



Deadlines, endless forms, constant college prep pressure: Is the finish line in sight?

Mass. charter school students scramble as application season comes down to the wire

By Liz Willen | December 12, 2016

BOSTON — By mid-November, Match High senior Aneudy Miguel Polanco has been late to school 15 times, but he's quick with excuses. On top of a full college preparation schedule, he juggles baseball training and his job as a cashier at T.J. Maxx. He helps his single mom take care of two younger brothers and a newborn baby sister, and struggles to meet so many deadlines he sometimes doesn't remember what week it is.

"I've been slacking a bit," he acknowledges, with a grin, but also a bit of panic. Aneudy *wants* to go to college, and knows it's expected of him. But he finds it hard to keep his grades up while managing a long subway commute, essays, financial aid applications, campus visits and contacts with baseball coaches. He is the only senior at Match who has yet to record his college choices on a classroom wall, but he's "working on it."

"If Match ended at 2 every day instead of at 4, I'd have straight A's," Aneudy says, occasionally rubbing his eyes. In class the day before, Aneudy put his head down on his desk and grabbed a little shut-eye.

Today he's talking with his college counselors about what he needs to get done immediately; he knows he's behind.

At the same time, Daniel Inoa and Humberto Rojas, who push and encourage one another while competing to graduate at the top of the class, are waiting to hear from their dream schools. Both submitted early action applications: Daniel to Harvard, Humberto to MIT; they'll find out Dec. 15. It's more than a little scary. Harvard last year admitted only 2,037 of 39,041 applicants; MIT took just 1,511 from 19,020. Both Daniel and Humberto have parents who didn't attend college themselves but who have huge expectations for their sons.

Across the U.S., it's make-or-break season for the college-bound, when seemingly endless and often overwhelming application tasks can create roadblocks for low-income students like the 43 seniors at Match, who come from largely poor and minority families and may not speak English at home. They generally don't have parents nagging, cajoling and encouraging them to stay on top of complex and confusing application details. That's where Match guidance counselor Shira Zar-Kessler and head of counseling Joanna Sanborn come in.

"Don't hit send [on the Common Application] until one of us looks it over!" Zar-Kessler warns during one of the twice-weekly counseling classes, where students are making lists of everything still outstanding in their applications, from sending colleges their most recent SAT scores to writing supplemental essays.

"These kids are all trying to push themselves to keep going right now, while saying, 'My God, how are we still doing this, I want it to be over,'" Zar-Kessler says. "Yes, they see the finish line is in sight, but they are saying, 'Oh why do I have to do so much to get there?'"



Dream school: UMass Lowell

Other colleges on list: Assumption; Bridgewater State; Framingham State; Providence College; Worcester State; Northeastern; Salve Regina; Salem State; Howard

Fear: That I won't get into my top choice.

Goal: To be a lawyer. At a young age I realized I was good at arguing, stating my claim and then defending it. I really have a passion for analyzing and then speaking on a subject.

Family: Youngest of four siblings. Lives with mother and younger sister.

Thoughts on college admission: This college process is very long and specific. It was a bit frustrating because at some points I couldn't log on to my Common App. Also, the CSS profile is really long and having to bring in documents more than once is very annoying.



Dream school: MIT (applied early action, finds out Dec. 15)

College list: Boston University; Cal Tech; Columbia; Cornell; Dartmouth; Northeastern; Stanford; University of Rochester; UMass Lowell

Fear: Debt. If I get in somewhere that I want to go, and they don't give me enough aid, I can't go.

Goals: To study engineering. I also love math and science.

Family: Lives with sister and parents. Will be first in family to go to college.

Thoughts on college admission: There's a lot of pressure [on me] here to accomplish what my parents couldn't.

Nationally, low-income students are more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to enroll in college. By 2014, just about half of low-income high school students enrolled in college immediately, compared with 81 percent of high-income graduates, according to the Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education. Match students beat the odds; some 87 percent of graduates since 2004 have gone onto a four-year college, according to data Match submitted to the National Student Clearinghouse.

