and passions for educational access and equity.

Envision a College-Bound Future

ARIES JARAMILLO '13 DID NOT have an easy or straightforward journey to and through higher education. Growing up in the Coachella Valley, a desert community in Southern California near the Mexican border, her parents both held jobs in the Palm Springs service and tourism industry. Like many of the area's other working class residents, neither parent had a college education. Jaramillo was the first in her family to pursue a college degree.

Today, she is a Berkeley graduate and a successful Adviser Fellow with the Destination College Advising Corps. When she graduated from high school, however, she didn't feel prepared for the college route. She had not completed the necessary requirements to attend a four-year university and, in fact, did not even know what those requirements were. In the fall of 2007, Jaramillo enrolled in community college, and over the following four years, struggled to balance employment and study — working first full time and then part time to help support her family during the economic crisis while also going to school. Eventually, with the support of a much-beloved counselor and transfer-preparation program, she was able to focus her energies and prepare herself for admission and success at Berkeley.

Once on the Berkeley campus, Jaramillo looked for places where she would feel comfortable and welcome given her background and experiences. She found these in the campus's culturally-based student recruitment and retention centers, where she served as the transfer outreach director, and in the Multicultural Community Center, a student-led space dedicated to cultural expression, cross-cultural programming, and multicultural activism.

Through her connections with these programs, Jaramillo learned about the Destination College Advising Corps (DCAC). When she graduated in 2013, she accepted a job as the DCAC College Adviser Fellow at the Cobalt Institute of Math and Science, a school for grades 6–12 in Victorville, California. Located only 90 minutes from where she grew up, the position allows her to work directly with low-income, first-generation students and their families on issues of college access and preparation, which gives her great satisfaction and joy.

Jaramillo is one of 41 Destination College advisers statewide who provide college counseling and support to more than 30,000 students in underserved high schools throughout California. All fellows are recent graduates and first-generation college students themselves, and each draws on his or her own experiences to assist and inspire young people from similar backgrounds in the practical and emotional aspects of moving toward college. Within their schools, DCAC fellows offer classroom workshops, cohort programming, and one-on-one advising to hundreds of students, as well as provide family and community support. At each site, these elements are customized to meet the needs of specific student, family, and community populations.

Cobalt Institute for Math and Science is composed of almost 90 percent students of color, a majority of whom is Latino. Like Jaramillo, many come from families that have moved to the desert from Los Angeles County due to economic hardship. More than 90 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch, and most have limited knowledge about college, the college admissions process, and the impact that



(Left to right): Julie Nguyen, Devan McFadden, College Adviser Fellows; Jose Rivas, Program Director, and Omar Padilla-Magana. College Adviser Fellow

college might have on them and their families.

Over the course of her first year at Cobalt, Jaramillo worked with most of the school's 300 high school students in some capacity. A key component of her job was the creation of interactive classroom workshops. In 2014-15, she ran sessions every month in each of the school's 11 English classes.

One of the most powerful workshop sessions Jaramillo offers is modeled after the Destination College Advising Corps training itself. The session looks at students' educational journeys and invites each student to share their own educational story with their classmates. This not only allows Jaramillo to know the students better, but also builds community among the students themselves, helping each person surface their own history, goals, and aspirations. As first-generation college students, setting goals and aspirations is an important part of being able to envision themselves in higher education. It is also an important initial step in crafting meaningful personal statements for college applications.

Jaramillo ends this Educational Journeys workshop with a literal visioning activity. Students wear university-style graduation caps and gowns and take pictures of themselves holding signs that read, "I am going to college because..." She shares these pictures with both the students and their families. When students see the pictures, it sparks pride and ambition. They think, "I'm going to wear this one day and my family will see me in it." The importance of this visualizing process, which can be both literal and metaphorical, is central to the Destination College program.

Beyond this, moving students from visualization to actually making it to college takes concrete practical support, as they often lack knowledge about college applications, selection, and enrollment processes. This is where much of the DCAC one-on-one advising comes in. For example, advisers may help with things like mapping out timelines and work plans for the application process, application forms, financial aid, personal statements and other essays, and talking with parents about college options.

More than anything, the work that Jaramillo and her colleagues do is about being an advocate for each student — saying, **“I believe in you. I know you can do this.”** Many students have never had anyone tell them that before, and it can be a profound experience. In particular, she said, “This kind of validation is important for students who others don’t necessarily view as college bound.” Jaramillo recalled an example of when her one-on-one attention helped transform a sophomore from an oppositional “D” and “F” student who disrupted workshops and made fun of her activities to an honor roll student with college dreams and commitments.

In addition to working with students, Jaramillo and other DCAC College Adviser Fellows often work with teachers, families, and communities. She runs several college workshops for Cobalt Institute parents, many of whom know little about how to help their children get to college and are unfamiliar with different types of institutions, the application process, and financial options. Drawing on the demographics of the area, she created a powerful community workshop for undocumented students and their families, sharing information about legal issues, scholarships, and the Dream Act, which seeks to provide a path to legal residency for undocumented minors. She also invited a panel of undocumented students from nearby UC Riverside to discuss opportunities and challenges in a safe and trusting atmosphere.

Jaramillo and the other Destination College Adviser Fellows have a profound impact on students and schools. Many students come away from their DCAC experience with a transformed sense of self, a deeper level of empowerment, and new possibilities for their futures. Statewide, the program helps 14,000 students each year achieve their dream of attending college. At the school and community level, the program also helps build broader college-going cultures, expand the views of teachers, parents, and students about what it means to be college bound, and widen the circle of who is included in the higher education pipeline.

In addition to the impact on students and communities, the Destination College program is also

deeply meaningful to the advisers themselves. Like many of her colleagues, Jaramillo loves the work she does, and plans to stay in the field of education long after her two years at the Cobalt Institute are over. As a result of her work with DCAC, she plans to attend graduate school to study higher education policy and management and looks forward to continuing her work on college access and success for nontraditional students. More than just professional training, Jaramillo credits DCAC with helping her realize her life’s purpose: “[This work] has made me realize that my function in life, what I’m meant to do, is to make higher education accessible to other students — in whatever way I can. That’s the only way families can break the cycle of poverty, by going to school.” This is the message she will share with her students at the Cobalt Institute again next year and the inspiration she will carry forward in her future endeavors in Victorville and beyond.

The Catalyst Moment

The Destination College Advising Corps program creates an opportunity for first-generation college graduates to “give back” to California’s low-income communities. Through this work, DCAC Adviser Fellows are able to support the next generation of underserved high school students in realizing their college aspirations while also nurturing their own professional careers and passions for educational access and equity.

Best Practices

- » Match the background of adviser fellows to students served as a way of building understanding and trust.
- » Believe in the potential of low-income high school students and help them concretely visualize their place in the college environment.
- » Provide holistic academic and personal support to students and their families throughout the college application process.

- » Use a near-peer advising model to maximize the positive role-model effect.
- » Build a collective college-going culture in underserved schools and communities.
- » Offer extensive training and ongoing professional development for new fellows, many of whom ultimately choose to stay in the field of educational equity.

Lessons Learned

- » Supporting high school students through the college application process is time intensive. Strive to create a workable balance between individual advising and classroom or community projects.
- » It is crucial to work with parents and other family members as key partners.

- » Teachers can be valuable resources for advisers and students and often benefit from the perspective of those who can share an expansive view of what it means to be “college bound.”

What’s Next

- » To sustain these efforts, DCAC will launch a new fundraising campaign aimed at foundations and will continue to seek business contracts with school districts.