High School Support Phase

Dreaming with Eyes Wide Open

By Tom Moore

High School. It comes at you hard and fast. Rainier Scholars Academic Counselor May-Lannie Lozano says the high schoolers she works with, “dive into current events, systems of power, personal relationships and questions of leadership.” Add to that school work, college prep testing and an ever expanding universe of extracurricular opportunities. Multiply this by the pressure to select classes that could help with a college major you haven’t chosen yet, coupled with the inescapable pressure (already) to earn a good income after college. One can easily understand how a scholar can feel lost in expectations and begin to wonder – what is the best path to be true to myself, to honor the mission of Rainier Scholars and become part of a new generation of leaders?

It is here, amidst the opportunity and anxiety, where Derek Rogers, the new Director of High School Support (HSS) and his team do their best work. Their goal is to provide a safe place and a process to filter the choices and competing agendas, allowing students to choose the ones that are right for them. Derek sees it as a process of triangulation between schools, students and parents. “With the close relationships we have with our schools, our one-on-one meetings with students every 5 weeks and regular meetings with parents, we are able to gather and relay information and quickly assess what, if any, interventions are necessary.”

Academic Counselors play a critical role in staying current with what is going on in the lives of the 190 scholars who are now in high school. Three of four counselors (May-Lannie Lozano, Kelabe Tewolde and J’Kela Smith) are Rainier Scholars alums, so they simultaneously provide a place of empathy and understanding for students and can shine a light on excuses or mistakes to learn from, that they may have experienced themselves in high school. The one ‘outsider,’ Ej Piñera, while having a strong, like-minded community of peers at Seattle University, recognizes how special a close, committed cohort can be – and he reminds his students of how fortunate they are to be Rainier Scholars.

In addition to four Academic Counselors, the HSS team includes a Program
Manager and Associate Director of College Counseling. There are four components of this phase: Academic Counseling, College Counseling, Leadership Retreats and Summer Internships. The focus of Academic and College Counseling is to help students maintain a strong academic record (a minimum GPA of 3.0, but ideally 3.5 or above), support a consistent level of involvement in school/community activities and interests, and to achieve college planning benchmarks including ACT test prep. The bottom line here according to Derek, is that grades and test scores matter – a lot! As Derek says, “they are just part of the rules of the game. We are clear with our students on how they need to play the game: they need to do the work.”

While the “rules” are real, there are also soft skills that Rainier Scholars must continue to develop in order to succeed. A key part of this process is Leadership Labs as well as the Leadership Development retreats which feature an in-depth focus on Social Contracts, Systemic Discrimination and Equity in Education. In each of these retreats, the curriculum is designed to help scholars understand the historical and systemic barriers that have shaped access and opportunity as well as the role of leaders in creating change. There are long-standing obstacles to overcome in order “to transform the leadership pool. They must understand the systems that are in place in order to enter them and transform them from within.”

After recently completing the retreats, one student wrote, “They changed my perspective on life entirely. Realizing that everything is not as simple as it originally seemed to be and that I must be an active member of my community in order to someday change the world for the better.” Being able to change, or clarifying one’s perspective amidst all of the huzzah of high school, is the transformation Derek and his staff desire. “We want our scholars to think critically about their next steps; to understand what the intention is behind any decision or choices they make.”

These questions also come hard and fast for the students. How do you take advantage of opportunities you have within the system while also advocating for change? How do you hold yourself accountable when there may be a culture that says that you can take an easier path? Derek and the HSS team understand the degree of difficulty here. “I think our students share a sense of struggle. They know what they are up against. We tell them go ahead and dream, but dream with your eyes wide open.”

Don’t just see the transformation, be it.
High school students today simultaneously have more distractions, as well as more resources, in the palm of their hand. They have more exposure to social issues and it seems like many have greater awareness or understanding of their identities and the injustices around them. During high school, students take their interests and understanding about themselves and pursue it, reexamine it, and develop it. They dive into current events, systems of power, personal impacts and leadership, while expanding their awareness of themselves, society and where the two intersect. Being a Rainier Scholar, I feel a greater shared connection with the current scholars. I can reflect on my own struggles and successes during that time, be empathetic, but also share strategies to hopefully support them based on what I’ve learned.

