Sink or Swim: Non-Profit College Access Outreach to High-Achieving, Low Income Students in a For-Profit Industry

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Affirmation to Honor Code:

I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code.

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Abstract

While institutions of elite higher education have made progressive steps toward admitting more low income students, notable socioeconomic disparities still remain. At Ivy Leagues, in particular, affluent and upper-class students significantly outnumber their lower income peers. Multiple factors contribute to these inequities, including the fact that few low income students apply, but the rise of the private, for profit college counseling industry has given wealthier students an advantage in an increasingly competitive application process. This study seeks to investigate the other side of the college counseling industry: non-profit "access" organizations that specifically target high-achieving, low income students and provide pathways to selective colleges. While several studies address counseling and mentoring programs, no literature currently explores student perceptions of a national nonprofit like QuestBridge. Through my own research, I investigate student experiences with QuestBridge, as well as collect qualitative data on the perceived value, community, and impacts of outreach programs geared toward high-achieving, low income students. Although I do not draw conclusive statements, I do identify several key commonalities across my interviews. My findings reveal that participants came into contact with QuestBridge through chance encounters or individual mentors, found its services valuable (for various reasons that include money and community), and, contrary to most existing literature, did not generally feel that QuestBridge drastically impacted the selectivity of the institutions they chose to apply to.

Introduction

In recent years, elite higher education institutions have come under intense scrutiny for their socioeconomic demographics and admissions processes. According to tax return data that spanned between 1980 and 1991, over half of Harvard students came from families in the top 10% income distribution bracket, and nearly two thirds hailed from families in the top 20% (Chetty et. al, 2017). The report equates Harvard's lopsided income distribution to the rest of the Ivy League, and estimates that students from families in the top 1% are 77% more likely to attend an elite university than students in the bottom quintile (Chetty et. al, 2017). While many universities have attempted to admit more low income students, affluent undergraduates still outnumber their lower income counterparts by 14 to 1 at selective four-year institutions (Furquim and Glasner, 2017). Various factors contribute to these discrepancies, including high admissions of legacy students and athletes, but the socioeconomic disparities in access to college

counseling and preparation resources are increasingly to blame. Low income students are not only less likely to attend selective colleges, but they are also less likely to utilize support resources and apply in the first place.

As of February 2020, the education consulting and counseling industry was valued at nearly 2 billion dollars (IBISWorld, 2020). The industry has grown 1.5% since 2015, largely due to an increasing demand for postsecondary education and college admissions guidance. More Americans are attending college than ever before, but wealthy families are disproportionately funding competitive counseling and reaping its rewards. Through services such as IvyWise, Ivy Coach, and Top Tier Admissions, parents can pay up to hundreds of thousands of dollars to secure admissions coaching, private test preparation, and mock interviews for their students (Del Valle, 2019). While these prices may sound astronomical, the narrowing acceptance rates at competitive universities push parents to seek any extra edge for their children. IvyWise, for instance, reports that 92% of their students are accepted into one of their top three choices, and that their acceptance rates to Yale and Princeton are six times higher than the national average (Schwartz, 2017). For those who can afford it, the college consulting industry is a golden ticket with a substantial return on investment.

Among low income students, however, counseling resources for selective institutions are few and far between. Although elite colleges have attempted to expand outreach to high-achieving, low income students, application rates remain disproportionately low (Hoxby and Avery, 2012). Compared to their high-income counterparts, low income students are less likely to receive admissions guidance, apply to a diverse range of schools, and be informed of prospective financial aid and scholarships (Pallais and Turner, 2006). Numerous nonprofit organizations provide tutoring and counseling to low income students, but few (namely, QuestBridge), specialize in guiding high achievers toward selective schools. While these organizations may entail consulting services, they are more comprehensively referred to as "college access programs" (Furquim and Glasener, 2017, p. 666). Thus, my research seeks to answer the question: how do high-achieving, low income students perceive services such as QuestBridge that attempt to increase accessibility to elite institutions? In particular, how do they a.) come into contact with these organizations, b.) perceive their utility and value, and c.) understand their belonging in the program. Ultimately, how do services like QuestBridge shape student opinions of higher education and their decisions on where to apply?

