BASIC training

Each summer a BC program gives 40 disadvantaged students the chance to prove they can handle freshman year. It’s hard. It works.

It’s a hot morning in early July, and sprinklers are sprouting on the deserted lawns of BC’s upper campus. In Carney Room 205, four young men and five young women are hunched over their desks. Five minutes into their very first college English class, they apply themselves to their very first assignment: Write a 10-minute essay beginning “I remember . . . .” Despite the summer sounds filtering through the window, the atmosphere in the room is tense.

“Keep it moving,” says the teacher, Sr. Hilda Carey, an energetic woman of 71, as she paces the room. A burly student pauses to shake out a writer’s cramp. “That’s a very common way of stalling,” Carey observes. “Keep it moving.”

The students are among 40 African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, and Native-American high school graduates whom BC has accepted on a conditional basis. All come from low-income families. Most attended inner-city high schools. Though the students earned good grades and come highly recommended by teachers and guidance counselors back home, their average combined SAT scores—considered by many educators to be a useful predictor of freshman-year success—cluster around 800, far below the scores of other incoming BC freshmen last year (the middle 50 percent of
NATALINA DEPINA ’03, FROM BOSTON, WILL MAJOR IN EITHER SOCIOLOGY OR POLITICAL SCIENCE:

"From elementary school, I was a child who really wanted to learn. OTE closed the gap halfway. I’m able to manage the rest on my own."

students entered with a range of 1210 to 1360). The University has struck a deal with these summer students: If they make it through a rigorous six-week program of courses, workshops, and mandatory study periods half-jokingly referred to as "boot camp" by the students and staff alike, they will become members of the class of 2003 in September.

“I tell you, I am scared,” one young woman says to another after class is dismissed.

The summer session is called Options Through Education (OTE), and it is managed by the Office of AHANA Student Programs. So confident are administrators that these students will succeed that during the first week students select their fall courses. History is on their side. Launched in 1979 by the office’s current director, Donald Brown, OTE has primed some 800 AHANA students to enter the University over the past 20 years. It’s rare to lose a candidate. In fact, the six-year graduation rate for OTE students from Boston College is 85 percent, on a par with that of BC students overall.

Once on campus as undergraduates, OTE students tend to be joiners, participating in artistic, government, and service activities, and disproportionately filling leadership positions in AHANA student organizations such as the Black Student Forum and the Caribbean Culture Club. Their average GPA falls in the 2.6 range, a bit lower than the campuswide 3.0 or so. Roughly every other year, an OTE student earns an invitation to join the Honors Program, which is reserved for the top 9 percent of entering freshmen.

Without special consideration, none of the OTE students would have made it beyond the first round at the admissions office, given their low test scores. In a ranking system of 1 to 10, with 1 denoting applicants most likely to gain admittance to the University, OTE students tend to get 7s or 8s; some have been tagged with a 9. How they beat the odds—and dent the credibility of standardized tests as both assessment tools and college gatekeepers—can be reduced to two ingredients: personal strengths that aren’t measurable with a No. 2 pencil and the preparation they receive in six weeks over the summer. According to Vincent Tinto, a professor of education at Syracuse University who studies the attrition and retention rates of U.S. college students, OTE is the most successful program of its kind in the country. “It sets the standard,” he says.

The record of students like the ones in OTE has not always been so strong at Boston College. The program rose out of a shaky foundation of racial adjustment that began on campus in 1968. BC had been slow to join other U.S. colleges and universities in the scramble to boost African-American enrollments. According to a Boston Globe report on Massachusetts colleges that year, African-Americans accounted for just over 3 percent of the undergraduates at Boston University and Harvard—a low figure by today’s standards. But they accounted for only 0.2 percent of students at Boston College.

In 1968 BC introduced OTE’s precursor, the Negro Talent Search Program, which was aimed specifically at recruiting disadvantaged students whose academic aptitude had been masked by low
SAT scores. In 1970 it became the Black Talent Program (BTP). What happened next will not likely be repeated. By the mid-1970s, in the wake of anti-war rallies and the seizure of campus buildings by African-American student protesters, and amid the distractions of oppressive financial deficits at the University, the primary responsibility for the recruitment—and retention—of disadvantaged black students devolved to African-American student leaders. Through BTP, black undergraduates wielded the power to admit students (as many as 75 a year) and to set the size of their aid packages. In the summer they operated an optional freshman orientation program. During the school year they ruled on the academic standing of BTP freshmen and sophomores. When the upperclassmen could fit it in, they offered tutoring. Karen Severin '80, an IBM manager who entered BC through the Black Talent Program, recalls, “It was one of the sloppiest things that BC ever did.” Severin was a rare survivor. In 1976 the six-year graduation rate for BTP students was a paltry 16 percent.

