The Issue

In 2010, over 400,000 low-income high school students in the United States graduated with the academic skills necessary to attend a 4-year college, but never enrolled. Holding academic achievement constant, low-income high school students are still less likely to enroll than their higher income peers: a study by Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government showed that only 34% of seniors in the bottom income quartile went to the country’s most selective colleges, in comparison with 78% of seniors in the top quartile. Low enrollment in higher education among low-income students is a form of educational inequity that ultimately exacerbates overall income inequality and perpetuates cycles of intergenerational poverty.

A crucial component in enrolling in higher education is access to individualized guidance counseling. The American School Counselor Association recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 100:1 in urban areas, but in New York City public schools, 98.8% of students go to a school where the student-to-counselor ratio exceeds that recommendation, and 50% percent of students go to school where the ratio is higher than 250:1. As a result, many students “fall through the cracks” and fail to receive the one-on-one guidance that they need. While many successful nonprofits and community programs have stepped in to address this problem, there is a surprising lack of organizations that specialize solely on financial aid. We believe that the shortage of college counselors and of specialized financial aid nonprofits contributes to two central problems: a knowledge gap, which describes the deficiency of knowledge about financial aid, and a support gap, which describes the inadequate amounts of individualized attention high school students receive.

The Idea

KAI will create a network of college students from New York City universities who will educate and mentor high school seniors through the financial aid process. Programming will have two components: education (which will address the knowledge gap) and mentoring (which will address the support gap). Educational programs will consist of 1) a series of 1-hour financial aid workshops and 2) online resources through KAI’s website and social media pages. Mentorship programs will consist of 1) a series of mentoring events, including walk-in “KAI Office Hours” and informal discussion groups (“KAI Conversations”) and 2) online and in-person availability of mentors for one-on-one help as needed. KAI volunteers (KAI Student Leaders) will carry out these programs in small teams over the course of the academic year in participating high schools. We will target schools where 75% or more of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and where the student-to-counselor ratio is higher than 100:1.

In terms of resources, KAI will draw upon existing educational materials about financial aid, guidance and feedback from college counselors at participating high schools, the work of the KAI student leaders, and, most importantly, the students themselves, who will offer continuous feedback about their own needs in terms of financial aid and mentorship.

KAI’s programs are intended to supplement the work of college counselors. Still, there are several aspects of KAI’s program that make it unique from those of college counselors and other college-readiness organizations. First of all, KAI Student Leaders are close in age to their
target market and have been through the financial aid process recently. High school students will relate to them as peers. KAI volunteers will also have access to a network of friends and classmates who may be able to offer anecdotal information or insider tips about financial aid opportunities at specific schools.

KAI is also unique in that it is specialized: by focusing solely on financial aid, KAI will provide more expertise and depth than programs that provide general information about the whole college process. Its curriculum is tailored specifically to low-income students in New York. Additionally, through mentoring, KAI Student Leaders will maintain long-term relationships with students who attend workshops, offering a more personalized approach than nonprofits that only provide workshops. Because KAI volunteers will be assigned to small groups of students, they will be able to provide more one-on-one time to each student than one college counselor could alone.

Our immediate impact will be to increase the amount of accurate information students have about financial aid. A secondary impact will be a change in attitudes about the financial attainability of college, which will hopefully encourage more students to apply for more financial aid and to a wider variety of institutions. Ultimately, we hope that by motivating more low-income students to attend college, we will have an impact on educational and social inequity in New York as a whole. We will measure impact through surveys before and after workshops, conversations with students and counselors, and long term follow-up once the students begin their college careers.

This year, KAI is working with five schools. We plan to maintain strong relationships with these schools so that we can return each year and work with each new senior class. Next school year, we plan to expand to include 1-5 additional schools. We will reach out to these schools as we did this year: by contacting schools via email and through connections with other organizations. KAI will sustain its volunteer base by reaching out to socially conscious and education-oriented college students through school listservs, social justice groups, and other education-focused organizations. Volunteers will be asked to stay on the team for at least one academic year so that they can maintain relationships with their students.

The cost of MetroCards for Student Leaders, curriculum material for workshops, and refreshments for mentoring events comes out to $3.10 per student per year. Based on the average number of students in the schools we are working with this year, we have estimated that each school will cost us $620. Next year, as we expand, we anticipate total programming costs to be between $3,720 and $6,200. KAI will use the awarded capital for 2014-2015 programming, marketing materials, and towards an application for 501(c)(3) status. For financial sustainability, KAI will keep costs minimal (i.e., having only volunteers on staff) and will create a team of 2-3 volunteer grant writers who will research and apply for grants to continuously fund the organization. We hope that a CmC seed grant, a second year of programming, and 501(c)(3) status will help us build credibility and make our organization more attractive to institutional donors who would be prepared to make multi-year commitments to KAI.
Team Member 1 is a junior at NYU studying Economics and Politics with a minor in Business Studies. As a woman of color and a daughter of immigrants, she has long been concerned with issues of racial and economic inequality.

She has been pulled to the field of education policy through her conviction that education is an essential cornerstone of development. She has become involved with this phenomenon of college inaccessibility through the personal stories and experiences of her peers. Students she has tutored in the Lower East Side not only shared stories of academic difficulties at the hands of the poor public education system, but also of financial barriers to the attendance of college. As a student of NYU, she has seen friends struggle to manage the skyrocketing costs of college that have made it an excludable good. It was these stories and experiences that inspired Faria to found KAI.

Team Member 2 is a junior in CAS double majoring in Economics and Romance Languages with a minor in Business Studies. She became interested in social justice and income inequality after moving to New York City, where socioeconomic divides are highly visible. She believes in improving access to education not only because of its importance for society as a whole, but also because of the tangible and transformative benefits education can have upon the lives of individual people.