

**A Technology-based System to Provide Equity and Access to the
College Admissions Process for High School Students**

A Proposal to the United States Department of Education

Research on High School Reform CFDA 84.305R

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Project Purpose and Goals

There are three overriding goals to the project:

- To instill greater equity and access to the college admissions process for all U.S. high school students,
- To improve college acceptance rates at U.S. high schools,
- To reduce inefficiencies in the college admissions process between students, high school guidance counselors and colleges.

A new website, CollegeForAll.org (“CFA”) will deliver customized outreach, recruitment, information and bi-directional communications services between college-bound high school students and U.S. colleges and universities (herein after referred to as “colleges”). The system will have a set of tools applicable to the needs of high school guidance counselors.

CFA will provide a platform for high school students to present themselves simultaneously to a broad array of colleges and gauge the level of interest and probability of acceptance at each institution prior to commencing the formal admissions process.

More than 15 million high school students, 40,000 high school guidance counselors and 4100 U.S. colleges are potential users of the CFA service.

There will be no charge to students and counselors for use of the CFA system. Fees applicable to colleges will be waived during the first two years of operation. In Year Three colleges will have the option of paying an access fee to use the CFA system or make a contribution of twice the access fee to a non-profit college scholarship fund to be setup by CFA.

Needs Assessment - High School Students

Delivery of the CFA system would mitigate the following conditions:

- Postsecondary enrollment opportunity disparity between racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups,
- The difficult, expensive and time-consuming process for students to evaluate and apply to colleges, and
- The very limited time of high school guidance counselors to advise and direct college-bound students.

The Opportunity Gap

Postsecondary education is considered a necessity for successful achievement in the 21st century (Camevak, Educational Testing Service, 2000). Forty of the fifty fastest growing occupation in the United States now requires at least some education past high school. Consequently, the rate of postsecondary education by graduating high school seniors must increase. Access to college is becoming a national imperative.

Yet there are continuing admissions gaps between racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups. Worse, for the past 30 years, the top income quartile of high school students has been enrolling in college at a rate 25-30% greater than students from the lowest income quartile (National Association for College Admissions Counseling (“NACAC”), 2005).

The following table illustrates the college enrollment disparity in the United States between white Americans, African Americans and Latinos (The Education Trust, 2005):

	Population: ages 5-24	Two Year Colleges	% Four Year Colleges
African Americans	12,274,000 14%	1,290,000 12.5%	1,285,000 10.5%
Latinos	13,151,000 15%	1,395,000 13.5%	785,000 6.2%
White	49,973,000 57%	6,054,000 58.6%	7,807,000 63.8%
Total Population	87,671,000	10,331,000	12,236,000
(Asians and Native Americans not shown)			

Relative to percentage of population, African Americans are under-represented at Two Year Colleges by 156,000 students and Four Year Colleges by 428,000. Relative to percentage of population, Latinos are under-represented at Two Year Colleges by 154,000 and Four Year Colleges by 1,050,000.

NACAC calculations, while slightly different, tell the same story - while African Americans and Latinos together represent 31% of the U.S. population, they represent only 18% of students enrolled at four-year colleges. Family income plays a direct role in the likelihood of obtaining a bachelor's degree. If your family income is over \$90,000, your odds are one in two, roughly one in four if family income is between \$61,000-90,000 and one in ten if income is between \$35,000 and \$61,000; for those families earning less than \$35,000 the odds of a college education are one in 17. By some calculations more than 300,000 qualified students are not going to college who could be. (Douthat, *Atlantic*, 11/2005).

College Search

High school students, facing what is arguably one of the most important decisions of their lives, are confronted with a noisy college admissions marketplace, conflicting or incomplete information, a shortage of professional guidance, and significant time and expense to rapidly identify, synthesize, evaluate and apply to multiple colleges. Even with parental support, which some students lack, the process can become overwhelming.

Students often do not have a clear perspective on what colleges are appropriate to their future academic and professional intentions. In other instances, students may not have considered - or been aware of - a particular college that would be a good fit to their enrollment credentials. These disconnects can lead to wasted time, effort and out-of-pocket expense and result in late applications with limited remaining choices.

Historically, the college search process has been a low-tech, labor-intensive research project many students are ill-equipped and unprepared to undertake without parental or outside resources, two support systems not available to many underserved student populations.