At Match, the finish line won't come till the end of May, when seniors reveal their college choices at a dramatic "signing day" ceremony before family members, counselors, tutors and nearly all the adults in their spacious and sunny school building. The kind of personal attention they get is unheard of in most public high schools, where a single school counselor has an average caseload of 491; in Massachusetts, the ratio is 419 to one.

Students enter Match via an annual lottery; last year 2,134 Boston students vied for just 161 slots in the school's pre-kindergarten through ninth grades, which feed into the 310-student high school. Match enrollment is now 1,149. Demand will likely grow because the supply will not: Voters in Massachusetts overwhelmingly rejected a ballot question last month to expand charter schools (62 percent rejected it; 38 percent supported it).

Opponents argued vigorously that charter schools — privately run but publicly financed — drain money from traditional public schools, which educate 74 percent of Boston students. It remains unclear how the election of pro-school choice and voucher advocate Donald Trump as president will influence the nation's charter debate going forward.

'There are so many expectations on me'

In the weeks before Common Applications to colleges are due, (many colleges call for a Jan.1 Common App deadline) seniors also worry about keeping up their first semester grades. Zar-Kessler wants students to submit earlier — she's set a target date of Dec. 20, before winter break.

Senior Michaela Notice, who hopes to get into UMass Lowell (the acceptance rate is 57 percent) and ultimately become a lawyer, is mostly done with the Common App. But she's also balancing basketball practice, prom planning, step team and student government, while worrying about a low grade in Spanish. On a recent November evening, her mom shows up at Match for a conference with Spanish teacher Tiffany Kidwell. Michaela's not looking forward to it, but Kidwell keeps the tone positive, and the three discuss ways she can boost her performance.

"She's such a leader in the school, I really want to see her succeed," Kidwell says. "And she's doing much better at asking when she's confused."

"There are so many expectations on me," says Michaela, the youngest of four; two are half-siblings. All are either in college or have attended. Earlier this fall, Michaela did poorly on a Spanish test on a day when she had a bad cold, then fell behind on a project when she was out sick. Today, Michaela is sore from the first day of basketball practice and just plain exhausted.

"My attention has been on making sure the Common App is accurate and my personal statement is on point, and I can't just forget about academics," Michaela says. After the meeting, she and her mother thank Kidwell; she announces: "We have a plan," and pledges to do better. She recently raised the grade from a D to a C+ and expects it will go up even higher.

The college-going culture and intensive support for students at Match starts early, says Joanna Sanborn, director of college counseling and mother of a first-grader at Match Community Day elementary school in Hyde Park, the entry point for most Match students. "I've had the chance to attend several events at my daughter's school, and in kindergarten she was *already* writing about what she would learn if she was going to college," Sanborn says.



The early grades lay the groundwork for an enormous task: getting students sufficiently prepared for Match High School's rigorous and traditional college prep curriculum, filled with demanding Advanced Placement courses. Not everyone will make it: Of 78 students who entered Match in the fall of 2013 as ninth-graders, 16 have either moved, transferred or no longer attend. Fifteen are repeating 11th grade while four have repeated ninth grade.

'Keeping them motivated'

Early on, Match recognized that some students needed to catch up, particularly those who entered in later grades and came late to the school's philosophies and expectations. That's partly why Match distinguished itself with a potent, high-dosage individualized tutoring program, geared to a student's individual strengths and weaknesses. Match has helped school districts in Houston, Chicago and Lawrence, Massachusetts pilot the model, which is also being replicated in a new spin-off organization started by former Match educators.



Dream School: I don't have one

Other colleges on list: Brandeis; UMass Boston; UMass Dartmouth; UMass Lowell; Bentley; Northeastern; Tufts; Providence

Fears: I'm worried I won't get in anywhere and that college will be harder than I think.

Goals: To play baseball in college, to find something I really want to learn about so that I look forward to going to class every day.

Family: Lives with mother, three brothers and baby sister. Will be first in family to attend college.

Thoughts on college admission: Everything just hits you. You've gotta decide which college. And you've got all this schoolwork on top of you and all those writing supplements.



