

STUDENTS

Where the Journey to College Is No Fairy Tale

For seniors at one low-income high school, spring is marked by hope, frustration, and limited choices

By Eric Hoover | JUNE 18, 2017

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Laura Buckman for The Chronicle

In late May, Seagoville High School's Class of 2017 gathered for a ceremony that some students welcomed and others dreaded. It was "signing day," celebrating those bound for college, especially recipients of big academic scholarships and grants. The lucky students, sporting T-shirts from various campuses, sat on the right side of the auditorium.

The rest of the seniors — who had to sit in the middle — filled twice as many seats. They were "the undecideds," unsure where they were going to college. Though a few were slackers, many were top students with sterling grades, solid test scores, and clear ambitions. They wanted to pursue a major, a career, a life. They just weren't sure yet which, if any, options they could afford.

At affluent high schools where savvy students apply to scores of selective colleges, May marks the end of the admissions cycle. Here, most applicants were low-income, and the timeline was different. Closure was a ways off.

Just before 11 a.m., hip-hop songs blared as restless teenagers waited for the event to start. Some in the middle rows chatted and goofed around. One young man dropped gum wrappers in a classmate's hair.

Other undecideds sat quietly, blanketed by doubts. One was an aspiring teacher, hoping a state university would give her more grants so she wouldn't have to start at a community college. One was parentless, eager to study science, waiting to see financial-aid packages. One was an undocumented immigrant accepted by a half-dozen colleges her family couldn't afford; as the ceremony began, she felt embarrassed.

The assembly, like those held at many high schools each spring, was meant to mimic the fanfare that football stars get when they commit to Division I programs. The teachers who organized the event wanted to show these students some love. And why not? Nearly all 281 seniors had been accepted to at least one college, and several had received a good deal of money. That was especially good news at a public high school where four-fifths of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, and few have parents who even started college.

Still, acceptances don't guarantee access to higher education. When the neediest students end up with too little aid, an acceptance can feel hollow, even cruel. In the fairy-tale version of college admissions, applicants find the right "fit" by weighing one institution's qualities against another's. Yet the quaint notion of fit derives from an assumption: that everyone's got plenty of choices.

Many students don't, as Sara Morgan knew all too well. The school's lone college adviser, she had guided seniors through an anxious spring, helping them apply for financial aid. Later, dozens were required to submit extra financial documents, a demoralizing process that often delayed their aid awards. Some were waiting for colleges to award state grants that could make or break their plans. As May neared its end, some students still didn't know what it would all cost, and some who did were disappointed.

So Ms. Morgan, 28, understood why many seniors weren't in a celebratory mood. Wearing a blouse, skirt, and low-top Converse All Stars, she walked to the microphone. She acknowledged those in limbo, where they were likely to remain for weeks. "There are a lot of people sitting in the middle who have decided to go to college, and, unfortunately, are still waiting on financial aid," she said, urging them to hang in there. Yet the hours were disappearing fast: Graduation was nine days away.

Seagoville High School, a beige square of a building, stands on the southeastern edge of Dallas County, far from the city's mirrored towers. Just down the road, goats tread green lots, the Migalitos Supermercado sells local tomatillos and bright dresses, and houses in the nearest subdivision go for \$500 down. The old oaks shading the school's parking lot can't be seen from the college-advising office; it's windowless.



Laura Buckman for The Chronicle

College counseling requires constant resourcefulness and attention to detail. Sara Morgan (left), at Seagoville High School, in Dallas, soon realized that her job was to navigate, encourage, translate, and cajole.

Ms. Morgan started last November. She was hired by the Academic Success Program, a nonprofit group that provides college counselors to 17 schools in the Dallas Independent School District. The group's executive director told Ms. Morgan that she was walking into a tough situation, the kind of job that tends to burn people out. The previous adviser had left after only a couple of months. When Ms. Morgan started, just after Thanksgiving, the admissions cycle was well underway. She had no college-counseling experience.

Ms. Morgan had taught high-school students, all of them poor, in American Samoa, an experience that drew her to college access. At Seagoville she quickly saw how poverty entwined with other circumstances to shape students' views of higher education — and their chances of reaching it. All winter she summoned students to her cramped office, where colorful pennants hang from the wall. Low-key and soft-spoken, she asked about their plans. Most

hadn't started a single college application.

