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## **Congratulations! You Are Nominated. It's an Honor. (It's a Sales Pitch.)**

By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO

The offer that arrived in Emily Wharton's mailbox looked and sounded more like an Academy Award than a sales pitch. In fancy script, on weighty card stock adorned by a giant gold seal, the letter congratulated Ms. Wharton for the honor of being nominated to attend the National Young Leaders Conference in Washington, D.C. It counted 366 members of the United States Congress on its honorary Congressional board of advisers. It told her that she would represent the state of New York and promised a "lifetime advantage" and "valuable addition" to her résumé. It used words like "elite," "distinguished," "select."

Ms. Wharton, a junior at Mamaroneck High School in Westchester County, N.Y., tingled with pride on reading it. "It makes you feel very unique and gifted," she says.

The Whartons did not respond to the invitation. Still, Emily's mother, Philippa, received an electronic elbow in the ribs every few days: more than a dozen e-mail messages from the group's managing director of education, reminding her of enrollment deadlines and offering testimonials from participants and fund-raising tips.

The company that organized the conference, a direct-mail powerhouse called the Congressional Youth Leadership Council, runs an alphabet soup of such conferences that it says are attended by 50,000 students a year. It solicits recommendations from teachers and alumni of previous conferences, and it culls names from mailing lists, for which the council paid \$263,000 in 2006 alone, according to its last filing with the [Internal Revenue Service](#), before it gave up its nonprofit status.

Philippa Wharton has saved all the solicitations, she says, "because they irritate me."

"I like to build my kids up, but on real accomplishments," she says. "It's just too much. Instead of coming right out and saying, 'We organize these wonderful trips to Washington, and you can meet all these other kids who are interested in government and motivated,' they play up the honor angle. It's like a marketing scam."

In fact, the conferences, like many on offer, manage to attract engaged students from around the country. For the Washington gatherings, "scholars" (as conference-goers are called) bunk at the National 4-H Youth Conference Center, a brick Georgian flanked by a dining hall and meeting rooms, just outside the city. During their parent-free trip, students role-play political situations, attend workshops, hear speakers and sightsee, and it culminates in a dinner and dance at a local hotel. The young participants generally give the trips positive reviews: surveys by the council show close to 97 percent satisfaction, and many conferees later recommend friends.

But the big promises in its mailings and the sheer volume of its business have gotten the company into trouble in the last few months. At least one lawsuit has been filed over its conference during the

inauguration, and in February, after nearly 25 years in operation, it lost its Better Business Bureau accreditation.

At least 15,000 students, many of them alumni, signed up for the event before knowing the election's outcome. The invitation promised they would "share firsthand the excitement and ceremony of the inauguration of the president and vice president of the United States." Students did hear marquee speakers — [Al Gore](#) and [Colin L. Powell](#) — but many have complained they were left largely on their own during the inauguration and parade, to which they thought they had special viewing, and were shut out of crowded panels and other events.

"You're told it's very selective, it wasn't at all," says Rasheed Hamdan, a graduate of American Military University. He flew in from Baja California Sur, Mexico, for the conference, the first he had ever attended. He had special business cards printed up and bought a tuxedo for an advertised black-tie gala, which turned out not to be formal or an official ball but, he says, a "glorified prom night."

Parents paid \$2,300 to \$3,000 for students to attend the four-day program, a total of more than \$40 million.

Malcolm Evans, a sophomore at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, left the conference early in frustration. "For that much money, and the way the stuff was worded, it seemed like you would have a much more personal and exclusive experience," he says. To view the inauguration, he had to trek out at 2 a.m. to stake a spot at a lamppost along Pennsylvania Avenue.

The lawsuit was filed in New York by a father who says his 12-year-old daughter attended the conference but ended up watching the swearing-in on television.

Richard Rossi, a co-founder of the council and the company that owns it, Envision EMI, says there was a great demand to attend the conference, and with a staff of nearly 1,000 on hand, he believed that the company was well prepared. The logistical challenges proved overwhelming, though. "We were operating in almost a war zone, literally a presidential state of emergency," he says. "There were a lot of things going on that were inconveniencing even V.I.P.'s."

Still, he adds, the majority of participants "had a positive to transformational experience."

Acknowledging responsibility, the company has set aside discount vouchers for future conferences and \$1 million for refunds. It hired a former United States attorney general, Benjamin R. Civiletti, to study the events and recommend changes, and it is setting up a parents advisory board.

