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America's elite universities are making millions off summer programs for teens — but do they really help kids get into college?

Or are they creating false hope?

By **Valerie Strauss**

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They've become big in the how-to-get-a-leg-up-in-college-admissions circus: pre-college summer programs for teens at America's most elite universities, including Harvard and Stanford. But are they what they seem?

Costing thousands of dollars, many of these programs send letters to students "inviting" them to apply, and suggest attending will provide a benefit for their college applications. And many students who can't afford several thousand dollars for a few weeks of a summer program wind up fundraising, with guidance on how to do it from the schools themselves.

In this post, Anne Kim, vice president of domestic policy at the Progressive Policy Institute and a contributing editor at the Washington Monthly, takes an in-depth look at what these programs offer, cost and actually provide to students. And she doesn't like what she sees.

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This was first published in the Washington Monthly's College Guide, and I was given permission to publish it.

By Anne Kim

Among the thousands of personal appeals on the crowdfunding site GoFundMe, you'll find a 2017 campaign for a young woman named Kirstin, then a high school junior with wavy light brown hair, hazel eyes, and a smile that hints at suppressed excitement.

"Kirstin's Invited to Stanford!" the page, created by Kirstin's aunt, declares. "My 16-year-old niece has been offered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. After working hard her entire school career to achieve a goal, she has done it!"

Kirstin, it turns out, was not admitted as an undergraduate, but was raising funds for an "Intensive Law & Trial" summer program offered on the Stanford University campus. Tuition for the 20-day program runs to \$4,095, not including airfare and pocket money. "Stanford, one of the most prestigious law schools in the country, is impressed enough with her to have invited her to this program in Palo Alto, California this summer," the post continues. "Her extended family is trying hard to raise the deposit of \$800 by week's end so this opportunity does not slip through her fingers."

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Search “pre-college” on [GoFundMe.com](https://www.gofundme.com) and you’ll find dozens of similar campaigns from hopeful students dazzled by the allure of two weeks on an elite campus. “Going to the Summer @ Brown PreCollege Program would give me a preview of what life would be like if I attend the school of my dreams,” reads a 2018 campaign by Benjina, from Newark. “This program will give me the experience of a lifetime,” writes Yakeleen, a high schooler from Tucson, hoping to raise \$2,200 to attend Harvard’s pre-college program. “Coming from a low income background while being a first generation student, this is a grand opportunity [sic] I intend on taking advantage of.”

These posts reflect the growing trend of summer “pre-college” programs at the nation’s most prestigious universities. Stanford, which launched its “pre-collegiate studies” program in 2012, hosts three-week summer sessions for high school students with course options on more than 50 subjects, in addition to the mock trial program Kirstin hoped to attend. Similar programs abound at other elite institutions.

In fact, of the top 40 schools ranked in U.S. News & World Report, all but one — Dartmouth — offer some sort of summer program for high school students (and, in some cases, even middle school students). “More and more colleges and universities are offering short-term on-campus programs that offer a taste of what life would be like at their institution,” reports the International Association for College Admission Counseling.

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These programs can offer precocious teens an enriching, hands-on preview of college life. But they also exploit both the allure of brand-name universities and families’ anxieties about an increasingly cutthroat college admissions process in which “summer experiences” matter.

While even ambitious teens once spent their summers scooping ice cream or lazing by the pool, they now choose from a dizzying array of summer options, including trips to every corner of the planet and camps in every subject from robotics to equestrianism.

“Admissions officers want to see that students are spending at least a few of their weeks productively during the summer,” said Andrew Belasco, chief executive of the college advising firm College Transitions.

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The popularity of summer pre-college programs suggests that many kids and parents see them as a good way to get a leg up on college admissions. And many universities, including Columbia and Johns Hopkins, encourage that belief.

But admissions experts I spoke to were unanimous that, when it comes to getting into college, the benefits of most pre-college programs are negligible. The big winners, rather, are the schools themselves, who use pre-college programs to generate millions of dollars in revenue while relying on marketing practices that oversell the programs’ benefits, including elaborate admissions processes that imply a misleading degree of selectivity.

And while the target demographic is most probably the sort of upper-middle-class family that can afford expensive private university education, it’s clear that the universities are consciously drawing in families who struggle to afford the programs’ high costs. Some schools, including Stanford, distribute “fundraising guides” encouraging students to solicit contributions, including through crowdsourcing sites such as GoFundMe. “With successful planning, creativity and resilience, students have worked with their community to achieve the goal of funding,” Stanford’s guide reads. “This is a great opportunity to gain leadership skills and connect to your community.”

