

"The Sky's the Limit"



The newest Kaplan scholars, Wilson Acuna and David Thelemaque, strike a pose.
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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Two BMCC students accepted into Kaplan Leadership Program.
- Standout students: David Thelemaque is from Brooklyn; Wilson Acuna is from Colombia.
- The new Kaplan scholars receive advice from an alum.

Former football player David Thelemaque didn't know what to expect from college. He enrolled at BMCC straight from his Brooklyn high school, with a mission: to improve his grades in college.

Now that he was no longer playing sports because of an injury, Thelemaque had more time to focus on his academics. "I admit, my grades weren't that impressive in high school," he says.

However, all that was about to change for him. This semester, he applied for the Kaplan Educational Foundation's [Leadership Program](#), which helps high-potential, lower-income and under-represented community college students reach their educational and career goals.

And he was accepted.

"I like to think if I wasn't forced out of football because of this injury, I wouldn't be part of this Leadership Program," says Thelemaque. "Starting now, the sky's the limit."

Thelemaque, and science major Wilson Acuna, originally from Colombia, are this year's newly accepted Kaplan scholars.

More than 20 students applied from BMCC to the Kaplan program, and out of the seven accepted in total from all the CUNY community colleges, Thelemaque and Acuna are the only two from BMCC.

Looking for leaders

Acuna, who wants to be an environmental biologist, received an email from the scholarship office saying one reason he qualified for the Kaplan Leadership Program was because his GPA was 4.0. "I liked hearing that the program supports you in so many ways," he says. "I came to BMCC from Colombia, so I was not familiar with how the school system works in New York, and Kaplan guides you through it all."

The Kaplan scholars are required to go directly to a 4-year college after they graduate from BMCC. The Kaplan Foundation supports each scholar through their time in community college, to the completion of their bachelor's degree.

"Wilson and David will have tremendous academic and leadership development support with advising, test prep and tutoring," says Jennifer Benn, Director of The Kaplan Educational Foundation.

Acceptance into this particular program consists of an extensive application process, including two rounds of in-person interviews. "For those accepted, the program is demanding and requires a lot of time," says Benn. "We're working to develop leaders."

Practice interviewing skills

The Kaplan scholars attend weekly meetings at the Kaplan headquarters in Manhattan, while attending BMCC and keeping up their grades. "We expose the Kaplan scholars to different types of career opportunities, take them on college tours, target a variety of colleges to apply to, help them with interviews, essays, poise, presentation skills and more," says Benn.

Sussie Gyamfi, BMCC's Scholarship and Special Services Coordinator, told the Kaplan applicants to show her their applications, for review. "Some students did not, and they applied to the program directly. But David and Wilson gave me their applications, and I believe that's partly why they were accepted into the program," she says. "They listened, asked me questions, and expressed their interest."

To prepare for their interviews with the Kaplan program directors, Gyamfi had Thelemaque

and Acuna practice their interviewing skills at the BMCC Center for Career Development.

“I was nervous at first to interview at Kaplan, but going to the Career Development office helped tremendously,” says Thelemaque, a math major.

According to Benn, when interviewing the applicants, the Kaplan directors were looking for students who want to give back to the community, have “big dreams,” leadership potential, 12 to 30 community college credits and a willingness to work hard.

“We had very positive feedback on David and Wilson,” says Benn.

The seven new Kaplan scholars, and the directors will become, in Benn’s words, “like a family. The amount of support and encouragement throughout the program is incredible,” she says. “The best compliment I ever got from a scholar was, ‘Thank you for believing in me when I didn’t believe in myself.’”

From here to Harvard

Togo native Hamissou Samari ('07) was one of the first graduates of the Kaplan Educational Foundation’s Leadership Program. After he obtained his Liberal Arts degree from BMCC, he went on to American University in Washington, D.C., where he graduated with a degree in International Studies.

This fall, Samari will attend [Harvard University](#), where he plans to receive his Master’s degree in Public Policy.

“Other than my decision to move to the U.S., applying to the Kaplan Leadership Program is probably the best decision I have made in recent years,” he says. “Not only did the program help me find the right schools and apply to them, but it also helped me overcome my fears of the 'eventual unknowns' at my transfer school.”

Samari agrees that the program is intense; calling it “more work and less leisure. But through a series of time management workshops and weekly lectures, Kaplan will help David and Wilson become experts in multi-tasking,” he says.

As someone who has “been there,” Samari has some advice for BMCC’s newest Kaplan scholars. “They must keep in mind that Kaplan is not an end, but a means to a better end. Maintaining good grades matters more now than ever before,” he says. “The better students they become at school, the better Kaplan scholars they will be.”

The teacher-student relationship

Thelemaque and Acuna believe one of the keys to success is to foster a strong professor-student relationship. Acuna found a mentor in former science professor Dr. Melissa Nashat. “She helped me think about possibilities beyond BMCC. We became friends and she told me not to limit myself,” he says.

Thelemaque asked his African Civilization professor and mentor Nicholas Ofiaja for a recommendation to the Kaplan Leadership Program. “You never know when you’ll need a recommendation, so it’s important to forge that connection with your professors,” he says.

However, both students agree that a good rapport with professors will only get you so far.

“Most of the professors here are excellent, but it doesn’t matter how good they are—it matters how hard you try,” says Acuna. “There are many resources you can go to at the college for assistance, such as the Writing Center or Career Development Center. It’s up to you to seek these opportunities out; you have to want to be helped.”

As for time management, Thelemaque says BMCC is no place for excuses. “There are so many older students here; many of whom have children and may be busier than you. You can’t make any excuses and say, ‘I don’t have time to apply for this Kaplan program.’ There are students here doing a lot more.”

According to Sussie Gyamfi, there are few scholarship opportunities for community college students. “Most scholarships are for high school students to transition directly into a 4-year school,” she says. “The fact that Kaplan offers this Leadership Program is wonderful.”