The company will not say how many letters it sends to parents and to students, nor has it responded to repeated questions about its marketing approach.

How is receiving an invitation an honor?

"These are students who are high-achieving leaders within their peer group, and they thrive on our programs, which are demanding and intensive," says Carmen McClaskey, Envision's director of communications. "Our focus has always been to have teachers nominate their high-achieving students for

our programs.” Alumni, she adds, have also been “extremely active” nominators. “We accede to their recognition of who the top students are and who will excel in our programs. ”



Solicitations begin filling mailboxes, virtual and real, as soon as children reach middle school, and continue coming through college. In a variety of settings, from Congress to Caribbean beaches, programs advertise their ability to cultivate leaders.

Denise Clark Pope, a lecturer in the School of Education at [Stanford University](#), does not discount that the experiences can be worthwhile. But the pitches, she says, “are feeding off myths and helping to perpetuate them,” that a child has been selected for a special destiny.

These ticker-tape parades in an envelope — the Congressional Youth Leadership Council tells potential participants they are “the nation’s most highly acclaimed students” and “most promising young leaders of tomorrow” — bewilder many parents and students. On the chat forum College Confidential, the thread begins in 2007: “I got this thing in the mail which I am not sure about. . . . Is it worth it? How does it look for college?” Others wonder: “Is it overpriced?” Is it “legit”? The thread continues into 2009.

The array of similarly named, competing companies underscores the extent to which the concept of student leadership has become big business.

There’s the National Student Leadership Conference, which offers a “select group of outstanding high school students” a taste of fields like medicine, engineering and business through field trips and simulations, and a chance to earn credit from American University (P.S.: the course comes for an extra fee — \$620 for one credit hour or \$1,650 for three, on top of a program fee of \$1,600 to \$3,000). There’s LeadAmerica’s Congressional Student Leadership Conference, which also advertises credit (P.S.: it’s pass/fail, from Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, and most universities will not accept it). People to People Ambassador Programs, which boasts of ties to [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#), has had to apologize for sending invitations to its leadership programs to deceased children and an Arkansas family’s long-dead one-eyed cat. And Leadership Classroom takes teenagers to the Caribbean each summer for “experiential learning” in sailing and scuba diving.

But the front-runner of them all is the Congressional Youth Leadership Council. By its own count, more than half a million students have attended its programs, dwarfing its rivals.

Mr. Rossi, a former staff assistant to a senator, and Barbara Harris, a former teacher, started the council as a nonprofit organization in 1985. They also started the for-profit Envision, which managed the council’s operations before buying it outright in late 2007. Though no longer a nonprofit, mailings still refer to the council as an organization, rather than a company, and the Web address retains the “.org” typically associated with not-for-profits.

Attendance for most students depends on ability to pay — \$1,480 for the five-day national conference, for example, and \$2,290 for nine days, plus transportation and some meals.

In 2006, the council grossed \$56 million tax-free, more than double its revenues in 2002. But only a small portion of that went to scholarships and grants: 1.7 percent, or about \$940,000, according to filings with

the I.R.S. At the time the council also had a \$12 million endowment that provided \$1.1 million in scholarships. That fund no longer exists, says Alexander Velaj, a board member involved in the dissolution of the council as a nonprofit.

Needy students are typically sent a brochure with fund-raising ideas and success stories of other students who have tapped friends, family and community to help pay their way. Ms. McClaskey says scholarships are "important and growing" but will not provide details. Mr. Rossi says that generally 90 percent of revenue goes into building up programs, and only 10 percent of the inaugural revenue was profit. Envision runs about 220 programs a year, most of them for 150 to 400 students each.

While the council's stated goals are educational, Envision has gone after profit openly: a vision statement adopted after 9/11 called for it to increase profits tenfold within eight years. "This big hairy audacious goal has ignited us to think completely out of the box when assessing potential opportunities," the statement said. "Halfway through this eight-year vision, we are on track to achieve our goal."

The company adopted that goal, Mr. Rossi says, as tourists fled Washington in 2001 and the company's survival was in doubt. Newly energized, the company branched out into new markets and bought out the nonprofit council, which aimed to grow "incrementally, or not at all," Mr. Rossi says.

The company sought growth with a purpose, he says: to "teach young people of great potential, not only at one point in their lives, but to develop this into an ongoing opportunity from young grades to middle school to high school and college," training them to step up in their communities and "do more than just take."