High School Support

High schools generally do not address the needs of students in college preparation (NACAC, U.S. Dept of Education):

- Only slightly more than half of U.S. high schools require students to prepare a written plan for postsecondary education,
- Only slightly more than half of U.S. high schools require parental participation in the preparation of the students postsecondary planning,
- Low-income and underrepresented minorities have more limited access to the coursework needed for college readiness,

- On average, each high school counselor is responsible for counseling 315 students while some states average 700-950 counselors per student, and
- The average high school counselor devotes only 39% of her time to postsecondary admissions counseling.

Project Solutions

It is clear students need additional services to better prepare their postsecondary educational planning. The CFA system would improve these conditions through the presentation of information, guidance and communication services helpful to students and parents and to further evaluate the likelihood of acceptance at target colleges.

Through the system's ability to "push" qualified student candidates directly to colleges that appear a good match, CFA presents the student to many colleges simultaneously and most likely would offer choices to the student otherwise unknown and passed over.

The CFA system would increase the ability for high school students to make themselves known to a broad audience of colleges at no expense, thus equalizing one aspect of the admissions process. It further provides a means to communicate with the college and assist with target college research, tasks either presently unavailable or partially served by fragmentary service providers. CFA would essentially provide a unified body of related services to the student, all directed toward facilitating the admissions process and improving the likelihood of acceptance.

Needs Assessment - Colleges

Delivery of the CFA system would mitigate three conditions:

- Ongoing and disruptive enrollment shortfall at both public and private U.S. colleges,
- The high costs incurred by colleges to recruit and enroll college applicants, and
- The lack of college-bound student outreach services currently available.

Enrollment Shortfall

The matter of college enrollment shortfall is of particular concern. Failure of a college to fully enroll its incoming freshman class is tantamount to "lost sales," leading to budgetary concerns and the potential to reduce programs, activities and faculty. The logical consequence of these actions is to place additional pressure on the institution to improve student candidate marketing with fewer available resources. Candidate marketing will be exacerbated by continuing economic difficulty, resulting in a degradation of the college's overall appeal.

In general, four-year private colleges have borne the brunt of enrollment concern as tuition increases have made certain college options unavailable to many students. In-state and two-year colleges became the necessary choice due to lower costs associated with state subsidies. With state budget-tightening the norm, even the community college is under pressure.

For example, in the last two years the State of Texas has cut funding to community college districts by \$76 million (Austin-American Statesman, 2/21/2005). Historically, state funding has accounted for about 60% of community college revenue. According to the Texas Association of Community Colleges, after these budget cuts only 31% of revenue has come from the state, resulting in tuition increases that in some cases exceed 300%.

A search of the Internet reveals dozens of similar stories. A few below are illustrative of the problem:

- In September, 2005, Indiana University announced a \$6.6 M budget gap resulting from a "significant" enrollment shortfall in 2004. The solution was to raise tuition 4.9% and slash expenses. 56 faculty were subsequently raided by higher paying competitors (Indiana University, 9/6/2005).
- Six of Michigan's 15 public universities are grappling with 2004 fall enrollment drops that have forced them to ramp up recruiting efforts to offset millions of dollars in lost tuition. Western Michigan University alone experienced a 4.6% drop in enrollment (Detroit News, 11/15/2004)
- The Ventura County (CA) community college district experienced an enrollment drop of 4.7% in 2004, all attributed to increases in tuition and other fees (California Virtual Campus, 8/17/2004).
- The University of Toledo (Ohio) has been unable to meet its enrollment goals since 2003 (Independent Collegian, 8/25/2005).

The issue of college budgetary economic trends is outside the scope of this application but its impact on student enrollment is direct. Regardless of the reason, colleges unable to meet their enrollment requirements will suffer harm not only to themselves but to the communities they serve. Improving college enrollment strategies is an obvious necessity.

Although overall college enrollment continues to increase nationally, according to NACAC the rate of application growth is actually *decreasing*, from 71% in 2003 to 67% in 2004. The national factors cited above are contributory to this decline and must be reversed through new approaches and the utilization of technology.

College Recruitment

According to NACAC, the average recruitment cost per enrolled student is \$1680. The bulk of this money goes to traditional marketing methods such as direct mail solicitation, the purchase of name lists, travel, college fairs and the printing and distribution of college catalogs. Most colleges maintain an informational website with widely varying degrees of utility. Essentially, colleges use a “shotgun” approach to their marketing efforts, casting a wide net over a largely unqualified target audience in hopes of generating meaningful leads.