She advised unaccompanied youths, such as the young woman who had no bed. She advised the sons and daughters of undocumented immigrants who feared that completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid would imperil their families. She advised a young woman who wanted to enroll full time while caring for her 4-year-old son.

And she advised students who were homeless. Victoria Denestan was one of them. Last fall she applied to colleges and completed the Fafsa on her own. Ever since her parents split up, during her junior year, she and her mother had been squatting in a house, knowing they could get booted at any time. She worked shifts at a movie theater, earning \$150 a week, which helped pay for groceries. Her mother was unemployed.

Though Ms. Denestan had an acceptance from a state university, she would need to take out loans, which she feared. She knew she would have to borrow plenty later to fulfill her dream: a doctorate in psychology.

So, on Ms. Morgan's suggestion, she called the University of North Texas at Dallas one day and asked if it would consider her for one of its top scholarships. In her application essay, she wrote that when hardship "came crashing into me like a bulldozer," she realized what would allow her to overcome it: Education.

Early one afternoon in April, Ms. Denestan sat down at the long table in Ms. Morgan's office just after the third-period bell rang. She wore a camouflage cap and big hoop earrings. As she dug into a bag of Chester's Flamin' Hot Fries, she was thinking about her scholarship interview, less than 24 hours away. Outgoing and expressive, Ms. Denestan was apt to impress anyone during face-to-face interactions. But she worried that her so-so standardized-test scores would sink her.

Ms. Morgan, huddling with another student at a computer, looked over at her. "Victoria, we have to do interview prep."



Laura Buckman for The Chronicle

When hardship “came crashing into me like a bulldozer,” she wrote in an essay, she realized what would let her overcome it: Education.

— Victoria Denestan, graduating senior

"OK. We can do that."

"Can we do it after school today?"

Ms. Denestan cocked her head and smiled. "If you want to take me home. ..." The bus she rode left soon after the last bell.

Ms. Morgan nodded. On the way home, they discussed some practice questions while riding in Ms. Morgan's used Prius.

The next morning, Ms. Denestan took a moment before walking into the room at UNT-Dallas where the selection committee would ask her many questions. She whispered to the ceiling: "Help me, Jesus."

A week later, representatives of the university came to Ms. Denestan's fourth-period English class. They handed her a certificate and a backpack full of schwag: She had won the full-ride scholarship, which would close the gap in her aid package. Stunned, she posed for a photo with her mother, whom Ms. Morgan had invited to share in the surprise. *This*, the young woman thought, *just made my life*.

Ms. Morgan was happy for Ms. Denestan. Still, she urged her to at least consider one alternative — an out-of-state college that had sparked the teenager's interest. A college adviser must think in terms of possibilities: The more, the better.

Ms. Denestan was torn, though. After one college puts a golden ticket in your hand, was it foolish to think about going anywhere else?

College guidebooks and online search engines urge students to consider an institution's many facets. Location, class sizes, culture. "Find your soulmate school," a Princeton Review website says.

As spring wore on, Ms. Morgan counseled many capable students who couldn't choose among colleges so easily. *They're locked into whatever is going to be affordable*, she thought again and again. To pick a college based on anything besides that one, bottom-line variable was a luxury.

Aldo Hernandez wanted that luxury. He had taken seven Advanced Placement courses, earned a 4.0 grade-point average, and scored a 1240 on the SAT. He applied to eight colleges and received seven acceptances. His first choice, the University of Pittsburgh, offered him a good deal, but he was left with a \$22,000 gap. Not happening, he thought.

As more aid packages arrived, Mr. Hernandez grew anxious. A fan of science, he distracted himself by reading a book about pathogens and viruses. Then, one day in late April, Texas Tech University, his second choice, sent his aid letter, which included a Pell Grant — \$5,920 — and \$5,500 in federal loans, leaving him with a \$10,000 gap. He knew that as a dependent he could take out only \$4,000 more because his father, a handyman, wouldn't qualify for a PLUS Loan. And he knew that he lacked a co-signer for a private loan.