Citing student privacy, Envision turned down my request to observe activities at last fall's National Young Leaders Conference for high school students. The company did provide a copy of its program. Students were to meet their Congressional representatives, watch a debate in Congress, visit Georgetown, Chinatown and memorials, and do the role-playing exercises that are the hallmark of the conferences.

Anita Barrett, managing director for academic affairs at Envision, showed me curriculum guides containing scenarios the students would enact. In an imagined presidential crisis, Russia declares its intention to annex a swath of the Arctic laden with natural resources. Student workbooks include background texts on American-Russian relations, historical facts and treaties. Students play the president, cabinet members, lawmakers, military leaders and other key figures trying to work through a solution.

The simulations offer "something you can't really get in school," said Grant Burrall, managing director of K-12 programs. "It's not taught in math or science or history class. It's about responsible decision-making, listening, public speaking skills."

Ms. Barrett concurred. "Leadership is what runs through our conferences: collaboration, problem-solving, conflict resolution," she said.

In December, the company let me attend a day of sessions at a leadership forum for middle-school students from the Washington area and West Virginia.

In one room, about 20 students sat along the walls, a faculty adviser in the center, discussing ways to think about decision-making — taking into account what is known, and the many ways relevant facts may be unknown. Like many a self-help seminar, the program has its own gestures and lexicon; rather than applause, for example, students snap their fingers.

“Good job,” the teachers said regularly.

At another workshop, the students practiced presentation skills, speaking into a camera for 30 seconds and critiquing one another. At a third, they broke into groups of four to discuss how they would respond to a hypothetical situation. One scenario presumed they were Jewish, reared in a religious home, and members of the drama club. They are offered the lead in the senior play, “Jesus Christ Superstar.” What do they do, and what values are reflected in their choices?

Only one student, who was Jewish, said he would reject the role. “It’s valuing a lot of things: the trust of your parents, loyalty, tradition of my Jewish faith, family,” he said. Another student said that she would tell her parents it was her life and she wanted to do it.

Afterward, a faculty adviser asked students what they had learned about themselves. A girl named Susan volunteered that she was reconsidering her tendency to lie to her mother, and to cover for friends who were doing drugs.

“Snaps for Susan,” the moderator said, as the sound of crickets filled the room.

What do experts say about the programs?

In 2007, in a letter sent to middle-school students, a leading researcher in youth development endorsed the Envision program as “key to significant personal development and future success” and urged parents to send their children. Contacted recently about the program, the researcher, Richard M. Lerner, said he regretted endorsing the program and using [Tufts University](#) letterhead in violation of its policy barring endorsements of outside products or causes. Dr. Lerner is director of the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development at Tufts.

“I was in effect telling parents to spend their money, which I didn’t have any business doing,” he said.

He said he was aware of no research showing that programs like Envision’s produce successful young people. Rather, he and other experts in the field say, studies of [Boy Scouts](#), [Girl Scouts](#), 4-H and other groups are trying to isolate what makes for effective youth development programs. A few of the more promising features: positive and sustained relations with a caring adult, mentoring in life skills and opportunities to use newly learned skills.

“Obviously, a four-day program is starting at a deficit,” he said. “There is no evidence these programs have a lasting effect.”

Dr. Lerner said he agreed to lend his support after presenting his findings on 4-H programs to Envision executives, following an introduction from the chief of the national 4-H club, which has financially supported his research. They described their programs, and Dr. Lerner said he liked some elements. He said 4-H’s support did not play a role in his decision to endorse Envision’s program, nor was he paid.

One participant in the middle-school forum, Zoe Velling, of Ashburn, Va., told me the program helped her to realize that at heart she was a peacemaker, and to assume that role more assertively. Since returning home, she had mediated a conflict between two friends, one of whom had hurt the other's feelings. To the one who took offense, she said: "She didn't mean it. You misinterpreted what she was saying." To the other, she said: "Maybe you should keep some things to yourself. You don't need to tell everything."

She paused and added, "In the past, I'd just stand back and watch."

Her mother, Carolyn Velling, said the workshops helped Zoe think more maturely about responsibility. She was glad the family sprang for the trip, at \$1,200 for four days.

"Honestly, I wasn't sure it was a real thing," Ms. Velling said, "until I saw her teacher's name on it."



Leadership companies marketing to teenagers spend handsomely on mailing lists (the [College Board](#) is one source), but the biggest pipeline to customers is teachers and program alumni. Mailings usually name the person making the nomination and include a list of past participants from the student's school.

