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Simon Scholars: Realizing college dreams

Unusual program sends 15 students on to higher education.

By **SAM MILLER**

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It was two years ago that Daniel Hernandez filled out his first scholarship application, and began thinking about college.

"I had hopes of going to Stanford," he says now. "But in terms of actually going – like, the prospects of realizing that dream were very slim."

His four older sisters were all high school dropouts. His older brother went to a junior college to wrestle, but he was an All-American athlete, something Daniel couldn't hope for. His family couldn't afford much, anyway.

"In reality, I thought I was just going to stay at Santa Ana Community College. Maybe transfer to a state school," he says.

Two years later, he's preparing to graduate from Middle College High in Santa Ana. He won't attend Stanford in the fall, but he will go to Boston University—the 60th best university in the country, according to U.S. News and World Report, with an annual tuition of \$37,000.

"It's not like I'm the first generation in my family to go to college," he says. "But I'm the first one going to a good university."

Daniel is one of 16 students who were chosen two years ago to be Simon Scholars, a scholarship program almost unprecedented in its ambition. Rather than simply fund kids' college dreams, the Simon program – funded by retired Newport Beach businessman Ronald Simon – would work with kids during their last two years of high school.

It gave the teens cash during high school, computers, tutors, SAT preparation, financial advice, leadership and etiquette training and a social circle of similarly successful students. The teens chosen weren't the brightest in their classes; they were those who would benefit most, above-average kids facing serious obstacles like poverty, poor health or family tragedies.

Kids whose futures were very much in doubt.

Fourteen of those 16 students will attend four-year universities in the fall; another is headed to a community college. One other Simon Scholar ended up in alternative education.

Here are three of their stories.

Daniel's expectations

Daniel and three other friends had made a pact: They would all apply to Boston University, and if they all got in they would live in the same dorm or apartment. The day the university announced who had been accepted, his friends each raced online and got the bad news that they had been rejected.

"All the others had been confident, but when they started getting the rejection letters it really hit me that I might not get in," he said. "I was too afraid to know, but my teacher was like, 'I want to know now!' So he made me check it in class. The class cheered when I got in, and applauded for me."

Daniel wants to be a journalist, and he chose Boston University over the more prestigious Swarthmore because he wanted to be in a good media market with lots of action. It was hard for him to admit that, despite the opportunity he earned, he wouldn't be on a college path that would make him rich.

"Before, I had this sick mentality that I was supposed to be wealthy, and I was supposed to help my family," he says. "That's what my family expected of me, but after awhile they realized I'd be struggling a bit. The fact that I was persistent enough to pursue it in college really changed their mind."

Stephanie's sacrifices

Stephanie Ochoa was another one of the Boston University applicants – she actually started the Boston University trend among her friends, years earlier when her older sister's friend talked about it.

She gave up a lot to make herself an attractive applicant. She refused to date throughout high school, because she was worried boys would knock her off-course. With good reason – two older sisters got pregnant during high school.

Still, it's not as though she ever thought she'd really get in.

"I didn't have too many goals," she says. "I probably would have only applied to local schools, like Fullerton. I didn't even look at these schools my freshman and sophomore



Susana Barron, right, takes a break from trail building at Santiago Park Saturday morning. Barron is one of the Simon Scholars, a group of Santa Ana high school students given scholarships for their last two years of high school and four years of college. They gathered at Santiago Park in Santa Ana to pull weeds, pick up trash and plant new plants for community service.

SAM GANGWER, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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years. It's only because of the Simon Scholarship that I had the courage to apply to the big schools."

Being named a Simon Scholar, she said, made her realize that she stood out. She applied to UCLA, Berkeley and a handful of East Coast schools.

When she got rejected by Boston University, she happily moved on to St. John's in New York, where she'll be able to spend at least a semester studying at the university's main branch in Italy. "And I want to major in business, and you know where business is – New York.

"There were a lot of potential guys to date. But if I was going to go to New York anyway, it would have only been a fling, and I'm not into that. It wouldn't have been nice to the guy if I started dating him and then I tell him, 'Oh, I'm leaving to New York, bye.'"

Juan's transformation

Juan Guevara's parents came here from Mexico 30 years ago. His dad owns a struggling mechanic's shop, and his mom works on an assembly line. Sometimes it hits Juan: In one generation, his family went from being poor in Mexico to having a son apply for Stanford.

Attending Stanford, though, will take another generation. Juan was turned down, but will go to his second choice, the University of Chicago.

In April, the university flew him out for a two-day orientation. The two students who were assigned to host him were too busy to show Juan the college experience, so they all stayed in and did homework in the dorm room all night. It was the first time he'd traveled anywhere in the United States east of Arizona.

When Juan was selected to be a Simon Scholar, he was the shyest of the students: "I was sort of schooly," he says.

"In Santa Ana, it's all gangster and stuff. I didn't want to do gang violence, any of this, so I had to be sort of a loner," he says. He complained that teens growing up in Santa Ana weren't given the role models they needed.

"I was surprised that a lot of people at my school don't want to go to prestigious colleges. They mostly applied to state schools, and Orange Coast College. I was wowed by that. ... The other Simon Scholars actually want to go to college. They have this drive to do something with their lives."

He's no longer the shy one. When he needed to raise money for a school trip, he worked as a hawker at Angel Stadium, selling cotton candy – "too heavy" – lemonade and pretzels.

"It actually changed me," he said. "It got me to stop hiding under my shell, to go out and do stuff. I don't know how to say it, but it gave me the confidence to change."

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