Discouraged, Mr. Hernandez came to Ms. Morgan's office and slumped low in a chair. His black headphones rested on the collar of his black polo, which he wore over a black T-shirt, with black jeans. The outfit conveyed his mood. Wry and thoughtful, he paused before answering Ms. Morgan's questions.

"What about the University of Houston?" she asked.

"I don't want to go there."

"Have you seen the financial-aid package?"

"Yeah. There's only a \$3,000 gap. I can afford that."

Mr. Hernandez, who was considering a career in the pharmaceutical industry, liked Houston's chemistry program but much preferred Texas Tech's campus and social scene. Those qualities mattered to him so much that he was ready to turn down Houston, the most affordable option.

Texas Tech had told Ms. Morgan that it wouldn't apply state grants to students' aid packages for several more weeks. So Mr. Hernandez, who was eligible, might end up getting another \$5,000, which would halve his gap.

Either way, his father had saved enough to help him cover his freshman year. After that, though, Mr. Hernandez would have to find a way — scholarships, part-time jobs — to get through. Despite those unknowns, he was leaning toward Texas Tech, accepting that he might have to drop out after one year. He wanted to *want* the campus he selected.

"I try to be a logical person," he told Ms. Morgan. "But I don't want to be logical when it comes to something that's so important to me. I don't want to, like, settle."

For many low-income students, the road to college is lined with red tape. This year's admissions cycle dumped more of it in their path.

First there were high hopes because the aid process had evolved in crucial ways. This time around, the Fafsa opened in October, three months earlier than before. And for the first time, applicants could use tax data from the "prior prior year" — 2015 — to complete the form. An online tool would allow them to pull that data from the Internal Revenue Service directly into their applications. A kinder, simpler Fafsa, many believed, would increase completion rates and give applicants earlier aid awards.

But two snags complicated all that. In March the data-retrieval tool was taken offline amid concerns about fraud. Without it, applicants had to enter tax information manually, using 2015 tax forms. That hitch disproportionately affected disadvantaged students, especially those applying to community colleges and less-selective four-year colleges, where the application season was far from over.

Though the tool's demise hindered some of Ms. Morgan's students, many more couldn't have used it in the first place. That's because many came from families that didn't pay taxes, often because their incomes were so low that they weren't required to file. Some students' parents lacked a Social Security number. Others didn't live with their parents. Some were homeless unaccompanied youths who hadn't paid taxes before.

What's more, applicants who don't use the IRS tool are more likely to be selected for verification, which requires them to submit additional documentation. Many colleges don't award aid to accepted students until they complete the time-consuming process.

And that's where the second complication came in. This cycle came with a new policy: If selected for verification, students and parents who said they hadn't filed taxes in 2015 would be required to submit proof of nonfiling from the IRS. More than 50 of Ms. Morgan's students were chosen for verification, and most found the required documents exceedingly difficult to obtain.



Laura Buckman for The Chronicle

"I don't want to be logical when it comes to something that's so important to me. I don't want to, like, settle."

— Aldo Hernandez, graduating senior

One afternoon in April, four of those seniors huddled in the college-advising office. One was still waiting for his nonfiling letter after nearly three months and two dozen phone calls to the IRS. He had been told he needed an appointment at the Austin, Tex., office to get the form, but the next available date was in late May.

Students' confusion was palpable. Ms. Morgan stood beside an anxious young woman who had just called a university's financial-aid office. "I just wanted to know," she said, "if you got all my, um. ..."

"Verification documents," Ms. Morgan whispered.

"Verification documents."

Later, Ms. Morgan sat down with a young woman whose mother had died two years earlier. Since then she had been renting an apartment with her older sister and earning about \$8,000 a year at a part-time job. Pell-eligible, she planned to major in biology at a nearby university. But so far she couldn't get the tax form she needed.

"I need an update on what you're thinking right now," Ms. Morgan said.

"I don't know, it's just stressful," the young woman replied, her voice trembling. "I can't get anything done."

After finally finishing verification, she had to further document the extent of her poverty. The university she planned to attend instructed her to complete a "low-income verification form," requiring her to list monthly expenses and income. She also had to write a personal statement explaining how she had supported herself "on little or zero income during 2015."