There are no hard and fast criteria for nominators. The council says it is looking for students who show leadership potential, academic achievement and extracurricular involvement. Last year, materials for some programs said a minimum G.P.A. of 3.5 was a must. That requirement has been relaxed. Now educators are told to use their own discretion. Typically, the company says, participants come from the top 5 percent of their class. The nomination form asks for nothing beyond the student's name, address, school year and sex.

"We do try to focus on the G.P.A. of 3.5 and above, but it's absolutely not the only indicator of achievement," says Shane Hedges, president of Envision. "High achieving can come in many forms — leaders in sports and bands, people who contribute to classroom conversation. We allow the teachers to tell us who are the students who have the potential."

Some teachers and guidance counselors toss requests for nominations in the trash; others see them as a way to recognize a deserving student. Some respond only to conferences that returning students have praised; others see the programs for themselves. Envision says it will cover accommodations for teachers but not transportation. LeadAmerica offers teachers grants of up to \$500 for classroom programs that promote leadership. The company says teachers are not obligated to nominate students to be eligible for a grant; they need only apply with a good proposal.

Anne Heitz, a guidance counselor at Fort Madison High School in Fort Madison, Iowa, believes attending leadership conferences can be "a neat opportunity for children." But she worries that a scarcity of financial aid shuts out low-income students. "It doesn't have any equity to it," she says. "That gets me going right there."

Linda Litterer, who teaches social studies at Fort Madison, sent her own daughter about seven years ago. "It was a huge boost to her self-confidence," Ms. Litterer says. Last year, she recommended 10 students for the National Young Leaders Conference, and no other.

Students are relatively isolated in her southeast Iowa town of 11,000, on the Mississippi. "There are some who've never even crossed the river," Ms. Litterer says. "For these kids, it is a big deal." The invitation's packaging, she says, "kind of reinforces that."

Erin Harmon says she chose the National Young Leaders Conference because of Ms. Litterer's recommendation. "I felt actually really honored," says Ms. Harmon, who has a 3.8 grade-point average. "There hadn't been someone from my school in five or six years. It seemed really official and really prestigious." The local paper ran a small feature before she left, and another when she returned. (The company offers press releases to send to hometown papers.)

She credits the program with helping her decide on a career in politics rather than law. She is headed for Wartburg College in the fall. She believes that recommendations from her counselors at the leadership conference helped win her admission (Wartburg admits 72 percent of applicants).

Patrick O'Connor, the director of college counseling at the Roeper School, a K-12 school for gifted students in Birmingham, Mich., says that when he gets these solicitations, he makes an announcement over the public address system. He advises any students interested in attending to stop by his office. "I'm happy to nominate whoever wants to go," he says.



In February, the Better Business Bureau downgraded Envision to an F rating.

As of April 8, 28 of the 57 complaints filed over the last 12 months had not been resolved. Issues included advertising practices, contract disputes and quality of the programs. Ms. McClaskey notes that the complaints spin off one event, the inaugural conference — in the prior two years, a dozen complaints had been filed — and fail to "reflect the value we have delivered to hundreds of thousand of students over nearly 25 years."

The council's Web site still features the seal of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Jeff Sherrill, an associate director of the association, says the seal is an educational version of the Underwriters Laboratories seal for electrical appliances, attesting that the programs meet minimum standards. The association, he says, reviews documentation that each program or contest submits for a range of features, but it does not endorse.

In Mr. Sherrill's view, a leadership conference is no more or less likely to enhance college applications than, say, soccer camp. "It doesn't fall into the same category as being selected by your county where there was truly some type of assessment and selection process," he says. "That becomes a true honor." By way of example, he cites appointment as a Senate page. "Honors typically don't come with a price tag," he says.

That is a sentiment echoed among college admissions officers, who say they do not place much stock in participation in such summits.

Susan Garrity Ardizzoni, director of undergraduate admissions at Tufts, says students whom she would hardly consider leadership material have received the invitations. In recent years, she has seen more applications from students citing attendance at these workshops as an achievement.

“But this doesn’t really give them any advantage,” she says. “For us, activities or essays are most meaningful for students where there’s an established track record or interest.”

Eric J. Furda, the dean of admissions at the [University of Pennsylvania](#), says that “the real depth to this in a highly selective process is: How has this shaped or influenced you? And your ability to articulate that.”

“For each opportunity, there will be a context or the deeper meaning,” he adds. “Where are you coming from, or where are you going with this experience?”

*Diana Jean Schemo, a former education reporter for The Times, is writing a book on the Air Force Academy, to be published next year by John Wiley & Sons.*

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