Dream school: Harvard (applied early action, finds out Dec. 15)

Other colleges on list: Bates; Brandeis; Bowdoin; Boston University; Dartmouth; Harvard; MIT; Northeastern; Tufts; UMass Lowell; Williams

Fears: My biggest fears are not being able to pay for college, not getting into my dream school or not getting into the school that makes my mom proud and represents the hard work I've had to put forth.

Goals: To have no debt. I am thinking of studying medicine or computer science.

Family: Lives with mother. Older sister, a Match graduate, attends Brandeis. Has younger half-brother.

Thoughts on college admission: I think it just takes luck, suppressing negative thoughts and stress, and support from people so that you can keep your sanity.

"We were getting students in high school [who hadn't previously attended Match charters] and there was an immediate problem," says Orin Gutlerner, chief academic officer at Match, who is also the boys basketball team coach and founding director of Match's teacher residency program and graduate school of education.

Gutlerner says personalized tutoring plays a huge and helpful role in getting students up to speed, especially in ninth and 10th grade. The "Match Corps" tutors are high-performing recent college grads from the national service program AmeriCorps, who commit to a year of service in exchange for subsidized housing and a \$15,000 government-funded living allowance.

"In its best form, the tutoring is tailored to what the student needs to be successful. It's also about keeping them motivated toward achieving a goal," Gutlerner says.

Match seniors say they've gotten close to their tutors over the years, even inviting them home for dinner. Brinda Lamarre, who came to the U.S. from Haiti at the age of nine and speaks Creole at home, says tutoring gave her a boost when she didn't understand something in class. It helped her master topics she wants to study in-depth at college, like chemistry. In class, she said, "You can ask and ask [if you don't understand the material] but they have to move on. If I was behind, the tutor had to stay where I was."

Humberto Rojas, now an academic star, relied heavily on tutors at first; he reluctantly entered Match middle school in sixth-grade, after attending a neighborhood public school with “no rules...I was apprehensive about three hours of homework.” He says the workload at Match was “a shock,” and at one point Humberto told his mother — a housekeeper originally from Mexico — that it was too much for him.

“She told me to just push through,” he says, and now Humberto is glad that he did. His father — a chef who works two jobs — often drops Humberto off or picks him up at school. He loves telling friends his son might go to MIT: if Humberto gets in he’ll be the first Match student ever to attend.

“My love for math and science began here,” Humberto says. He also found the tutoring system flexible and tailored to his needs. By ninth and tenth-grade he was sharing a tutor with Daniel Inoa because the two learned the material so quickly.

Making the most of summer

Daniel, who never had a grade lower than A-minus, has experienced rejection before; he didn’t get into a summer program at Franklin & Marshall College and it became the topic of his college essay. He describes how he feared facing his older sister, a former Match student who attends Brandeis, and his mother, who works as a secretary. His father is a maintenance man but no longer lives with the family.

“My mother is a woman who constantly brags about her son’s accomplishments. I struggled and persevered through school in order to make her feel proud of me,” Daniel writes. “I could just picture on her face the pity, and the disappointment.” He adds, however, that rejection ultimately helped him “build resilience,” and gave him a chance to study at the summer academy at Noonan Scholars, a nonprofit organization that supports low-income and first-generation students throughout their senior year.





Brinda Lamarre

Dream school: UMass Lowell

Other colleges on list: Brandeis; Simmons; Tufts; Framingham State; UMass Boston; Bridgewater State; Worcester State

Fear: Rejection letters.

Goals: Study chemistry, become a neonatologist.

Family: Lives with mom, grandparents, college student sister, one cousin and nine other family members.

Thoughts on college process: I think we need one or two days in the week [in school] just to work on college stuff, because doing all of that with other homework is really kind of annoying. My mom wants me to be something. She doesn't want me to rely on people. She doesn't want me to be like her.



Serena Walker-Jean

Dream school: Brown

Other colleges on list: Brandeis; Dartmouth; Tufts; University of Connecticut; UMass Amherst; University of Rochester; University of Vermont; Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI)

Fear: Submitting an application I don't feel confident about. If I at least feel confident [about the application] then I know I will have done everything I can to get in. It's scary to get rejected somewhere or waitlisted and not know why.

