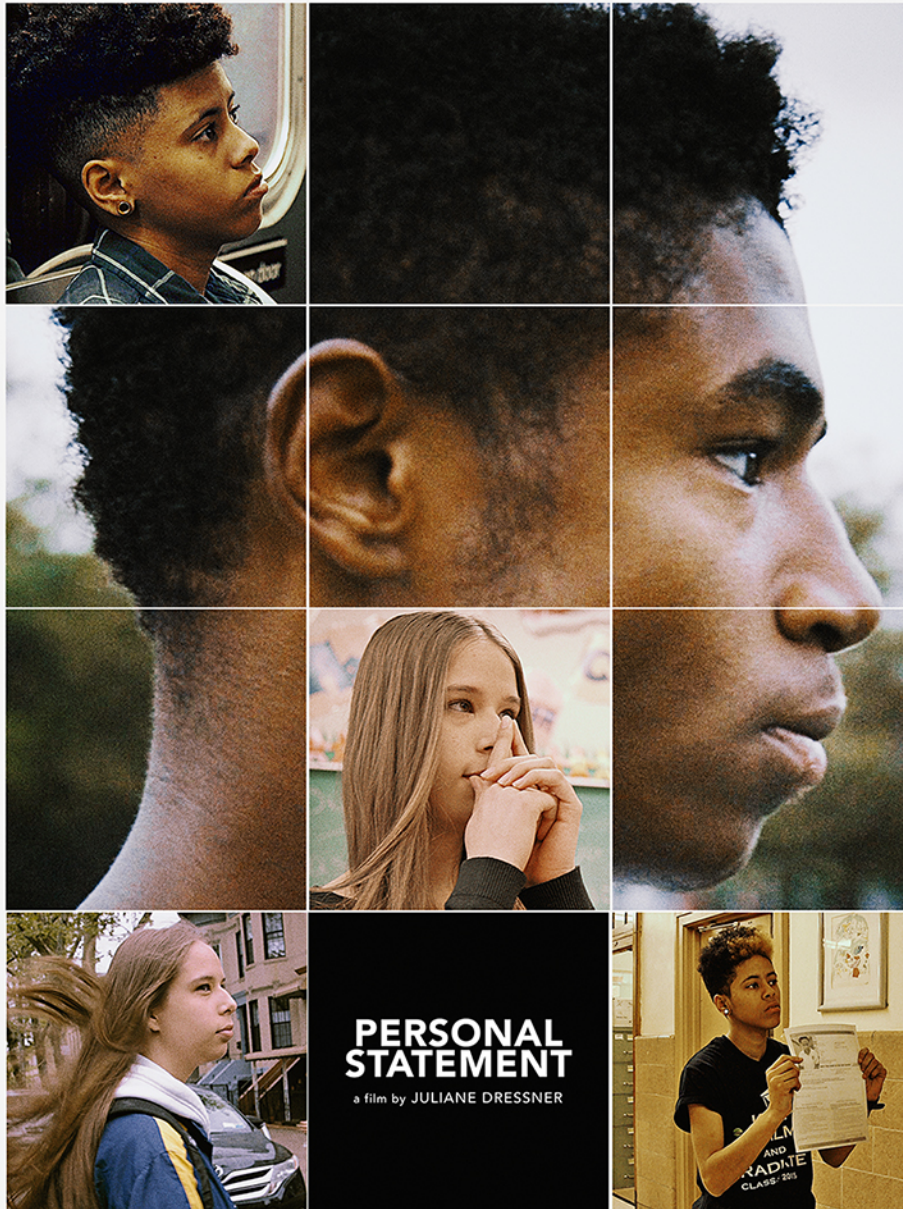


PERSONAL STATEMENT

Discussion Guide



REIFY FILMS PRESENTS "PERSONAL STATEMENT" A CO-PRODUCTION OF REIFY FILMS, HAZEL PICTURES, WISHWORLD CHANNEL AND AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY INC./AMERICA REFRAMED IN ASSOCIATION WITH LATINO PUBLIC BROADCASTING (LPB) WITH SPECIAL THANKS PROVIDED BY THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND AMERICAN FILM BOARD PRODUCED BY CHARLES THE DREAM, POVERTY AND OPPORTUNITY IN AMERICA A FILM BY STEVE MURPHY FROM MARCH TO MAY 2018 WITH ENOCH JIMMOTT, KAROLINE JIRENEZ, CHRISTINE RODRIGUEZ ORIGINAL MUSIC BY T. GRIFFIN EDITOR EDWIN MARTINEZ MADELEINE GAVIN, KENT BASSETT, MARTHA SHANE ADDITIONAL EDITORS BY RIKKI GUNTON, JULIANE DRESSNER EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS FRANCISCO BEO PRODUCERS OF AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY JULIANE DRESSNER, EDWIN MARTINEZ EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS OF LATINO PUBLIC BROADCASTING SANDIE VIGUERA FIDUCIO CHRISTOPHER HASTINGS EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS FOR AMERICA REFRAMED CHRIS WHITE, JUSTINE NAGAN PRODUCED BY JULIANE DRESSNER, BETH LEVISON CO-DIRECTED BY EDWIN MARTINEZ DIRECTED BY JULIANE DRESSNER



