

Marc: Generation One

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By David Marc



Khalid Sumner '03 says he was able to take advantage of a range of educational opportunities at SU.

Throughout its history, Syracuse University has welcomed and strongly supported students who are the first in their families to attend college

For many Syracuse University students, college is a rite of passage they have anticipated for years. They may have any number of reasons for attending SU, including expectations of family and friends as well as the internalized cultural values that have made higher education a measure of personal achievement. Most of these students have heard firsthand accounts from the people closest to them of everything from wacky roommates and finals madness to “must-take” courses and life-altering professors, and they arrive for freshman year at least somewhat informed about what to expect of college.

But for hundreds of other students—the precise number is not known—a college education is not something they have ever taken for granted. For them, the decision to continue schooling beyond high school signals a break, rather than a continuity, in family tradition. They are “first-generation” students—the first in their family’s history to attend college. They come to SU from urban high-rises and rural communities, from across the United States and abroad. They represent a variety of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, and they face challenges that are generally invisible to their classmates. “Most first-generation college students do not have the benefit of informal communication about higher education, which makes it difficult for them to construct realistic expectations—culturally, socially, academically, and financially,” says JoAnn K. May, director of SU’s Office of Supportive Services, which offers a constellation of advising, counseling, and tutorial services to undergraduates. “They are dealing with a system that is completely unknown to them.”

Khalid Sumner '03, who completed a B.S. degree in information technology and management, with a minor in finance, is the son of immigrant parents—his mother is from Jamaica; his father, Guyana. He grew up in the East New York section of Brooklyn, an area he describes as “an all-black-and-Latino neighborhood—minus the white undercover detectives.” With little else to go on, Sumner came to SU with ideas of college life drawn mostly from popular culture. “I thought it was supposed to be what I saw in movies: wild parties, sports games, and social

freedom,” he says. “To a certain extent, that’s true. But my four years weren’t exactly what I had envisioned.”

Instead, Sumner got information and counseling that enabled him to take full advantage of SU educational opportunities, ranging from a math clinic that helped him master freshman calculus to a semester abroad in Hong Kong. He learned a lot outside the classroom as well. “It was a shock to meet suburban white kids who thought listening to Jay-Z and Biggie made them understand the ghetto,” he says.

Rebecca Oliver '06 started working after school at age 15 with no expectations of going to college. However, the Syracuse native did so well academically in high school that she decided to consider it. In June 2002, she was a recipient of Empire BlueCross BlueShield’s Edwin R. Werner Scholarship for Academic Excellence and Public Service, chosen as 1 of only 4 winners out of more than 10,000 applicants. The scholarship allowed her to attend the school of her choice, and she selected SU because of the reputation of its social work program. “I’ve had jobs in restaurants and hotels, but I prefer to work directly with people in a way that makes me feel like I’m doing something worthwhile, instead of punching a clock,” she says. Now a social work major in the College of Human Services and Health Professions, she is a dean’s list student and a Chancellor’s Scholar.

Jacirys Dominguez '06 arrived on the Hill from the Bronx, not sure what to expect. “My parents were really proud that someone from the family was going to college,” she says. “They bragged to everybody that I was going to Syracuse. But they really weren’t familiar with all the practical stuff that was involved.” She credits her fellow students and professors with helping her adjust. One of



An interest in social work led Rebecca Oliver '06 to SU.

her first goals in college was to improve her writing, and she achieved this through tutorial services made available by the University. "The people I've met here are exceptional," she says. "They really made me feel at home. Even the upperclassmen are really welcoming."

Dominguez, who plans to major in accounting, had a busy first year, exploring a variety of creative learning opportunities. She joined La Lucha (SU's Latino student organization), danced with the Raices Dance Workshop, and volunteered at a community center—while maintain-

ing a 3.1 grade point average. "The main problem for me was learning to manage my time," she says. "I'm not complaining about my grades. But now that I have the hang of it, I'll do better."

