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**University of Washington Dream Project to expand and deepen programming**

*Receives \$972,000 grant from Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to develop new partnerships, expand and deepen existing work on college access and completion, and evaluate program success*

SEATTLE—The Dream Project, a college access and retention program headquartered at the University of Washington, is taking bold steps to expand, deepen and evaluate its work of helping first-generation and low-income students attain their higher education and raise awareness among university students about the issues of educational opportunity and social mobility. A recent \$972,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the first major grant awarded to the Dream Project, has made this expanded work feasible.

The Dream Project was founded in 2005 by UW students—first mobilized by then-freshman Alula Asfaw—who recognized that higher education is a factor in social mobility; that educated citizens are crucial to healthy communities and successful democracies; and that low-income and first-generation students are less likely to reach college. These undergraduates were concerned about the barriers to higher education experienced by low-income and first-generation high school students and instead of just studying the issue, they decided to combine their academics with action and created the organization.

“We wanted to create a program that was a partnership where both the high school students and the college mentors were seen as equal beneficiaries,” says Matt Harris, a founding member of the Dream Project and now the program’s assistant director. “So we created this two-track program where college students learn and engage in a new way.”

While a number of college access programs exist, the Dream Project is unique in its approach and ability to marshal, focus and sustain undergraduate energy. In the Dream Project, UW students participate in a college-credit class in which they learn about issues of higher education access and social mobility. These undergraduates then mentor high school students in every facet of applying to college and funding, including applying for scholarships, completing and submitting college applications, and navigating the process for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

To date, the Dream Project has assisted more than 1,000 students in their pursuit of higher education and achieved a college-going success rate among its mentees of 84%. That percentage increases to 92% when focused on students who participate consistently in program activities.

With the grant from the Gates Foundation, the Dream Project will expand its geographical reach into all South King County school districts—Seattle, Renton, Kent, Tukwila, Highline, Federal Way and Auburn—and increase the overall number of high school student participants, in some cases working with 100% of a high school’s juniors and seniors. The grant will enable the Dream Project to work effectively with approximately 3,000 high school students and 2,800 college-student mentors over the next three years. Overall, the program will more than double in size over the term of the grant.

Because of the Dream Project, students at Seattle’s Academy of Citizenship and Empowerment “believe it is possible to attend college,” says counselor Shauna Pierson. “It doesn’t seem like such a far-fetched idea, dream, or goal. Working with Dream Project mentors makes it a reality. They are taking their high school studies more seriously and realize what they do here is going to lay the foundation for their futures.”

In the past five years, the Dream Project has grown from a program of 30 UW undergraduates mentoring 90 high school students at three high schools to 300 UW undergraduates mentoring 500 high school students at 15 schools in seven school districts. In the 2009-10 academic year, the Dream Project piloted an initiative aimed at 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students to counsel them on courses of study and other preparation that will position them well for college admission and scholarship success. The pilot, which will be expanded to all Dream Project sites, began in response to needs identified by high school principals and counselors.

In addition to the extensive mentoring, UW undergraduates govern the Dream Project, guiding the program’s direction, fundraising, communicating with the high schools, and recruiting high school and undergraduate students into the program.

For the undergraduates involved, the Dream Project’s service-learning model connects and animates classroom-based theory and community-based practice, building undergraduate knowledge, experience and insight. These types of opportunities are essential to a contemporary university education and are often credited with helping students persist through college and earn their degrees.

The near-peer age of the mentors in the Dream Project, along with their diverse racial and ethnic heritage, and the fact that many are graduates of the very schools in which they volunteer, creates a uniquely natural mentorship relationship with the Dream Project’s high school participants.

“The Dream Project not only helps ‘push’ first-generation students forward, but also ‘pulls’ them into a community-in-waiting once they arrive on campus,” said Kimberly Mitchell, senior program officer at the Gates Foundation. “Conceived and led by students, the program combines strong institutional support with the first-hand experiences and voices of students who know how to get to and through college. It’s an innovative program in our own backyard, and we’re excited to support its growth here and across the country.”

The grant also includes a formal third-party evaluation to help the Dream Project measure its impact and develop strategies for further expansion, potentially capitalizing on national interest. New Dream Projects have already taken root at UW Bothell, Colorado State University, and Rutgers University.

The Dream Project is one of a suite of service-learning programs in the UW’s Undergraduate Academic Affairs.

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