BC was hardly alone in experiencing a high rate of failure among students whose backgrounds left them ill-prepared culturally, socially, and academically for college. After a bout of Great Society optimism and experimentation during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of institutions—among them Brown, Dartmouth, and the University of Virginia—backed away from so-called high-risk applicants to concentrate on recruiting higher-scoring minority students. BC, of course, sought those same students. But the University also chose to continue its program for disadvantaged, low-scoring minorities—and to fix it by placing it in the hands of professional educators.

The task of wresting control from BTP students went to Frank Campanella, the University’s Executive Vice President. “We slugged it out over a few years,” says Campanella of the period marked by picketing and heated student confrontations. “I worked hard to convince students that they should not be fully responsible. They saw me as this big white guy trying to take their budget and control their program—which I was.” From the start, two motives, operating in tandem, have propelled BC’s persistent attempts to include disadvantaged minority students. One is a University commitment to what Campanella defines simply as “service to others.” The other is the goal of achieving a racially and socioeconomically representative student body in the face of strong competition from the Ivy League and other selective institutions for conventionally qualified minority applicants. Identifying students of promise whom the College Board had missed was an experiment aimed at shoring up the University’s minority enrollment. “We didn’t know if it would work at the beginning,” says Campanella, but “that was going to be our niche.”

It’s been a shared niche, to be sure. Georgetown’s Community Scholars Program, Notre Dame’s Balfour-Hesburgh Scholars, and the state-supported Higher Education Opportunity Program at Syracuse University and other New York schools are but a few of the “bridge” programs for disadvantaged students that, like OTE, GERALDO CABAC’O3, FROM THE WASHINGTON HEIGHTS SECTION OF NEW YORK CITY, PLANS TO MAJOR IN PHILOSOPHY AND EITHER FRENCH OR HISTORY:

“The classes I’m taking—philosophy, theology, history, French, first-year writing—require a lot of reading and writing. The schedule during OTE was worse than what I have now.”
combine some form of prefreshman experience with academic monitoring during the school year. The recipes vary. Syracuse's program serves disadvantaged students of all ethnicities whose SAT scores, while subpar, put them near the admissible range. Few bridge programs match BC's graduation rate—particularly when it comes to students with markedly low SAT scores.

When Donald Brown, OTE's creator, came to BC in 1978 at the age of 30, he had a sharp picture of the hurdles that disadvantaged minority students faced. Brown grew up in the Patterson Projects of the South Bronx, and his own combined SAT score was 650. After attending Springfield College in Springfield, Massachusetts, he went on to earn his doctorate in education at UMass-Amherst. Brown tells OTE students, "It's not your fault if you come into BC not having the skills. It becomes your fault if you don't do something about it."

If Brown had not chosen a career in education, he could well have found success as a motivational speaker. His face conveys perpetual enthusiasm. When he addresses the OTE students as a group—which happens often—he waxes eloquent with a preacher's fervor. "All of you are being called on to do something special," he tells the students on their first day. "Be the very best you can be." When he speaks to OTE students, he saves his ripest intonations for two words—"Boston College"—which he enunciates slowly, almost melodically, as if they were shaped out of gold.

Brown has had plenty of experience dealing with adolescents. His previous jobs included running Upward Bound at UMass-Amherst, a program that seeks out talented high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds and uses an array of enrichment experiences to steer them toward college. He also oversaw the care of juvenile delinquents for the state Department of Youth Services. The summer program that he developed at BC combines warm, attentive support with martial law. It's a labor-intensive effort, with a staff-to-student ratio of better than one-to-two.

First, the regimen. From July 1 to August 13, most of the students' waking hours are spoken for. On weekdays, they sit in class six hours a day (after math and English, they alternate between an oral communications class and a seminar on the first-year experience). On Tuesdays they also attend informational sessions with campus security officers, library staff, or representatives of other BC offices. On Wednesdays there is Town Meeting—a sometimes spirited forum for airing complaints and, at Brown's urging, "pointing out the positives." In the evening the students' presence is required at individual and small-group meetings with staff members. On Saturdays attendance is mandatory on field trips—to Martha's Vineyard, for instance, and the Riverside amusement park. Study hours (6:30 to 9:30 on school nights) and curfews (midnight on school nights) are scrupulously enforced. So are the rules about male-female visits in dorm rooms (doors must stay open).

