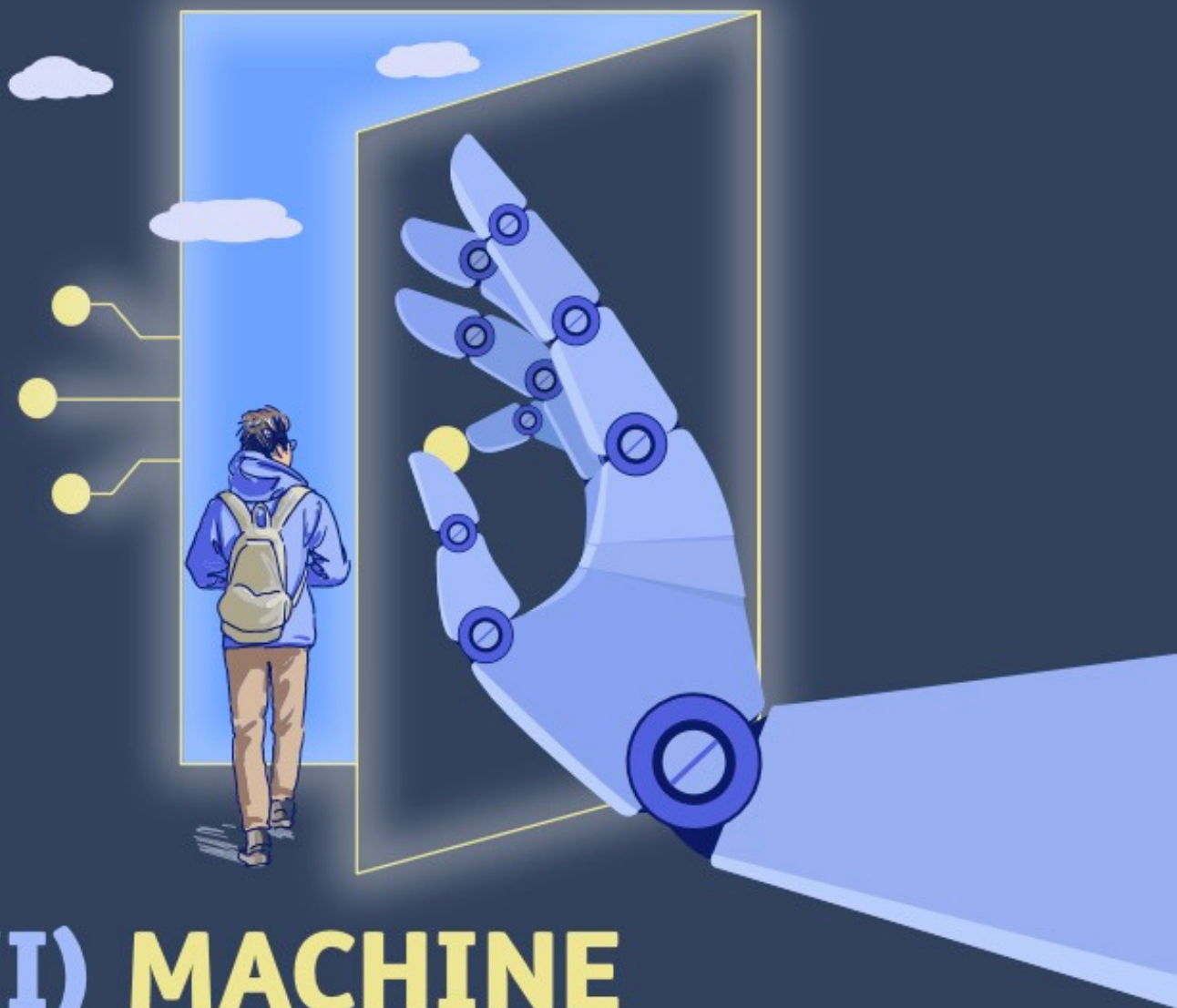


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A(I) MACHINE IN THE PROCESS

When it comes to artificial intelligence, there's no 'right' way to use it. But AI is changing how both students and counselors approach college admission — whether you're ready or not. | 18

A Village of Student Success

A Texas-based nonprofit nurtures student success by building a network that fosters achievement beyond college access.

