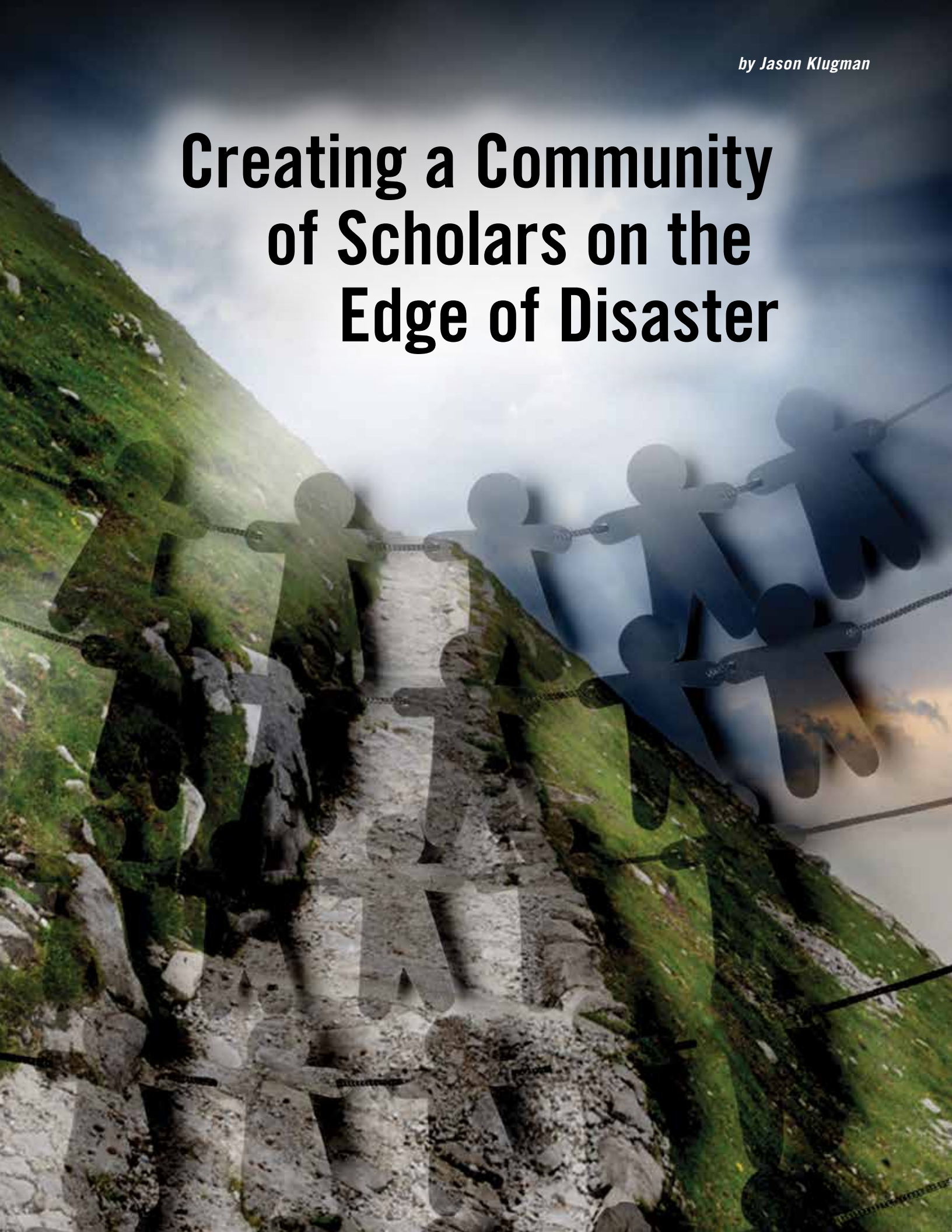


*by Jason Klugman*

# Creating a Community of Scholars on the Edge of Disaster



- **The electricity has been off for two months.**
- **We're out of food this week.**
- **The roof is leaking, and we don't have the money for repairs.**
- **My father died in prison last week; he contracted TB a few months ago.**
- **I'm pregnant.**
- **One of our football teammates was shot over the weekend.**
- **I haven't had a Spanish teacher all year.**
- **We're on our fourth substitute in chemistry.**
- **My mother lost her job.**
- **The laptop that you gave me was stolen.**
- **We were in lockdown yesterday and couldn't make it to SAT prep.**

—Actual events faced by Princeton University Preparatory Program Scholars, 2008–2013

It is a wonder that our students are able to go to school, let alone gain admission to college and earn degrees.

