



## High school seniors reveal choices in joyous ‘signing day’ ceremony

*College-bound students at Match High School set money woes aside and become heroes, just for a day.*

By LIZ WILLEN | June 12, 2017



*Match High School senior Aneudy Polanco celebrates his choice of UMass Amherst with his mother and girlfriend on college ‘signing day.’ Photo: Liz Willen*

*This is the final story in an occasional series looking at six members of the senior class at [Match High School](#), a college preparatory charter school in Boston. This installment focuses on their final college choices. Read previous installments [here](#).*

BOSTON, Mass. — After months of anticipation, [Match High School](#) seniors were ready. One by one, they took their seats in the packed auditorium, as friends and family held aloft homemade signs of congratulations.

Sweatshirts emblazoned with the 43 college choices that students would announce during the beloved pep-rally tradition known as “signing day” remained folded neatly beneath chairs. The dramatic reveal has become an increasingly common ritual at charter schools where college acceptance is both the goal and part of the culture.

On this spring day at Boston University “we celebrate seniors on their journey to college and life beyond!” dean of students Robert Hendricks exclaimed. Tutors danced. Teachers clapped. The class of 2029 — currently in kindergarten — read touching letters of encouragement and advice for the largely low-income, minority upperclassmen, most of them the first in their families to attend college.

Now, all they have to do is pay for it.



That’s the next big challenge after years of being pushed, prodded and prepped for higher education at Match High, where students are selected by lottery and get [individual tutors](#) for help with a tough college-prep curriculum. Since 2004, the school says, almost 90 percent of its graduates have gone on to a four-year college.

Each senior received at least one acceptance this year, but all are concerned about the payment pressures their families will face. Financial aid offers left many with gaps they’ll struggle to cover — a situation [common to low-income students](#) across the U.S. at a time when more merit

aid from universities, along with private programs and government aid, is going to [wealthy students](#) with high grade-point averages and entrance test scores.

Money factored into every Match senior's decision. During the ceremony, several students announced they'll be attending far [less costly](#) community colleges like [Bunker Hill](#) for the first year or two, before transferring to state schools or more expensive options like [Bentley University](#), where costs for resident students [total \\$66,180](#).

Others are taking a chance on those pricier choices, believing it will pay off later. Serena Walker-Jean chose [Lehigh University](#) in Pennsylvania over the [University of Rochester](#), but still faces out-of-pocket costs upward of \$11,590 annually. She said she is “not too worried about anything except being able to pay for college” — even though Lehigh is offering gift aid of \$52,410.



Aneudy Miguel Polanco, who came late to the signing ceremony after getting a haircut, shouted “[UMass, Amherst!](#)” while grasping a sweatshirt with the flagship state school’s mascot. His mom, Seanny Nova, tried not to cry; she’d pushed hard to support Aneudy’s choice of UMass Amherst over [UMass Lowell](#), even though it will cost at least \$7,580 more out-of-pocket annually.

Nova, a nursing assistant and single mother, plans additional overtime shifts and other economies to help cover the costs. “No more fun times,” declared Nova, who is training to become a nurse and has two younger sons and a baby girl. “We are going to eat at home. And no more vacations.”

Nova is willing to make the sacrifices for UMass Amherst because she believes the giant public research university has the better reputation. She came to Boston from the Dominican Republic at the age of 20 and never went to college.

“When I came here 20 years ago, with nothing but myself, without my family, I went through a hard, hard time, but now seeing him finish high school, I am so proud for him ... and I hope he finishes college, too,” Nova said.



**Humberto  
Rojas**

**Northeastern**



Years ago, on her pediatrician's advice, Nova entered Aneudy, a bright and precocious child with a mischievous streak, in the Match lottery; he started in sixth grade. It was touch and go at first; Aneudy spent a lot of time in detention. And in high school, Aneudy often came late to school as he juggled playing on the baseball team, babysitting his siblings, working as a cashier and studying for tough AP courses.

Aneudy might not have survived the arduous college application process if college counselor Shira Zar-Kessler had not kept on top of his deadlines. His success was one reason why Zar-Kessler was all smiles on signing day, as was Joanna Sanborn, Match's director of college counseling.