Marcus Solis '91 who, like Dominguez, came to Syracuse from the Bronx, remembers experiencing a sense of unreality when he first arrived on campus. "I thought I had landed on another planet," says Solis, now a reporter for WABC-TV in New York. James K. Duah-Agyeman G'99, director of student support and multicultural education, finds nothing

unusual about Solis's first impression. "It really can be like another world for students who are from radically different environments or who are the first in their families to go off to college," he says. As a first-generation college student who immigrated to the United States from Ghana, Duah-Agyeman speaks from both personal and professional experience. "But I can tell you this about Syracuse: If you impressed us enough to be accepted here, then we will do everything possible to help you feel at home at this institution and to succeed academically," he says.

The Democratic Mission of Higher Education

The commitment to student success that Duah-Agyeman speaks of is a hallmark of the University's Academic Plan, running deep in Syracuse tradition and extending to every student. There is general agreement that in the case of Gen-1ers, this basic responsibility takes on even greater significance. Access to higher education for these breakthrough students serves as an indicator of the health of American democracy, an affirmation that the fundamental structure of a merit-based society remains intact despite the prejudices of every kind that continue to hamper the cultivation of talent. "This is particularly important at private universities, which may have been perceived as uncaring or uninterested in students who come to college from atypical environments," says Horace H. Smith, associate vice president of undergraduate studies.

While many universities can trace their efforts to recruit a diverse, upwardly mobile student body back to the social upheavals of the 1960s, Syracuse has been at the job quite a bit longer. The University admitted women and African Americans to its earliest classes in the 1870s, and has launched pioneering programs in continuing education since the turn of the 20th century.

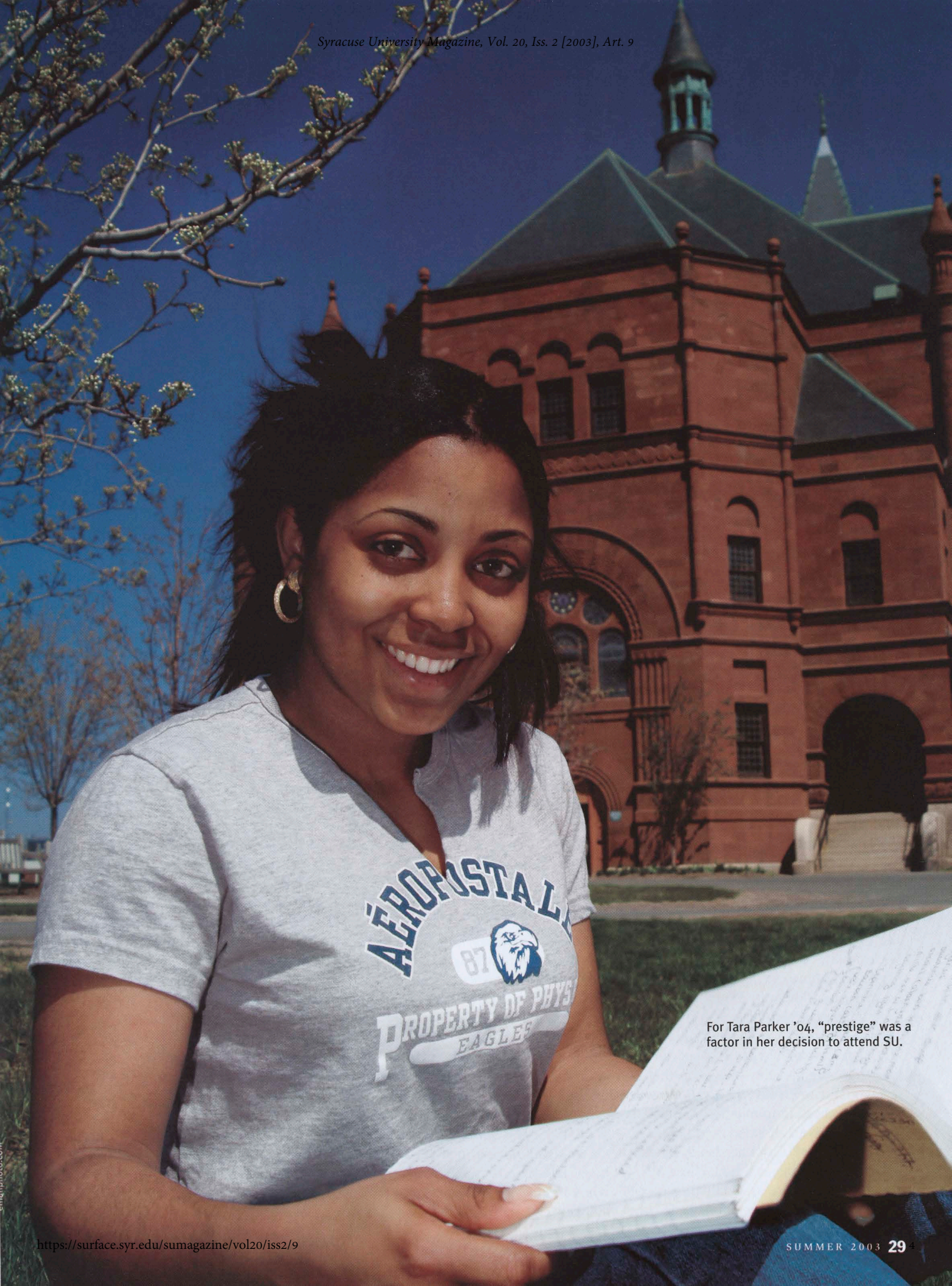
Perhaps more than any other private university in the country, Syracuse led the way in seizing the unprecedented opportunity for access to higher education created by the GI Bill of Rights, which provided full tuition benefits to returning World War II veterans. During the years following the war, the Hill was covered with prefabricated Quonset huts to house the crush of new students, many of them from families that had