J’Kela Smith
B.S. Psychology/Studio Arts
Union College, Class of 2017
Cohort 5 Alum

Today’s students are tech savvy and more interested in STEM fields than when I was in high school. There are also many more of these opportunities for students to take advantage of, and I encourage scholars to do so. I believe the college preparation, networking and leadership development workshops are transformative for our high school students. Having adequate preparation for college – starting early in their junior year – allows them to feel confident and guided through the entire process. Being a Rainier Scholar allows me to relate to my students on a personal level. I hope to help them see there is a big world out there and now is the time where almost everything is up to them. I want to build their confidence, showing them it is possible to live out your dreams – even when it may seem scary.

Kelabe Tewolde
B.A. Political Science
Colgate University, Class of 2018
Cohort 5 Alum

One thing that has changed dramatically since I was in high school is how everyone is so reliant on technology. Social media has reached a new level of influence and as such it has become a new category to be managed. At the same time, students are more into social activism and social change than I, or most of my peers were at that age. I think the current political climate has definitely influenced that and hence, I find myself looking for a different set of internship and volunteer opportunities for my scholars than what was available in the past. I believe the transformative part of HSS revolves around leadership - it’s when scholars realize they can be leaders. Being a Rainier Scholar, I am able to relate to them in a way that only a Rainier Scholar can. I know how it feels to be the one person of color in a class or being seen as the “voice” for my race in group discussions. It is a struggle and I can relate... I think it really helps me do my job.

EJ Piñera
B.A. Psychology, Seattle University, Class of 2018

Academics has been undergoing a digital transformation! While it makes some things easier, it can be a challenge for young students to separate academic responsibilities from social interactions. What has remained the same for Rainier Scholars is the capacity for accountability. I believe HSS offers a chance for our young scholars to develop agency. It’s a place where their work ethic is put to the test, where they RISE to meet challenges and obstacles - combatting them with excellence, perseverance, integrity and courage. As someone who is not a Rainier Scholar, I realized I had to advocate a lot for myself. Seeing a community of other young leaders here at Rainier Scholars whose mission is to leave an impact has helped me consistently recommit to my goal of being a change agent and young leader in my community. When you know the trajectory of who you want to be and what you want to do, it’s easier when those around you echo the same sentiments and values and can share in the process.
Welcome
New Board Trustee

Our most recent addition to the Rainier Scholars Board of Trustees is Patricia Handjaja. Patricia is currently the Chief Financial Officer at Shelter Holdings, a real estate development and business investment company in Bellevue, Washington. She provides both strategic and financial guidance while maintaining oversight for all financial functions. Patricia has over 17 years of experience in finance and previously held the position of Chief Financial Officer at Noble House Hotels and Resorts.

Born and raised in Indonesia, Patricia came to the Pacific Northwest to pursue a college education. She earned her B.S. from the University of Washington. Patricia is both a licensed CPA and CFA. Patricia attributes her accomplishments to her parents because they understood the importance of education even though neither of them earned a college degree. In fact, that was one of many reasons she was drawn to Rainier Scholars. As Patricia so poetically wrote recently, “Education is the foundation for flowing knowledge, flickering ideas and forming a better environment in class and in life. Together with hard work and dedication, anything is possible.” After spending time on a summer program tour and witnessing our scholars in action, Patricia was inspired.

“With the proven program created by Rainier Scholars, I am confident that this organization will continue to light one’s fire to dream the biggest dreams and to continue to make the impossible possible.”

Executive Director’s Perspective
Seasons of Inspiration

As summer quickly turns to fall here in the Pacific Northwest, I find myself celebrating another full cycle in the Rainier Scholars year. We have just completed our transition to serving students one year earlier (beginning in the summer after 4th grade) and are thrilled by the results of this transition. Our youngest scholars represented themselves and their age group (the youngest ever in the history of Rainier Scholars) so beautifully this past year. Highlights include setting records for the number of students making honor roll and earning placement into top public and private school programs in the region, while demonstrating that utter brilliance and incredible humanity can come in the smallest packages. In this shift, we discovered once again that students will meet whatever bar you set for them and that challenge and rigor are appreciated.

As enamored as I am with our youngest scholars, it is the news and updates from our trailblazing alumni in our first six cohorts which has truly provided the inspiration in recent months. As our college graduate ranks now exceed 200, we see the vision coming to full fruition. I revel in the updates I receive from alums with news of their most recent job acquisitions, graduate school acceptances and announcements of major milestone accomplishments.