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For Kirstin's family, creativity appears to have taken the form of debt. "We came up short but Kirstin saved and raised \$650 on her own," her aunt wrote in an update posted July 2017. "Brian and I put the balance of her tuition on credit because we are not letting this pass her by." To be fair, summer pre-college programs sound like a lot of fun for teenage overachievers.

"They're summer camp," said Brian Taylor, managing director of the New York-based admissions consulting firm Ivy Coach. At Harvard, for example, pre-college students live on campus, eat at the dining halls, and explore such topics as "the psychology of color-blindness" and the "science of happiness." UCLA's program promises "Movie premieres. Comedy shows. Major league baseball and soccer games," along with excursions to Santa Monica Beach and shopping in Beverly Hills.

For careful shoppers who understand what they're buying, the programs can be richly rewarding. Michele Gilman, a law professor at the University of Baltimore, sent her daughter to Brown for a summer workshop in number theory. "It was a chance for her to explore an interest in a way that she couldn't access in high school," Gilman said.

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Shellie Bressler, a Washington–area parent, said she sent her sons to pre-college programs so they'd know what to expect as college freshmen living away from home. "I wanted them to see what it's like to live in a dorm with a stranger and have freedom and flexibility outside of their classes," she said. Other parents say the programs helped their children figure out what kind of school they wanted to attend: big city vs. bucolic college town; liberal arts college vs. research university.

In these cases, the experience can pay off. Gilman's daughter, for example, now attends Brown and is majoring in math. "She ended up applying early decision to Brown and got in," Gilman said. "And I think it's because she had such a good experience over the summer. She loved the campus, she loved the town. Her interest in Brown grew from that."

But college admissions experts say that for many families, these experiences aren't worth the often very hefty price tags. Harvard's two-week session costs \$4,600, while Brown charges \$2,776 for one week and \$6,976 for a four-week residential version. Some programs offer college credit, but it comes at a steep premium. Duke, for example, offers a noncredit "Summer Academy" for \$6,745; its "Summer College" program, which allows students to take one Duke course for credit, costs an additional \$2,800. By comparison, the cost of an entire semester's worth of credits at North Carolina community colleges is capped at \$1,216.

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More to the point, these prices don't buy what many parents believe they're getting with a pre-college program: a backdoor way to get their kid accepted to their dream school.

I interviewed half a dozen professional admissions consultants, most of them former college admissions officers, and all of them said that pre-college programs generally don't give kids a special edge on their applications or carry the prestige that many families think they do.

“Some of our parents who come to us have paid thousands of dollars to these programs thinking their students get an advantage, which is just not the case,” said Belasco, chief executive of College Transitions. “People attend these programs all the time and then don’t get in,” said Ivey Consulting’s Anna Ivey. “It can be heartbreaking because they’ve fallen in love with the school.”

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(Kirstin’s fundraiser for Stanford’s pre-college law program, for instance, declares, “Attending Stanford has been a lifelong dream of Kirstin’s.” Her family didn’t respond to multiple interview requests, but a student with her name, from the same small town in Vermont, made the dean’s list at the University of New Hampshire in the fall.)

One reason these programs don’t blow the socks off admissions officers is that they don’t reflect either the academic rigor or the selective admissions of the institutions that host them. Many pre-college programs are run by separate departments within a university (often the school of professional studies), or even by an outside company, and so have no connection to undergraduate education or admissions.

Among the private, for-profit companies that run pre-college programs is Envision, a subsidiary of the global educational travel company WorldStrides. In addition to programs at Johns Hopkins, UCLA, Yale, Rice, Georgia Tech, and other schools, Envision runs the Stanford-based mock trial program that was the subject of Kirstin’s GoFundMe campaign.

Although that program hires Stanford Law School faculty to help teach some classes, the fine print on the Envision site notes, “This cultural excursion is not affiliated with Stanford Law School in any way.” It is, in other words, a side gig for Stanford professors.

Children “invited” to attend are invited by the company, which also runs the admissions process, not by Stanford Law. Likewise with Envision’s “Global Young Leaders Conference,” a 10-day excursion costing \$3,095 that includes embassy visits, a tour of Washington, and “real world simulations” that seem very much like what one would do in a high school Model United Nations. Like the mock trial program, the application process is managed entirely by the company, although college credit is offered through George Mason University.

Unsurprisingly, given all this outsourcing, summer pre-college programs are not nearly as selective as undergraduate admissions at the institutions hosting them — or as families are sometimes led to believe.