Overview of the Film

In PERSONAL STATEMENT, three seniors at Brooklyn high schools are determined to get their entire classes to college, even though they aren't even sure they are going to make it there themselves. They are working as college counselors in their three schools because many of their friends have nowhere else to turn for support.

In the film, we see Karoline, Christine and Enoch, the three main characters, work tirelessly as peer college counselors to realize better futures for themselves and their peers. They struggle and they stumble, but refuse to succumb to the barriers that prevent so many low-income students from attending and graduating from college.

Karoline, Christine and Enoch spend much of their senior year helping their peers get to college, even though they must overcome obstacles of their own that could easily prevent them from going to college themselves.

The film follows them through their senior year and into college as they attempt to navigate the college process on a terribly uneven playing field.

The Issues Addressed in the Film

Low-income teenagers across the United States want all that a higher education promises: the possibility of prospering and participating in the American Dream.

By 2020, **65%** of all jobs will require higher education.

On average, college graduates make **\$1 million** more over their lifetime than those who only graduated high school.

But only **16%** of students from low-income backgrounds obtain a bachelor's degree.

As a result, income inequality persists.

People from low-income backgrounds are increasingly excluded from higher education.

One major cause of the achievement gap is the fact that most students don't have access to college guidance support.

Most public high schools don't have a single college counselor. Instead, school counselors are often responsible for providing college and career counseling.

But more than one-fifth of public high schools in the nation don't even have a school counselor, according to the [Education Department's Office for Civil Rights](#).

Nationwide, the typical **school counselor to student ratio is 1 to 464**.

And school counselors report that they can only spend **22%** of their time on college guidance.

You can find the ratio in your state [here](#):

<https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/state-by-state-ratio-report.pdf>.

According a recent [report from the ACLU](#), **1.7 million** students attend schools with police but no counselors.

It is as if we expect students to learn math, but don't provide funding for math teachers.

And we know that college counseling works:

A [study by the College Board](#) found that adding one counselor to a high school's staff predicted a 10-percentage-point increase in the number of students who enrolled in four-year colleges.

"...a [recent study](#) showed that students who met with a school counselor to talk about financial aid or college were three times more likely to attend college, and they were nearly seven times more likely to apply for financial aid." - Michelle Obama

"Intensive college counseling provided to college-seeking, low-income students shifts their enrollment toward four-year colleges that are both relatively inexpensive and have better graduation rates than other institutions," according to a [research paper](#) published last week in Education and Finance Policy.

"Counseling also improves low-income students' persistence" - [Inside Higher Ed](#)

And we know that peer college counseling works:

"At the Bushwick Campus and Franklin K. Lane Campus, the first two campuses with Student Success Centers that are models for the program in the film, **postsecondary enrollment has increased 14 percentage points and 11 percentage points** respectively over the last four years – compared to 6 percentage points citywide." - NYC Department of Education

Conversation Starters

Below are some questions that refer to specific parts of the film that you can use to spark a discussion.



Time code in the film: 2:42 – 3:07:

The scene: Christine talks to her mom about her interest in going away to college. Her mother jokes and says that she will go along with Christine if Christine goes away to college. She also says that it isn't safe for girls to be away from home.

Questions:

- Have you ever encountered this type of a generational divide within a family?
 - What suggestions do you have for young people who come up against this kind of resistance to pursuing their college dreams?
 - What can a daughter do in this kind of a situation to alleviate her mother's concern that, as a girl, she will be in danger if she goes away to college?
 - What can others, including educators, do to address this kind of a situation?
-



Time code in the film: 4:00 – 5:01:

The scene: Karoline, Christine and Enoch are three of the seventy students training to become peer college counselors.

Questions:

- Is this kind of program necessary where you live? You can find the ratio of school counselors to students in your state [here](https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/state-by-state-ratio-report.pdf):
<https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/state-by-state-ratio-report.pdf>.
- Would you have joined this kind of a program if it had been an option in your school?
- The students are paid for their time both while training and working as peer college counselors in their schools. Do you think that it is important that they are paid for this work?
- In case you have questions about the program, here is a 2-page briefing on the Right To College program run by College Access: Research & Action:
<https://bit.ly/2GauoWD>



Time code in the film: 7:28 - 8:12

The scene: Irma, Karoline's college counselor and supervisor, asks Karoline if she was able to get her dad's tax forms, which she needs to apply for financial aid. Karoline explains why she wasn't able to get them, and refers to the issues she is dealing with at home with her dad.

