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Antipoverty Group Works With Community Colleges to Graduate More Students

By Jennifer Gonzalez

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Mercy Arenas sits with a student in her cramped office on the North Campus of Miami Dade College.

The student, Rose Zephir, 23, a soft-spoken Haitian immigrant, has come for help. Sensing her shyness, Ms. Arenas gently peppers her with questions. "Do you live alone or with family?" "Do you have children?" "Do you work?" "How much money do you earn?"

Ms. Arenas is not a financial-aid officer but a project coordinator for the campus's branch of Single Stop USA, a New York-based nonprofit whose mission is to fight poverty.

Ms. Zephir's responses give Ms. Arenas an idea of the benefits she might qualify for and those she won't. Right away, the counselor tells Ms. Zephir that she is ineligible for Medicaid because she doesn't fit the criteria: She is not 65 years old, legally disabled, or the parent of a child under 18.

But Ms. Arenas has an idea of how to help. She reaches for a paper ensconced in a slot on the wall and places it on her desk, facing the student. "Are you familiar with the Community Health Centers?" she asks. The student shakes her head no. Ms. Arenas explains that they provide medical and dental care at a reduced cost.

"It's a much better option than going to the emergency room," she says.

The student has a good chance of receiving food stamps and assistance to pay her electricity bill, so Ms. Arenas enters the information into a computer program. Ms. Zephir won't find out for another two weeks whether she will receive the assistance. In the meantime, she'll wait and hope for the best.

Poverty is a stark reality for many community-college students, and it hampers their chances of earning a degree. The statistics highlight the challenges they face: 29 percent of students nationwide have household incomes below \$20,000, 79 percent work full or part time in addition to taking classes, and 35 percent are parents or have dependents (17 percent are single parents), according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

The continuous burden of having to deal with financial, legal, and social issues makes it that much harder for students to stay in college and graduate, leaving them stuck in a perpetual cycle of poverty.

Single Stop USA's goal is to break that cycle. Since 2009, it has formed partnerships with several community colleges to ensure students complete college by removing the financial and social barriers that make it hard for them to succeed. According to a McKinsey & Company report commissioned by the organization, \$65-billion in federal benefits were left unclaimed in 2008-9. The group believes the figure is higher today and plans to commission another report.

That money left on the table could be the key to solving the problem of poverty, says Elisabeth Mason, chief executive and co-founder of Single Stop. She cites research showing that community-college students drop out for financial reasons and that giving them even small amounts of money makes a difference in their retention rates.

"We want to make sure students don't have to make that trade-off between attending college or putting food on the table or paying rent," she says.

Hoping to Move Millions

The nonprofit has 90 locations, including ones at community centers, hospitals, food pantries, and job-training sites, but it has seen the most growth in its community-college partnerships. Single Stop USA has focused on that sector for two main reasons: to reach a large number of people (12 million students are enrolled at two-year colleges), especially those in vulnerable populations, and because it believes that poverty could be eradicated if more students completed college.

Community colleges in five states (California, Florida, New Jersey, New Mexico, and New York) have already welcomed Single Stop USA onto their campuses. The nonprofit would eventually like to have partnerships in 12 to 15 states, but Ms. Mason says the goal is not necessarily to form partnerships in every state but rather to create a "tipping point" in which other community colleges take up the model because there is enough evidence that it works.

"We want to move millions out of poverty every year," she says.

Last year, Single Stop USA connected close to 10,000 community-college students with \$23-million in benefits and services. An additional 11,500 students were served in the first quarter of this year alone, Ms. Mason says. Miami Dade College opened Single Stop offices last year at two locations: the North and the Wolfson Campuses. A third office will open this fall at the Kendall Campus. To date, the offices have served approximately 1,600 students.

Grant money, such as a recent \$1.1-million award from President Obama's Social Innovation Fund, pays the staff salaries at the community-college sites, and the colleges supervise the employees. The grant also covers the services of lawyers and other experts who work with students.

How It Works

The model is simple. Students meet with a trained counselor, like Ms. Arenas, who uses a software program called Benefits Enrollment Network to determine in as little as 15 minutes the benefits for which each student is eligible. They then help the students apply for the benefits, which can include emergency cash, energy and housing aid, food stamps, health insurance, child-care subsidies, and tax credits. Legal, tax, and financial issues are handled by appointments with professionals.

Tineshua C. Youin, 29, learned of Single Stop from a flier she grabbed one day while walking down a hallway on the North Campus. She now receives food stamps and is working with a counselor to get child care for her 18-month-old daughter. Ms. Youin, who plans to become a social worker, says Single Stop reminds students that "you don't have to do it all on your own."

"People come into college, and they are lost," she says. "They need help sometimes."

Ms. Arenas, a licensed mental-health counselor, is at the forefront of that support. Between seeing clients, she routinely goes out to a waiting area that Single Stop shares with the college's financial-aid office to talk to those who may not have heard about Single Stop. Just before ushering Ms. Zephir into her office, she had given an ardent speech to a family of three about the services available through the nonprofit.

Students who visit her office won't find a more passionate advocate, but even Ms. Arenas is realistic about how much help she can provide. That's because not all students will meet the federal requirements necessary to receive benefits.

"I try to be as honest as I can," she says. "I don't want to give anyone false hope."

More Money, More Graduates

All of the help provided is designed to increase retention and graduation rates. That's a goal shared by many others, including federal and state governments, foundations, and other nonprofit organizations.

Today, 44 percent of all American undergraduates attend community colleges. The dropout rate among those students is staggeringly high: Only 31 percent of community-college students who set out to earn a degree actually complete it within six years, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Even a small amount of help can make a difference. Ms. Mason cites research showing that students who have access to additional financial resources, such as emergency cash assistance, stay in college longer and are more likely to graduate. In a 2009 demonstration project by MDRC, a New York-based nonprofit research organization, low-income students were given up to \$1,000 for each of two semesters. Students who received the assistance had semester-to-semester re-enrollment rates that were 30 percent higher than the control group.

In another MDRC study, students at 11 community colleges received emergency grants of \$299 in 2005 and \$430 in 2006. Results varied, but over all, students receiving financial resources had higher semester-to-semester re-enrollment rates than the annual re-enrollment rates at the colleges over all (ranging from no higher to up to 70 percent higher, with an average of 28 percent higher).

When Julio A. Cohen, 23, was laid off from his job as a construction surveyor last year, his first thought wasn't to go to college. He enrolled at Miami Dade anyway, but the need to help his family financially nagged him. He stopped worrying when, after a visit to Single Stop, he arranged for his family to receive food stamps.

He said the money he used before to pay for groceries now goes toward his savings. And he can focus on his academic goals: to earn associate degrees in architectural-design and building-construction technologies.

Miami Dade cannot yet quantify success stories like Mr. Cohen's because it's too early to assess the effectiveness of the Single Stop program. The college does plan to track the retention and graduation rates of students involved with the program, as do other community colleges using the model.

Ms. Mason is fond of saying that her dream for Single Stop is that it would "put itself out of business." That's unlikely to happen soon, given that one in seven Americans lives below the poverty line. But it could happen one community college at a time, she says, and that's as good a start as any.