Students hear the rules from Joana Maynard, a round-faced 43-year-old doctoral candidate in theology whose level gaze sends two clear messages: "I'm always ready to listen" and "I'm not easily fooled." Maynard is officially the OTE coordinator, and unofficially its drill sergeant, the person patrolling OTE venues with a beeper and a janitor's ring of keys. For much of the six weeks, she lives in a room in Roncalli Hall alongside the students.

Before coming to BC, Maynard was a high school counselor in the Boston Public Schools. "The hardest part of that job," she says, "was that once a student had gotten into college, that was the end of the relationship." Often the students that she advocated for would enroll in a school and then bounce back out again after a semester or two. Now, Maynard says, "I have four years to work with them."

On the program's first day, Maynard delivers decrees on sex ("You're not here to make a love connection"); on swearing ("I don't swear. You won't either"); on drugs ("We don't drink funny stuff, we don't smoke funny stuff, we don't shoot funny stuff"); and on noise ("Every summer I've had some nice stereo in my room that I borrowed for awhile. If we can hear your headphone buzz at your doorway, it's too loud"). Maynard leaves the students with a warning. "Many of you may be used to As and Bs. You will learn that you're at a different level now. Please be patient with yourself," she urges. "Go for help. Put your energies into it."

The students chafe under the rules and test them, particularly in the early weeks. Eventually, even among the most relentless critics, Maynard's unfailing frankness and calm earn respect and affection. "You won't see me going to OTE reunions," says Geraldo Caba '03, who is now settled in as a freshman. "I do check in with Joana, though. That I do. She's someone I can talk to."
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Though undergraduates no longer dictate the summer program as they did in the days of BTP, nine upperclassmen carry a large share of the day-to-day burden of making OTE work. These are the preceptors—the first line of enforcement, the role models. For the program's six weeks, the preceptors, all of them AHANA students, live in Roncalli on the same halls as the entering students; every third door has a preceptor's name on it. In a way, the preceptors set the tone for the summer. They are also the program's most vulnerable component.

"A lot of preceptors get stressed out," says Addrain Conyers '00, who held the job last summer. "At 2 o'clock in the morning, at 6 o'clock in the morning, someone's knocking on your door." Turnover from summer to summer is extremely high. Few 20-year-olds are comfortable with the dual roles of authority figure and friend, particularly when it comes to imposing penalties—depriving a student of precious free time, for instance. And few 18-year-olds gracefully abide being on the receiving end. "The preceptors are talking down to us" is the most frequent complaint voiced at Town Meeting. But the youthfulness of the preceptors is more a plus than a minus. OTE is designed to create a community for its students—Donald Brown favors the term "family"—that will last beyond the summer. When they are no longer officially on the job, the upperclassmen will be welcome familiar faces for the students on campus in the fall.

Conyers, a double major in psychology and sociology, is a genial, poised young man with a broad infectious smile. He attended boarding school on scholarship for four years and did not enter Boston College through OTE. But he did grow up in the inner city, in Newark, New Jersey. "I know how it is," he says. "When I was in an urban environment, there were 30 to 40 people in a class. I don't want to say the OTE students are 'disadvantaged,' because each one of them is smart. But some teachers probably didn't care whether they got an A or a B. And a lot of their peers weren't at their level." To him, the most important message that the students get from the preceptors is this: Your peers are serious about your work here.

Now when Conyers runs into OTE students on campus, they tell him they finally understand why they had so little flexibility over the summer. "They're stressed," he says, "but that means they're doing the work."

OTE students do earn college credits during the summer, but the English class they take is not quite college level. "We take them 70 percent of the way," says Sr. Carey, who has been with the program for eight years and teaches freshman English during the academic year. In math, only about half the students—those who placed into the higher-end precalculus classes—earn elective credits. The others receive remedial instruction. Indeed, most of the math instructors are high school teachers on summer vacation.

The summer classes strengthen basic skills—writing, problem solving. But their larger purpose is diagnostic.

Although OTE is, strictly speaking, a summer program, students sign a contract at the beginning that tethers them to the Office of AHANA Student Programs for the duration of their time at BC. As undergraduates, they will be expected to meet with an advisor three times a semester, and to obtain tutoring when needed through the AHANA office or the Academic Development Center in O'Neill Library. Their academic well-being will be followed by means of midterm progress reports from their professors.

The monitoring begins immediately, at weekly meetings of the summer staff. Unbeknownst to the students, it is here that the program's multilayered webs of support are spun. Eleven teachers, three counselors, three administrators, and all of the preceptors make up the full staff, and almost all of them attend every meeting.

From around the room, the names of students
are called out, a list is formed, and the staff gets down to work.