Many other students at Seagoville had nobody else to help them, which is why they had come to depend on Ms. Morgan. Late one afternoon, the adviser was leaving her office when she glanced at the whiteboard by the door. Someone had written a message in looping, green letters: "I love you Ms. Morgan!" She smiled faintly at the words, and then she wiped them away.

Most days Ms. Morgan left thinking she could have done more. At night she remained tethered to seniors, who often texted her questions. Sometimes ideas surfaced while she was trying to fall asleep. She wrote each one in a notebook: *Handout that explains how to apply for Parent Plus Loan.*

Ms. Morgan thought about some students all the time, especially M.C. Those are the initials of an eloquent young woman who loved theater. Who wanted to go to Texas A&M at College Station. Who happened to be an undocumented immigrant.

Born in Mexico, Ms. C. was 4 or 5 when she crossed the Rio Grande with her mother and older sister, not far from El Paso. Walking through rugged terrain on one cold night, she was frightened by the sharp outlines of cows and bulls against the sky. After learning English, she read everything she could: Junie B. Jones and Captain Underpants, then *Frankenstein* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

At Seagoville, Ms. C. excelled in science and served on the student council. She organized blood drives and cleanup projects. Ms. Morgan saw her as the kind of student who very likely would have received a generous offer from a selective liberal-arts college or two, especially if she had applied early. Yet by the time they met, those deadlines had passed.

As of May, Ms. C. was ranked 13th in the class, and to her that number felt unlucky. She had acceptances from a handful of colleges, but only modest aid awards. Texas A&M, which had not offered her a scholarship for first-generation students, had an annual price tag well north of \$20,000. The University of Utah — with tuition of \$35,000 a year for nonresidents — gave her a spot in its honors college but no grants. And a couple of more affordable options nearby lacked drama programs.

As an undocumented student, Ms. C. couldn't get federal aid. Though Texas gives aid to undocumented students, any award would be limited.

Then there was her last option. Panola College, a community college in Carthage, Tex., had offered her a theater scholarship, but it would cover only a fraction of the cost of attendance, about \$16,000. *My college dream just vanished*, she thought upon adding up all the numbers. Though her parents weren't against her earning a degree, they didn't seem interested in discussing it. "Why "don't you just work for a couple years?" her mother asked.

One afternoon in May, Ms. C. stopped by Ms. Morgan's office wearing her black hair pulled back tightly and a shirt that said "Property of SHS Theater Department." She sat quietly near a half-dozen of her classmates discussing their college prospects. After listening for a few minutes, she stood up and bolted out the door, crying.

Ms. Morgan ran down the hallway to catch up with her. For 15 minutes, they huddled at a table in the waiting area. Resting her head on her floral-print backpack, Ms. C. explained that it was hard to be around peers with similar academic records who had been offered much more money. "It felt like I wasn't equal," she said. "That really hurts."

Ms. Morgan spoke softly, telling her not to get down on herself, not to give up, not to write off Panola.

Ms. C. trusted Ms. Morgan, who had helped "take the fog away" as she navigated the admissions process. She knew some students who mistook the adviser's candor for discouragement. But she was grateful when Ms. Morgan told her one day that, with no Pell Grant or scholarships, she probably couldn't afford her dream college. That was more helpful than all the times other people had said, "Oh, you'll get to A&M!"

After the impromptu chat with Ms. Morgan, Ms. C. felt better. Sniffing, she wiped both eyes with her hands, adorned with glittery silver rings. She looked up at the fluorescent lights and smiled. All she could do was wait and see what would happen. She had done everything else.

By late May, the seniors could feel time thinning out. On the next-to-last day of classes, harried students poured into Ms. Morgan's office, each one bursting with questions.

One young woman hoping to visit a beauty school didn't know what to do because her mother refused to take her. Another wondered if she should apply to one more college. Another didn't know if she should get a part-time job next fall instead of doing work-study.

College counseling, Ms. Morgan had learned, required constant attention to small details, hour-to-hour resourcefulness. When she realized that some seniors didn't know how to address an envelope, she stuck a sample on her wall. When they kept forgetting their passwords to online portals, she made a list of them. Her job was to navigate, encourage, translate, cajole.

