



USING FLY-INS TO EXPAND ACCESS

The programs help underserved students
increase their college options.

By Elena Loveland





Providing access to the underserved has long been a priority in college admission. A newer trend to increase access to underserved students are fly-in programs that enable students to visit campuses overnight, get deeper insight into a college, and consider schools that they might not have otherwise.

“The idea for fly-ins is to increase the number of underrepresented students on campus—it’s important for colleges to include a number of student categories under this underrepresented umbrella—including first-generation, lower-income, students of color, and students from rural communities,” explains Jonathan April, general manager of College Greenlight, an online platform providing important resources to first-gen and other underrepresented students.

Swarthmore College, in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, is one institution that has launched a fly-in program. Discover Swarthmore is open to any high school senior, but is geared toward students of color, low-income students, rural students, first-generation-to-college students, and other traditionally marginalized students, including DACA/undocumented students.

To make visiting a campus truly accessible to all populations, college fly-in programs are often free for students. Discover Swarthmore covers the costs of transportation, including flights (and even luggage fees), train fare, and reimbursement for driving. Current Swarthmore undergrads host visiting students and dine with them in the campus dining hall.

“Fly-ins are all about expanding access to students traditionally on the margins of the college application process,” said Windsor L. Jordan Jr., Swarthmore’s senior assistant dean of admissions and director of multicultural recruitment. “So for students who can’t afford to travel for a campus visit, or live in a rural environment where travel is limited, a fly-in program is invaluable to giving them insight into a college.”

The program has grown over the past few years. It is now offered twice each fall and a spring fly-in program has started for admitted students.

Counselors and others nominate students for the fall program. Advisers at community-based organizations, teachers, and high school counselors can suggest students beginning in February.

“This allows us to begin communicating with counselors who are working with these populations sooner and give them a long runway to work with as they think about who to nominate,” Jordan said.

Each campus develops a fly-in program differently, depending on their institutional priorities. Diversity and student engagement with campus resources are central to Swarthmore’s fly-in program.

“One of the really special things about Discover Swarthmore is that our admissions office has a chance to partner with diversity and inclusion leaders on our campus and student groups in our cultural centers to create programming that raises up the voices and experiences of underrepresented students on our campus,” Jordan explained. “This means when students arrive on campus for our fly-in they get a chance to interact with folks who share their experience and (they) can learn directly from them about what it’s like to be a student of color or a first-generation-to-college student on our campus.”

It’s not just private small liberal arts colleges, like Swarthmore, that host fly-in programs—many public universities offer them as well.

The Stephen M. Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, started its All-Access Weekend two years ago. The event is

aimed at students interested in studying business and offers participants the opportunity to engage in different business-based learning experiences.

Like Swarthmore, the school also offers a second fly-in program aimed at admitted students. So far, Ross Preview Weekend has been a success: in its first year, 75 percent of participants chose to enroll after attending, and the number of students from limited-income families (\$75,000 annual income or below) rose 5 percent, according to C.J. Mathis, the school’s assistant director of undergraduate admissions.

He noted that the Ross events are somewhat unique because they bring parents or guardians to campus along with their students.

“For many underrepresented students, college choice is a family decision,” he said. “. . . It is equally as important to involve the family so (they) have a sense of comfort knowing if their student chooses our institution, that they will have the resources necessary to be successful and feel supported holistically.”

THE IMPACT OF FLY-IN PROGRAMS

Fly-in programs have positive benefits for students, said Ellen Ridyard, director of Sponsor-a-Scholar at Philadelphia Futures, a nonprofit that provides resources for low-income, first-generation college students to ease access to college.

“We’ve definitely seen the impact of fly-ins in the way they cemented students’ connection to campus and decision to apply early decision. . .” said Ridyard. “Students are able to capture significant fit details and heightened storytelling in their supplementary essays based on their time on campus—information you can’t find by browsing the college website alone.”

Philadelphia Futures has strategic partnerships with several colleges in Pennsylvania, including: Albright College, Arcadia University, Dickinson College, Drexel University, Gettysburg College, Franklin & Marshall College, Haverford College, Lafayette College, Lehigh University, Penn State University, Temple University, and Villanova University. Students visit each partner college annually during a day trip. And program staff encourage seniors to attend fly-in programs at any college they are seriously considering, although Ridyard notes that space constraints limit the number of students who can participate in any given program.

Fly-in programs not only allow students to learn more about a college and deepen their interest in applying. They can also help prevent students from making the wrong college choice, Ridyard noted.

“For example, last fall a student visited a selective liberal arts college with a strong math program and quickly realized that the learning environment was too small,” Ridyard said. “From there, the student pivoted and focused their application efforts on larger, selective research institutions.”

EDUCATING COUNSELORS, PARENTS, AND STUDENTS ABOUT FLY-IN PROGRAMS

Sometimes students and parents have misconceptions about what a fly-in program is.

Mathis recommends that counselors and admission officers encourage students to explore their options, while also being clear about the purposes of the program.

“For example, invitation to a fly-in program does not guarantee admission in many programs, so it’s important that students understand this early in order to best manage expectations for all involved,” says Mathis.



If a student really enjoys their experience at a fly-in program and decides that it's a top choice, it can be disappointing if they are not ultimately accepted to that institution. Likewise, students can face disappointment if they aren't selected to attend a fly-in program at one of their top choice schools.

"Even though students understand that fly-in programs are competitive, they still feel the sting of rejection if not selected to participate, and further coaching can be needed to keep a student hopeful about admission when a fly-in application doesn't pan out," advises Ridyard.

