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Within reach

• Programs are helping low-income kids realize that college is not just for other people.

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Lily Moua, the daughter of poor Hmong immigrants in St. Paul, led a dual life in high school: one as a striving student, the other as a dutiful daughter in a traditional family that expected her to help cook and care for her many siblings.

Moua successfully straddled those two worlds to go to St. Olaf College. She's a driv-

en student, but she had help along the way from groups like the St. Paul nonprofit Admission Possible.

Helping low-income students get to college has gained new urgency with the realization that the fastest-growing group of young people in Minnesota are minorities, many of them poor and with no family history of higher education. It's why Minnesota donors and nonprofits are targeting them for college prep and scholarship programs. The most recent

announcement came this week, when health care executive William McGuire announced he was giving millions to that cause.

The numbers are stark. Less than half of low-income and minority students graduate from high school on time, according to a 2004 Citizen's League report on the future of Minnesota higher education.

Higher ed continues: "Where self-interest intersects with community interest." A9 ►

« MY PARENTS HAD LOTS OF EXPECTATIONS FOR ME AND WANTED ME TO BE A LEADER.

I HAD NO IDEA HOW TO DO THIS. » Lily Moua, a daughter of Hmong immigrants who is a senior at St. Olaf



Lily Moua, participating in a dance class at St. Olaf, is considering graduate school. She is the first in her family to go to college.

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Less than 5 percent have a bachelor's degree from a Minnesota college within 10 years after their freshman year in high school.

At the same time, the report said, the number of white high school graduates in Minnesota is projected to decline by 19 percent over the next decade, while the number of minority high school students, who are more likely to be from poor families, will increase by 52 percent.

That affects everyone from employers to senior citizens who will rely on those future workers to fund their Social Security benefits, said David Laird, president of the Minnesota Private College Council.

"The way we invest in these young people will determine the standard of living in the future," he said. "This is one of those issues where self-interest intersects with community interest."

McGuire plans to give \$5 million to \$10 million to programs that help low-income students prepare for, enter and stay in college. Earlier this month, two Twin Cities community and technical colleges announced a \$3 million program that will offer free tuition to qualifying low-income students.

Even with help, it's hard

But getting students from low-income families into college means fighting not only poverty but lack of knowledge and even fear of what it takes to get into college.

The depth of the problem is demonstrated by Destination 2010, a project run by the Minneapolis Foundation. In 2001, the project identified 450 inner-city third-graders and promised that if they graduated on time from a Minneapolis or St. Paul public school, they'd get a \$10,000 scholarship to a four-year college (half that amount for a two-year college). Tutors, college visits and summer camps were offered to keep those students on track.

Of the original 450 students who could have joined the program, 368 signed up. Five years later, only 230 students remain.

"The real attrition happened in the first year to year and a half," said Emmett Carson, Minneapolis Foundation president. Kids dropped out because families moved in search of affordable housing and jobs and be-

HELP FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

The Power of You: Two years of free tuition to needy city residents who graduate or receive a GED from public high schools in Minneapolis and St. Paul this spring. Students must attend Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) or St. Paul College, both two-year schools. In 2007, four-year Metropolitan State University will join the program.

So far more than \$450,000 has been raised from General Mills, St. Paul Travelers and the Perlman Family Foundation.

The McGuire program: UnitedHealth Group CEO Dr. William McGuire has pledged \$5 million to \$10 million to expand LearningWorks at Blake, which works with seventh- and eighth-graders, and Admission Possible, which coaches poor and minority high school juniors and seniors. It also will create a McGuire Scholars program at the University of Minnesota's Twin Cities campus, enrolling about 50 to 80 students a year over four years.

cause of other family issues.

It's easier now to keep students together as a group, Carson said, because as they move into middle and high schools they are not as scattered. To make the possibility of college more real, students visit college campuses.

"Kids see a dorm room, and you see their minds spinning," Carson said. "They walk out and see themselves differently. They see themselves as belonging."

He sees his younger self in the program's students. His parents wanted him to get an education, he said, but because they'd never been to college they couldn't help much.

"I showed up at Morehouse [College] never having visited Atlanta before," Carson said. "My father was there for a day and said, 'Well, son, do the best you can.'"

In contrast, his own daughter has two parents who have Ph.D.s. She's been talking about college since third and fourth grade, he said.

"It's all about parent orientation and understanding," Carson said. "It's very difficult for parents who did not have academic success themselves to be the primary dispenser on how to decipher the college process. Financial aid is more complicated than ever."

Bruce Gilman, principal at Minneapolis' Roosevelt High School, agreed. More than 77 percent of Roosevelt students are poor enough to qualify for lunch subsidies, and many are from immigrant families that have no college experience.

"The role models are not there," Gilman said. "The challenge, trite as it sounds, is to get students to realize their potential."

The 'uncool' factor

Another challenge is to combat teen culture that, es-

pecially in high school, puts athletes and entertainers on a pedestal but can make academic achievement uncool. Carson, who is black, said that his 15-year-old daughter has been accused of "acting white" because she's a good student.

"When the majority of people do not do well on a test, they set the norm that there's something wrong with those who do well," he said. "Part of this is a way for kids to maintain their own sense of worth if they're failing."

Moua, who is one of 12 children, was torn between cultural pressure to play a traditional role in her family and her mother's conviction that in America, anything was possible.

"My parents had lots of expectations for me and wanted me to be a leader," Moua said. "I had no idea how to do this."

When Moua was picked for Admission Possible, she said, it opened doors, helping her prepare for admission tests, exposing her to other college-bound students and helping her with applications, scholarships and financial aid. Now a senior at St. Olaf with majors in sociology and anthropology, she has studied in Thailand, Tanzania, China and Vietnam and is thinking about going to graduate school to study social policy. She thinks she might like to teach in a community college.

Moua agrees with Carson that a single college degree can transform families by making the possibility of college real. It's already happening in her family. Moua was the first to go to college. One of her younger brothers is deciding on a college now, she said, and a sister wants to follow.

"They see that if Lily can do it, I can do it too," Moua said.