Throughout the day, Ms. Morgan rarely sat down, carrying on three or four conversations at once. Students interrupted her constantly. While peering over the shoulder of a young man completing the Fafsa, she said, "You were *not* born in 2099!" After microwaving a pot pie for lunch, she placed it on the table. Thirty-two minutes passed before she took a bite.

At one computer, Victoria Denestan, the homeless student who had won the scholarship at UNT-Dallas, was checking out Centenary College of Louisiana, which had accepted her. She liked the descriptions of student life at the small, residential college. And she doubted she would experience the same "togetherness" at UNT-Dallas, where most of the students would be commuters.

Ms. Morgan had offered to drive her to Centenary — about three hours away — the following week. But Ms. Denestan was hesitant. Centenary had left her a gap — \$4,000 — and UNT-Dallas had not. She felt bound to the university that had given her so much money. And she wondered aloud what might happen if she fell in love with Centenary: "It might be really great, but right now I don't *know* that."

A college adviser can present choices, but only students can seize them. After Mr. Hernandez got his aid award from Texas Tech, Ms. Morgan tried to scare up another option. She reached out to Hampshire College, in Massachusetts, which was still accepting applicants.

Later she wrote the admissions office's name and number on a Post-it and handed it to Mr. Hernandez. But the note stayed in his pocket. The tiny college didn't seem like a good fit. And he didn't want another acceptance from a college he couldn't afford.

The next day, a dozen students crowded into Ms. Morgan's office all at once. Amid the whirl of teenagers, she remained placid, as she had all spring. She high-fived students who brought good news. She told those who had accomplished small tasks that she was proud of them. Now and then she took a long swig from a cup of hours-old coffee.

A few times, her exasperation came through. Once, while talking with a senior who had been ignoring a verification request, and who had yet to talk with his parents about the loans they would need to take out to pay for his college, she raised her hands in disbelief: "What in the world," she exclaimed, "are you doing with your life?" She knew the young man — then ranked second in the class — had great potential.

After the last bell rang, a few students huddled around the long table, griping about the signing-day ceremony, which would take place the next morning. One young woman who had yet to complete the verification process said she didn't feel like going. "I don't want to be belittled by all these students getting all this money," she said, shuffling her pink Nikes. A young man with thick, floppy hair nodded in agreement: "I don't want to get embarrassed."

Ms. Morgan gave them a plaintive look. "You guys ... you've got acceptances to big schools, you should be proud," she said. "It's not your fault that you don't know where you're going." The young woman shrugged.

As the last students trickled out, they left the office strangely silent for the first time in seven hours. Ms. Morgan looked down at the table and sighed. "I give up," she said. But that wasn't true.

Later that evening, Ms. Morgan tended to an urgent matter: Robert Delcastillo, one of the stars of signing day, needed a T-shirt to wear to the assembly.

Last winter Ms. Morgan encouraged him to apply for the Texas A&M at Commerce's honors college, which comes with a scholarship. She edited his essay, a clever riff on the duality of his personality. After some last-minute technical difficulties, Ms. Morgan, working on a laptop at Starbucks, helped him submit his application just before the deadline.

The morning of his interview, Mr. Delcastillo couldn't take a shower because his parents hadn't paid the water bill. So he boiled bottled water on the stove, bathed himself as best he could, and ironed a dress shirt. His mother, then unemployed, drove him to Commerce, where he nervously dropped puns on his interviewers. Weeks later, a letter came: He got the scholarship, about \$70,000 over four years, plus a \$2,750 annual stipend.

When poor students snag major scholarships, however, their financial hardships don't magically disappear. Though Mr. Delcastillo's mother had since found a job, there was little money for day-to-day expenses. His father was disabled and couldn't work. A while back, Mr. Delcastillo sold his Xbox for \$80 to cover his family's cellphone bill. He knew that his parents probably couldn't pay \$25 apiece to attend orientation with him.

So, as seniors throughout the nation adorned themselves with brand-new college gear this spring, he didn't even consider buying himself a \$20 Commerce T-shirt. Knowing that, Ms. Morgan arranged to get one from a university admissions officer.

At school the next morning, she handed it to Mr. Delcastillo. The shirt — blue, with big yellow letters — said "LION PRIDE." It fit.