“I collect homework from my students individually and I look each of them in the eye,” a math teacher begins, as the discussion turns to one student. “For two days running, his eyes have dropped.”

Are things OK on the home front? Is he getting along in the dorm? How’s he doing in English? Does he speak up in oral communications class? At night the math and English teachers volunteer their time as tutors on a rotating basis in Roncalli—is he seeing them? Of all the questions, this last one is the most important. Students who seek help when they need it will succeed.

The group comes up with a plan of action tailored to the student’s situation. His math teacher may talk with him about communicating when he’s struggling with a lesson. If the student is doing well in English, a counselor may try to pair him up with another OTE student who needs help with the language but who’s thriving in math, for mutual aid. A few preceptors may offer to sit in on the math class for awhile so they can offer homework support.

The aim of OTE is not really to bring its students up to speed academically—no six-week exegesis of Othello or immersion in algebra can take the place of four years at Wellesley High or Portsmouth Abbey. The aim, rather, is to show the students that with discipline they can meet tougher expectations than they’ve previously encountered. And it’s to show them that the expectations will indeed be tough. “After OTE,” says Natalina DePina ’03 of Boston, September was like “jumping into cold water we knew was going to be cold.”

Like virtually all of her OTE classmates, DePina represents the first generation in her family to attend college. She came to this country from the Cape Verde Islands when she was six years old. She entered school for the first time when she was seven, attending a bilingual program. Last year she graduated third in her class from Charlestown High School, with a 3.75 GPA. She was also the senior-class president. “I wasn’t prepared for the SATs,” DePina says. “Now I’m here, and I’ve been doing OK. I’m a determined person. If somebody else can get an A, I think, ‘Why can’t I?’”

Critics of affirmative action in college admissions have long warned of the harm that the practice may inflict on the individuals it is meant to help—the “midnight of self-doubt” that the Hoover Institution’s Shelby Steele writes about, the exacerbation of racial tensions, the higher likelihood of failure.

BC has its share of racial mistrust. An incident involving hateful E-mail messages sent to AHANA student leaders in the fall of 1998, for instance, still rankles AHANA upperclassmen.

OTE students do complain of being stereotyped as special-admissions “dumb people.” The tag, they say, is applied, sometimes in jest, sometimes not, by other AHANA students. OTE participants don’t like it, and, having passed through the crucible of the summer, they...
certainly don’t believe it. Denise Duverge ’03 explains that she saw OTE as an opportunity to be taken. “I know I deserve to be [at Boston College],” she says, “but I have to prove I deserve it.” Based on her performance during the summer, Duverge was invited to join the Honors Program last fall.

At Boston College, the affirmative action stigma that attaches to OTE students eventually fades. During the school year, they take the same courses and satisfy the same requirements as everyone else. But the summer transition is a fertile period for self-doubt. Once, at Town Meeting, a young woman asked why BC had accepted her if the school didn’t think she could handle the work without OTE. “You need to be in this program,” said Brown, placing weight on each word. “But we see in every one of you that you are stars. I look around and I see doctors, lawyers, teachers.” When Duverge heard this, she says, “I had goose bumps.”

Duverge describes BC as “more segregated” than the high school that she attended. “Here, anytime I see a person of color, I just know I’m going to know them,” she says. That realization can be comforting but it also has the potential to be confining.

The OTE staff urges students to soak up as many experiences and get to know as many cultures as BC has to offer. (Counselors tactfully point out that certain wardrobe items—do-rags, for instance, and sunglasses in the classroom—will put off some people in the BC community, especially faculty.) In the past 10 years, say administrators, OTE students in increasing numbers have arrived on campus intent on absorbing it all. “Where I came from,” said a quiet African-American student in oral communications class one day, “everyone is just like me. I want to associate with different people.” But the program also cultivates AHANA cohesiveness. “At some point,” Brown tells the students, “you are going to experience an incident of bigotry at BC. There are people you can talk to.”

Selecting students for OTE is an inexact science. Participants qualify for almost as
assistance vice president for student affairs. In the end, 60 invitations go out for 40 slots.

The selectors look for signs “that a student has been through adversity and come out on top,” says Horton. They try to gauge whether he or she has consistently taken full advantage of available resources and opportunities. They also follow a checklist: Does the student have specific long-range goals? Is there a mentor in the picture? Can the student deal with racism? What about leadership experience and community involvement? These are some of the considerations advocated by William E. Sel-lacek, an education professor at the University of Maryland, to help measure the potential of minority students to succeed in a competitive, largely white, academic environment. Sel-lacek developed the checklist because SAT scores fail to do the job.