By Kenya McCullum

It takes a village to raise a child. Texas-based college access organization **EMERGE** has taken that adage to heart by creating a village of people dedicated to putting first-generation and low-income students on the trajectory of lifelong success that benefits not just program participants, but their families and communities. The services **EMERGE** offers were specifically designed with this goal in mind, said CEO Ashley Cash.

"We encourage our team and community members to be a part of the village that surrounds these brilliant young people. It shows up in our model: We support students in a seven-year continuum from 10th grade through college graduation," said Cash. "It's really important that we carry that support and build that relationship over the long term, so we're there for the college search, the application process, the transition to campus, the sophomore slump, the career exploration," eventually culminating with a "walk across the graduation stage."

Juan Venancio walked across the Harvard University (MA) graduation stage in 2024 with a bachelor's degree in government. He went on to earn a master's degree in global affairs from the Schwarzman Scholars program at Tsinghua University



Built on the belief that college success doesn't end with acceptance, **EMERGE** surrounds first-generation and low-income students with a sustained network of counselors, parents, and mentors — supporting them from high school through graduation and beyond, and turning individual achievement into lasting community impact.



We support students in a seven-year continuum from 10th grade through college graduation — because it really takes a village.

Ashley Cash
CEO, EMERGE



in China. Venancio has since brought the knowledge he gained from his education back to Texas and is currently the pro bono and new projects coordinator at Texas Appleseed, a non-profit legal advocacy group in Austin. He also is the co-founder of Global Sino Institute, an independent, non-partisan think tank that conducts research to address global challenges.

“Juan’s story is so incredibly powerful,” said Cash. “He is a great

example of not just succeeding for himself, but really building a system to help others succeed.”

Venancio credits, in part, the EMERGE village for all that he has accomplished since his high school graduation from Sharpstown International School in Houston in 2019.

“I think that EMERGE is unique because it takes on the position of providing and serving as a foundational pillar for students to dream and to grow,” Venancio said. The program prepares students “to actually go to these top universities and succeed because...it really takes a village,” he added.

“You have an entire community supporting you from Houston,” Venancio said. “I’m very privileged and very blessed to have been a part of this because it really has catapulted me to (go) far.”

And of course, no village would be complete without the guidance of loving parents steering their children in the right direction. Venancio’s mother and father, immigrants from Mexico and Honduras, instilled the importance of higher education in him from a young age — inspiring him to take advantage of the opportunities that they never had.

This type of parental involvement is an important part of the EMERGE

village, and the organization offers specific programming to help parents understand the college application process, particularly the financial aid piece. EMERGE counselors make home visits to provide parents with additional support.

“We really bring parents along from Day One so that they’re part of this high school journey, and then obviously onto college,” said Cash. “We have to have family buy-in. We know that it matters on the front end, of course, so parents need to know that students are going to be participating in a workshop, maybe in the evening, or there are other activities we’ll be able to provide for them. But in addition to that, we know how critical the family voice is in where students go to college.”

Mentors are another critical part of the EMERGE village. These are professionals in the community, including some EMERGE alumni, who encourage students and show them what is possible with a college education. EMERGE mentors also give students access to their own networks, which can help open doors during and after college. Whether students are looking for internships or opportunities following graduation, mentors help make the connections they need to thrive — and position students to eventually give back to the village themselves.

“I think we really are leaning into this ethos that our model needs to be relational and not transactional,” Cash said. “We don’t just process students through an application pipeline; we really build a community around each of them through their time with us and beyond.”

Kenya McCullum is a freelance writer based in California.



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Juan Venancio | EMERGE alumnus



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