Colleges have begun to utilize professional marketing companies, such as Targetx.com to better understand the potential opportunities presented by the creative use of technology. These nascent efforts focus on augmentation of traditional marketing strategies with instant messaging, blogs, email blasts, podcasts and website improvement, leaving unchallenged the fundamental precepts of how colleges identify and recruit students.

Early Outreach

According to NACAC, 59% of high school students start development of a postsecondary plan in the 9th grade. For those students who have committed to a high school curriculum in preparation for college, the point of planning represents the creation of new student candidates to all colleges. However, unless directly contacted by the student who may, for example, request information, colleges have no way to identify and market to these potential candidates.

Through telephone surveys of college admission offices conducted by the applicant, it became clear colleges would like to develop relationships earlier than in the 11th or 12th grade with potential student applicants. Not unlike industry, the “sales” process of student solicitation can be strengthened by repeated contact and communication over time. The challenge for colleges has been to locate these prospects early and develop relationships prior to the actual admissions process which seems, more often than not, something akin to a hastily arranged marriage.

Project Solutions

The CFA system directly addresses enrollment shortfall issues by increasing pre-screened student applicant flow to colleges. This capability provides colleges with new, qualified leads to evaluate for invitation to apply. There is no known service that provides an automated mechanism of matching students to colleges and presenting candidates to colleges in a customized manner. Colleges would further be able to set their own selection criteria and query the entire student database based on any field recorded in the student profile.

It is logical if colleges were to use a system that pre-screened and sent potential student applicants directly to the college while providing the college with a system to track and communicate with those applicants in a cost-effective manner the cost per enrolled student would drop. Selectivity and yield rates should also improve. The CFA system would provide this opportunity.

The CFA system endeavors to register all high school students, regardless of grade. In this way, colleges can initiate new, earlier outreach programs and dialog between the high school student and colleges can begin earlier, presumably leading to improved outcomes for both parties.

The CFA System

The CFA system is comprised of seven main components:

- Student interface
- College interface
- Guidance counselor toolkit

- Student Registry
- College Registry
- Content Databases
- Administration

Student Interface

All students in grades 9 through 12 will be eligible to register with CollegeForAll.org. Students will select a username and password to access the system. The registration process involves the completion of an on-line form similar to a college application (see Appendix A. for a sample of the form). Applicant is considering various ways to make the form engaging to the student user. The use of graphical symbols, as appropriate, and other visual aids are intended to retain student interest and to facilitate comprehension of the registration process. Students may cut and paste their college essay, if available and list preferred colleges.

Registered students will be notified via email twice yearly as a reminder to keep their registration current. As the student advances through high school new grades, test scores, interests and activities will be updated. The student interface allows students to ask the system what colleges are appropriate based upon their academic, geographic and personal criteria. The system presents students with a list of colleges meeting those criteria. The list is hot-linked to additional information about each college. Students may communicate directly with any college from within the system, requesting, for example, a college catalog, submit a question or learn about financial aid.

All functionality within the interface is designed to do most of the work for the student, who, in most instances, need press only one button to perform the selected task. In this way the system is viewed as user-friendly and approachable. The design intention of the interface is to get the student to use it because it is easy, helpful and fun.

The College Interface

The college admissions office will access the CFA system via user name and login. Once accessed, the admissions office personnel will be able to set preferences based upon their own criteria. Grades, test scores, ranking and other data elements may be entered as a range or cut-off. This criteria is used by the system to present potential student candidates appropriate to the college's requirements. Colleges may set up to ten different sets of preferences and store them for reuse with re-entering data each time. The interface allows colleges to quiz the system and generate potential student candidates for review and possible invitation.

The college interface allows for color-coded applicant tracking, the status of a particular candidate, an activities log of communications and mailings and a memo field for taking notes. The system will automatically generate up to ten different letters or written communication forms of the colleges design. A letter of invitation, for example, can be issued with the push of a button. Mailing labels can be generated.

Student candidates can be searched, ranked and sorted by any field contained on the student registration form. The system could locate, for example, a high school football player from New Jersey wishing to major in Journalism with a GPA over 3.2.

Guidance Counselor Toolkit

High school guidance counselors may participate in the process at the permission of the individual student. Students will issue a "permission slip" allowing their counselor to access their registration and assist in completion, updating, enhancement and review.

The counselor will also have full access to the Content Databases and will be able to communicate directly with students and colleges.

Student Registry

The student registry is a secure database containing all student registrations.