Literature Review

While little scholarly literature exists on college access organizations geared toward high-achieving, low income (HALI) students, several studies address the general phenomenon of the demographic. Hoxby and Avery (2012) outline multiple factors that contribute to low application rates of HALI students at selective institutions, or "undermatching." According to the most recent comprehensive survey of nationwide student data, 39% of "high achievers" (students who scored above the 90th percentile on the ACT or had an A- average) were from families in the bottom two income quartiles (Hoxby and Avery, 2012, p. 11). Of these students, 40% applied to no selective colleges, and 39% applied to only one selective college (p. 16-17). For the purposes of the study, a "selective college" was defined as ranking anywhere between "Very Competitive Plus" and "Most Competitive" in Barron's 2008 *Profile of American Colleges* (p. 1). While many elite institutions provide considerable financial aid for low income undergraduates, Hoxby and Avery argue that students are not adequately informed of prospective aid, and have less access to the companies, alumni, and peers that typically counsel their higher-income counterparts.

It is vital to note, however, that Hoxby and Avery differentiate between "achievement-typical" and "income-typical" HALI students. Achievement-typical students, who are usually concentrated in urban areas and attend magnet or private schools, generally apply to the same number of selective colleges as their high-income counterparts. Income-typical students, on the other hand, are often geographically isolated from other high-achieving peers and tend to apply to less selective colleges (Hoxby and Avery, 2012, p. 1, 24). Jack (2016) coins a similar distinction between "privileged poor" and "doubly disadvantaged" students in his studies on academic engagement at elite colleges. "Privileged poor" students may have attended magnet or preparatory schools on scholarship, and are more likely to engage with their professors than the "doubly disadvantaged" students who remained in low-performing schools and impoverished neighborhoods (Jack, 2016, p. 11). I do not intend to conduct a comparative study between achievement-typical and income-typical HALI students, but I do recognize that Hoxby, Avery, and Jack touch on an important distinction that should inform my research process. If geography and peer demographics influence HALI application rates, they are likely to inform perceptions of college outreach programs, so I must be mindful of school backgrounds before I make any generalizations about the students I interview.

Hoxby and Avery assert that many high-achieving, low income students lack the information necessary to apply to selective institutions. While Pallais and Turner (2006) also identify informational barriers as an obstacle to HALI students, Avery (2010, 2014) appears to be the only researcher systematically investigating the potential of college counseling and program outreach to improve these application rates. In his first study, Avery paired high-achieving students from low-income schools with certified college counselors (Avery, 2010, p. 8). Over the course of a year, counselors advised students on where to apply for college and what materials to include in their applications. Compared to a control group that did not see a counselor, participants who received guidance applied to more competitive colleges and were more likely to be admitted to their first choice school (Avery, 2010, p. 20). Avery attributes these results to greater information access, but also observes that counselors encouraged students to apply to a wider variety of schools. Many HALI students might idealize the likes of Harvard or Yale, but Avery concludes that a key benefit of counseling is to direct them toward the plethora of other selective schools that are slightly less competitive (Avery, 2010, p. 33). Avery (2014) reiterates these findings in an additional study on the Amherst Telementoring Program, which partners Amherst College undergraduates with HALI seniors. Prior to data collection, Avery differentiated between Barron's "Most Competitive" colleges with a ranking of "1" or "2." Group 1 consisted of the nation's top schools (the Ivy League, Stanford, Williams, Amherst, Duke, Cal Tech, etc.) and Group 2 included all other institutions in the "Most Competitive" category (Avery, 2014, p. 21). On average, participants who were paired with an Amherst mentor applied to 2.53 "1" colleges and 2.10 "2" colleges, compared to non-participants who applied to an average of 2.31 "1" colleges and 1.26 "2" colleges (Avery, 2014, p. 22). Ultimately, Avery argues that counseling and mentoring significantly widen the scope of where HALI students apply, as well as improve their chances of admission to reputable institutions.

In both studies, Avery conducts qualitative interviews with student participants, but most comments pertain to the effectiveness of an individual counselor or mentor. My research aims to explore student perceptions of more comprehensive programs like QuestBridge; therefore, although I anticipate using a similar form of qualitative analysis, I am more concerned with student reflections on a program rather than a person. Existing research clearly suggests that college guidance increases the likelihood of HALI students to attend competitive institutions, but gaps remain in the literature about any specific organizations. Granted, few programs target

HALI students in the first place, but scholarly work is sparse even amongst known organizations. The only academic analysis of QuestBridge, for example, investigates whether the program increases economic diversity at selective colleges (Furquim and Glasener, 2017). Furquim and Glasener acknowledge that QuestBridge may remove application barriers and increase the percentage of low-income applicants, but they conclude that QuestBridge admissions numbers have a statistically insignificant impact on economic diversity at top schools (Furquim and Glasener, 2017, p. 663). Furquim and Glasener raise fair questions about the institutional impact of one program, but their study is devoid of any student testimonials. Therefore, in my own research, I hope to provide the missing analysis of how students themselves perceive their belonging, involvement, and experience in programs dedicated to elite college access.