James K. Duah-Agyeman G'99, center, director of student support and multicultural education, speaks as one first-generation student to another, meeting with Warren Howe '04, left, and other students.

SU academic counselor Christopher Weiss offers advice to Tyisha Wallace '04.





For Tara Parker '04, "prestige" was a factor in her decision to attend SU.



Matthew Hamilton '04 credits SU's SummerStart program with helping him acclimate to the campus and get ahead academically before the start of his freshman year.

never sent children to college; some whose parents were barely literate. Determined to keep the doors open to every qualified applicant, SU went so far as to establish auxiliary regional campuses in Utica (which evolved into Utica College, now an independent institution affiliated with SU) and in Endicott (the forerunner of today's Binghamton University, part of the SUNY system).

"The campus was so crowded with veterans when I arrived that I couldn't even get a place in a Quonset hut and had to rent a room off campus," says SU Trustee Lee N. Blatt '51, founder and chair of Herley Industries Inc. (see related story, page 52). "But we were serious about getting an education, and the professors did everything to be helpful to us." Though he attended SU more than a half-century earlier, Blatt traveled a path to a college degree that is remarkably similar to that of fellow graduate Khalid Sumner. Both were born and raised in immigrant households in Brooklyn; both attended Brooklyn Tech, one of New York City's academically elite public high schools; and both chose SU.

Robert C. Wilson, associate director of the Office of Supportive Services, is con-

vinced that SU's extraordinary commitment to the GI Bill still benefits the University. "I believe it helped make Syracuse a more hospitable place for today's first-generation college students," he says. "We have so many successful alumni who went through that experience in the Quonset huts. It's not surprising that they support us in the things we do to keep Syracuse in the business of upward mobility."

Recruitment is the Key

Long-term success in the education of first-generation college students depends on a university's ability to find and attract a steady flow of qualified candidates. SU is aided in its efforts to recruit and maintain promising candidates by two seminal programs, each addressed to a different set of student needs. The U.S. Department of Education's Student Support Services Program (SSSP) is specifically designed to aid students whose high school records meet all SU admission standards, but who are in need of special academic advising, personal counseling, and fo-

cused tutorial services. SSSP has three eligibility requirements, any one of which qualifies a student for benefits: economic need so pronounced that even with SU's full financial aid award, family hardship is likely; medically documented learning disabilities requiring skilled tutorial services; and status as "a first-generation college student," indicating a need for special advising.

