

The New York Times

Lifting Kids to College



Sierra Williams, a student at University of Southern California, was enrolled in the Neighborhood Academic Initiative. *Photos by Brad Torchia / The New York Times*

By Frank Bruni

LOS ANGELES — If you go by the odds, Sierra Williams shouldn't be in college, let alone at a highly selective school like the University of Southern California.

Many kids in her low-income neighborhood here don't get to or through the 12th grade. Her single mother isn't college-educated. Neither are Sierra's two brothers, one of whom is in prison. Her sister has only a two-year associate degree.

But when Sierra was in the sixth grade, teachers spotted her potential and enrolled

her in the Neighborhood Academic Initiative, or N.A.I., a program through which U.S.C. prepares underprivileged kids who live relatively near its South Los Angeles campus for higher education. She repeatedly visited U.S.C., so she could envision herself in such an environment and reach for it. She took advanced classes. Her mother, like the parents or guardians of all students in the N.A.I., got counseling on turning college into a reality for her child.

Sierra, 20, just finished her junior year at U.S.C. An engineering major, she's

already enrolled in a master's program. "My end goal is to get my Ph.D.," she told me when I met her recently. She wants to be a professor and, through her example as a black woman in engineering, correct the paucity of minorities in the field.

It's now some two decades since the first class of seniors in the N.A.I. graduated from high school and went on to college. More than 900 kids have used the N.A.I. as an on ramp to higher education — more than a third of them ended up at U.S.C. — and that number is growing quickly as the N.A.I. expands.



More than 900 kids, including Vanessa Zelaya, center, have used the N.A.I. as an on ramp to higher education, and more than a third of them ended up at USC.



At N.A.I., the first class every day is taught in a room on USC's campus, so that college is demystified for students like Jessica Hernandez-Flores.

The public school that many N.A.I. enrollees attend, the Foshay Learning Center, was responsible for more new arrivals on the U.S.C. campus last fall than any other public or private high school in America. Nineteen N.A.I. alumni started as freshmen; 11 more transferred from other colleges.

And N.A.I. doesn't even represent the whole of U.S.C.'s efforts to address inadequate socioeconomic diversity at the country's most celebrated colleges. Although U.S.C. has often been caricatured as a rich kids' playground — its nickname in some quarters is the University of Spoiled Children — it outpaces most of its peers in trying to lift disadvantaged kids to better lives. Those peers should learn from its example.

According to a recently published study whose data was just a few years old, 38 of America's top colleges, including five from the Ivy League, had more students from

families in the top 1 percent of income earners (about \$630,000 annually and above) than from those in the bottom 60 percent (\$65,000 and below). There are many reasons, principally a failure to identify and recruit disadvantaged kids whose abilities and accomplishments make them perfectly eligible for elite colleges with low acceptance rates. (U.S.C.'s is now about 16.5 percent.)

But we also don't make enough disadvantaged kids eligible in the first place. We don't guide them through elementary, middle and high school so that they have the necessary grades, scores, skills and mind-sets. This is the problem that U.S.C. has been focusing on: University administrators figure that they can't just wait for public education to improve and should use some of their considerable resources to chip in themselves somehow.

"We're not doing a good job in K-12 schools," C. L. Max Nikias, the president

of U.S.C., said to me recently. "The pipeline is not there. I feel that puts more responsibility on our shoulders to improve the raw material for us."

At an event in Washington on Wednesday, he plans to urge more colleges to form partnerships with K-12 schools. "I don't know what is holding them back," he said.

Many are already doing at least a bit of work along those lines, and the importance of continuing these projects, expanding them and exporting them to colleges that lag behind can't be overstated. Some schools host summer programs for disadvantaged kids. Some send their students and even their faculty members into the communities around them to teach, tutor or mentor needy kids. Some have been instrumental in the establishment of community centers for those kids.

But what U.S.C. has done stands out. In addition to the N.A.I., it has been involved in the establishment of three charter high



An N.A.I. class on the campus of USC



Sergio Lopez, a student at N.A.I., will be the first among his parents and siblings to finish high school.

schools serving low-income neighborhoods in its general geographic area. The first of these, U.S.C. Hybrid High, was set in motion by the U.S.C. Rossier School of Education. Last year's seniors were Hybrid High's first graduating class. All 84 were accepted into four-year colleges.

The second charter, U.S.C. East College Prep, is in its second year, so it has only freshmen and sophomores. The third, U.S.C. College Prep Santa Ana, has only freshmen.

Meantime there are hundreds of kids from the sixth through 12th grades in the N.A.I. During high school, their first class every day is taught in a room on U.S.C.'s campus, so that college is demystified and becomes a fixed part of their vocabularies. They head back to campus on Saturdays for special classes and enrichment activities. And they must have a parent or guardian willing to come to campus for separate sessions.

One recent weekday morning I sat in

on an A.P. English class that a Foshay Learning Center teacher was holding in a room at U.S.C. Her 31 students were all in the N.A.I. All were minorities. Almost all spoke up readily and repeatedly as they discussed aspects of the novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God," including themes that connected it to another book they'd recently read, "Middlemarch."

"Freedom means ... what?" said the teacher, Jacqueline Barrios, and in this instance she answered her own question. "The ability to have a voice. To think for yourself."

During a pause, I asked the students how many had a parent who had graduated from college. Only four hands went up. I asked how many would be the first in their families, including siblings, to enroll in college. Eighteen of the kids raised their hands.

One was Sergio Lopez, 17. He later told me that he'd be the first among his parents

and siblings even to finish high school. His dad, a mechanic, immigrated from Guatemala and his mom, a homemaker, from Honduras.

Sergio was just accepted into U.S.C. and will head there next fall, joining a student body that isn't as lopsided with the 1 percent as many other elite colleges are. According to that study, 13.9 percent of U.S.C.'s students are in that bracket, while 21.9 percent are from the bottom 60 percent of family incomes. He told me that any nerves he might have felt about college, especially as a first-generation college student, are allayed by how familiar U.S.C.'s environs have become.

"It got comfortable," he said, adding that an N.A.I.-assigned mentor at U.S.C. has given him tips on how best to study: Ditch the dorm for the library, which has fewer distractions. That may be a no-brainer for some kids. For others, nothing about college is obvious — or inevitable.