Together, they'd spent countless hours discussing essays, aid applications and the differences between state and private schools. They'd shared frustrations, disappointments and victories large and small, knowing that, nationally, the odds are stacked against low-income students, who are more likely to [drop out](#) of high school and less likely to enroll in college.

Zar-Kessler called signing day "my favorite of the year," and focused on the good news: Instead of staying home and attending [UMass Boston](#), Brinda Lamarre had happily decided to live on campus at [Bridgewater State](#), which gave her about \$12,000 in aid; she's taking out roughly \$6,500 in state and federal loans, leaving a gap of about \$3,000. "She'll have a campus experience," Zar-Kessler said contentedly.



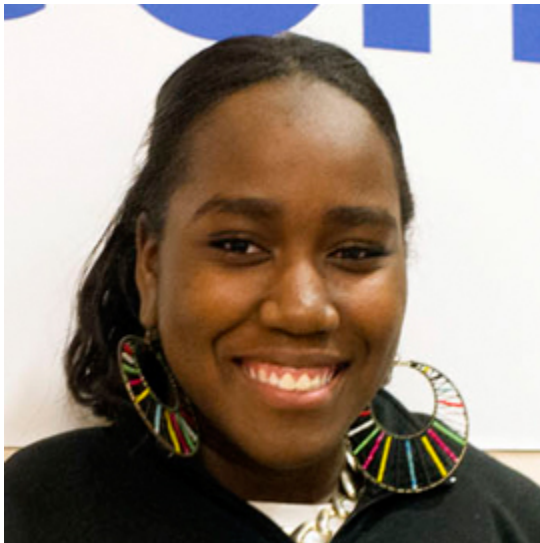
**Brinda  
Lamarre**

**Bridgewater  
State**



She and other Match staffers had convinced another family to let their son, a top student, accept a scholarship to live at [Tufts University](#), instead of keeping him at home. And a total of eight Match students had been accepted to [Northeastern University](#), the most in Match history. Class valedictorian Humberto Rojas has a full ride and will live on campus.

There was also good news for Michaela Notice, who wants to be a lawyer and captained the women's basketball team at Match. Michaela will attend [Salem State University](#), which emerged as her late first choice, and where she hopes to continue playing hoops next year.



**Michaela  
Notice**

**Salem State**



[Framingham State](#) had offered her a better aid package, but Michaela said, “I didn’t feel the same way [at Framingham as] I did when I visited Salem State.” She and her mother both felt Salem was the better fit, although her family is still trying to figure out how they’ll pay; Salem State offered Michaela \$7,000 and she’s eligible for a federal Pell grant of \$5,500 — leaving a worrisome gap of about \$10,000 annually.

Finally, it was hard not to feel joyful about salutatorian Daniel Inoa's choice. He had two great offers: full rides to top-rated [Williams](#) in Williamstown, Massachusetts, and Ivy League Dartmouth in Hanover, New Hampshire.



Daniel had trepidations about fitting in and finding a good barber for his kinky hair at Dartmouth. (Williams had a black barber with experience cutting his type of hair next to campus.) But after his first-ever visit to [Hanover](#), Daniel chose Dartmouth. The distance (about two and half hours via [Dartmouth Coach](#)) wasn't as far as he'd thought. Daniel loved Dartmouth's white buildings with green shutters and climbing ivy. He enjoyed the classes he sat in on, and met up with some students he'd known and hung out with in Boston, including minorities with similar hair. They all agreed to "figure something out."

As he addressed the senior class on signing day, Daniel didn't dwell on his own choice, although there were plenty of screams when he announced "Dartmouth!"

Instead, Daniel praised his teachers, friends, mentors, tutors and family, and pointed out that Match students applied to 111 colleges across the country, earning 243 acceptances and 166 rejections.

"We can finally sigh with relief now that the hardest part for us is over," Daniel said. "No more personal statements or constantly nagging Ms. Sanborn or Ms. Z.K. [as Zar-Kessler is known] to send countless documents to college."

The road ahead will not be without obstacles; there is a [huge gap](#) between the graduation rates of low-income students and their wealthier peers. Daniel told his classmates to not be afraid. He had experienced plenty of rejection while applying to colleges, but managed to learn from his experiences and move on.

"If we are not ready to fail," he said to applause, "We are not ready for our future."

*This story was written by Liz Willen, editor in chief of [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.*