

A comfort zone for new leaders

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By Scott Waldman, Staff writer

On his first night at Union College, Kenrik Liu laid down in a big field and looked at the stars.

In Schenectady, he was a world away from his Boston home and experiencing a bit of culture shock as he adjusted to life at an elite private college.

"It was a scary thing," he said.

Though he was overwhelmed, he felt comforted by the nine other inner-city students lying around him and imagining the moment they would be handed a degree. The 10 came to Union under the auspices of The Posse Foundation, a national organization that takes groups of promising students from school districts in seven cities, including New York, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, and places them all in the same top-tier college.

On Sunday, Liu lived the moment an adviser had asked the Posse Scholars to picture back then when they gazed at the night sky. He walked across that same field and picked up his diploma, his first step into a career in finance. He and seven other Posse Scholars were among the roughly 500 students who crossed the stage at the school's undergraduate commencement ceremony.

Of the original 10 Posse Scholars, one transferred and one is scheduled to graduate from Union next year.

The students in the program receive full tuition from the school, and Posse provides academic support and application assistance. Students meet once a week throughout their college career, creating a support network of peers with a similar background. Union's group helped one member through the aftermath of a parent's heart attack and another with a mother's breast cancer diagnosis.

The national program looks beyond SAT scores and grade-point average to find future potential leaders who might not otherwise stand out to an admissions counselor, said Deborah Bial, the organization's founder. The goal is to create a network of people who are school principals, elected officials and community leaders with an awareness of urban issues and who can call on each other for help.

"When you create a critical mass on a campus, you can affect community change," she said.

The Foundation -- which got its name when Bial heard a once-promising student say 'I never would have dropped out of college if I had my posse with me' -- has 38 partnership colleges and a 90 percent graduation rate. The group had 12,000 nominations for just 480 slots this year, she said.

Bial plans to double the Posse Foundation's graduates and partner schools in the next decade and she has backing to do just that from the White House. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has praised the group and President Barack Obama recently gave a portion of his Nobel Peace Prize winnings to Posse.

Union has committed to enrolling 10 new Posse students every fall since 2006 and has no plans to stop the program in the near future, said Matt Malatesta, vice president for admissions, financial aid and enrollment. He said the program benefits the campus because it brings in a diverse group of students who bring a different perspective to campus.

"We look for change agents," he said. "Kids who are going to make a difference."

Eleven family members showed up Sunday to cheer on Antonio Gutierrez, who was intimidated by his first day of classes at the mostly white school. Gutierrez, the first member of his family to earn a college degree, said his "posse" helped him get through that early phase. He'll spend the next year as a City Year volunteer, helping young people with their education. After that, he'll head to law school.

He said being at a small school such as Union, which has just 2,100 students, prevented him from being just another face in the crowd, as he would have been at one of the larger public schools where he grew up. "I don't think I would ever have had the money to get an education at such an amazing school as Union," he said.

Seconds after she received her degree, Alexandria Nunez-Bibby, 23, said she was in a state of shock that she was leaving a place that had become home. The sociology major speaks Chinese and hopes to land a marketing job at Reebok, where she was an intern. She said her experience at Union, which would not have been possible without Posse, changed her life.

"It got me out of my comfort zone," she said. "I've grown mentally, physically and emotionally."