Methods

QuestBridge is a national nonprofit organization headquartered in Palo Alto, California that strives to connect high-achieving, low income students with selective colleges. QuestBridge was founded in 1987 as a Stanford summer enrichment program, but by 2004, president Mitch McCullough began to shift its focus toward recruiting low income students to attend partner colleges on full scholarships ("History," n.d.). Today, QuestBridge partners with 45 competitive institutions, including Brown, Duke, Emory, Oberlin, Stanford, and Yale. High school seniors who exhibit advanced academic capabilities and whose families make less than $65,000 per year are eligible to apply for the National College Match program, which admits students as finalists and allows them to rank their preferences for up to 12 partner colleges. Colleges have sole discretion over which finalists they choose to admit, but students receive a full 4 year scholarship to the highest preference that matches them back. If finalists do not match with any colleges, they are still eligible to reapply through the QuestBridge regular decision with no application fees and guaranteed financial aid ("How It Works," n.d.). In addition to the National College Match, juniors can also apply to the College Prep Scholars Program, which operates as a more traditional counseling service. Prep Scholars gain free admission to summer college programs and admissions conferences, receive application advice, and are five times more likely to earn a full scholarship through the Match program ("College Prep Scholars Program," n.d.). As of 2016, more than 70,000 students had participated in QuestBridge programs, 27,000 had been admitted to a QuestBridge partner through the National Match, and 7,000 had received full

scholarships ("Our Impact," 2016). Questbridge is the most comprehensive and well-known outreach program for HALI students, so it serves as the perfect case study for my research.

I conducted my study through a series of six qualitative interviews with HALI students who participated in the QuestBridge National Match Program and/or the College Prep Scholars Program. Harvard College does not partner with QuestBridge, so I interviewed students from other selective institutions. I attended high school with three QuestBridge scholars currently enrolled at Stanford, Northwestern, and Washington University in St. Louis, so I utilized a snowball sampling scheme in which my friends recruited other QuestBridge participants to speak with me. Through these initial contacts, I was able to interview three more students from Vanderbilt, Haverford, and Emory. I was initially hesitant to interview three people from the same high school, but their testimonies proved to be quite different, and actually allowed me to analyze how perceptions can vary within the same institution.

Although I provided my participants space to speak freely about their experiences with QuestBridge, I conducted fairly structured interviews over Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes, and I asked between six and eight questions (for specific questions and interview protocol, see Appendix A). The subjective nature of in-depth interviews may have rendered my findings more personal than general, but I believe that interviews were the most effective way to gage perspectives and opinions on a topic that severely lacks student testimonial. Furthermore, the driving goal of my research was not to make any sweeping assessments of college outreach programs or HALI students, but to explore how students perceived and interacted with a sample program. Therefore, interviews were essential to gather the individualized qualitative data I seeked.

After I conducted each interview, I immediately wrote a reflection that detailed the participant's insights. Next, I attempted to quantify and categorize keywords and concepts through a code book I developed inductively and deductively (for code book segment, see Appendix B). My code book enabled me to operationalize the variables in my research question; when I mapped certain concepts or phrases, I could supplement examples of testimonial or behavior that indicated the variables I was investigating. For example, if my code was "belonging," I provided a description of belonging in the QuestBridge program, and then pulled a quote from a student interview that exhibited how the student felt they fit into the program. As I detected similarities and common themes across interviews, I made tentative observations

based on inductive reasoning. The experiences and environments of HALI students differ too drastically to make any generalizations from 6 interviews, but I was able to extrapolate several key commonalities in student testimonials and discuss them in length in my "Findings" section. For example, in my initial research design, I had anticipated that some of my subjects would report that they were not always aware of outreach options, or were at least unfamiliar with certain resources until their senior year. In my actual research, I discovered that this was a generally correct assessment; most of my participants were not aware of QuestBridge until their junior or senior years of high school.

