Putting Student Award Winners on the Fast Track

Andrew Santiago, an aspiring writer and winner of a scholarship from the Kaplan Educational Foundation, has found direction in his life thanks to support and guidance from his BCC Advisor.

COMING OF AGE in the streets and shadows of the city, what Andrew Santiago has lived with — drugs, violence, death — is no unusual. But thanks to his own drive and the support of the Kaplan Educational Foundation, the 21-year-old recently found an oasis, a single, rental room in Harlem — a quiet study, deep and pursue his goal of becoming a writer.

“It’s a quiet room, it’s mine, and I sleep. It’s magic,” says the soon-to-be graduate of Borough of Manhattan Community College, finally uncovering a few of the things most college students take for granted: a bed of his own, safety, and a good night’s sleep.

Santiago and students like him are the diamonds in the rough. Hardworking and likely the first in their family to go to college, they often have little support at home and only a vague understanding of what it takes to burnish their academic careers. CUNY officials know that beyond the University’s honors programs and the other high achievers, attending senior and community colleges, who qualify to compete for prestigious scholarships. Now the University is moving forward with new efforts to find students like Santiago and prepare them to compete for national awards.

In November, 70 CUNY administrators from programs for high-achieving students convened at each campus or branch to find the brightest among CUNY’s many thousands across the University, match them with appropriate awards and mentor them through the rigorous application process.

“There is a range of very talented students at CUNY,” said James Airozo, University director of student academic awards and honors. “We’ve expanded our outreach efforts and that will expand the applicant pool for scholarships.” CUNY, he added, is “trying to break the assumption” that only Honors College students are eligible, as public institutions are increasingly competing against private colleges and universities in grooming students for national honors.

The Kaplan Educational Foundation is one of a number of foundations, philanthropists and other donors who are investing in high-achieving students. Each year hundreds of students such as Santiago, who has written a play and wants to develop his creative writing skills, and other extraordinary students seeking careers in the sciences and technology.

Along with William and Linda Macaulay, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Rhodes Trust and others, the University recognizes the potential of CUNY students as the University sharpens its own efforts to mentor high-achievers such as its newest Rhodes Scholar, David L.V. Bauer, and promote them for top awards.

Azuoro pointed to the case of Mark Santiago, who was admitted to CUNY through the SEEK program — which provides extra financial aid, tutoring and counseling to talented low-income students with shaky transcripts — but who won a scholarship from the Cooke foundation to pay for medical school.

CUNY Matters (LG-09) CUNYMatters LG 3/05 3/9/09 6:52 PM Page 13

CUNY Matters — Spring 2009 | 13