For the past 13 years, Princeton University (NJ) has been involved in a unique effort to identify and prepare outstanding high school students from low-income families for selective college success. The Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP) began in reaction to the broken pipeline for low-income, high-achieving students to elite colleges and universities. PUPP launched with the best of intentions and the brightest idea—financial aid alone was not enough to ensure collegiate success for these students. Instead, an investment in educational preparation and cultural capital is needed to open doors and create a pathway for high potential, low-income students to be successful in college and beyond. This investment must be carefully crafted to meet the broad needs of students in low-income communities—students who often face challenges that can verge on the disastrous at any moment. To think strategically, and act intentionally, we consider disasters in a range of categories that are often fluid, co-existing and cumulative. In the essay, I share some experiences with disasters and ways in which we work to help our scholars to achieve their best future.

Princeton partners with six local high schools that span from the well-healed environs of our local college town, to Trenton, New

Jersey. Trenton, our state's capital, is just 12 short miles away, yet it is a world apart. Amid the concentration of state office buildings and a shiny new courthouse are crumbling reminders of its industrial heyday, neighborhoods deep in abject poverty and a desperately under-funded school system with a high school that performs among the 20 worst in the state on the 11th grade state exams.

Each spring, we work with our school partners to identify the best and brightest students from demographic groups that are traditionally underrepresented in our nation's elite colleges and universities. Many are the first in their family to aspire to attain a college degree and their success on state exams and in the classroom in ninth grade puts them in a category all their own. The application process is like a mini college admission process, with short answer questions, a writing sample (applicants spend up to two hours to write two original essays) and small group interviews. For many of these students, it is the first time that they have been gathered and recognized for being among the highest achieving in their peer group.

Our partner schools offer vastly different educational opportunities for our scholars and we work to create a community of scholars bound together by their shared vision of collegiate opportunity and future

success. The scholars also have many other characteristics in common: most are eligible for free or reduced lunch; most live in rented apartments or multi-generational homes; and more than half speak a second language with their parents. Together, they work to deftly negotiate the strains of adolescent lives lived, to borrow a phrase from Mike Rose (author of *Lives on the Boundary*) on the boundaries—of success and failure, sickness and health, life and death.

After we select a cohort of scholars (typically a total of 24 ninth graders from our partner schools), we begin with a mandatory orientation session which includes a presentation about the goals and expectations of PUPP, our “Priority Skills” and our “Dress Code.” We end the first night of orientation with the signing of a contract—between the scholar, a parent or guardian and me, in my role as director. We often refer to the contract when we talk with our scholars about their academic performance and our shared expectations. But, we also think of it as our shared commitment not just to their academic preparation, but to their health and well-being, and, by extension, to the health and well-being of members of their families.

*We end the first night of orientation with the signing of a contract—between the scholar, a parent or guardian and me, in my role as director. We often refer to the contract when we talk with our scholars about their academic performance and our shared expectations. But, we also think of it as our shared commitment not just to their academic preparation, but to their health and well-being, and, by extension, to the health and well-being of members of their families.*

Our experiences with PUPP scholars and their families, schools and communities have greatly informed our professional knowledge about what it really takes to bridge the enormous gap that separates talented, low-income students from elite college success. To achieve our goals, PUPP offers rigorous academic preparation, including the six-week summer institutes that our scholars participate in for three years, our after-school academic sessions and our weekend cultural enrichment events. We also take care to provide personalized college admission and financial aid guidance and support to scholars and their families. We think of it as a “high touch” model deliberately designed to engage in our scholars’ lives to buttress their goals and ambitions for future educational and professional success.