This is evident from the sheer volumes of students admitted. Stanford’s website, for instance, says its summer program serves more than 3,000 students — or nearly double the number it admitted this year to its freshman class. As tightly as the gates are shut for undergraduate admissions, they are flung wide open during summer. That’s another reason admissions offices aren’t likely to be impressed by an Ivy League pre-college program on a student’s résumé.

“Yeah, they might ask you to write an essay or even ask for a recommendation letter, but if you can afford the price tag and you show evidence you can handle it by being a halfway decent student, you’re going to be accepted,” said Elizabeth Heaton, a former admissions officer at the University of Pennsylvania who is now vice president of educational consulting at Bright Horizons. “I don’t think I’ve had a student apply to those programs and not get in.”

While some programs require a minimum GPA, the standard tends to be forgiving. Johns Hopkins, for example, where the average high school GPA of incoming freshmen is 3.93, requires only a 3.0 minimum GPA for its summer “immersion” program (\$2,575, one week, no college credit).

“Most of our programs are not super selective,” said Liz Ringel, chief marketing officer for Summer Discovery, a company that runs pre-college programs on 14 campuses, including the University of Pennsylvania, Johns Hopkins and other top-tier institutions. “We want to make sure that students are in good academic standing, they haven’t been expelled, they don’t have any disciplinary action against them, and they are going to enjoy the experience on campus.”

Ultimately, schools may be less interested in a student’s academic brilliance than in their ability to pay. Among the college admissions consultants I interviewed, the consensus was that a primary purpose of these pre-college summer programs is making money.

“Colleges are businesses, and one of the reasons they run summer programs is because they have all of these empty dorm rooms that ideally they could fill with people and make use of the resources that are already there,” said Bright Horizons’ Heaton.

In 2015, a Brown University administrator told the campus newspaper that the school’s summer program had brought in \$6 million that year, 70 percent of which was essentially profit. “The summer program,” the paper reported, “is one of several efforts administrators have made in recent years to diversify the university’s revenue streams and reduce its reliance on undergraduate tuition.”

It should be said that there are a few long-standing summer programs that do signal true academic achievement to admissions officers. These include MIT’s Minority Introduction to Engineering and Science, a free program limited to 80 high school juniors, and the Princeton University Preparatory Program, another tuition-free initiative for low-income high school students from neighboring school districts.

MIT’s website attempts to distinguish these efforts from others by cautioning that while “[m]ost summer programs admit all or most students who can pay the (high) tuition . . . a number of competitive-admission summer programs select only the best students on the basis of merit and are often free or comparatively affordable.”

To their credit, some colleges are fairly upfront that going to their pre-college program won’t be a boon with the admissions office. Rice University’s website, for example, flatly states that “Admission to Rice Summer Sessions does not in any way influence your admission to Rice as an undergraduate.”

Nevertheless, many parents and students still believe otherwise.

Some of this is due to a general conviction that any edge, however small, is worth it in the college admissions arms race. But colleges help encourage these perceptions through practices that create the impression that the programs are more selective and valuable than they probably are. Some institutions, for instance, explicitly argue in their marketing materials that their pre-college programs will make students more competitive.

Columbia University’s pre-college website promises “an Ivy League achievement for your college transcript,” while Johns Hopkins urges students to “Get an edge on the competition for college admissions.”

At the same time, Sean Recroft, the assistant dean for summer programs at Johns Hopkins, said admission to summer pre-college programs doesn't help students get into Hopkins later. "It does not hurt if you do a program and do well," he said. "But we're certainly not a feeder to Hopkins undergraduate programs."

Perhaps the most common way that colleges build an aura of prestige around pre-college is by requiring students to go through an onerous application process that mimics the selectivity of undergraduate admissions.

Harvard, for instance, requires a \$75 nonrefundable application fee, a "counselor report," and transcripts. Deadlines are as early as February, creating a sense of urgency in submitting applications, and the website mentions the role of an "admissions committee" in reviewing applications. Stanford University's "Pre-Collegiate Summer Institutes" likewise requires a \$65 application fee, transcripts, one to four teacher recommendations, and even work samples (depending on the program). And a blog post on Brown's pre-college site warns, "Take the pre-college application as seriously as you would a college application."

College Transitions' Andrew Belasco argues that there's a purpose to having such elaborate admissions processes for programs that ultimately aren't very selective. "It gets people to buy in," he said. "You're more likely to commit if you have to invest something beforehand and more likely to think it's a legitimate program."

