



# Parent **POWER**

Project Transition Links Parents to  
Student Achievement and Success

BY CHRISTINE YACKEL



**W**HEN ANDREW TAITT '08 WAS A FIRST-YEAR STUDENT, HIS MOTHER CALLED him at least five times a day to make sure he was all right. That continued until she attended Family Weekend and saw for herself that her son was in good hands. Her trip to campus was sponsored by Project Transition, a unique program that builds strong connections between the University and parents of first-year students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. "My mom loved Family Weekend because she got to see the beautiful SU campus and how safe it is here," says Taitt, now a graduate student in the School of Information Studies. "After meeting with some of my professors and my counselor, my mom returned to the Bronx feeling relieved that I was part of a supportive and welcoming family in my new home away from home. It made my life easier because after that she only called twice a day."

In recent years, SU has admitted some of the most academically gifted and diverse entering classes in its history, with a significant increase in students from low-income families—many of whom are the first in their families to attend college. Recruitment alone, however, is not

**Photos (clockwise from top left):** Excitement builds as Patricia Alvarez '14 searches the crowd for her family. Tomas Salazar '14 gives his mother a big hug as soon as she steps off the bus. Samantha Cruz '14 is happy to see her mother, Deborah, and her sister, Kayla, after many weeks apart.

**Facing Page:** Merlin Valdez '14 is all smiles as he welcomes his mother, Mireya Cuevas, to campus for the start of Family Weekend.

enough. Academic success depends on the combined efforts of the University community, students, and parents. Unfortunately, some parents from low-income households have no firsthand knowledge of the college experience, limited means to visit campus, or language barriers that restrict their ability to help their children through the challenging transition from high school senior to first-year college student. That is the motivation behind Project Transition, an innovative program created by SU's Office of Supportive Services to give parents and family members the confidence and insight they need to help students achieve four years of academic success. "College can be a double-edged experience for these families," says Jan Strauss Raymond '65, who originated the Project Transition concept. "On the one hand, they are proud of their children's accomplishments. On the other hand, they are nervous about sending them far away to a place they've never seen, to be cared for by people they've never met."

## New Point of View

While working with parents of children with learning disabilities in a predominantly Dominican neighborhood in New York City during the mid 1990s, Raymond was astonished to discover that none had ever seen a college and didn't know they lived just two subway stops away from Columbia, one of America's great universities. A woman of action, she arranged for the parents to take a tour of Columbia with a Spanish-speaking guide, followed by a question-and-answer session. "It was fascinating," says Raymond, an active volunteer and longtime champion of New York City youth. "The parents were so awestruck they didn't feel comfortable walking through the college gates."

Through this experience, Raymond came to realize the parents had already dismissed the

idea of sending their children to college because of an inaccurate image of college life. They imagined dorm rooms would look like a suite at the Plaza Hotel and were amazed to see just how small and cluttered they really are. Raymond recalls that one mother didn't think her son could go to college because they were on welfare and she couldn't afford to buy him the proper clothes. Then she looked around and saw that the Columbia students were wearing jeans and T-shirts, just like her son. "This blew her away because she had an image of college students wearing blue blazers and top hats," Raymond says. "The parents didn't understand their kids already fit in. It was clear these parents were not prepared to get their kids ready for college."

Raymond believed that by changing how parents view higher education, they could play an important role in helping their children make a smooth transition from high school to college, stay in school once they get there, and thrive. She reconnected with her alma mater and approached Bob Wilson, director of Student Support Services (SSS), and Denise Trionfero, director of the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), under the auspices of the Office of Supportive Services, about maximizing parent power by creating vital points of contact between the University and parents of low-income or first-generation students. "Bob and Denise landed on my idea with both feet," Raymond

says. "Bob did some research and discovered that no other school was doing anything similar, so we built our own program from the ground up."

Raymond's husband, Chip Raymond '66, who at the time was president of the Citigroup Foundation, secured funding to launch a pilot parents program at SU. Now in its 10th year, Project Transition targets parents of admitted high school seniors from the New York City

Denise Trionfero, director of the Higher Education Opportunity Program at SU, greets the mother of Harly Rodriguez '13.



**64**  
**FAMILIES**  
The number of families from New York City and northern New Jersey currently participating in Project Transition.

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**10%**  
The percentage, nationally, of college students from low-income families who earn degrees.



public school system who qualify for state-funded HEOP or federally funded SSS assistance. Following an informational meeting at SU's New York City-based Lubin House in the spring, parents are encouraged to participate in a series of cost-free meetings and events sponsored by Project Transition ([campaign.syr.edu/project-transition](http://campaign.syr.edu/project-transition)), both on and off campus, throughout the year.

Students and family members participating in Project Transition come together for the Welcome Dinner on the first night of Family Weekend.

## Tears and Laughter

Family Weekend is one of the most eye-opening experiences for family members participating in Project Transition, which covers the cost of a round-trip bus excursion, hotel accommodations, registration fees, and meals for those who could not otherwise afford the trip to Syracuse. Family members meet with deans, advisors, and career services staff to become familiar with the challenges and opportunities their students face, and experience firsthand the college environment their children now call home. They also have fun just hanging out with their kids. "I hadn't seen my mom in almost two months, but I think she was more excited about her visit to campus than I was," says Curtis Richardson '13, looking back on his first year at SU. "My mom fell in love with the place, and she got to meet my roommate—she fell in love with him, too!"