Goals: To get into a school I am excited about and have the financial support to actually attend; to study sociology.

Family: Lives with mother, younger brother.

Thoughts on college admission: If I'm rejected, I would like to know why some students were more "qualified" than me. I am just not so sure that people can understand the person I am by reading facts and a few essays. This just makes me more nervous about applying to college.

Such outside opportunities play a part in the success of Match students; the school looks for worthwhile summer programs that offer scholarships. Michaela Notice spent 15 days last summer canoeing, rafting, hiking and camping in Utah and Colorado, via the National Outdoor Leadership Program, (NOLS). Humberto attended Crimson Summer Academy at Harvard.

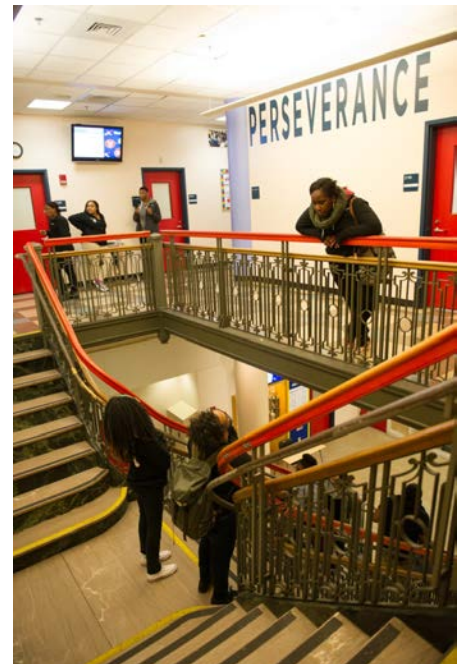
Brinda Lamarre spent a summer in South Africa, via the Experiment in International Living, learning about multiculturalism in rural and urban societies. Serena Walker-Jean, whose dream school is Brown, spent three consecutive summers fueling "an uncontrollable love for math and science," at (MS)², Math and Science for Minority Students, at the elite Phillips Academy boarding school in Andover, Massachusetts.

"When I was accepted, I wasn't as excited as my counselor, but I was open to the idea of doing something completely different and something that other kids would dread to do for five weeks of their summer," Walker-Jean writes in her college essay. Instead of being the student who knew all the answers, the one who friends asked for help from, she learned "to struggle" and to "have to ask my wonderful and intelligent peers from all over the country."

How will they afford it?

In the months to come, as Match students start hearing from colleges, their conversations and dreams will shift entirely toward the question of what they can afford. Most require government subsidized Pell Grants, scholarships and other financial aid. Many are still struggling with the detailed CSS/Financial aid profile and will soon face the daunting FAFSA forms, so Match has financial advisors from the nonprofit uAspire coming to the school once a week to help them out.

Match seniors worry constantly about paying for college. On average, low-income students pay more than three-quarters of their annual family income out-of-pocket to attend a four-year, public or private nonprofit institution — nearly *five times* the proportion of wealthier families, according to a new report by the nonprofit Education Trust. Students from low-income



families are vastly less likely to attend top colleges than wealthier Americans with similar academic ability.

Advocates and foundations such as the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation (among the various funders of The Hechinger Report) are calling on colleges to do a better job helping low-income students overcome the many obstacles that keep them from selective colleges; at such colleges “rich kids outnumber poor kids by 24 to 1,” notes author and scholar Richard Kahlenberg of the Century Foundation.

Aneudy figures he’ll have no choice but to take out loans. He’s also focused on finishing his essay and finalizing his list. One thing that keeps him going: he refuses to believe that college will be more tiring than his schedule now, especially if he gets to live on campus. Earlier this fall, he accidentally overslept and almost missed taking the SAT exams. He made it with just a few minutes to spare.

“My other friends who don’t go to Match, they get out at like 2, and they have the whole day to go home and take a nap,” Aneudy says. “My friend who goes to college, he’s just chilling, he has so much time.”

Zar-Kessler, meanwhile, is preparing students for the next step: how to regroup if the news from colleges is disappointing. “We have a workshop scheduled for January,” she says.

The topic? Handling rejection.