College Registry

The college registry is a secure database containing all participating, registered colleges.

Content Databases

One content database will contain information specific to a particular college.

Additional content in the form of general information will be available regarding the college admission process.

FAQs, how-to advice, scholarship information and resource listings will be available. It is anticipated content will continually be developed, acquired and expanded to facilitate the admissions process for students.

Administration

Administration provides data about the “back-end” of the system. It will monitor frequency of use, monitor adoption by students and colleges and automatically “push” potential student candidates to colleges on a daily basis. Administration serves the critical task of evaluation and measurement necessary to ensure the system performs in accordance with the primary goals of the project.

Participant Engagement

The challenge for applicant is to engage three audiences in utilization of the CFA system - the student, the counselor and the college.

By making CFA free to students, counselors and colleges applicant believes a major barrier to entry has been eliminated and will provide for greater receptivity, promotion and adoption by its intended audiences. Applicant intends to advise its target audiences of the CFA service through the use of direct mail, advertisement in related trade association publications and highly-targeted websites, public speaking and sponsorship of student-oriented organizations such as the Parent Teacher Association.

Resources will have to be committed to promote and make known the CFA service to its intended users. A marketing plan is described in Appendix A.

Beta Testing

Applicant has conducted research to assess the level of interest from both colleges and students. A limited Internet advertising campaign was conducted to test the willingness of students to participate in the project. Students were informed there would be a fee to register for the service (which is not the case in the working product) and nevertheless more than 300 students were registered at fees ranging from \$9.95 to \$40 per month (money was actually not collected as no service was available). The willingness of payment for this service is indicative of interest and need. It is safe to say if students are willing to pay to participate, they will most likely register in large numbers when the service is provided at no charge.

Likewise, the admissions offices of 16 randomly chosen colleges were called and offered free access to the CFA system. Nine of the 16 immediately asked to participate without further information of evaluation. Telephone surveys of additional colleges indicate a range of interest from “sign me up” to a willingness to try the system. The general take on the CFA system by admissions offices is that it sounds like a “reasonable” idea.

Monitoring and Measurement

Applicant recognizes the need to evaluate the efficacy of the system prior to advancement to Goal Three funding.

As the nature of the service provided has a certain cyclical quality to its utilization it is assumed two full college admissions process cycles will have to be experienced in order to 1) develop a sufficient student and college participant base to make the data meaningful, and 2) to set up and monitor trends at a control group of high schools. Not less than 24 high schools from six demographic profiles - wealthy, middle-class, poor, urban, suburban, rural - will be solicited to participate as a control group for evaluation of the CFA system and to make recommendations for improvement. Data points to be captured include:

- Student registration adoption rate
- The completeness and accuracy of student registration forms
- The participation of counselors

- How the system is used by students
- How the system is used by counselors
- Perceived changes in student applicant behavior by use of the system
- Perceived changes in counselor time utilization by use of the system
- Quantifiable increase in student college applications
- Quantifiable increase in student college applicants
- Quantifiable increase in student acceptance to college

Applicant will develop a similar control group of 24 colleges for capture of the same data sets listed above. These two control groups will function essentially as Boards of Professional Advisors in support of the project.

Project Objectives

The objectives of the project are as follows:

- Development of a proto-type CFA system for utilization by its target audiences as described above
- Evaluate the outcomes associated by utilization of the CFA system
- Determine next steps

Tasks and Resources Required

The following essential tasks must be completed in Goal Two funding:

1. Design and creation of the student interface
2. Design and creation of the college interface
3. Design and creation of the counselor toolkit
4. Identification and enlistment of high school control group
5. Identification and enlistment of college control group
6. Website development
7. Database development
8. Outreach to high schools, counselor, students and colleges
9. Acquisition / licensing of college content database
10. Development of additional content
11. Evaluation of efficacy of CFA system

Resources and expenses required to complete the above tasks include:

- Project Director
- Educational Advisor
- Website Developer
- Graphic Designer
- Control Groups
- Printing and Marketing
- Computer Equipment
- Office Supplies
- Travel

Project Timeline

It is believed two full college admissions process cycles will be required to glean meaningful data. Hence, funding under Goal Two contemplates both Year One and Year Two budgetary calculation.