The techniques seem to work. Back at the crowdfunding site GoFundMe, an earnest-looking teen with glasses and brunette waves named Emma was hoping to raise \$3,650 for another Stanford pre-college program in the summer.

"As would be expected, the entire application process was a difficult one, as it was aimed toward thousands of kids who will possibly be our next leaders," she wrote. "As a result, the application itself was based off Stanford's college application which included teacher recommendations, national test scores, work samples, essays, and more. It was honestly a miracle just to get in!"

These GoFundMe campaigns are evidence of at least some students' inflated sense of the prestige of pre-college programs. They are also evidence of how some schools are encouraging students to go to extraordinary lengths to raise the money to attend. Pre-college programs don't qualify for federal financial aid, and while some schools offer grants or scholarships to cover the cost, the amount is typically minimal. Notre Dame's Office of Pre-College Programs, for instance, says on its website that it only offers "[v]ery limited need-based, partial scholarships" and "does not offer merit-based financial assistance or scholarships."

In lieu of aid, some schools are more likely to direct students to fundraising guides. In addition to Stanford, these schools include top-tier institutions such as Northwestern, Brown, Emory and Brandeis. The results of these tactics are what you see on GoFundMe.

"I'm calling to raise \$2,500 for the program at Northeastern because I truly do not want to let go of such an amazing, rigorous program that will inevitably help me pursue my dreams, and I believe that anyone given such a great opportunity should never pass it up because of financial difficulties," writes Mealakety, a high schooler in Rhode Island. "I also cannot pass up the opportunity to study at the university I am highly interested in applying to in the future."

Some of the guides supplied by schools suggest tactics like bake sales and online auctions and even include a sample fundraising letter with blanks for students to fill in, like this, from Washington University in St. Louis: "I am a student at (name of school) and have recently been accepted by Washington University in St. Louis to attend a summer program for outstanding students. I have maintained a grade-point average of _____ and have been highly involved in (list activities, teams, community work). I have enrolled in (name of courses or program), because I am passionate about _____."

Not surprisingly, the for-profit pre-college company Envision also offers a fundraising guide for students, along with a link to [Fundraising.com](https://www.fundraising.com), where students can sell popcorn, mugs, T-shirts and other products. "Make fundraising part of your personal success story," Envision's site says. "It's absolutely appalling," said Ivey, the admissions consultant, of these tactics. "So many schools that have summer programs are richer than God. They don't need to be taking money from teenagers hoping to score some extra points in the admissions process."

So what is the "best" summer experience for high schoolers?

For one thing, there are far cheaper ways to explore an academic interest over the summer than a pre-college summer program. “Take a class at a community college,” said Colleen Ganjian, founder of DC College Counseling. Ivey suggested taking a free online course from platforms such as edX.org, which features many of the same top-tier schools. “I understand it’s fun to be on the actual campus,” she said. “But at what price? And for what benefit?”

Admissions counselors also say that teens should do what they used to do, before the pre-college and summer experience fad took hold: Get a job. “College admissions officers love jobs,” said Ivy Coach’s Taylor. “It doesn’t matter if you work at McDonald’s. If you need a job to help your family pay the bills, that makes you likable, and that’s a huge part of the process.”

“A job is great,” said Stefanie Niles, president of the National Association for College Admission Counseling and a vice president at Ohio Wesleyan University. “They have the opportunity to make money, manage their money. They learn about responsibility. They’re working in a team setting. There’s a lot you can learn from a summer job.”

Niles added, however, that the “ideal” summer experience is up to students and there is no magic formula. “From the admissions side, we like to see students participate in activities that help them grow, that expose them to new ideas, and where they may be challenged in new and interesting ways.”

Nevertheless, so long as the college admissions process remains opaque and increasingly competitive, and so long as parents and students become ever more desperate for the brass ring of acceptance into a selective institution, the allure of pre-college summer programs will only grow. In fact, the next frontier is pre-college for middle schoolers, which more schools are beginning to offer. Summer Discovery, for instance, said it runs two such “junior discovery” programs, at UCLA and Georgetown University, but could be expanding its offerings next year to accommodate parent demand.

Parents, meanwhile, are reluctant to pass up any conceivable potential advantage for their kids.

“Guilt plays into a lot of this,” said one parent who sent her kids to multiple pre-college programs. “Don’t you want to give your kids a leg up?” But rather than a competitive edge, pre-college programs may too often be selling big dreams, false hopes, and a tantalizing taste of an elite education that is ultimately out of reach.

