

Great Expectations

Operation Link-Up and SU's Summer College work together to motivate inner-city minority teens to pursue a college education

By Christine Yackel

Photography By John Dowling

At first the idea of attending Summer College didn't appeal to Rory Quince. Like most teenagers, he wanted to spend summer vacation hanging out with friends—not sitting in a classroom with his nose stuck in a book. But his mother insisted that he go. "Summer College turned out to be a great experience for me," Quince says. "I'm glad my Mom convinced me to take advantage of this amazing opportunity. I remembered to thank her when I got home."

During Summer College—a six-week academic program that allows high school students to explore academic and career interests while earning college credit—the Paterson, New Jersey, high school senior made new friends, sampled a slice of college life, and took courses in writing and American history. "I plan to major in history when I go to college next fall because it's important for kids to learn where they come from," Quince says. "If you don't know where you come from, you don't know where you're going."

Finding a successful path in life isn't always easy for inner-city teens. Sometimes they need an extra push in the right direction from someone who cares. For Quince and the 11 other Paterson high

school students who attended Summer College, that someone is Carey Jenkins, founder and president of Operation Link-Up (OLU), a charitable organization that provides support, direction, and educational assistance to the youth of the Paterson High School District in Passaic County, New Jersey. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that what you get out of kids is what you expect out of them," Jenkins says. "I say to them, 'You will start doing better because I expect you to do better.'"