Still, the various programmatic aspects of PUPP are not enough for some of our scholars in the most delicate situations. When we think about disasters of adolescence and high school, things like earning a “C” on a report card, earning a “2” on an AP exam,

breaking up with a first boyfriend or girlfriend, or even getting a rejection letter from a top-choice school, do not even figure into our equations. We think about disasters the way the National Weather Service categorizes hurricanes via the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale or tornadoes using the Fujita-Pearson scale. The larger the number, the higher the intensity and potential for damage.

As we know, sometimes storms lose strength as they travel through land, but their intensity can vary based on how quickly they move up or down the coast—creating new kinds of ratings—like Super Storm Sandy, which lost the wind power of a Category 1 hurricane, yet did more damage to the Jersey Shore than previous Category 1 storms. We compare this to the lasting aftermath of any number of small disasters that impact our scholars’ daily lives. And, understanding the collective force of any combination of disasters is critical for educators who work to develop students whose problem-solving skills take them far beyond end-of-course, high stakes exams.

Categorization helps us prepare for the real-time events that shape the lives of our scholars. Like the way the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) prepares for a storm or an insurance company braces for the financial impact of a natural disaster, we use our knowledge of what can go wrong and how to best organize ourselves to meet the challenge of serving our scholars as they prepare for college and live their lives.

We rarely use the term “disaster” with our scholars, but help them work through difficult times, sometimes from crisis to crisis, while also maintaining our ethic of care and a level of consistency and normalcy for our scholars. When students are admitted into PUPP, we offer them and their families our general expertise with anything they need. Sometimes, families are timid or too proud to ask for help, and many just do not expect the help to be available. Others take us up on the offer right away—everything from negotiating a payment plan with the local energy company to shopping for groceries and home essentials to providing attorney-

supported guidance through the new “deferred action” program for undocumented students (and other family members). Some of our daily work has nothing directly to do with the college preparation mission that guided the founding of our program. But, over time, we have recognized that to do college preparation correctly, we cannot ignore the lived experiences, challenges, hurdles, crises and disasters that our scholars and their families face.

Charting our own disasters looks something like this:

<b>Academic Disaster .25:</b>	Scholar does not have an official photo ID because a: the family is moving (again) and items are boxed up; B: the school has not issued new IDs this year; or C: the family does not have enough documentation to cover the required points for a state-issued ID; or D: all of the above; and cannot take the ACT/SAT when scheduled.
<b>Academic Disaster .5:</b>	AP Biology classroom is moved to a “non-lab” classroom due to building re-organization limiting all access to actual, inquiry-based science labs (and, as a result, AP English courses are now taught in science classrooms).
<b>Academic Disaster 1.0:</b>	Scheduling of honors classes for 10th graders is uncoordinated in new rotating block schedule and students are restricted to taking two of four possible honors classes. AP course is canceled due to low enrollment (having resulted from restrictions on access to honors courses the year prior).
<b>Academic Disaster 1.5:</b>	Math/Science/Spanish teacher goes on permanent disability (or never shows up) leaving scholar without a Trigonometry/Chemistry/Spanish II teacher—and no substitute is hired.
<b>Academic Disaster 2.0:</b>	Scholar has an undiagnosed learning difference and cannot gain access to appropriate testing and services.
<b>Facility Disaster 1.0:</b>	Library computers are unavailable because of district-wide virus that goes unattended to for weeks. Library computers are unavailable due to budget cuts that limit the hours of the media center staff.
<b>Facility Disaster 2.0:</b>	Recent rains (and under-maintained roof) cause leaking and roof/ceiling damage in the library limiting access to facilities and create inaccessible stairways and classrooms begin to grow mold. Entire wings of buildings are closed off due to unsafe conditions.

<b>Personal/Family Disaster 1.0:</b>	Parent/guardian laid off from unskilled factory work or seasonal construction position.
<b>Personal/Family Disaster 1.5:</b>	Parent’s car breaks down the morning of an important test/interview/ regular day of school causing student to miss test/interview/school/work.
<b>Personal/Family Disaster 2.0:</b>	The electricity was turned off due to overdue bills caused by lay -offs at parents’ job, or family is in food emergency due to the same set of circumstances.
<b>Personal/Family Disaster 3.0:</b>	Family is evicted from home.
<b>Personal/Family Disaster 4.0:</b>	Scholar is kicked out of her home after father learns that she is pregnant.
<b>Personal/Family Disaster 5.0:</b>	Death of a parent/guardian or sibling may place scholar “in danger of homelessness.”

