

Peer program helps Latino high students become first-generation undergrads

By Vashti Harris | For Mosaic

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Some of More Than Bootstraps' new and returning leaders doing summer training. For the 2023-2024 academic year, the program will have 14 leaders. (More Than Bootstraps)

Yessenia Garcia didn't know whether she was going to be able to attend college.

“There was a point in my life where I had felt so drained that continuing my education became questionable,” the 18-year-old incoming freshman at Montclair State University said.

“I didn’t know if that was the right path for me or how I would do if given the lack of information or guidance to make my college journey possible,” Garcia said.

During her sophomore year of high school, she joined the [More Than Bootstraps program](#), a college access and success program for first-generation college students.

During the height of the pandemic, Garcia said she struggled and felt overwhelmed having to adjust to virtual learning.

“Not only was I working on my own stuff during this virtual learning experience, but I also had to help out with the virtual learning of my younger siblings at that time — one was in a special school for impaired

hearing and special needs, and the other one was just finishing her final year as a pre-K student.

“This was because I was the only one who was able to help out with American Sign Language and the only one in the household who was able to understand English and work with technology,” Garcia said.

Like many families, Garcia said her family always had the goal of her earning a college degree, so when she learned about the More Than Bootstraps program she decided to join.

More Than Bootstraps President Audrey Fisch, who founded the program in 2018, said they employ a near-peer mentoring model to help first-generation high school students get into college.

“Our college student leaders, all graduates of the Passaic Public Schools and now at higher education institutions from Passaic County Community College to Rutgers University to Dartmouth College, mentor high school juniors and seniors in the three Passaic high schools,” Fisch said.

Based in the Town of Westfield, Fisch said the program serves students from Passaic, which has a low-income, predominately Latinx community.

“We understand the significant obstacles that first-generation college students face on their journey into and through higher education,” Fisch

said. “We wanted to build a community of first-generation, underrepresented students who empower each other to access and succeed in higher education.”

During the academic year, Fisch said college student leaders guide their high school fellows through a curriculum focused on three areas: knowledge of college and financial aid, professional development and confidence building, and communication with their families about their college and professional goals.



More Than Bootstraps' (MTB) summer kickoff, where they welcome its newest class of 17 rising high school juniors with new MTB t-shirts, ice cream, and college-themed ice-breakers. (More Than Bootstraps /More Than Bootstraps)

Ashley Delgado, 18, of Passaic, who is a college student leader in the program, is a sophomore at William Paterson University. After joining the program during her junior year in September 2020, Delgado said as the oldest child to an immigrant single mother, completing college has always been an expectation set for her, but has also always been her dream.

“I didn’t know how to start the initial process. I learned about MTB when a college leader came to visit my virtual AVID class,” Delgado said. “I joined as a fellow and I was the first to ever transition into a college leader position.”

Today, Delgado said she has continued her involvement with the program to give back to her community.

“I wanted to ensure that other students who share my story have a role model, the resources, and the support past generations never received,” Delgado said. “Passaic students are just as capable of achieving success as anyone else, it’s time we all get the recognition and support we deserve.”

On a weekly basis, Fisch said students meet in small mentoring groups and work their way through tasks. Once a month, the full group gathers to discuss the task, share presentations, engage in activities, or hear from guest speakers, Fisch explains.

All students involved in the program, Fisch said, receive a stipend for participating fully in the program. High school fellows receive \$75 a month and college student leaders receive \$400 a month.

After learning about the program's stipend, Garcia said this aspect of the program initially drew her into wanting to join.

"Imagine getting paid for receiving help and learning through out the way. ... At first, it seemed like a scam. I remember my family also being skeptical about it; however, I took that risk," Garcia said. "If I'm being completely honest, that had to be the best decision I could have ever made that year."

Fisch said high school fellows also receive a \$150 stipend for the MTB Summer Program during the summer before their senior year as they prepare to embark on college and financial aid applications.

College student leaders also receive \$1,000 to attend the summer training program, Fisch said.



More Than Bootstraps' member enjoying their end-of-summer reading session. (More Than Bootstraps)

All students also receive, Fisch said, a laptop computer and access to emergency funds if they need extra or early funds for books, if a family member is hospitalized and they need some dinner money, or if they need money for a licensing exam.

While providing access to peer mentorship, funding, and mental wellness services, Fisch said all the program's resources are given to help alleviate the pressure many first-generation college students take on.

"First-generation college students face enormous pressure. They typically embody their family's hopes and dreams. Yet navigating the way to and through higher education is enormously challenging, particularly as a teenager without anyone to guide you.

"It's crazy that we ask our young people to 'pull themselves up by their bootstraps,'" Fisch said.

Oftentimes, Fisch said many students have the misconception that attending an in-state public institution is the least expensive option. However, through the program, students learn about private institutions that offer more comprehensive financial aid packages, even if those schools may not be their first choice.

“First-generation students often have family responsibilities that include regular childcare of siblings or relatives and transportation or translation responsibilities for medical/legal appointments,” Fisch said. “An out-of-state selective institution may not be the right “fit” for them and their families.”

As the program enters its fourth year, Fisch said the biggest obstacle for most first-generation students, especially those at local public institutions, is that they must work more hours at low-wage jobs while trying to commute and attend school.

“With limited time and energy, these students may struggle to find a mentor on campus, utilize ever-more limited campus resources, and even make friends,” Fisch said. “Without friends and family at home who have experienced college, bumps in the road can easily escalate into insurmountable obstacles.”

To help students educate their families about both the options and the expectations of higher education, Fisch said they host a “family

conversation” during the December of each students’ junior year. It’s one of several tasks related to communication with families.

In April and May, Fisch said the program recruits sophomore students, and both citizens and undocumented students [are eligible to apply](#).

“We are interested in students who have the ambition to pursue higher education and recognize that they need and want help on that journey,” Fisch said. “We welcome students who are high achievers as well as students who have not yet achieved academically. ... Our goal is to ‘grow’ our own Leaders.”

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