At the ceremony later, Ms. Morgan thanked the seniors who had met with her, "even a few of you against your will." They included an aspiring computer engineer who once had told her, politely, to stop calling him into her office, because he thought college was too expensive. After she explained grants and scholarships, he changed his mind. Months later, he was wearing a T-shirt from the University of Texas at Dallas, where he wouldn't have to take out loans.

Nervous, Ms. Morgan stepped away from the mic but then turned back to thank the seniors again: "I know it was very personal, and ... I know, I think, I appreciate that a lot." Many students applauded. "Woo!" one shouted, "Ms. Morrrr-gaaan!"

Then the raucous celebration began. Teachers onstage hurled handfuls of candy at the crowd. A young woman with a sweet voice sang "The Star-Spangled Banner," reading the lyrics from her phone. The school's mascot — a blue, wide-eyed dragon — danced vigorously.

Sitting in the center of the auditorium, Ms. C., the undocumented student, watched as her classmates took the stage one by one. Those planning to attend two-year colleges went first, followed by those headed to four-year campuses. Then came a dozen bound for the military. Each senior received a pair of balloons and a T-shirt that said, "I DECIDED."

Though Ms. C. was happy for her peers, she resented the ceremony, which quite literally divided the class. She felt ostracized. And she winced when a teacher demanding quiet told the collegebound students that the chit-chatting undecideds were "interrupting your show." *Just because we're undecided*, Ms. C. thought, *doesn't mean we've decided to throw our lives away*.

Finally, seniors who had received an especially large bundle of grants and scholarships took the stage. They sat down at a skirted table and posed with big, laminated checks bearing five-figure totals. Mr. Delcastillo, in his new Commerce shirt, smiled sheepishly when his name was called. After another student's \$98,680 aid package was announced, a young woman in the middle section shouted a question: "Can I have some?"

Applying to college is often described as a rite of passage, a moment of self-discovery. But for many students, it's a long and disheartening walk in the dark.

At Seagoville High School, that walk continued into June. Nine days after getting their diplomas, a dozen recent graduates came to Ms. Morgan's office, still seeking an end to the admissions process. Many had not yet seen aid awards.

Four who had completed the verification process were told that their documents hadn't been processed yet. One was told the wait would be six weeks. Another was told eight weeks.

Some Texas colleges didn't hold state grants for applicants flagged for verification, which meant that money ran out while some eligible students were scrambling to finish the process. By the time one top student finished verification at her chosen university, she was told that all state grants had been allotted. Having received only a Pell Grant, she planned to take out loans to cover the gap that remained.

Another young woman, who'd waited all spring for an aid award, realized too late that she had missed several emails informing her that she was selected for verification. With no grants coming her way, she decided to attend a two-year college instead.

College counselors aren't superheroes. They have the power to help students get more choices, but that power goes only so far. And each student's decision takes a different shape.

Ms. Denestan never accepted Ms. Morgan's offer to drive her to Centenary. After praying for guidance, she decided that God wanted her to go to UNT-Dallas. She decided not to tempt herself with a choice between two very different colleges.

In mid-June, Mr. Hernandez, who had committed to Texas Tech, had not heard about the state grant; the university had yet to give out all the awards. He found the wait nerve-wracking. By turning down a more affordable university, he had based his decision on a feeling instead of logic.

Ms. C., whose last-choice college had become her only viable one, was feeling optimistic. She had finished 11th in the class, moving up two spots. The more she learned about her scholarship at Panola, the better it sounded. Her parents had agreed to take out loans to support her. But, like many other undocumented students in Texas, she still didn't know if she would get a state grant.

As one senior class departed, Ms. Morgan was thinking about the next. She could hear the questions students would ask. She could feel the weight of the challenges they would carry. Already she felt behind. Before verification swamped her this spring, she had planned to spend more time meeting one-on-one with juniors.

In the months ahead, rising seniors in wealthier parts of the city would take test-prep classes. Their parents would edit their essays. Their counselors would polish their applications for early-decision deadlines.

Many of them were already much farther along than her students, who were just learning the essential vocabulary of applying to college. Before the school year ended, she ran a workshop for 30 juniors ranked at the top of the class. She asked if anyone knew what the Fafsa was. Only one hand went up.

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