Academic Disasters happen all the time. Tests are failed, teachers are absent for days (or weeks or months) and calculators are stolen—yet our resilient cohorts work through the challenges. They may miss out on a key set of concepts in physics or trigonometry, but we hope that there will be an opportunity somewhere down the line for them to make it up. The native Spanish speakers are typically able to coast through two years of Spanish with or without a teacher, and we provide extra tutoring to prepare them to take (and pass) the AP Spanish test. In many cases, we arrange for focused, individualized tutoring. In others, scholars seize opportunities to take or re-take a course online or at the local community college. A few of our partner schools work collaboratively with other local universities to offer dual enrollment programs for high achieving students who “max out” on the offerings at their home school.

Category 2 Academic Disasters occur less frequently. Final grades do not meet expectations; parents get divorced; relationships end. Principals are re-assigned. Budgets are cut, and counselors are let go. The merry-go-round of school reforms in our partner schools shifts teachers and administrators from classroom to classroom, building to building, from block scheduling to rotating schedules to mandatory test preparation and more. Through it all, the PUPP team works to manage anxiety, advocate for extra credit, or help to make new arrangements for mail, transportation, and completion of financial aid forms.

We work through these challenges with fortitude and knowing glances. We have the numbers for local social service organizations at the ready. We have cell phone numbers for teachers and vice principals, and our deep relationships with our school partners

allows us extraordinary access to our scholars in school—to help change their class schedules, to send out transcripts, or to provide that replacement calculator.

After that, things get a little tricky.

### Family Disasters: A Sampling

When parents split up or families feud, students often bear the brunt of picking up the pieces. A home destroyed in a fire is not the end of the world, but the loss of property and the stability that a home represents can be especially devastating to high school students. Family illness, job loss (or benefit reduction) or the threat of deportation can all serve as destabilizing factors in our scholars' lives. The more academically talented and engaged our scholars are, the more likely there will be an expectation that they will work to solve the problem—everything from providing child care for younger siblings, to accompanying parents to doctor appointments, to filing paperwork for benefits, or getting a part-time job to help contribute to the family bank account. The stories of these young people growing up “too fast” are plentiful, and not unique to our work.

#### *The lights are out:*

Every fall, when our partner schools are closed for a holiday or professional development session, we host mandatory college admission workshops for our senior class. Often, we provide a school bus to pick up scholars at their local schools and bring them to the university where we can work in a computer lab to edit and revise essays, complete applications and consider the range of opportunities. One such morning, in the fall of 2010, found me stopping at the home of one of our scholars who had missed the bus. We have a not-so-sophisticated method of calling and texting and updating each other when scholars aren't where they are supposed to be, so, as I drove through Trenton, I got word that Samir had missed the bus.

A colleague found Samir's address for me and gave me general directions to his home in Trenton. I pulled up at his house, knocked on the door and waited for him to answer. When he did, he said that his alarm didn't go off and he was grateful that I was there to take him to college admission. He asked if I could wait a few minutes while he got his stuff together. As I stood on his porch, I noticed that the lights were out throughout the house and, as Samir left, he blew out a candle that had been burning in the living room.

On our drive to Princeton, I asked Samir about the lights. Nonchalantly, he informed me that the power had been turned off for over a month, since his mother lost her night job. I asked what the family was doing about it, and he demurred. He did not have an

answer. He did, however, have four younger siblings living in the house and they were starting to worry that, with winter coming, they weren't going to have electricity.

This news set into motion what I like to call our “Emergency Response Plan.” The PUPP counselor and I began to mobilize our resources to work with Samir's mother and his family. We purchased battery-operated “touch lights” and lanterns for the house and some blankets, while opening negotiations with the local energy company and connecting Samir's family with local service organizations that provide emergency support for utility bills. At the same time, Samir began a new college essay, one that explained that a lack of power in his home in Trenton was nothing compared to his escape from the Sudan and his experiences in a refugee camp. As a junior at a top-ranked small liberal arts college, Samir's experience is one we often think of as we work to manage crises as they emerge, and inspire our current scholars to develop their natural resilience and grit. We also know where to get the best deals on “touch lights” and which camping lanterns offer the best light for studying.