Limitations

Several limitations existed in my research methodology that inhibited my ability to make conclusive statements. As I mentioned above, high-achieving, low income students hail from a variety of academic backgrounds that influence their college readiness, so I could not make sweeping statements about how the entire population perceived outreach programs. In addition, I only interviewed six students, so my research was already too limited in sample size to deduct many conclusions. Any findings I reported were not reflective of all HALI students. Instead, the goal of my research was to investigate personal perceptions, describe personal experiences, and draw tentative inferences about consistent linking themes.

It is also important to acknowledge that my sampling method relied on participation and referrals from my own friends. Because I attended high school with three of my subjects, I knew it was a possibility that they may share similar educational experiences to me. Although I did not qualify for the QuestBridge program, I took the same classes and was in the same social circles as those who did. I did not anticipate that this proximity would influence my ability to objectively conduct and code interviews, but I was mindful that it existed. In order to minimize any potential bias or leading questions in my interviews, I refrained from sharing personal information or hinting at any commonalities in school experiences. For the duration of the interview, I pretended that I had no prior knowledge of the school environment in question.

Finally, while I did not conduct a comparative study, I did gather informal demographic information about my participants' high schools. Three attended a socioeconomically diverse public school in Kansas. One attended a Title 1 public school in Florida, another attended a public magnet school in Philadelphia, and the last went to two lower-income schools in North Carolina. Although I was mindful of Hoxby and Avery's distinction between "achievement-

typical" and "income-typical" HALI students (2012), I knew that I did not have the resources or the experience to fairly assess which categories my participants belonged to. As a result, I chose not to speculate about whether high school demographics influenced my participants' answers. I could make educated guesses based on the general information they provided about their schools, but I did not think it would be ethical or academic to impose my own inferences on my participants' perceptions.

Positionality and Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research with Human Subjects

As I conducted research on college outreach programs for HALI students, it was vital for me to remain aware of my positionality to the topic. First, I acknowledged that I was conducting research on my low-income peers from a position of financial security. As the child of a social worker and a community college lecturer, I am by no means wealthy, but I have never wanted for anything fundamental or doubted my ability to attend college. I am also incredibly privileged in that I had parents who prioritized my education above all else, and an older brother who attended Harvard and gave me invaluable advice in the college application process. I never lacked information or support about my college options, and I can now admit that I took many of those resources for granted. I recognized that I could not fully understand the experiences of HALI students, and I strove to create an interview environment in which they felt comfortable to share their perspectives without fear of judgement. I also attempted to refrain from making any assumptions based on personal relationships I may have had with the subjects. Lastly, while I cared deeply about issues of equity and access in higher education, I did not have particularly strong opinions about QuestBridge. I did not know that the program existed until my senior year of high school, and I had little relation to it apart from a few friends. I remained mindful of my positive biases toward non-profit education organizations, but I did intend to seek honest testimony about QuestBridge experiences. As a researcher, I was genuinely curious about what I would discover in my study, and I did not see myself influencing or leading any interview responses to depict QuestBridge in a certain light.

Due to the interview focus of my study, it is also important to provide a brief statement on ethical conduct in research with human subjects. All participants in my study received consent forms, which they signed and returned before we spoke. Prior to each interview, I clearly explained my research goals, answered any questions, and communicated that participants could withdraw from the study at any time. I asked permission to record all Zoom interviews, and

reassured participants that their privacy and confidentiality would be maintained throughout the entire research process. Finally, I used letter delineations (Student A, Student B) to provide subjects with anonymity in my final report.

Findings

Sub-Question A.) How do students come into contact with organizations like QuestBridge?

Although my study represented an extremely small data set, all six participants indicated that they discovered QuestBridge through chance encounters or individual mentors. A concerted, broad scale advertising campaign did not appear to be present. Students A, C, and F attended the same public high school in Kansas, but all stumbled across QuestBridge independently. Student A, now a college athlete at Washington University in St. Louis, once received a flyer in the mail, but did not seriously consider QuestBridge until a mentor for a different college advising program suggested she apply. Student C, a first year at Northwestern University, recounted that a social studies teacher told her about QuestBridge during a summer National History Day trip to Washington, D.C., and that she would have never known of the program otherwise, or been able to complete the application in time. Finally, Student F, who now studies at Stanford University, recalled that Yale University sent him a letter prior to his senior year with both an invitation to apply and a blurb about QuestBridge. He noted, "to my knowledge, prior to my year of high school, there was no one from my school who had gone through the process of applying to QuestBridge. [...] Overall, it was a very new process for myself and my guidance counselor, but she was incredibly helpful in getting me through that process." Student A was similar in that her counselor had never heard of QuestBridge, but she did not appear to have experienced the same cooperative process as Student F. She reflected, "I wasn't really influenced, like counselors definitely didn't bring it up at all. [...] I didn't talk about QuestBridge with any of my teachers other than to ask them to submit letters of recommendation." While Student C worked on her application with the school's few academic enrichment (gifted program) instructors, she stated, "I feel like the actual counselors at my high school did not do a very good job at preparing us for college or talking to us about any kinds of scholarships other than small local scholarships." Therefore, Students A, C, and F not only came into contact with QuestBridge through different means, but also perceived different degrees of application support from counselors and teachers at the same school.