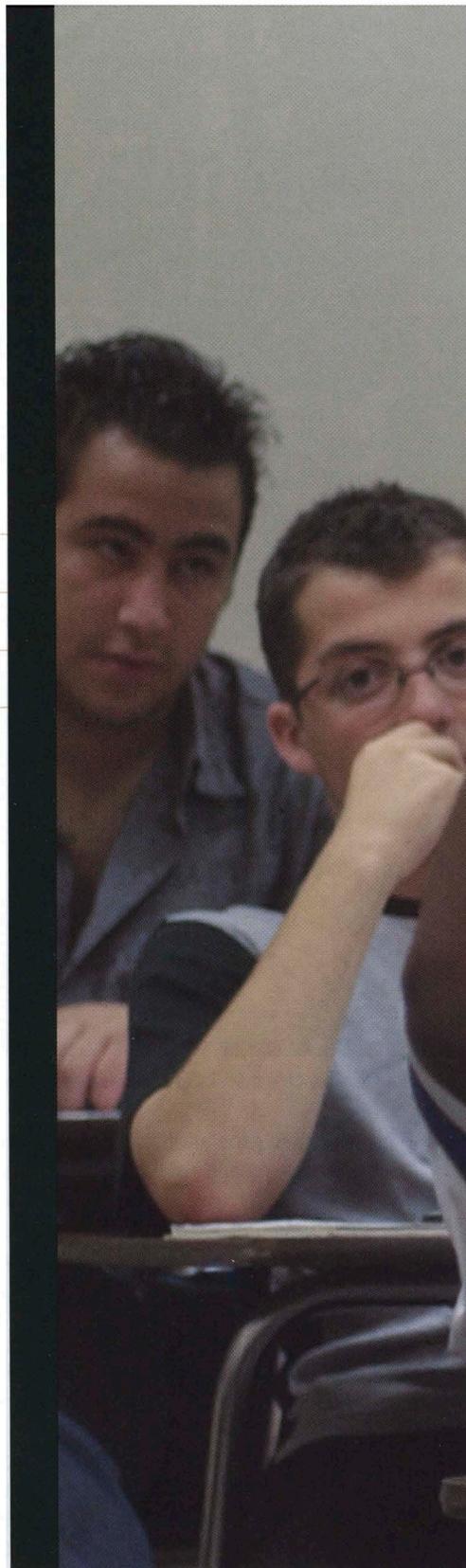
Above Average

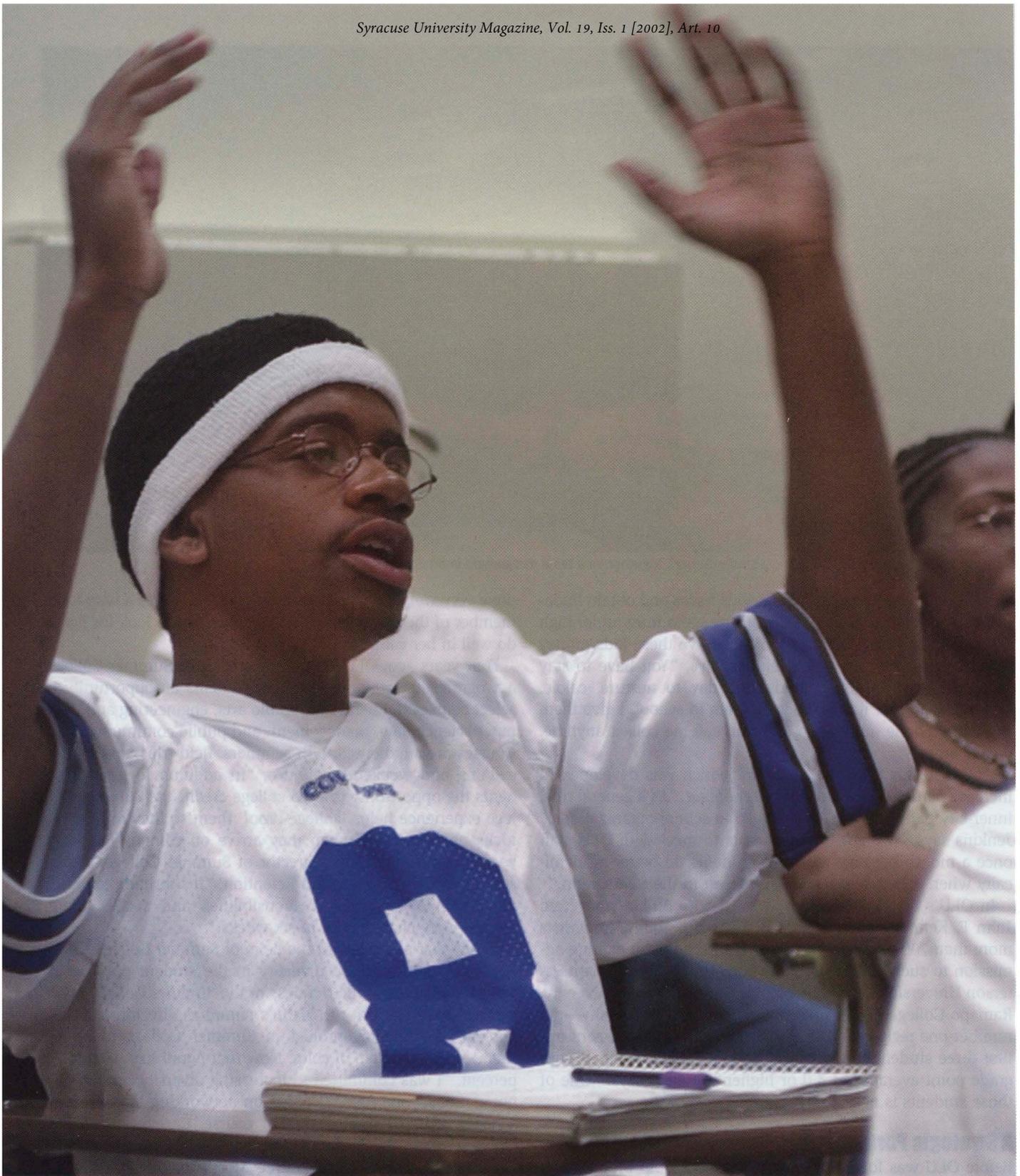
In the late 1980s, OLU was a vague notion floating around in Jenkins's head. At the time he was enjoying a successful business career at Philip Morris and General Foods. But on a deeper level, he knew he wanted to give something back to the African American community by helping inner-city minority teens get ahead. "I was tired of our children settling for average grades and average lives," he says.

Growing up poor in Mississippi, he'd struggled against the odds to earn a college degree because he knew it was his way out of poverty. "Pursuing a college education is not a piece of cake for African

Americans," Jenkins says. "Many parents don't even know how to help their children fill out an admissions form."

When the right opportunity presented itself, Jenkins acted on his beliefs. After reading a newspaper article about the Syracuse Challenge—a program designed





Operation Link-Up student Rory Quince discusses an idea in writing class.

to help local high school students gain admittance to SU with a full financial aid package—he telephoned David C. Smith, now vice president for enrollment management at SU, who was quoted in the article. They met at Lubin House and talked for hours about Jenkins’s ideas for

motivating minority students to get a college education. “I guess you could say SU was there for the birth of Operation Link-Up, which has become one of the most important programs of its kind in the country,” Smith says. “Carey Jenkins is to student motivation what Michael

Jordan is to basketball.”

Energized by his conversation with Smith, Jenkins walked away from the corporate world and established OLU. The main focus of OLU is its College Program, which introduces inner-city minority students to colleges and univer-



Summer College and Operation Link-Up students work together on a team assignment in an engineering class.

sities, helps them complete admissions forms and obtain financial aid, and monitors their academic progress from junior high school through college. “You can’t just give these kids money for college and walk away,” Jenkins says. “You have to stay with them right through graduation day to nurture, cajole, badger—whatever it takes to keep them in school. I give them my home phone number so they can call me collect anytime, day or night.”

