

Foundation helps underserved students transfer to higher schools

By Erika Prafder

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Community college attendee Nolvía Delgado was able to fulfill her dream and transfer to a four-year college thanks to hard work, good grades and a Kaplan scholarship.

Photo: Angel Chevestt

When opportunity knocked, Nolvía Delgado was ready.

Education was a priority in Delgado's Ridgewood, Queens, upbringing, but, "My mom didn't understand the complexity of the higher education system here," she says.

Although Delgado, who was born in the Dominican Republic, was an honors student, "I didn't understand the options available to me. I planned on [attending] community college, because that's what everyone else did."

During her sophomore year at Borough of Manhattan Community College, Delgado, now 26, was identified as a candidate for the Kaplan Educational Foundation's Leadership Program (kaplanedfoundation.org), which would prove to be life-changing.

Founded in 2006, the program helps high-achieving, under-represented, low-income black, Latino and Native American students transfer from associate degree programs to top four-year colleges, an especially challenging feat as many of these students also need to work part-time and have limited information about the admissions process, says Nancy Sánchez, the foundation's executive director.

“Many are first-generation college students, without the resources other students take for granted,” she says.



Nolvia Delgado conducts a group session with four high school students at the Brooklyn Lab School.

Photo: Angel Chevestt

To date, the foundation’s track record is impressive – 90 percent of Foundation Scholars earn their associate degree, and of those scholars, all successfully transfer to a four-year college. In addition, 100 percent of those who complete their four-year program are either employed in their chosen field or have matriculated into graduate programs.

To qualify as a scholar, “You must be enrolled in a community college in New York, New Jersey or Westchester, have a 3.5 GPA, show great academic promise [and] a potential for leadership, and want to make a difference in the community,” says Sánchez.

After an “intimidating and rigorous application and interview process,” Delgado was ultimately selected to be one of nine scholars in her cohort.

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- Nolvia Delgado

The individualized attention Delgado received enabled her to focus on her studies for the first time, she says. When she was struggling with a science course, “The foundation got me a tutor, alleviating that burden.”

Scholars receive a monthly stipend, allowing some to quit their jobs to dedicate themselves to their academics fully. Says Sánchez, “They’re given metro cards to get around the city for internships. A laptop is also provided. We give them what they need to thrive, not just survive.”

For the first year, each Friday, “Scholars come to our offices for leadership workshops. We cover the college admissions process, help them with essay writing, building their confidence, and identifying and applying to the transfer schools. We also discuss how they will speak with their families about going

away to school,” says Sánchez.

KEF organizes college visits and preps scholars on questions for admissions officers.

Eventually, and with KEF’s advisement, Delgado chose Smith College, an all-women’s institution.

While someone from KEF helps move you in and stays for orientation, the transition was admittedly hard for Delgado.

“I didn’t know anyone and my uncle passed away that first semester. I didn’t know if I could stay, as I wanted to be with my family,” says Delgado, whose KEF mentor encouraged her.

“She told me, ‘You’re doing this for your family, and for everyone who came before you,’” says

Delgado. “She followed up on me, and it’s the reason I didn’t leave.”

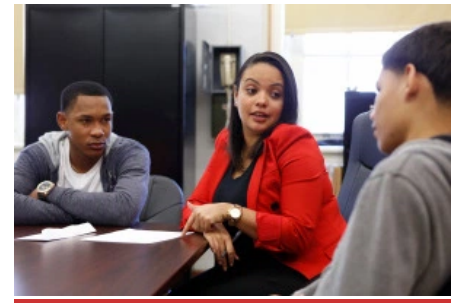
Delgado is now director of partnership for the Community Schools Initiative for the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation in Brooklyn, NY. In her role, she connects high school students and their families with resources they need.

“I enjoy this work,” says Delgado. “Students come to school with so many underlying issues.”

Eventually, Delgado plans to work in education on an international level. She applied and was chosen for the Fellowship for Emerging Leaders in Public Service at New York University’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service.

“It’s supposed to help us develop our five-year plan and career in this field. I’m finding it helpful,” she says.

To up-and-comers and others aspiring to follow in her footsteps, Delgado says, “Do your research. Take advantage of opportunities afforded. Take risks, and always dream big.”



Nolvia Delgado talks with students at Brooklyn Lab School.

Photo: Angel Chevestt

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