Student B, who attended a Title 1 public school in Florida, learned about QuestBridge through her junior year English teacher. "[My teacher] threw it out there and said, you know, if this is something interesting, you go for it on your own. Really, it was just that initial drop of water, and I did the rest of the digging and the searching and realized, oh, this seems like a really awesome program. I'm going to do the work to apply to it." When I asked Student B (who now attends Vanderbilt) if she felt disappointed or overwhelmed at the prospect of researching and applying for a program like QuestBridge on her own, she insisted that she never expected otherwise. She stated, "I'm confident in my own ability to try and navigate these circumstances, because that's kind of just what I've been doing my entire life." Student D, who went to a public magnet school in Philadelphia and now attends Haverford College, also discovered QuestBridge at the encouragement of a teacher. "She told us about this event at the University of Pennsylvania," Student D said. "It was pretty intimate. It was a meeting of their black student organizations on campus [...] and it turned out that some of them were QuestBridge students. I had never heard of it before, but they were like, it's a full scholarship, you should try it." I asked whether Student D thought she would have learned about QuestBridge had she not attended the conference; she answered that she already knew of the program by name, but that, "I don't think I would have given it as much thought without people kind of selling it to me in a way. I had seen it listed on things but it kind of looks like any other scholarship if you don't know anything about it." Student E, who attended two public schools in North Carolina and is now a student at Emory University, learned of QuestBridge through a list similar to what Student D described. "I had a counselor [...] and she would send high school students opportunities to sign up for."

The most prominent themes across interviews were that participants discovered QuestBridge later in their high school careers, and through primarily random means. Even if some participants knew of QuestBridge by name or reference, they did not seriously engage with it until their junior or senior years of high school, usually only after a chance encounter or a mentor conversation. Student C, in particular, was adamant that had she not been on an extracurricular trip with a particular teacher, she would not have known about QuestBridge in time to apply before its deadline. Student E was the only subject who reported learning about QuestBridge directly from a guidance counselor, and Student F was the only subject to state that a counselor was helpful in the QuestBridge application process. Ultimately, there appeared to be no organized advertising campaign (apart from Student A's single flyer) present to participants

outside of their individual school environments and chance informational encounters. Before I conducted my research, I tried to refrain from making sweeping hypotheses about my small data set, but I did anticipate that participants would not be widely aware of outreach options until their senior years. I was generally correct that participants did not discover QuestBridge until what felt like later in their high school careers, but this period of time typically coincided with whenever they began to think seriously about college admissions. In most cases, this was actually prior to the participants' senior year, usually during their junior year or the summer that directly followed. Therefore, while most participants felt that they encountered QuestBridge randomly or sporadically, the timing of their encounters generally fit into the same two year period.

Sub-Question B.) How do students perceive the utility and value of organizations like QuestBridge?

Within my data set, one subject participated in the QuestBridge College Prep Scholars Program, four participated in the National College Match Program, and one participated in both. Students B and E, who were College Prep Scholars, reported that the program's main focus was to prepare students for the National Match application. Student B recalled attending a free conference at Rice University before her senior year; she was able to speak with admissions officers from partner schools, workshop her application essays for the National Match, and meet fellow Prep Scholars. She noted that, "the amount of information provided really summed up and prepared me to actually fill out [The National Match] application [and] rank my colleges." Student E, who did not ultimately become a QuestBridge National Match Finalist, reflected that her time as a Prep Scholar was still extremely valuable. "I came from an area with not a lot of opportunities, [so] anything that would help me prepare for college [...] I 100% went for it." She continued, "Once I was in the CPS program, I met a lot of people that were extremely ambitious and accomplished. I wasn't really used to that, because the first few years of high school most people didn't really care about their schoolwork. I thought that meeting [other College Prep Scholars] was really motivating and inspiring. [...] I didn't get the [National Match] scholarship, but more than anything, it was the people that I met that really helped me, and the connections from there." Here, Student E's testimony aligns with much of the current literature on high-achieving, low income students. More than anything else, she valued QuestBridge as a way to connect with other HALI peers and gain insights into the college admissions process.