STARTING A FLY-IN PROGRAM ON YOUR CAMPUS

For a higher education institution that wants to increase access and attract a more diverse pool of applicants, starting a fly-in program can be one method used to accomplish that goal.

Jordan encourages any institution considering launching a program to do so, but he acknowledges fly-ins can be a "costly and time-heavy undertaking" for admission staff.

"Whatever shape the fly-in takes, it should align with the goals of the institution and take into consideration students who are traditionally at the margins in this college process," Jordan said. "All institutions don't have the same resources and therefore won't have the same fly-in program."

Some fly-in programs are national and some are regional. It is up to the institution to determine which type of program would best meet their needs.

When developing a fly-in program, Jordan encourages institutions to bring together campus stakeholders early and often. "Fly-in programs are campus-wide endeavors that include dining services, facilities, academic support along with cultural centers faculty, and students—your planning should include all these voices as you build and pull off the program," he advises.

Mathis says admission offices should ensure that there is support for a fly-in program both administratively and financially. "You may have to start small and grow your program, so determine what's important to your institution to create buy-in and be ready and willing to present the results of your program early and often," he noted.

April, with College Greenlight, recommends that colleges "know what they can offer."

"Fly-in programs that cover all costs are what many have come to expect for the communities that institutions are looking to reach, so even if you can only do that for a small number of students, it makes more sense to offer everything to a few students, rather than add costs for a bigger group," he says.

Some institutions require counselors to nominate students; others allow students to apply without a nomination.

"We think a combination of the two is the best option," April said. "Counselor nominations can be incredibly helpful in knowing that students have been specifically selected for a program and likely are a good fit for the opportunity. The purpose of fly-ins is to increase access, so we also like the ability for students to nominate themselves, reducing a potential access barrier."

And remember: Starting a fly-in program does not guarantee instant success.

TIPS TO START A FLY-IN PROGRAM

- Ensure there is support for the program both administratively and financially.
- Smart small and grow your program.
- Determine what is important to your institution in creating a fly-in program.
- Get buy-in from all relevant stakeholders.
- Share the results of your program.

"Depending on the overall intended outcomes of their program, it may take time to see desired results," advises Mathis. "So, be committed to the purpose, but also continue assessing the program and adjust, adapting to the needs of the students as they pertain to your intended outcomes."

THE FUTURE OF FLY-IN PROGRAMS


Fly-in programs seem to be gaining in popularity and that trend is likely to continue.

"Institutions are recognizing building relationships with students from diverse backgrounds early in the recruitment process increases application and yield rates," notes Mathis. "Also, the traditionally aged college-going population is beginning to decline, and so institutions are having to rethink and be more innovative with recruiting students."

April predicts that fly-in programs will continue to reach another type of underrepresented student in the future.

"The future of fly-in programs is trending to support rural students," he says. "Students from these communities have strong roots and the counselors that support them encourage relationship-building. If they are going to leave home, which many of them want to, they need to know that it is going to be the right fit for them. Fly-in programs provide that opportunity without financially burdening the family and grow trust between the family and the environment (where) they will be sending their child for four years."

A fly-in program is a chance to not only engage prospective students from diverse backgrounds but also educate others in the college admission process about your institution's goals. From that perspective, it has even greater benefits beyond just attracting prospective students.

"A fly-in program isn't just a chance to talk to prospective students about your institution, but can also be a chance to educate high school counselors, community-based organization advisers, and teachers about how your institution supports underrepresented students," says Jordan. "It is good to think about what materials these influencers need to help their students make informed decisions about the financial aid policy or support systems at your institution." 

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ENSURING STUDENT SAFETY AND SECURITY

SAFETY AND SECURITY IS A PRIORITY WHEN CAMPUSES PLAN FLY-IN PROGRAMS.

Policies vary by institution. Some programs set curfews and may require an adult to accompany a student on their visit. Other institutions select certain staff members to supervise visiting students.

On campuses where current college students serve as hosts, training is usually involved.

At the University of Michigan, where the Ross School of Business hosts fly-in programs, organizers adhere to strict guidelines and training requirements set by the university's Children on Campus office, said C.J. Mathis, assistant director of undergraduate admissions at Ross.

"In order to host minors on campus, the programming staff must complete the trainings and review the training every year," he explained.

In addition, for students to participate in the school's All-Access Weekend fly-in program, they must bring along "at least one parent, guardian, or an adult that the parent has approved as their guardian proxy (who) stays with the student," Mathias said.

The school is also careful about when it schedules its fly-in programs, avoiding dates that correspond with football games, local festivals, or party-centric holidays like St. Patrick's Day.

At Swarthmore College (PA), similar policies are in place to keep fly-in participants safe. Prior to arriving on campus, students fill out a permission form and share their emergency contacts, allergies, and medication information with program organizers.

Two members of the staff stay overnight at an on-campus inn and respond to participants' needs 24 hours a day. Students can easily access the contact information of the dean on-call—it's printed on the back of each attendees' name tag. And information about visiting students and their on-campus hosts is shared with program leaders as well as Swarthmore's public safety team, residential life team, and the dean of students' office.

"We have a safety plan that we review with staff before the program, so each member of the team knows what to do in an emergency situation, whether it be as simple as a bug bite or has severe as a broken limb," explained Windsor L. Jordan Jr., Swarthmore's senior assistant dean of admission and director of multicultural recruitment.

"The most important thing about safety during the overnight program is to provide families and students with the information they need in order to contact us if they require help, and that our team knows what to do if something should occur," he added.

Coordination before students arrive on campus allows for a quick response and assures families that their student will be well cared for.

"Fly-in programs are an all-campus undertaking," Jordan said.

—Elena Loveland