From childhood, most minority students lag behind most Caucasians in standardized tests. (The bulk of research data so far has focused on African-Americans. But what data exists on Latinos and Native Americans point to similar patterns. For Asian-Americans, the picture varies depending on country of origin and immigration history.)

In their 1998 book, The Black-White Test Score Gap, Harvard’s Christopher Jencks and UCLA’s Meredith Phillips presented studies by some of the nation’s leading researchers on minority test performance. They found it easier to identify factors that do not explain the test score gap than to identify the ones that do.

Poverty does dampen scores—and blacks and other minorities are more likely to be poor. But poverty exerts its harm indiscriminately, affecting Caucasians in a similar way. The test gap, by contrast, persists at all income levels and is little influenced by parents’ educational attainment. Jencks and Phillips encourage researchers to turn toward complicated terrain. “Our best guess,” they write, is that “successful theories will probably have to pay more attention to psychological and cultural differences.”

In an elegant series of experiments conducted among students at Stanford University, the sociologist Claude M. Steele (brother of the Hoover Institution’s Shelby Steele) has illuminated what one of these differences might be. His results point to the stereotype of black intellectual inferiority as a powerful depressant of black scores.

Claude Steele found that when he gave an SAT-type test to African-American students, they—unlike whites—performed significantly worse when they were told that it measured intellectual ability than when they were told the test would simply help researchers probe the problem-solving process. When black students were asked to indicate their race on a pretest form, they also did significantly worse. They ended up working more cautiously—taking more time with individual questions, answering fewer of them, and second-guessing themselves, with less accuracy. The stronger the student (in other words, the
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more a student's personal pride was likely to be caught up in academic achievement), the more marked the disparity in scores tended to be. When racial identification was planted as a factor, black students behaved as if a lot more was at issue than a few points on a test. Black underperformance, writes Steele, "appears to be rooted less in self-doubt than in social mistrust."

OTE confronts the habit of social mistrust, and it does so on a grand scale. For the six weeks of the summer session, before the other freshmen arrive, OTE hands its students the campus—its buildings, its services, its capacity to foster friendships. By the time the rest of the entering class checks in nervously on their first day, OTE students know their way around and already have roots. Not only do they belong at Boston College; Boston College belongs to them.

Last summer marked OTE's 20th anniversary. To celebrate, the staff convened the first-ever OTE reunion over a weekend in late July. For the students, the chance to mix with alumni afforded a glimpse into what their own futures might hold.

Once, during a panel discussion featuring several alumni, Donald Brown decided to improvise: "The spirit moves me," he said, and he asked the 30 or so alumni in the room to line up along the walls and address the 40 current students who formed the remaining audience's nucleus. As the alumni spoke in turn, offering encouragement and hard-nosed advice, phrases like "while I was in graduate school . . ." and "when I went to law school . . ." were heard time and again. There were also intimations of how far the journey to the middle class had been for some. Among the alumni speaking that morning was James Destin '83. Now a New York City businessman, Destin described being homeless before BC chose him for OTE. Michael Gaines '91 earned an M.B.A. from Harvard. "You're like me," he said looking squarely at the students. "I'm not lucky. It's all persistence." Noting that the OTE regimen has consistently paid off for its adherents, he added, "OTE is the best-performing mutual fund on campus."

These are unsettled times in the realm of college minority admissions nationwide. On the one hand, efforts are under way to diminish the importance of SAT scores—particularly of low scores earned by disadvantaged minority students. For instance, the Educational Testing Service, which produces the SATs, is developing a formula to help colleges identify what it calls "strivers"—students whose scores may seem low but who in fact performed better than their family income, the quality of their high school, and their race would predict.

On the other hand, recent years have also seen a growing push to abandon affirmative action in college admissions. Affirmative action has already been wiped out by law in the state universities of California and Washington, and by a court decision affecting the universities of Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

At Boston College OTE is as big as it is ever likely to get, because it is expensive. The cost of the summer session is roughly $250,000, and annual financial aid grants to the full complement of OTE students, freshmen through seniors, amount to about $2.7 million.

OTE creates a modest ripple of benefits outward, beyond its 40 students. The program nourishes ambitions in students' siblings, at their old high schools, and in their communities. But, for all that, OTE and other bridge programs do little to knock down the barriers facing many students of color who seek entry to selective schools—namely, poor academic preparedness and low SATs. These obstacles may be chipped away, over time, through efforts at earlier stages by federal, state, and local governments, private organizations, communities, families, and individuals. In the meantime, OTE and programs like it will continue on a small scale to tap the talent that test scores hide.