The majority of participants who did become National Match finalists had similar assessments about the value of QuestBridge. Except for Students A and F, all explicitly stated that the prospect of a full scholarship was the main factor in their decision to apply. As Student D recounted, "I'm the youngest out of four kids, so when college came around, I was really searching for scholarships, and I knew that I would follow where the money was." Student C reflected, "my parents weren't able to contribute anything to my college tuition, so it's kind of on me to get scholarships. [...] I just thought it would really help my situation, and it would be one of the only ways I could go to a really big school that I wanted to go to." Student B echoed a similar sentiment: she was drawn to QuestBridge as a way to pay for a top institution. Student F admitted that pressure from an individual mentor was most impactful in his decision to apply, but he did recall that the program's resources felt "too good to be true." Student A, on the other hand, felt that QuestBridge was more of an opportunity to keep herself in check with college deadlines. She anticipated that she would receive the same amount of financial aid whether she applied through the Common Application or QuestBridge, so she viewed the early QuestBridge deadline (late September) as a way to "finish the applications instead of leaving them to the last minute." Interestingly, Student A was the only subject to bring up the fact that she would have likely received considerable financial aid without QuestBridge. This may have been due to a blindspot in my own questioning (I did not ask participants about their anticipated contributions before the program), but may also indicate that researchers cannot quite homogenize the perceived value of an organization like QuestBridge to be monetary. For students that already expect generous financial aid, the value of QuestBridge might linger more in its structure, certainty, and community.

Sub-Question C.) How do students understand their belonging in a program like QuestBridge?

The question of belonging in QuestBridge and identifying with its eligibility requirements elicited several different types of responses from participants. Student F was most direct: "I felt like I was a high-achieving student regardless of my socioeconomic status, and I also most definitely identified as a low-income student, so based on that criteria, I definitely felt two for two." Both Student C and Student D stated that they felt confident in their academic abilities and identified with the eligibility criteria, but that they were still a bit daunted by the prospect of a national competition. "I kept applying to safety schools," Student D admitted. "I was like, if this doesn't happen, I don't want to be just out of luck." Student A also felt that she

"fell within the category" of a high-achieving, low income student, but that she wasn't entirely certain whether the National Match was right for her. "At the time, I still wasn't 100% sure on swimming in college. So it's like, if I match with a school where I don't want to swim, how would that affect my belonging in that campus community?" Student B brought up the issue of the specific financial requirements: "I always knew of my circumstances, but I never knew what it looked like on paper." She, too, identified as a HALI student, but was reluctant to embrace QuestBridge until she could ensure that she qualified financially. Student E, on the other hand, had no doubts about her financial eligibility for the College Prep Scholars program, but did feel "quite a bit of imposter syndrome." Although she later grew to appreciate the friends and connections she made, she admitted that she initially struggled to fit in with other high achieving peers. "It was quite a bit of a shock [...] but we connected through Facebook groups [...] and then we made an unofficial group where it was easier to be ourselves because there weren't administrators or anything. That's when I began to find my belonging, because like, you relate to other people, you realize we're all human."

Unsurprisingly, there were fewer common themes in the "belonging" portions of the interviews. While all participants identified under the umbrella term of "high-achieving, low income," they diverged in more specific categories of belonging. They ranged from feeling completely confident in their abilities and prospects to feeling like an imposter, and several observed that the national scope of the program was intimidating. However, most uncertainties about belonging appeared to surface prior to participants' acceptance or immersion in QuestBridge programs. In other words, participants mainly reported doubts about whether or not they would become finalists, not whether or not they were qualified. Student E was the only subject to state that she felt intimidated by the achievements of her QuestBridge peers, but she eventually came to feel comfortable in the community.

How do services like QuestBridge shape student opinions on higher education and their decisions on where to apply?

