

University Business

November 3, 2020

How virtual advising makes dreams come true during COVID

By Matt Zalaznick

Even though she was set to graduate high school near the top of her class, Ashley Espinosa wanted her writing to be stronger for her college applications.

Coming from a Hispanic household in Brooklyn, New York, she felt that English was not her best subject.

“Being able to tell your story is probably the most important factor in your application—that’s where colleges get to see who you are as a person,” says Espinosa, now in her first year at the University of Southern California. “If I wasn’t able to tell that story correctly, I wouldn’t get to my dream college.”

USC is her dream college, though she hasn’t been to campus yet. She has experienced “fear of missing out,” while COVID has forced her to take all her classes online from home in Brooklyn this semester.

Her professors have been accommodating and understanding, but she feels disconnected from campus life.

“People who are privileged enough to get off-campus apartments have been in Los Angeles,” Espinosa says. “One of my biggest concerns is what if I get to campus and I don’t have any friends. What if I don’t find my group of people?”

Advising around-the-clock

Espinosa was supported on her path to USC by an online advisor who, day and night, edited the essays she wrote for more than 30 college applications.

Espinosa’s advisor was supplied for free by CollegePoint, a coalition of agencies backed by Bloomberg Philanthropies that works to enroll high-achieving first-generation, low-income and underrepresented students in highly selective colleges and universities.

Over an eight-month that began pre-COVID, Espinosa’s advisor worked around her busy, six-day-a-week schedule as a high school volleyball and basketball player.

At the beginning of her senior year, Espinosa and her advisor began making a list of colleges and identifying scholarships. The advisor helped her keep track of important application deadlines as she visited campuses and dealt with the death of her grandmother.

She set her sights on USC because of its progressive urban planning and public policy program. And once she was accepted and enrolled, she and her advisor began discussing how she would get involved in campus beyond academics.

She has joined two programs in which she tutors low-income, K-12 students in Los Angeles who are also contending with the challenges of online learning.

“It’s my way of contributing back into the community that I will be in for the next four or five years,” she says.

She has also been using Zoom and social media to connect with other USC students, including a Hispanic group in Snapchat.

“You need to have friends supporting you,” she says. “That’s the only way I got through high school—I was part of a group of kids who wanted to be the best and they pushed me to become better.”

Social-emotional support

As a virtual service, CollegePoint was poised to adjust easily to the disruptions of COVID, says Nick Watson, CollegePoint’s lead at Bloomberg Philanthropies.

For the class of 2020, it extended its program year, which usually ends in June, to September to help students make the transition from high school to college, Watson says.

For the class of 2021, its advisors plan to start working with students earlier, during the end of their junior years.

CollegePoint has also provided students with technology grants to get devices, hotspots and other essential tools for online learning.

“We’re making sure they have tech access not only for the college-application process but also for a successful senior year,” Watson says.

CollegePoint also connects high schoolers with college juniors and seniors who have been through the program and share their experiences at various institutions.

This year, students have shared how they formed “pods” on campus during COVID restrictions, Watson says.

“This is unprecedented for all of us and there is a lot of anxiety for newly enrolled freshmen,” Watson says. “Our advisors are putting in the work to make sure students know that when they’re feeling anxious about applying for scholarships or meeting a deadline, our advisors are that reassuring word at the end of the day.”