Path to success with Posse Foundation

Students bond, pursue scientific studies with help of Posse Foundation on the Brandeis campus

By James Sullivan | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT    MAY 18, 2012

From left, Virginia Ramos, Rebekah LaFontant, and Yvonne Perez were encouraged to study science.

Rebekah LaFontant will graduate Sunday from Brandeis University. “It’s kind of
bittersweet,” the New York City native said earlier this week.

“Brandeis is a bubble - it shields you from the real world. Once I leave, I’ll be a real adult.”

But LaFontant, who had a double major in health policy and psychology, seems better-prepared than many other graduates. She plans to serve in Boston’s City Year program before moving on to graduate school. Long-term, she wants to be a primary care physician and conduct clinical public health research.

She is one example of the success of the Posse Foundation, the 23-year-old leadership development program that places diverse groups of 10 students from the same urban communities in prestigious colleges and universities each year. Her graduation, and that of the fellow New Yorkers who entered Brandeis with her in 2008, marks a first for the foundation: They are the initial graduates from its pilot program for science students. All 10 plan to go into science-related fields.

Until recently, the foundation focused on developing liberal arts students - potential educators and communicators who could become the leaders of tomorrow - at its 41 partner schools. But rapid advances in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics have made it critical, administrators say, to make those studies accessible to students from all backgrounds.

It is a tribute to the deep commitment of the New York-based foundation, said Irv Epstein, a Brandeis chemistry professor and former provost who was instrumental in getting the pilot program off the ground. He has been speaking with representatives from other schools, including the University of Wisconsin, Bryn Mawr, and Texas A&M, who are now welcoming their own science “posses.”

“The dropout rate among all students in the sciences is very high,” Epstein said. “It’s something on the order of 50 percent who enter college professing an interest in the sciences and ultimately leaving for another field. That rate is even greater for students from less-privileged backgrounds.”

The Posse Foundation was formed by Brandeis alumna Deborah Bial, who will deliver Sunday’s commencement speech on the Waltham campus. The idea for the foundation, Bial said, came about when a comment caught her ear: a college dropout who said he would have graduated “if I had my posse with me.”
“At the time, the word ‘posse’ was a little more hip,” she said with a laugh during a recent interview. “We thought, ‘Why not send a team of students, so they could back each other up?’ It was a very simple idea.”

President Obama supports the program - in 2010, he donated part of his Nobel Peace Prize money to the organization - though Bial is unsure how it was brought to his attention.

“I would love to know the answer to that question,” she said. “When we got the phone call that we would be one of the 10 nonprofits to receive the Nobel money, we were completely surprised. I cried.”

Another upcoming Brandeis graduate in the Posse program, Usman Hameedi, whose family emigrated from Pakistan in the 1980s, accepted a two-year position as a research assistant at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. The Posse students who were already on campus as liberal arts majors when he arrived helped ease his transition, he said.

“One of the beauties of Posse is you have your immediate posse but also the upperclassmen,” he said. “It’s a really important network of brothers and sisters. I became a social butterfly very quickly, and that made me more confident to step outside my comfort zone.”

LaFontant agreed, up to a point.

“The campus is very friendly and welcoming,” she said. “But being a minority on this campus, it’s a different type of social atmosphere. It can be very socially awkward.
“Educationwise, Brandeis is great, but socially, for minority students, it can be a bit challenging,” she added.

Posse students, Bial said, are selected in part for their leadership skills.

“People think, ‘Oh, it’s a group, they’re going to stick to themselves.’ In fact, it’s the opposite. Seventy-nine percent of our students hold an officer position on campus. That’s a huge percentage.”

They are also likely to engage in extracurricular activities. When Hameedi returns to New York to take his research position, he plans to pursue his other love - competing in poetry slams.

“I was passionate about science in high school,” he said, “but at the same time I was challenging myself to be a writer. I was forcing myself to use both sides of my brain.

“Having the eye of a scientist as well as the eye of a poet, you appreciate the finer details,” he said. “You see details most people don’t see.”

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