Applicant expects Goal Two funding to achieve the following:

Within four months:

- Creation of the CollegeForAll.org website
- Creation of the student interface
- Creation of the college interface
- Creation of the counselor toolkit

- Creation of the high school control group Board of Professional Advisors
- Creation of the college admissions control group Board of Professional Advisors

Ongoing from project inception:

- Content development
- Promotion of the CFA system to students, counselors and colleges
- System refinement

At 18th month of project:

- Evaluation of data collected
- Make informed choice as to future direction and appropriateness of Goal Three funding

Project Location and Personnel

The principal place of operation for development of the CFA system will be at the offices of XXXXXX XXXXXXXX, located in West Orange, NJ. The company is in discussion with the Enterprise Development Corporation (EDC) operated by the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) in Newark, New Jersey. The EDC is the largest business incubator in the state of New Jersey with a five-year success rate of 77% for all business startups. The EDC offers rentable space at EDC facilities on the NJIT campus and provides resources, guidance, management and technical assistance to new businesses. Generally, EDC offers the NJIT faculty and students the opportunity to assist on particular real-world business projects. Should applicant be successfully funded, the CFA project will move to the NJIT campus in Newark, New Jersey.

Two personnel have been retained to spearhead the CFA effort:

- Project Director - XXXXX XXXXX
- Educational Advisor - XXXXX XXXXX

To reduce costs, applicant intends to utilize outside service providers and the resources of NJIT to perform technical, creative and promotional assistance.

Evaluation

As part of Year Two funding, applicant intends to identify and retain a third-party expert. This expert(s) will evaluate all data collected, both from the two control groups as well as administrative data captured automatically by the system, to provide impartial statistical and consultative analysis to determine the following:

1. Size of registered student population
2. Rate of adoption by high school students
3. Size of college population participation
4. Rate of adoption by colleges
5. Utilization and usefulness of system by students
6. Utilization and usefulness of system by counselors
7. Utilization and usefulness of system to colleges
8. Increase in participation in college admissions process by underserved students
9. Increase in high school college placement rate
10. Increase in college selectivity ratio
11. Increase in college yield ratio
12. How effective has the CFA system been in meeting the original goals of the project?
13. Are there any discernable patterns or trends resulting from use of the CFA system (demographic, geographic, and socio-economic)?
14. What changes need to be made to improve the systems performance?
15. Does the CFA system warrant further development and funding?

Favorable results of this evaluation will be disseminated through publication in one or more professional journals, presentation at professional conferences and additional public relations / marketing campaigns.

Sustainability

Applicant believes the project will have long-term social benefit sufficient to warrant its continuance as a going concern. Applicant contemplates the necessity to develop strategies to provide self-sufficiency after the exhaustion of Goal Two (and Goal Three) funding. There are four options, any or all of which could be undertaken:

1. Partner with a related-business,
2. Attract new investment,
3. Begin to charge colleges for access to the CFA system, or
4. Develop affinity programs to further serve the needs and interests of the CFA audience.

CFA has had preliminary discussions with Peterson, a division of Thomson Publishing, an \$8 billion public company. Peterson provides college-bound students with information on colleges, including a college directory, test preparation materials and general guidance. Peterson has expressed an interest in participating with CFA on this project once it gets off the ground. As the work of CFA is complimentary to related-businesses of this type, it may be possible to partner.

New investment is a logical source of new capital provided investors are made comfortable with a clear path to profitability and an exit strategy in five to seven years. They would be seeking a multiple of between five to ten times their original investment, so CFA would have to begin to look more like a for-profit business.

Charging colleges for access to the system, or development a program whereby colleges begin to pay for names “pushed” to them by the system is a realistic and defensible revenue-generating method. There is precedent that colleges pay organizations (such as the College Board) for lists of names of students who have taken the SAT, and colleges expend considerable sums annually on the recruitment of their incoming freshman classes. As noted in “Project Purpose and Goals” applicant is considering the creation of a non-profit foundation geared to providing financial assistance to underserved student communities. One source of endowment for the foundation would be to offer colleges the choice of paying CFA directly for access to the system or to make a charitable contribution of twice the annual access fee to the scholastic foundation.

The creation of affinity groups benefits students and the broader CFA audience by developing programs with other markets to offer CFA members products and services on favorable terms not available elsewhere. The issuance of special credit cards, for example, or provision of loan programs, health insurance, discounts on books, etc. are all examples of affinity programs. CFA would receive a portion of revenue generated from these programs. Applicant believes the aggregation of large numbers of people in a common demographic (high school students) to have inherent value to marketers. This provides CFA with a fallback if other options do not come to fruition.