



Bottom Line

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Poor Get College Counseling

Programs aim to help students whose parents lack higher education navigate process

By JOSH MITCHELL

Erin Kelley grew up poor with parents who never went to college, but she is about to do something only 11% of Americans like her do: earn a degree.

The Boston College senior is the latest success story of Bottom Line, which counsels disadvantaged youth on how to get into college—and graduate. About 80% of the nonprofit's clients earn a degree. And in an era of skyrocketing college costs and debate about the value of higher education, they typically leave with relatively little debt and a job waiting for them.

The work of Bottom Line, and other groups that provide intensive counseling, is increasingly being studied by academics seeking to boost the prospects of low-income, first-generation college students.

Ms. Kelley, who grew up in a small apartment in the Boston suburb of Chelsea with her parents and three sisters, said she never thought of applying to a competitive school such as Boston College until a Bottom Line counselor urged her.

After Ms. Kelley got in, her counselor helped her find scholarships and sent her care packages. She kept track of Ms. Kelley's academic and financial standing. When the student found herself unable to afford a textbook one year, the counselor came through.

"I would not be where I am if it were not for Bottom Line," said the 21-year-old business major, who is about to graduate with a manageable student-debt load of \$21,000 and a job waiting for her. "I would not have even looked at the application."

Degrees are earned by only about 1 in 10 Americans who grew up poor—defined as a family income below \$25,000—and whose parents never went to college, says the Pell Institute, a think tank focused on higher-education policy.

But new research on the work of Bottom Line suggests that an aggressive form of counseling—advising students on everything from where to apply to what major to choose to how much financial aid to seek—can significantly boost these students' outcomes.



Boston College senior Erin Kelley credits Bottom Line with helping her get into college and stick with it.

Boston-based Bottom Line advises some 3,900 disadvantaged students annually, from junior year of high school through college. It works with students in the Boston, New York City and Chicago regions who show academic promise.

Bottom Line's services are free to students, costing the nonprofit about \$5,000 a client over the length of their relationship. Almost all of its funding comes from philanthropists.

Intensive counseling services have been around for years, but research on their effectiveness has been scant. Academics are now giving their work a closer look amid growing concerns that poor Americans are dropping out of college at high rates and defaulting on student loans. Other programs providing mentoring services include the federally funded Upward Bound and the Posse Foundation, both of which advise poor high-school and college students.

Ben Castleman, a University of Virginia education professor who has studied Bottom Line, said other research suggests one major advantage of students from affluent households is having par-

ents who are highly involved. "They can tap into their social networks. They do research on their own. They hire private college consultants to work with their children on the college application process," he said.

Poorer students often lack this guidance, meaning they don't apply to four-year schools even when they have the grades to succeed there. Others apply to

Researchers find that intensive counseling programs are helping disadvantaged students.

colleges that don't match their skills and interests, fail to apply to "reach" schools, or don't seek scholarships and other financial aid, he said.

Bottom Line, started in 1997, seeks to fill that void. The group generally accepts students whose families make less than double the federal poverty level—or under \$48,500 for a family of four—and have at least a 2.3

grade-point average. It accepts about 60% of applicants. Demand has grown rapidly, to more than 2,000 applicants last year.

Students are assigned counselors who meet with them routinely, first helping them decide on a range of schools to apply to, then helping them with essays and filling out applications. Counselors steer students toward schools where graduates have high job-placement rates and incur relatively little debt.

"There's no magic bullet to this," said Greg Johnson, Bottom Line's chief executive. "It's building relationships with students who don't have someone else in their life" providing such guidance.

An October paper by Mr. Castieman and Harvard University public-policy professor Joshua Goodman compared the paths of students who earned just below a 2.5 GPA and didn't get into the program with those who earned just above and did. The paper concluded Bottom Line's students attended colleges that on average were 35% cheaper, in terms of net costs, than the colleges attended by the other group of students.