The bulk of the literature on high-achieving, low income students concerns their college application habits. Prior studies argue that HALI students often "undermatch," or apply to less selective institutions than they are qualified to attend (Hoxby and Avery, 2012). As a result, most existing literature calls for more college access programs and counseling resources to guide HALI students toward competitive schools. In my own study, however, most participants did not

report that QuestBridge significantly impacted the selectivity of where they chose to apply. Student B, for example, noted that many of the schools she was already considering overlapped with QuestBridge partner institutions. Student C stated that "it was pretty much everywhere I already wanted to go," and Student F admitted that while becoming a Finalist exposed him to more elite colleges, he had already planned to apply to Harvard, the University of Chicago, and Emory, in addition to two safety schools. Student D did believe that QuestBridge had an impact on where she applied, but in the sense that she focused most of her attention on QuestBridge partner schools, which were already selective. A common theme across the four interviews, then, was that QuestBridge did not necessarily spark new interest in elite institutions, but rather provided opportunities and resources for existing aspirations.

The exceptions were Student A and Student E, but for vastly different reasons. As a prospective college athlete, Student A noted that becoming a QuestBridge finalist altered her recruitment plans. Some of the schools she had initially considered for swimming were not QuestBridge partner institutions, so she had to decide whether she still wanted to compete where she matched. Student E had already considered a range of schools before she joined the Prep Scholars program, but claimed that the competitive, achievement-driven atmosphere pushed her to apply to over 20 colleges, many of which were more selective than she had anticipated. Therefore, Student E's testimony more directly supports Hoxby and Avery's claims that counseling services and proximity to high-achieving peers promote stronger application habits.

Conclusion

At the beginning of my research process, I set out to investigate several key questions regarding college access organizations for high-achieving, low income students. I spoke with six students who had utilized QuestBridge (a national nonprofit), either through its College Prep Scholar Program or the National College Match. My overarching question was about general student perceptions, but I divided my interviews into three categories: contact, value, and belonging. Ultimately, my research offers insights into three tentative findings. These findings are not meant to be read as conclusive, but rather as potential points for discussion and further research. First, QuestBridge appears to lack a concerted advertising campaign. All participants discovered the program through chance encounters (the mail, a conference) or individual mentors. QuestBridge was not widely known or circulated at the participants' schools, and only two subjects noted that their counselors were particularly helpful in the application process.

Furthermore, participants were not generally aware of QuestBridge until later in their high school careers, which prompts additional questions of equity in the college access industry. Whereas higher-income students may have access to tutoring and counseling as early as middle school, the participants in my study were not privy to QuestBridge until their junior or senior years of high school. My second finding concerns the perceived value of QuestBridge. Four participants primarily valued QuestBridge as a way to pay for college, one valued it as a way to enforce application deadlines, and another valued it as an opportunity to connect with other HALI students. These responses are too disparate (and from too small a data set) to draw any serious conclusion, but they do indicate that the perceived benefits of organizations like QuestBridge vary from student to student. While paying for college was a serious concern for some participants, others already anticipated financial aid and simply desired application structure or a community of high-achieving peers. Ultimately, these differences reinforce the idea that HALI students come from diverse backgrounds, and should not be homogenized as a population. In order to promote and support programs like QuestBridge, it is vital to understand that HALI students will perceive its value differently. If QuestBridge ever launches a more substantial marketing campaign, or if teachers and counselors attempt to publicize it themselves, all parties should aim to highlight both the financial and communal elements of the program. Finally, and perhaps most controversially, my research revealed that most participants were already planning to apply to selective colleges with or without QuestBridge. While some subjects noted that QuestBridge narrowed their prospective lists or introduced them to lesser-known elite schools, only one participant claimed that the program prompted her to consider more selective colleges than she had anticipated. For others, QuestBridge served as more of a helpful tool (and eventual source of funding) in a competitive application process that they were already intent to navigate themselves.

My findings have two potential implications for future research. First, they expose a need for more studies on college access organizations geared toward HALI students. QuestBridge is the most famous example, yet it has no existing literature base, and it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions about its efficacy without wide scale data. Second, my findings reveal that it may be time to reexamine existing narratives about high-achieving, low income students. Save one exception, participants in my study did not appear to "undermatch" or doubt their abilities to apply to competitive schools. I may have simply interviewed students who were highly

motivated and intent to become competitive applicants on their own, but such consistency across a single data set begs the question of whether the same is true for larger populations. Since Hoxby and Avery released their landmark study in 2012, there has not been another systematic report on HALI application patterns. Another national study might take more time and resources, but it would be extremely helpful to investigate whether HALI students are still undermatching at the same levels they were in 2012. If undermatching is indeed in decline, perhaps as a result of increased access to information through social media or the internet, college access organizations will certainly need this data to better anticipate and support heightened application demands. Above all else, high-achieving, low income students are a robust, diverse demographic that deserve far more attention, resources, and literature than they have received in the past. While my findings are small and largely qualitative, I hope that they can provide an initial window into the student perceptions and experiences that are necessary to understand issues of access and equity in higher education.