#### *I'm pregnant:*

The latest reports on childbirth in the US, from the National Center for Health Statistics, show that teenage pregnancy has been on the decline for more than a decade. Alas, over the past dozen years, the PUPP community has included our fair share of teen mothers. Those who become pregnant in high school enter an extremely precarious zone for which the pathway to high school and college completion becomes increasingly more treacherous. Fortunately, most of our young mothers continue to make their way through high school graduation and into college, with a few earning degrees within six years.

In the summer of 2011, we found out from one of our rising juniors, Cassandra, that, not only was she pregnant, but that her father had kicked her out of her home and she was now staying with her half-sister in the next town over. Again, we went into Emergency Response mode. We made sure that her older sister was going to be able to provide the support she needed—a safe and stable home for her junior and senior year. We worked carefully to make sure that Cassandra could remain in her high school and not interrupt her academic progress. We continued almost “business as usual” with her—and we celebrated her ability to remain focused throughout the remainder of that summer institute and into her junior year of high school.

Cassandra displayed a tremendous amount of grit and determination during her last two years of high school. Working in concert

with her child's father (and their family) and her older sister, she was able to care for her child, maintain her grades, and receive necessary food and supplies and childcare. Upon completion of her final PUPP Summer Institute in 2012, she began working at a local grocery store to further provide for herself and her child.

After committing to a local state university, we worked with Cassandra to make sure all of her paperwork was submitted, verified and approved. We wrote third-party letters to support her request for independent status and had numerous conversations with her school's financial aid office and with the state. When her first semester of college began, we helped purchase books for her to bridge the gap in funding caused by administrative delays. We still hear from Cassandra regularly, as she works through getting independent status from the state—a separate process than the federal government or local university. And we will continue to support her as she becomes increasingly independent, moving into a state-supported apartment with her child this winter and continuing on her pathway to a college degree.

*The latest reports on childbirth in the US, from the National Center for Health Statistics, show that teenage pregnancy has been on the decline for more than a decade. Alas, over the past dozen years, the PUPP community has included our fair share of teen mothers. Those who become pregnant in high school enter an extremely precarious zone for which the pathway to high school and college completion becomes increasingly more treacherous.*

[We do this kind of direct alumni support for other scholars as well—those who did not quite understand that although their financial aid at their elite college was covering tuition, room and board, their work-study funds had to be earned. Many start college with barely enough to buy sheets and a blanket. So we loan them laptops, or help them purchase new ones. We have purchased airplane tickets and even taken a few of our scholars to move in to their campuses for orientation. We use alumni support funds to buy the first round of college textbooks. Thank goodness for Amazon Prime!]

#### *Multiple disasters:*

As teachers and counselors, all of us have had the grim duty to support our students through disasters—fires, joblessness, the death of a close family member—a parent, grandparent, guardian, etc. One scholar managed his way through two of these upper category disasters in high school. The first, a home fire that sent his mother and three siblings to live with his grandmother, was challenging, for sure. We gave him a replacement laptop from the

university surplus and helped with the clothing and home goods drive for him and his family. But, his junior year, another Category 5 befell his family. His father, who was serving time in a local state correctional facility, contracted tuberculosis while incarcerated. In short order, he passed away while behind bars. Before he went to prison, he had shown this scholar where he kept the firearm in the house—and told him that it was his job to protect the family now.

Another scholar, Stephanie, a current first-year student at another top-ranked small liberal college, began her application essay for PUPP with a vivid description of a house-full of chaos and commotion—governed by the alcoholism that impacted her mother and grandmother. As a ninth grader, she was in foster care and later, during her sophomore year, she was adopted by her foster mother. By the time senior year rolled around, her foster mother got married and moved her family out of state and the scholar, not wanting to leave her school community, went back to live with her grandmother. Sometimes we need a flow chart to follow the individual stories. Through it all, Stephanie maintained her place

among the top students in our program—perhaps one of the top scholars we have worked with since our inception in 2001.