OLU also has a Parents Program, which was developed to increase participation in a child’s schooling. “As a general rule, inner-city parents don’t get involved in school organizations,” Jenkins says. “We encourage parents to meet with OLU staff once a month because we know students do better academically when their parents take an interest in their education.”

In OLU’s first year, Jenkins worked with 30 students from John F. Kennedy High School in Paterson. Today, he assists more than 700 students from four high schools in gaining admission to such colleges as New York University, William Paterson University, Penn State, Notre Dame, Cornell University, Ramapo College of New Jersey, and Syracuse University—the number-one recipient of OLU graduates. “In 1991 we sent our first three students to Syracuse, and all three graduated with grade point averages of 3.0 or higher,” Jenkins says. “One of those students is now a physician.”

A Strategic Partnership

Before OLU was founded, only one student from the Paterson school district had ever been admitted to Syracuse. Since then, 37 OLU students have enrolled at SU and 23 have graduated. “Most people don’t expect much out of minority kids, but we continue to break that stereotype,” says Lisa Hibbert, an OLU alumna and recent SU graduate with a degree in management information systems. “Mr. Jenkins expects all of us to graduate from high school, go on to college, and become successful professionals.” George Burman, dean of the School of Management, says all of his OLU graduates, including Hibbert, have

done very well at SU and professionally. “Lisa was a wonderful member of the management family,” he says. “I look for her to do well in her career.”

Four years ago, OLU teamed up with SU’s Summer College, a program that offers high school students an opportunity to select courses in liberal arts, studio arts, engineering and computer science, law, management, and public communications. Courses are augmented with seminars, field trips, and special evening and weekend activities. “In addition to giving students the opportunity to earn college credit, the Summer College experience helps ‘college-proof’ them so they’re ready to focus on academics when they arrive on campus freshman year,” says Nance Hahn, director of Summer College, a division of Student Support and Retention. “It’s thrilling to watch kids grapple with new responsibilities and social adjustments—they change a lot in six weeks.”

In her year and a half at the helm of Summer College, Hahn has worked to increase diversity in the student population. “Diversity is part of the richness of the Summer College experience,” she says. Prior to Hahn’s tenure as director, about 10 percent of students enrolled in Summer College identified themselves as people of color. Now that figure has risen to 37 percent. “I was committed to increasing diversity from at-risk populations,” she says. “I relied on networking through high schools, word-of-mouth, and, of course, Carey Jenkins and Operation Link-Up to attract more students of color.”

OLU, with advice from Lonnie Morrison, SU’s director of admissions programs in New York City, handpicks students entering their junior or senior year of high school to apply for Summer College admission. Selection is based on grade point average, and teacher and counselor recommendations. “We also look at a student’s rising trajectory,” Hahn says. “We look at their potential.” Once they are accepted, SU covers the OLU students’ tuition and expenses because Hahn believes increasing the number of scholarship recipients helps promote diversity. “Nance has been a risk-taker in giving financial aid to

students of color,” says her predecessor, James Duah-Agyeman, now director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs. “She is building a program around diversity so that students can be challenged to live in a diverse environment.”

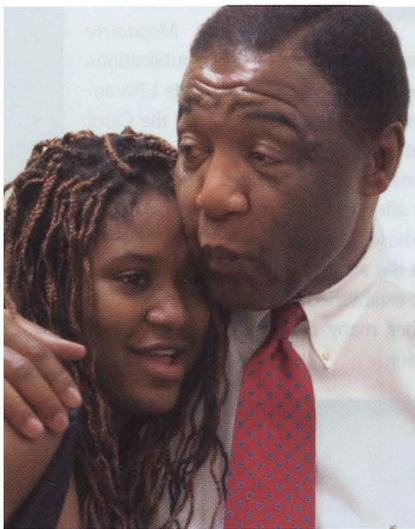
A Taste of College

At a spring send-off luncheon for the dozen Operation Link-Up students headed for Summer College, Jenkins told them that failure was not an option and that he expected them to get all A's. “I tell the kids that if you take care of the academics, everything else will take care of itself,” says Jenkins, who arranged for the students' transportation to Syracuse and made sure they had money to buy books. Once the students were on campus, he paid close attention to their academic progress and visited them in mid-July to offer encouragement and support.

One of the OLU students, Karene Clayton, got off to a bad start when an adverse reaction to a prescription medication landed her in the hospital. “My Dad rushed up to Syracuse to take me home,” Clayton says. “But after he saw how well I was taken care of, and how safe and secure my residence hall was, he agreed to let me stay.”

