

Chairs' Corner – June 2010
The Dream Project

TO: UW Foundation, Deans/Chancellors, University Advancement Staff

FROM: Daniel J. Evans, Chair, UW Foundation
Lyn Grinstein, Vice Chair, UW Foundation
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Dear Friends,

A few days ago, thousands of students bid their triumphant (and perhaps anxious) farewells to the University of Washington. In the fall, thousands more will arrive for the first time. This ever-renewed academic cycle—and the shaping of young lives that it signifies—is a source of pride and inspiration to everyone involved with the University, or with any institution of learning.

But that cycle does not include everyone equally. For reasons with which we are all familiar, there are young people for whom the door to higher education seems closed. Many programs—UW, community, state, federal—are trying to open that door. At the April meeting of the UW Foundation, many of you heard a presentation about one such program, the University's own Dream Project. We were so taken with the project that we are using this message to tell you a little more about it.

The Dream Project, you may recall, is almost wholly student owned and operated. It was the brainchild of Alula Asfaw (born in Ethiopia, brought up in the U.S. by an older brother), who found his way to the UW by a somewhat circuitous route. In 2005, while still a freshman, Alula approached Professor Stan Chernicoff with a proposal: What if UW undergraduates reached out to non-traditional high-school students like himself and helped them through the daunting and mysterious college-admissions process? Professor Chernicoff suggested adding one other component—a class that would provide both intellectual context and practical training for the UW students' work—and thus was born the Dream Project.

From the beginning, the project has had a double mission. Most obviously, it aims to find, encourage, and help high-school students who ought to be heading for higher education but aren't: low-income students, those whose parents didn't go to college, those in high schools where college is not a common goal, etc. For these kids, Alula thought, a corps of UW undergraduates—approachable, enthusiastic, themselves recent veterans of the college-admissions campaign—could offer both inspiration and practical personal guidance.

But the second mission of the Dream Project has to do with the UW students themselves. "Raising awareness," they call it—awareness of struggles and environments far outside their own experience.

“A lot of people on campus don’t recognize that it’s a huge privilege to be here,” says Steven Kwan, a junior in computer engineering who’s worked on the Dream Team since his freshman year. “It’s really humbling to sit down with these high-school students and learn what they’ve gone through.” Freshman Madhu Panjini, who grew up in Lacey and plans to major in political science, echoes his comment: “I never realized how fortunate I was.”

These two were among several Dream Team leaders who showed up, one afternoon during finals week, for conversation in the project’s cheerfully chaotic Mary Gates Hall headquarters. Others who attended: Spencer Ureña (a freshman from Olympia); Italiana Hughes (sophomore, communications, Seattle); Luke Allpress (freshman, pre-engineering, Buckley); Olivia Kozyra (freshman, pre-med and education, Spokane); Nancy Tran (sophomore, communications and sociology, Seattle); and Jenée Myers Twitchell (who helped start the project as a senior and is now a Ph.D. student in education). Italiana and Nancy had themselves been Dream Scholars as high-school seniors.

The ethnic, socio-economic, and intellectual range of these students is only partly apparent from these brief identifications, but obvious in person. One of the striking things about their conversation, for anyone of a (much) older generation, is the matter-of-fact, head-on way they talk about racial and other differences—no walking on eggshells here. “This is the most diverse group on campus,” Steven observed with obvious relish.

The conversation quickly revealed that, in the four years since the project was launched, it has become a magnet for a remarkable array of idealistic, pragmatic, lively, and totally dedicated UW students. Some 700 of them participated at some level this past year, though the core group is closer to 250. With Professor Chernicoff as their adviser and a 10-student steering committee in charge (including those named above), these students run a complex and ambitious operation.

They research and choose high-needs Seattle-area high schools to visit (12 now). They organize teams to visit each school once a week during fall and winter quarters, mentoring students one-on-one. They stage an Admissions Weekend on campus in November, at which all high-school Dream Scholars can work on their college applications with professional counselors and hone their personal essays with UW writing tutors. They hold “FAFSA Night” in January, when UW financial-aid officials visit each school and make sure students and families understand how to apply for aid. In May they choose recipients of \$1000 scholarships from among Dream Scholars admitted to the UW, and present them at a special ceremony. And then, to launch the following year’s project, they hold a Spring BBQ on campus for high-school juniors.

Oh, and by the way, they raise all the program’s funds. One group has visited the Gates Foundation several times. Italiana helped make the “ask” to a big donor for special projects. Says Madhu, “I’ve never seen anything like the level of leadership and power available to students in this program.”

And the results? In 2006-07, the project's first year, Dream Team members mentored 103 high-school seniors, of whom 77 entered two- or four-year colleges in the fall of 2007, including 24 UW freshmen. The following year, all these numbers more than doubled, and dramatic growth has continued since then. (It's worth noting that the UW acceptance rate for Dream Scholars is roughly the same as that for the general population, and the percentage of admitted Scholars who actually enroll here is significantly higher.)

Numbers from 2009-10 are still being collected. So far, of the 466 high-school seniors mentored this year, reported college destinations include the UW, South Seattle Community College, Howard University, Wellesley College, Central Washington University, Stanford, Lewis and Clark College, Yale, Seattle University, and many more. If rates of attendance from past years hold steady, the total number of college-bound students will top 300.

The Dream Project (now officially housed in Undergraduate Academic Affairs) is still dreaming big. Luke is working on adding 9th- and 10th-graders to the program, to help students get on the right academic track sooner. Another steering-committee member, Ben Overton (junior, international studies, political science, linguistics), is working on replicating the program nationally, with 10 urban universities identified as potential sites and one (Colorado State) already signed on.

A year from now, the UW graduating class will include Dream Scholars for the first time. That is a measure of how brief the project's history is and how far it has come in that time. The Dream Team students know that they have changed lives—and it is not lost on them that their own lives are among those changed.

Dan, Lyn, and Orin

Looking Back

- **Contributions July 1, 2009 through May 31, 2010 total \$262,176,717.**
- The **May 2010 Report of Contributions** is attached and contains fundraising details.

Looking Ahead

- **Saturday, September 11, 2010.** Joint meeting of Foundation Board & UWAA Trustees, 8:00 a.m. coffee; 8:30-10:30 a.m. meeting.
- **Friday, January 28, 2011.** Foundation Board Meeting, 8:30 a.m. coffee; 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting.
- **Friday, April 29, 2011.** Foundation Board Meeting, 8:30 a.m. coffee; 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting.
- **Friday, September 9, 2011.** Joint meeting of Foundation Board & UWAA Trustees, 8:00 a.m. coffee; 8:30-11:30 a.m. meeting.