Before leaving for college, Stephanie hosted an intervention at her grandmother's home to try to make some lasting change in their lives. The results were short-lived, however. A few months into her first year of college (where she is on full financial aid), her birth mother passed away. Once again, Stephanie was called upon to manage the proceedings. For her first Thanksgiving in college, she stayed on campus—organizing a potluck with international students on her floor. We have not yet heard what the plans will be for winter break, but our work with Stephanie—and with all of our scholars—does not end with their acceptance to college. It cannot end there. We are contractually bound to continue.

#### **Community Disasters:**

##### *Super Storm Sandy*

In the fall of 2012, just over a week before our fall college tour, wide swaths of Central and Coastal New Jersey were devastated by

Hurricane Sandy. Homes were lost, roads were flooded and communities in our area (Mercer County, New Jersey) were typically without power and access to fuel for periods of time ranging from 24 hours to two weeks. At Princeton, the university's back-up generators and reserve fuel allowed the university to remain partially open to serve students who stayed on campus during our fall break (the timing, as far as super storms go, could not have been better for the university as most of the students were off campus during break). So, the university opened its doors, electrical outlets and dining halls to local EMS staff and volunteers. Meanwhile, we were scheduled to host our mandatory orientation meetings for our annual overnight college tour—one in Princeton and one at Trenton Central High School. Unfortunately, Trenton was one of the communities hit hard by power outages following the storm; the high school—and many of the homes of our scholars—were without power for more than a week. As power was haphazardly restored in the county, classmates and extended family members began checking in on each other. Homes that had power became emergency shelter for those without, and many were forced to take a week or more off work.

and permission slips, and, where needed, granola bars, juice boxes, fruit and water. Thankfully, the trip went off without any issues.

### Closing Thoughts

The PUPP College Tour is a hallmark of our program. PUPP Scholars visit upwards of 30 campuses over their three years in our program. With generous support from a corporate sponsor, the scholars on the tour get their “PUPP hoodie” and after the tour, you are guaranteed to see it worn with pride over the course of the winter and into spring. For some, the trip is the first time they stay overnight in a hotel room. For all, the opportunity to visit the hallowed grounds of institutions like Johns Hopkins University (MD), Georgetown University (DC), Brown University (RI), Wesleyan University (CT) and Mt. Holyoke College (MA) allow them to envision an entirely new and different future for themselves. On tour, we meet up with our alumni to check in with them about their experiences—and they share their stories of awkward cross-cultural moments and eye-opening observations with a rapt audience of their younger selves. We host a study hall one evening for scholars to

*When we prepare to meet a new cohort of PUPP Scholars, to take them through our orientation process, we do a field-survey of sorts. We take a look at their family structure and do a computer survey to understand the resources they have at home. We examine their academic record and note any idiosyncrasies that might exist.*

Since the university was officially closed for a week, all non-essential employees were instructed to stay home. Each passing day, the PUPP team connected with each other and with our scholars to make sure everyone was safe, warm and had food to eat. We postponed our orientation program and rescheduled for one night in Princeton. Most of our seniors and juniors were able to connect with us and each other to make it to campus for the meeting. We stocked up on extra food supplies and told students to bring any electronics that they needed to charge—and to bring family members.

Most of the scholars who were set to go on the college tour were able to come to the meeting with parents, neighbors or other scholars. We reviewed the expectations of the trip, our plan for separate hotels for boys and girls (a lesson for another reflection), and we distributed the itinerary and the beloved PUPP hooded sweatshirts. After the meeting, we encouraged families to take home whatever they needed. The scholars that could not make it were visited in person by members of the PUPP staff who brought the paperwork

stay on top their school work, and we meet with admission officers who ultimately will hold a piece of the key to each of their futures.