“I teared up last week as one alum handed me his official business card, and I saw that I could now call him “Dr.” and envisioned all of the young patients who will benefit from his pediatric care in the years to come.

“I smiled when a recent MBA graduate explained that in all of her interviews for full-time work, in addition to focusing on the level of challenge and learning possibilities in each one, the most important factor to her was the "double bottom line" commitment of a company to both profit and social impact work.

“I felt immense hope when a third alum reached out to let me know that after two years of living and working abroad, he was pursuing a career in the Foreign Service because he believes in both the possibility of and responsibility to strive for a freer, more secure and prosperous world.

Each of these alums began the journey with us well over a decade ago and are living fully into the adulthood and futures they have dreamed about.

Access to high-quality education provides the freedom to self-determine and choose a professional path which you are passionate about, and leadership training prepares you to lead and give back in the communities from which you come. Full circle moments indeed as another cycle begins.

Sarah Smith
Sarah Smith, Executive Director
As a rising 12th grader, there were an infinite number of ways that Nazrawit Dessie could have spent her last summer as a high school student. Revealingly, she seized the opportunity to spend this valuable time interning at K&L Gates – one of the largest international law firms in the world. She was exposed to many facets of the firm, including Human Resources, Accounts/Receiveable, Tech and Billing. Naz found the challenge of balancing so many duties both exciting and enriching. “My favorite part of this internship was the variety of things I could do. I didn’t have to just sit at a desk all day, I was always moving.” She made an impression on her internship host, Kirsten Merrett, who noted Naz excelled in all of the things expected of her. “As this was Naz’s first work experience, I think she did a fantastic job!”

Beyond what she experienced through her daily tasks, Naz also learned that she loves working with other people. When the Tech team needed her to talk with and gather information from every person at the firm, she found everybody welcoming and supportive; people in other departments knew her name and made an effort to start conversations with her. These connections proved fruitful when she was struggling with a task or interested in a specific topic. Ms. Merrett also noted that Naz worked well with all of the groups, and that she was especially helpful to the AR team who were down a position.

Not many students can say they interned at a law firm as a high schooler – a fact not lost on Naz. “That is not something that many people get the opportunity to do, so to be able to say that I had that internship opportunity is super rewarding.” Now a senior, Naz will be able to include this experience in her college applications as she continues on her journey to a career that builds upon the skills, knowledge and relationships she gained this summer.

2018 Internship Partners

Internships provide real world work experience and an opportunity to develop professional skills and competencies. This summer, Rainier Scholars students in high school and college landed over 100 internships with 60 different businesses, companies and organizations in the Pacific Northwest and beyond. Thank you to ALL of our internship partners and workplace mentors who hosted our scholars.

21 Progress
Aegis Living
Art and Global Health Center Africa
Artemis Connections
Baird Private Wealth Investments
BMGI
Cascadia Consulting
Center for Victims of Torture
Charlies Produce
City of Seattle
Coffee Town Press
Envirosights
Epiphany School
Evo Sports
Eworks Architecture
Forterra
Frazier Healthcare Investments
Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center
Giddens School
Goldman Sachs
Harley Marine Services
Harper Engineering
Harvey Mudd College
Helsell Fetterman Law Firm
Institute for Systems Biology
K&L Gates
Lebawi Academy in Addis Ababa
Liberty Mutual
MCM Insurance
Museum of Pop Culture
Microsoft Finance
Microsoft Explorers Program
Microsoft Learning and Readiness Team
Microsoft Young Technologists
MOHAI
Nokia
Nordstrom
Novo Nordisk
Pemco Insurance
Perkins Coie
Ravenna Solutions
Rios Cruz
Seattle Art Museum
Seattle Arts & Sciences Academy
Seattle Central Community College
Seattle City Light
Seattle Wastewater
ServiceNow
Skanska
Slalom Consulting
Tableau
The Boeing Company
UW – Center for Communication, Difference and Equity
UW Early Social Cognition Lab
UW INSIGHT, Harborview
UW Molecular Engineering and Sciences Institute
Vulcan
Washington State University
Whitepages
We deeply appreciate our generous luncheon sponsors and donor community for serving as beacons of light to over 700 low-income students of color, guiding them to a horizon of new possibilities. Surrounded by a constellation of support, we encourage all scholars to dream big, work hard, be brave and shine bright as they chart their course to college degrees.

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