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Getting into college and graduating

Organization helps low-income students get degrees

By Jacqueline Reis TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
jreis@telegram.com

WORCESTER— Bottom Line, a nonprofit organization that helps students get accepted to and graduate from college, hopes to open an office in the city next year, but its students are already here.

People such as College of the Holy Cross senior Waheed A. Pirzai and Worcester Polytechnic Institute freshman Saul E. Garcia credit Bottom Line with keeping them on track through the college application process, helping them with financial aid and loan consolidations, and sending them care packages good enough to make their roommates jealous.

“All I know is they turned a lot of nothing into something, pretty much,” said the modest Mr. Garcia.

He is the first person in his family to go to college, and he plans to major in computer science or computer engineering at WPI. He connected with Bottom Line while a junior at John D. O’Bryant High School of Mathematics & Science in Boston.

Mr. Pirzai also signed up with Bottom Line while a Boston student, although he ultimately graduated from Malden High School.

A chemistry major with his eye on medical school, Mr. Pirzai said a student leadership program called Summer Search put him in touch with Bottom Line, which has helped him with everything from his loan company to his essays. (He was born in Afghanistan and lived in Pakistan for a while, so English is his third language after Farsi and Urdu.)

He recently called Bottom Line about summer opportunities and his upcoming year off between college and medical school.

“I don’t think I would be here at Holy Cross without their help and push,” he said.

Bottom Line is based in Boston, but Executive Director Greg A. Johnson met last month with Worcester school officials and hopes to open a small office next summer.

The group targets high school students who come from low-income families and who would be the first in their families to go to college. Their counseling is free, and they would work with between 75 and 100 students the first year, Mr. Johnson said.

The group started about 10 years ago to fill two gaps. The first is the lack of college access for inner-city students, who are often in an overburdened school community in which guidance counselors have too many students.

The second is the lack of college retention programs, especially for low-income students, he said. "Some of the colleges are not great at serving this population and keeping them enrolled," Mr. Johnson said.

To help keep them in college and connected with Bottom Line, the group sends them care packages, holiday and birthday cards, and congratulations messages at the end of exams. "We want to keep them engaged with us so that if something comes up, they call us."

The group has dealt with issues related to roommates, pregnancy, finances, problems at home and academics.

About 80 percent of Bottom Line's students graduate from college, he said.

The school system is enthusiastic about the group's impending arrival, said Albert C. Vasquez, the Worcester public schools' manager of student and staff support services and alternative programs.

"It looks good to everybody involved in the initial conversations," Mr. Vasquez said of Bottom Line.

The district is still trying to decide which kids would be a good fit for the program, but they're considering University Park Campus School and Claremont Academy, he said.

Contact Jacqueline Reis by e-mail at jreis@telegram.com.

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