When we prepare to meet a new cohort of PUPP Scholars, to take them through our orientation process, we do a field-survey of sorts. We take a look at their family structure and do a computer survey to understand the resources they have at home. We examine their academic record and note any idiosyncrasies that might exist. Did they come to orientation with multiple family members? Are they currently living in a multi-generational home? Perhaps there's a grandparent who is actually “in charge.” Or, is their Spanish teacher actually a long-term substitute? Once we lay this groundwork, we keep our attention focused not just on their academic development or the expansion of their knowledge of the world around them, but we observe how they participate with their peers, how they relate to our faculty and engage with our summer undergraduate teaching assistants and our school year graduate teaching fellows. We obtain their progress reports and report cards. We manage their test preparation. We communicate with their teachers and parents

and collaboratively address issues that emerge. We want to ensure that we are ready for any unforeseen hurdles.

We know that for some of our scholars, those who face the most treacherous Category 4 and 5 disasters, it could actually be the lower-order disasters that send them into a tailspin. A scholar feeling the pain and heartache of a death in the family or the loss of a family home could bounce back with amazing resilience, but when they face a bad grade or a hiccup in their schedule, or when their mother's car will not start on the morning of the SAT, sometimes those are the most important spaces for our intervention.

Knowing how our scholars respond to crises within the framework of our categories allows us to anticipate how they might face the next challenge. The categories are a tool that helps us think systematically about a scholar's life experiences, struggles and levels of grit. Indeed, all of this information adds to our ability to effectively guide our scholars (and sometimes their peers and siblings) through the college admission process. If we can understand their responses to lived experiences as low-income high-achieving high school students, we are better positioned to offer sound and strategic advice through the creation of a college list and application essay, and in the preparation of financial aid materials. Ultimately, this attentiveness affords our scholar the space to make decisions informed by our knowledge of their journey and the collective wisdom revealed by the experiences of the PUPP community.

All of the recent attention on "college readiness" and "college for all" is encouraging, focusing our national awareness on the low levels of college attainment for disadvantaged students. But catchy slogans and extra test preparation are not nearly enough to meet the full range of needs of students whose daily experience is often characterized by the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. A college tour can serve as both an encouraging journey to possible futures and a depressing trip to places that will never get to be fully explored. When school reform measures double down on remediation, restrict access to advanced courses, or disregard the impact of poverty and social isolation on students, no amount of cheerleading will help bridge the college knowledge (to college attainment) gap. We need efforts that engage in nurturing the whole child. We need to have serious sets of expectations that match the opportunities provided. We need to stop engaging in polarizing debates about excuse-making and test scores and realize that our nation's future success rests in our ability to provide opportunities for each child to meet his or her full potential. In order to better meet their needs, we need to create comprehensive support networks that, rather than leaving no child "untested," would truly find ways to leave no child behind.

*Note: I am grateful to the PUPP scholars who allow me into their lives and agreed to share their stories and to QuinnShuana Felder-Snipes, PUPP Counselor, and my colleague Kathleen Nolan for their critical feedback on this essay.*

Notes:

The Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale  
<http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/aboutsshws.php>

Fujita-Pearson Tornado Intensity Scale  
<http://www.publicaffairs.noaa.gov/storms/fujita.html>

Pregnancy Rates for U.S. Women Continue to Drop  
by Sally C. Curtin, M.A., Joyce C. Abma, Ph.D., and Stephanie J. Ventura, M.A., National Center for Health Statistics; and Stanley K. Henshaw, Ph.D., Guttmacher Institute  
<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db136.pdf>

Rose, Mike. (1989). *Lives on the Boundary*. New York: Free Press.



**JASON KLUGMAN** is the director of the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP) and a lecturer and program associate with Princeton's Program in Teacher Preparation. He earned his doctorate in Education, Culture and Society from the University of Pennsylvania. He has broad expertise in urban education, college access and success, and teacher preparation.

CollegeWeek **Live**

## Schedule Online Chats with 300+ Colleges.



80 percent of students want to text chat with admissions reps and current students before choosing a college.\*

Invite them to join us at [collegeweeklive.com](http://collegeweeklive.com).

- 300+ colleges.
- Live text and video chat.
- Expert presentations.

It's free and easy, Sign Up Today  
[CollegeWeekLive.com/NACAC13](http://CollegeWeekLive.com/NACAC13)

\*Noel-Levitz