Many of SU's Gen-1 students gain admission through normal criteria. But the University is committed to making further efforts at accessibility by seeking out high school graduates and general education degree-holders who demonstrate college potential, but whose academic credentials don't meet normal admission standards because of social and educational disadvantages. To make college possible for such students, SU collaborates with New York State's Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), an initiative established in 1969 to expand opportunities at the state's independent colleges and universities. "Careful recruitment is crucial in making HEOP work," Wilson says. "It does no good—for anyone—to admit an individual who has

given no indication of being able to succeed at college-level work. To the contrary, it can set up a damaging failure. When we know the high school record is not as strong as we'd like for Syracuse, we look for other things, especially voluntary activities, such as after-school clubs, Saturday morning academies, church organizations—anything that embodies the positive principle of participation above and beyond the classroom. We need something that tells us, "This student makes an extra effort!"

Christopher Weiss, an academic counselor with the Office of Supportive Services, believes SU's reputation is a positive factor in attracting the most qualified students among those eligible for HEOP assistance. "I think our outreach is helped a lot by word of mouth," Weiss says. "We have a good reputation among guidance counselors at many downstate schools. They know we provide the services their students need, and they have confidence in sending their best to us."

Both Weiss and Wilson agree that, with a majority of HEOP-eligible students living downstate, Syracuse's location works both ways as a factor in their college decisions. In some cases the prospect of breaking free of urban problems outweighs the anxiety of separation from family. In other instances, parents who have successfully nurtured a talented child in a threatening environment may feel the need to continue keeping a tight rein by choosing a local college. "Close family bonds often play a crucial role in the student's life," Wilson says. "In some immigrant families, for example, young people have assumed caretaker roles. They may be the only English speakers in the house, and the family might depend on them to speak to shopkeepers or even to answer the phone. When an immigrant student happens to live nearby, this kind of situation works in our favor."

Such was the case with Adelena Bagdasarova '01, a DeWitt, New York, resident. The University waived the normal campus residency requirement for Bagdasarova, so she could keep up her family obligations by living at home while attending school full time. "We are Armenians who were forced to leave Azerbaijan because of war between the two countries after the breakup of the U.S.S.R.," she says. "I applied to several other schools, but I chose SU because it's close to home and offered many degrees and programs that allowed me to explore my interests. I also liked SU because the campus was so beautiful."

For students from war-torn countries, decaying neighborhoods, or isolated rural areas, a school with a picture-book campus can be an attraction. "I wanted to go away to school and have a *college experience*," says Jacirys Dominguez. "I came up for Multicultural Weekend [a pre-freshman event hosted by the Office of Admissions] and decided to go to SU. I felt comfortable. I liked the atmosphere and the people."

Tara Parker '04, a psychology major in the College of Arts and Sciences from Paterson, New Jersey, admits that "prestige" played a role in her decision to attend SU rather than one of several state schools that had accepted her. She was also heavily influenced by her campus visit. "I learned a lot about what Syracuse has to offer," she says. Parker feels she benefited from SU's SummerStart, a six-week, pre-freshman program that "helped me get in tune with college," she says. Matthew Hamilton '04, a student in the L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science, had good things to say about SummerStart as well. "I got to know the campus, meet new people, and get ahead on credits before the fall semester of my freshman year even began," says the Staten Island resident.

SummerStart is open to all newly admitted freshmen, but

those coming to SU in the SSSP and HEOP programs are required to participate. Students spend the summer living on campus and enjoying recreational and leisure activities while taking up to nine credits in regular summer school courses. "This program is extremely important," says Duah-Agyeman. "The students get a realistic exposure to college work and they are able to form social networks. When autumn comes, they are ready."

The latest figures from the New York State Department of Education point to just how ready Syracuse's first-generation college students are. The University's HEOP students, many of whom are Gen-1ers, achieved a graduation rate of 74.6 percent in 2002, using the standard measure of tracking the number of bachelor's degrees earned within 6 years of admission. That percentage aligns closely with the campus-wide graduation rate of 77 percent for students who entered SU in the fall 1996 semester. Horace Smith feels that SU receives much in return for its efforts in keeping the doors open to the broadest population possible. "The diversity we achieve here on campus is increasingly reflected in the broader society," he says. "Moreover, the byproduct of the outstanding student graduation rates we are achieving among first-generation college students is creating an important byproduct for Syracuse University: an alumni community that will help ensure the future of this institution."

Jacirys Dominguez '06 says Multicultural Weekend made her feel comfortable on campus.