Clayton, who wants to be a scientist, took a writing course and a biology lab at Summer College before entering her senior year of high school. She admits she “battled with biology”

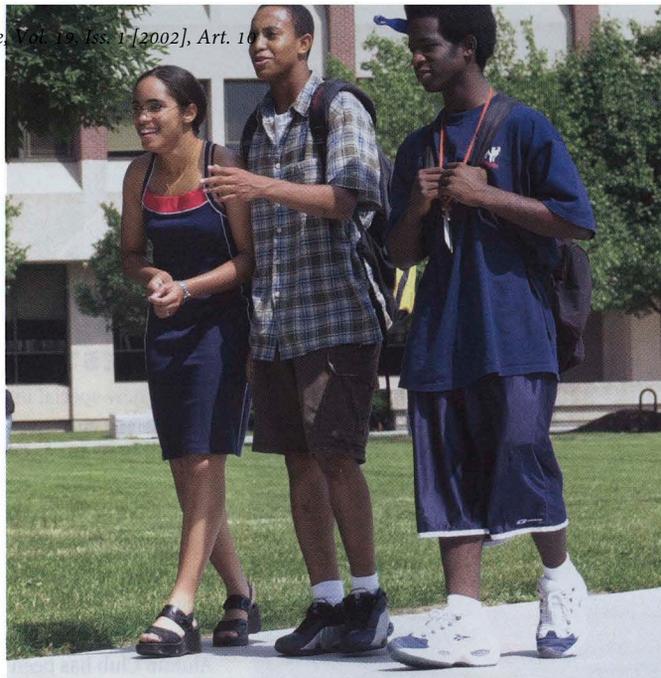
until she realized she needed to spend more time studying. “I learned that if you don't have good time-management skills, you won't succeed in college,” she says. Born in Jamaica, Clayton has been in the United States for almost two years. Her guidance counselor pointed her to Jenkins, who found her a mentor and encouraged her to attend Summer College. “Mr. Jenkins is very persistent,” she says. “Trust me—he's very serious when it comes to our academic work.”



Carey Jenkins offers encouragement to Michayne Campbell.

Michayne Campbell, now in her junior year at Kennedy High School, is also a Jamaica native. She says that during her freshman year of high school she made it her duty to seek out Jenkins in his OLU office at Kennedy. “Thanks to Mr. Jenkins, I now have a mentor, advanced college credits, and an opportunity to get a college education,” Campbell says. “I want to teach fifth grade, so I plan to attend Syracuse University and major in elementary education with a minor in Spanish.”

Campbell says she got lost during her first few weeks of Summer College because “the SU campus is so huge.” She took college-level writing and pre-calculus courses, and participated in floor meetings, discussions on alcohol and drug awareness, and stress management exercises. “At first I was homesick, but after a while the people on my residence hall



Students enjoy a beautiful summer day during a walk across the Quad.

floor felt like family,” she says. Besides attending classes and studying, Campbell participated in recreational activities designed to help students relax and get to know each other. “I loved Karaoke nights,” she says.

Kennedy High School senior Anne Charles looks forward to returning to college in the fall to study computer science. Born in Haiti, she became involved with Operation Link-Up in eighth grade at her brother's urging. At Summer College she met people from all over the country and took classes in writing and law. “Our law professor had us work in small groups to defend a client,” she says. “I was really scared to talk in front of the group, but I'll always remember how confident I felt when I overcame my fear—my team was very supportive.” When asked what memento she treasures most from her Summer College experience, Charles points to her SU I.D. card and says with a smile, “It made me feel like a real college student.”

Future Promise

Back home in Paterson, the OLU students are more determined than ever to earn good grades so they can attend college. “I'm working toward a full scholarship,” Clayton says. They actively recruit other minority teens for OLU and encourage them to take advantage of the Summer College opportunity. “The Summer College people made me feel good about myself,” Campbell says. “That's important, because I need someone to believe in me. Without Mr. Jenkins and my mentor, I wouldn't even have thought about going to college because it seemed out of the realm of possibility.” Campbell and the other OLU students say they hope to become mentors themselves some day.

Jenkins says the OLU program has not changed much over the years because it was right from day one. Now he would like to raise more money to increase his staff and reach out to minority students in other New Jersey school districts. “I want to continue to do more of what we do, better,” he says. SU administrator David Smith agrees. “Carey Jenkins's success has been stunning—we've had a terrific group of Operation Link-Up students attend Summer College and graduate from SU each year,” he says. “Carey uses tough love, and it works.”