

## Plainfield Outreach placing minorities on the road to college

By JUDY PEET

For the past 11 years, a quiet little program has been developing in Plainfield, steadily growing without the benefit of fanfare or funding.

Called the Outreach College Guidance Club, this volunteer clinic has become a low-profile mecca for hundreds of college-hopeful minority students who wouldn't or couldn't get the necessary college counseling in their own high schools.

Strictly an optional program held from 7:30 p.m. to 8:45 p.m. every Wednesday during the school year, Outreach boasts an astonishing 75 per cent rate in college placement.

For program veterans, however, that ratio is not at all astonishing. In fact, the reason for it is rather simple.

"It's a question of desire," explains Bernice Hargrove, who after using the program to get in and through Montclair State College, returned to become a voluntary Outreach adviser.

"The kids who come here want to go to college," she says. "Our problem is we come from

an environment where our parents couldn't go to college and our counselors didn't care if we went to college. We had no way to find out the requirements."

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Outreach, which has advised more than 500 high school junior and seniors from public and parochial schools in Plainfield and South Plainfield, is the brainchild of Bill Gary, who also works full-time for the Plainfield School District.

"The original question was why was there a large percentage of black graduating seniors failing to go to college?" Gary says. "We polled tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders who said that high school did not gear itself to motivate them to go on to college, and felt too ill-prepared to cope with the rigors of college."

The first Outreach club in 1969 was composed of 30 Plainfield High School seniors that met at the Neighborhood House at 644 W. Fourth St.

The West End settlement house donated the

facilities for the weekly sessions, but that is the only financial backing the program has received, Gary says.

Explaining why Outreach members have never sought funding, Gary says, "A lot of people get hung up on funding. Our program is not contingent on money, but on the talents of our volunteers."

Volunteers include Bill Terry and Curtis Cooke, who also work in the school district, plus a rotating staff of about six other part-time volunteers.

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The program, according to Gary, goes beyond basic requirements such as advice on admissions requirements, necessary credits, waiving application fees, equal opportunity programs, financial assistance and how to take admissions tests.

"A big problem we discovered was fear," Gary says. "They had never had the chance to be away from home before and they were afraid."

To that end, Outreach has also developed "value exercise," in which groups of students choose the alternatives in specific situations. For example, in one exercise, students are given a survival situation in which some people must be sacrificed. The students play roles and decide a moral basis for the sacrifices.

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"They (Outreach) make you aware of yourself, and how you think," says 17-year-old Darleen Eure of Plainfield. "Now I know I can handle any college."

Another facet of Outreach is yearly orientation trips to colleges around the country.

"College is not just getting in," Gary says. "We explain what they can expect and nurture them all the way through."

"They showed me a lot about college life and being on my own," says Michael Walls, 17. "I had seen a lot of kids go and fail, but now I'm not worried. It has made me more mature."