

ScholarMatch program description 2016

Founded in 2010, ScholarMatch is the only major nonprofit that combines a crowdfunded scholarship platform with game-changing college access and career support for low-income youth, both in-person and online. Our mission is to make college possible for underserved youth by matching students with donors, resources, colleges, and professional networks.

Higher education is the most cost-effective solution to breaking the cycle of poverty. Our programs are built to address the three major barriers to success for underserved youth. These are 1) lack of knowledge and tools to navigate college admissions and financial aid systems, 2) lack of financial resources, and 3) lack of a supportive community and mentorship throughout college.

The program: To combat the phenomenon of undermatching and help low-income students find the schools where they are most likely to succeed, we have developed and launched a new web tool called the ScholarMatcher. This innovative online platform is the first and only tool on the market that is built specifically for low-income students to discover colleges that are a good fit for them academically, financially, and culturally. Furthermore, it's free, user-friendly and accessible to all—from low-income students and their parents, to schools and nonprofit youth-serving organizations.

To determine which schools were a best-fit for underserved youth, we ran analytics on 1,400 U.S. colleges and universities, and collected over 40,000 data points specifically relevant to low-income students. The data includes retention and graduation rates, available financial aid, loan default rates, postgraduate earnings, money spent on student services, and more. The data was used to generate scores for schools in the four basic categories that matter most for low-income students: financial aid, academics, student support, and post-graduate success. The scores are based on a 4.0 scale and give students a quick and easy way to understand the rich and complex analysis of the college data. After scrutinizing the scores for each college, 296 schools rose to the top as the best bets for low-income student success.

Using this data and a powerful set of algorithms developed in-house, we created the ScholarMatcher. Students begin by entering their GPA or SAT/ACT score and are introduced to a curated list of schools that fit their academic profile, displayed in an interactive interface powered by Google Maps. Using our powerful filters and search features, students can build a robust college application list of target, reach, and safety schools in just a few clicks-- always starting from a broad pool of exceptional institutions that have been vetted for low-income students.

The ScholarMatcher is innovative because it provides a straightforward, new solution to a complex and ongoing problem. Essentially mimicking aspects of the college advising that many higher-income students can access through knowledgeable family members, counselors, or personal coaches, the ScholarMatcher distills an overwhelming amount of data into something that is easy for any teenager to understand and use. It is also built with one vital need in mind: getting low-income students to think outside the 'undermatching' box and explore the colleges and universities across the country that can best support them. In fact, a recent study conducted by Stanford researcher Caroline Hoxby has shown that providing simple, free information to help high-achieving low-income students understand their college options can increase their enrollment in top colleges by 80%. Using the ScholarMatcher, students will learn that they have far more options than they realized and apply to colleges accordingly.

Current use and future expansion: The ScholarMatcher now serves as a new facet of our Destination College program—a free college access program serving more than 500 students at our drop-in center and through partnerships with local schools and organizations every year. We plan to further expand our reach by embedding this tool within other college access programs, high schools, and youth-serving nonprofits both in the Bay Area and nationwide.

Over two years, we plan to scale the project by developing additional online tools, creating a virtual platform that provides high-quality college access support for low-income students. This includes help with the college application process (including application/essay review and college coaching), financial aid (including FAFSA support and financial aid counseling), and virtual coaching to make the final admissions decision.

As the ScholarMatcher expands from a college search tool to a full-service, virtual hub for college access, we believe this platform could be used by tens of thousands of students nationwide, and become the go-to site for low-income students to receive support in every step of the college admissions journey.?

As users increase, we will also have the opportunity to cultivate an earned revenue stream from top colleges who are eager to meet and recruit qualified low-income students. Preliminary talks with admissions offices demonstrate that colleges are enthusiastic about the possibility of channeling their student finders fees into something that will support under-resourced students, rather than the current for-profit companies they currently pay to help find qualified students. The income generated from the colleges will provide valuable funds to sustain the operation of the free virtual college counseling services. The college recruitment efforts also provide an additional benefit for students: when they are given personal attention and made to feel valued and desired by a high quality school, they are far less likely to undermatch, and more likely to consider applying to a high quality institution.

Location within the college access landscape: While there are many organizations focusing on college access for low-income youth, the students who need support far outnumber the resources available to them. We saw how the closed cohort model that most college access organizations use can let promising students fall through the cracks, and we opened our free, wholly inclusive drop-in center as a response. This open model has been incredibly successful for us, but no matter how effective, this type of hands-on support is costly and has a limited reach because it is based around and depends upon a physical space. We believe this points to the need for a new dimension of service—a free, high-impact virtual option with the capacity to support tens of thousands of low-income youth. The launch of the ScholarMatcher, and the expansion of our services to the virtual world is just this.

Notably, earlier this summer, the U.S. Department of Education terminated their own efforts to create a similar resource—a large-scale college ranking system built to demystify the price and quality of colleges throughout the country. Instead, they are now calling for the creation of powerful and easy to use tools for students and their families. The ScholarMatcher is exactly this—the only free, online, college search platform on the market that was designed specifically with the needs of low-income students in mind.