Questions:

- Do you have any advice for students about how to stay focused on school when they are stressed out because of things going on outside of school? If you are experiencing anxiety around your personal life, what should you do? Who can you go to for help? Who is available to help students in schools? How important do you think it is for schools to have school counselors to help students who are dealing with difficult situations?
 - Karoline says, "If I don't laugh, I'm going to cry and that won't be good for anybody." What do you think she means by this? Why do you think she feels this way?
 - What can be done to make it easier for students who have difficulty getting the documents they need to apply for financial aid?
-



Time code in the film: 17:59 - 19:47

Scene: Karoline talks with her counselor and supervisor, Irma, about being upset because a boy is being bullied in school for being homosexual. Then, while running a workshop for 9th graders, she reacts to a student's homophobic comment.

Questions:

- When a student says something homophobic, Karoline manages to handle this in a powerful way. Have you witnessed or experienced bullying, either verbally, physically or on social media? What kind of support do students need in order to be able to intervene when they see bullying?
 - Do you think it is important for schools to have open conversations about gender and sexuality? In your experience, do schools touch on this topic enough?
-



Time code in the film: 24:29 – 26:02

Scene: Enoch helps his friend Zhané call a college to request an extension and then he calls an admissions office to check on the status of his own college application.

Questions:

- Did you relate to Zhané in this scene? Is it scary when you have to make those kinds of phone calls? How can schools help students prepare for making those kinds of calls? If a school does not provide that kind of help, how can students get help and how can they help their peers?
 - When Enoch calls the admissions office to see if his application is complete, he finds out that it is not. But the college did not contact him to let him know that. Considering that the average school counselor to student ratio in the U.S. is now 1 to 464, it is understandable that school counselors are not able to call every college that each of the students on their caseloads have applied to. Did you know that it's a good idea for students to call every school they have applied to and confirm that their application is complete? Do you feel that students need to practice making those calls beforehand? You might want to break into groups of two right now and do some role playing, taking turns playing the role of the applicant and the role of the admissions counselor.
 - What other kinds of help should schools provide to support students in the college and financial aid application process?
 - Are there other things that are nerve wracking related to the college process?
 - When students feel overwhelmed by homework and deadlines and college applications, how can they get the support and help they need?
-



Time code in the film: 25:11 – 30:30

Scene: Enoch learns that if he isn't able to get his mother's most recent 1099, he may risk losing his chance to receive the financial aid he needs to attend SUNY Cortland. He tries to reach his mother, but because she lives in a homeless shelter and lost her phone, he has trouble finding her. When he finally manages to meet up with her, she doesn't have the form he needs so he has to skip school to go to the IRS office to get it.

Questions:

- Do you think that the colleges and administrators of the financial aid system understand how difficult it is for some students to get the financial information and documentation they need to apply for financial aid?
 - Might there be an easier way for the college to find out whether Enoch is a low-income student, and therefore eligible for aid?
 - During a meeting at the peer counselor training, Enoch suggests contacting parents directly to request the financial documents that students will need to apply for financial aid during the students' junior year. After talking about his own experience, he says, "You have to go through the struggle in order for someone else to learn." What do you think he means by that?
-



Time code in the film: 38:21 - 41:44

Scene: Christine and Karoline log in and to find out if they were accepted into their dream colleges.

Questions:

- How does Christine react when she receives her admissions decision? Why do you think she reacted this way?
- Do you think that Christine's reaction had something to do with the fact that she had not yet received information on how much financial aid she would receive, and she didn't know yet if she could afford to go to that college?
- When colleges require a \$500 deposit in order to hold a spot, do you think they are taking the circumstances of students who don't have access to \$500 into account?
- Whenever anyone applies to college, there is the possibility that they will be rejected from some of the schools they apply to. Talk about how important it is to apply to schools that you are very likely to get into in addition to applying to a number of "match" and "reach" schools. What suggestions do you have for your peers about how to prepare yourselves for rejection.
- Many students say that the biggest obstacle to going to college is financial. That is not surprising, as college tuition has skyrocketed over the last 40 years. Meanwhile, getting a college degree is the surest way to earn a living wage, but only 16 percent of low-income students are managing to obtain a college degree. Considering this and the other data shared above in the section of this guide called, "The Issues Addressed in the Film," what needs to change in order for the U.S. to be a place where there truly is equal access to opportunity and social mobility?