This fall, two busloads of family members headed north from New York City to attend Family Weekend, which included special activities for Project Transition participants coordinated by HEOP, SSS, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and the Parents Office. Colleen Bench '89, director of the Parents Office, says that before Project Transition, Family Weekend could be a difficult time for HEOP/SSS students. "While others were out having fun with



Patrice Davis '14 and her mother, Yvette, share a special moment together at the Project Transition breakfast.



Marcus Peterson '14 meets his parents, Gerald and Cheryl, after their arrival at SU.

their families, these students were stuck in their residence halls by themselves because their parents couldn't afford to visit campus," she says. "It can be terribly hard for these students to be with their affluent classmates. All it takes is one careless comment or disparaging look to break them down."

One of the many positive outcomes documented in Family Weekend evaluations is that parents become well-informed supporters and enthusiastic champions of their child's academic progress. Without this knowledge, parents can unintentionally sabotage students' efforts and undermine their resolve to hang in through the rough spots and stay on track for graduation. "Sometimes the student is the only English speaker in the family, so it's a sacrifice to send that child away to school," Trionfero says. "And they often play a significant supportive role in the family by looking after younger children or contributing to the household income. There are culture clashes as well. In some cultures, it's not the norm for females to go to college, so girls are torn between their responsibilities as a daughter and a student."

It is difficult to change family and cultural dynamics, but Project Transition seeks to transform parents' way of thinking about college from apprehension of the unknown to an informed appreciation of the full range of opportunities that lie ahead for their children. "I would not have been able to afford to come to Family Weekend on my own," says Deborah Cruz, whose daughter, Samantha, began her first year at SU this fall. "I got to spend time with my child and walk around campus and get information about the school. I'm so proud of my daughter for all her accomplishments, and it was nice to be able to come up to campus and let her know."

“The University has made a huge commitment to recruiting students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and I'm so pleased Project Transition provides an extra boost to help them succeed.”

—Jan Strauss Raymond '65

## Winning Strategy

Empowering parents has proven to be a winning strategy. According to Trionfero and Wilson, HEOP/SSS students at SU achieve, on average, 75 and 82 percent graduation rates, respectively. However, HEOP/SSS students whose families participate in Project Transition get the additional encouragement and support they need to consistently equal or surpass the general Syracuse University student population in academic achievement. This is a significant accomplishment, considering that college students from low-income families have only about a 10 percent chance of earning a degree. Raymond, a member of the College of Arts and Sciences Board of Visitors, says this is what Syracuse University's mission is all about. "It's easy to educate someone like me who grew up in a middle-class family in Connecticut," she says. "But the University has

## 98 FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

The number of first-year students who were eligible to participate in Project Transition this year.

made a huge commitment to recruiting students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and I'm so pleased Project Transition provides an extra boost to help them succeed once they get here. My dream is to package our program and convince other colleges and universities to do the same. I'm not done. We can do much more. The excitement never wears off."

For the first few years of Project Transition, the cost of bringing family members to campus for an all-expense paid weekend was underwritten by Citigroup. When that support ended, funding from Jan and Chip Raymond, the School of Education, and the Parents Office sustained the program until new donors could come on board. Now an initiative of The Campaign for Syracuse University, the program aims to raise sufficient funds to increase its capacity beyond the 64 families from New York City and northern New Jersey currently being served, and reach out to families in Boston and other key recruitment areas of the country.

In the past year, Norman and Edith Weisfeld, Eric and Barbara Bodner, and Robert and Susan Cohen—all parents of current or former SU students—have generously donated their time and resources to ensure that Project Transition continues to give all academically gifted SU students a chance to fulfill their dreams through higher education. "Meeting so many of the students and their families was a wonderful experience and incredibly heart-warming," says Susan Cohen, who attended this year's Family Weekend with her husband, Robert, and fellow donors Barbara and Eric Bodner. "And seeing the joy, laughter, and smiling faces was priceless. We now know more than ever that we are committed to Project Transition and Syracuse University's efforts to expand educational opportunities for all students and their families."

## Persistence Pays Off

Graduating seniors and their families who participated in Project Transition come together one last time to celebrate their collective achievements. "The Celebration Dinner is a tremendous occasion and such a triumph for these families," Wilson says. According to Bench, there is not a dry eye in the house. Students give testimonials and thank their parents and counselors for helping them succeed. In the words of honor roll student Evelyn Liz '10, who earned a degree in social work from the College of Human Ecology, "I am thankful I had the opportunity to be an undergraduate student at Syracuse University. At first I was confused about choosing

a major, but with the support of my family and two amazing counselors, I discovered my perfect profession. I had the opportunity to be a Literacy Corps volunteer, intern at a health and human services agency in New York City, and make lifelong friends. My SU experience will be unforgettable."

The success of just one child can have a ripple effect throughout an entire family and community, lifting everyone up. Curtis Richardson's mother, Beverly Chaney, is so enthusiastic about Project Transition that she returned this fall as a mentor to family members attending Family Weekend for the first time. And she brought along her daughter, Milan, who is interested in attending SU. "I was delighted to have my daughter accompany me on this trip," Chaney says. "We had the opportunity to participate in some activities and explore career choices she's interested in. She told me, 'This is where I belong.'" Her big brother couldn't agree more. "It's like being in one big happy family," Richardson says. "Without my mother and Denise working together to guide me and push me to do my very best, I don't know where I'd be today. I'm really blessed."

Curtis Richardson '13 poses for a family photo with his mother, Beverly, and his sister, Milan, upon their arrival at SU.