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Appendix A:

Targeted Interview Population:

6 high-achieving, low income students who participated in the Questbridge National Match Program and/or the Questbridge College Prep Scholars Program. Students are currently enrolled in college, and attend Stanford, Northwestern, Washington University in St. Louis, Vanderbilt, Haverford, and Emory.

Draft Interview Questions:

Where did you attend high school, and how would you describe the socioeconomic make-up of your school? Did you feel that academics were prioritized and your peers were performing at a high level?

How did you hear about the QuestBridge program? How impactful were any counselors, teachers, peers, or family members in your discovery of the program?

How did you perceive the usefulness of a program like QuestBridge? Did it strike you as particularly beneficial to your situation? What drew you to its services?

How did you understand your belonging in a program like QuestBridge? Did you immediately identify with its eligibility requirements?

How did QuestBridge influence where and to how many colleges you chose to apply? Had you not become a Finalist, do you think you would have applied to the same schools?

How did QuestBridge impact your sense of college readiness? During your time with the program, did you receive college counseling, mentoring, or any other services you found to be helpful?

Draft Interview Protocol:

1. Collect informed consent prior to any interviews. I will provide all prospective subjects with clear information about the purposes and logistics of the study, answer any questions, and then provide ample time for them to decide whether they would like to participate in an interview. If the subject wishes to proceed with the study, I will supply them with an Interview Consent Form that must be signed before any interviews can occur. I will reassure the subject that they can withdraw from the study at any time.

2. Develop a script to open and close the interview. This does not need to be long or formal; just a short paragraph that thanks the interviewee for their time, touches on the goals of my research, and ties back to my questions.

3. Collect consent to screen record the interview on Zoom and take notes. By this point, the subject will have signed a consent form, but I will ask for their permission to record and clarify any remaining questions.

4. Begin with basic questions: subject name, school, year, major. Create a warm and welcoming interview environment by asking how their day is going, how the school year is going, etc.

5. Ease into more structured questions. Rely on "how" questions rather than "what" questions, and allow subjects space to bring up their own points, arguments, and experiences. Begin with a structured question, listen to subject response, then ask follow-up and/or clarifying questions.

6. Conclude the interview with the closing script. Thank the subject for their time and insights, and communicate the remaining timeline of the research.

7. Immediately after the interview, write a reflection that details any insights and key concepts.

8. Code insights and concepts with a code book. Begin with a preliminary, deductive code book, but create an inductive code book as interviews progress and consistent themes and terms surface.

9. In the writing process, ensure the confidentiality and privacy of all subjects with pseudonyms, vague references to geography, and letter/number delineations.

Appendix B:

<center>(Sample) Code Book</center>

Code	Description	Example
Contact with QuestBridge	Student exposure to information about QuestBridge before applying. Applies to peers, counselors, teachers, family, social media, and the internet.	"My junior year English teacher just randomly brought it up, and kind of just, you know, threw it out there and said, if this is something interesting, you go for it on your own." -Student B
Value of QuestBridge	Student perceptions of QuestBridge utility (e.g., benefits of the programs, drawbacks of the programs, rationales for applying).	"I came from an area with not a lot of opportunities, [so] anything that would help me prepare for college [...] I 100% went for it." -Student E
Belonging in QuestBridge	Student perceptions of where they fit into the QuestBridge eligibility requirements (e.g., did they immediately identify with the program requirements and how did their participation in the program make them feel as students).	"I felt like I was a high-achieving student regardless of my socioeconomic status, and I also most definitely identified as a low-income student, so based on that criteria, I definitely felt two for two." -Student F
College Plans	Student college plans prior and post participation in QuestBridge.	"It was pretty much everywhere I already wanted to go. I thought it was a great opportunity." -Student C
Access to Higher Education	Student perceptions of higher education in general; opinions on access to college as a low-income student, QuestBridge efficacy, etc.	"For me personally, even if I had applied through the common application, and didn't do QuestBridge, I would have received the same amount of financial aid from any school. [But] matching is super helpful if you think you won't get a similar amount of financial aid from the school."