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## College Students Find Support in Campus 'Posses'

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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BRYN MAWR, Pa. (AP) -- When Sharhea Wade arrived at Bryn Mawr College from a big-city high school, it seemed as if every other student on the quiet, leafy campus had graduated from an exclusive private school.

"I felt intimidated by them," recalled Wade. "Bryn Mawr is a different world."

Yet whenever she felt like a fish out of water, Wade could turn to her "posse" -- nine other girls who, like her, had been recruited from struggling Boston-area school districts and sent on full merit scholarship to the elite women's college.

Wade's posse is one of dozens sent to top-tier universities each year by the New York-based Posse Foundation. The combination of monetary and social support is a model that experts say could help move the U.S. toward President [Barack Obama's](#) goal of having America lead the world in the percentage of college graduates by 2020. Next fall, the program hits the [Ivy League](#) when it debuts at Penn.

So far, Obama's focus has been on increasing access to higher education -- especially for minority and low-income students -- through expanded Pell grants and simplified financial aid applications.

But [paying for college](#) is only part of the battle. Keeping students in school by supporting their psychological and academic needs is equally important, said Laura Perna, an associate professor in the [University of Pennsylvania's](#) Graduate School of Education.

Posse founder Deborah Bial started the organization in 1989 after a once-promising inner-city student told her, "I never would have dropped out of college if I had my posse with me."

Since then, Posse has sent more than 2,600 students to its partner campuses, including [Vanderbilt University](#), [Colby College](#) and the [University of California at Berkeley](#).

The program targets students in disadvantaged urban districts who have strong leadership skills but may lack the guidance to wade into what can be an intimidating college admissions process. Posse is not need- or minority-based, though many students fit both categories.

The demand for such help is dramatic, Bial said. Posse, which had been recruiting from six major cities, added Miami as its seventh this fall. The program received more than 12,000 nominations this year for 460 slots nationwide, Bial said.

Posse provides academic support and help with college applications, but admission decisions are made by

individual schools, which offer full merit scholarships. A [University of Missouri](#) study presented last week links merit aid to increased freshman year grade-point averages, particularly for minority and low-income students.

Students headed to the same universities are placed in posses of about 10 that begin meeting in high school. The meetings continue weekly at college, creating tight-knit groups where members can find motivation or comfort when they feel lost or frustrated.

"I have this incredible sense that I can succeed and take on whatever I want at school because I have this intensely supportive network behind me who believes in my potential," said Augusta Irele, 21, a member of Wade's posse at Bryn Mawr.

Research shows that integration into a community is important for college retention, Perna said. Having a posse of peers with similar backgrounds creates a bridge to the new institutional climate while helping maintain relationships at home, she said.

Matt Rivera, 20, said his posse helped him and other members through the culture shock of leaving their Chicago-area homes for selective DePauw University, set amid cornfields in Greencastle, Ind.

"Everyone calls it a bubble," said Rivera, a junior. "There's nothing for 45 miles."

Some Posse scholars say their presence has spurred some uncomfortable but needed conversations about race and class on campus. Jenny Rickard, a Bryn Mawr administrator and Posse liaison, said the program has been mutually enriching for the school and the students.

"The scholars have really energized the environment at Bryn Mawr, really creating a culture that is more inclusive," Rickard said.

Both DePauw and Bryn Mawr say Posse students are active campus leaders and have graduation rates on par with or higher than that of the general student body. Overall, Posse officials say their students have a 90 percent graduation rate, compared with a 58 percent rate nationwide for bachelor's degrees within six years.

Bial, whose work with Posse earned her a \$500,000 [MacArthur Foundation](#) "genius grant" in 2007, said the ultimate goal is for scholars to take their diplomas from the Main Streets of college towns to the boardrooms of Wall Street and beyond.

"We're creating a new kind of leadership network in the United States," said Bial. "It's not a good-old-boys network, it's not the Greek system. You've got young people who represent the real diversity of this country."

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The Posse Foundation: <http://www.possefoundation.org/>

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