

Jeff Ochs '04 and Adrienne Baker '06  
are changing the faces of higher education BY KAREN OLSON

# in the ZONE

For many 20-somethings, the first year out of college is a tough one. A lucky few may take some time off to travel to faraway lands. But most find themselves on the bottom rung of new ladders—corporate, educational, nonprofit—where they try to find their footing, hoping to begin the long climb upward.

Jeff Ochs didn't find a ladder to his liking. So he built his own.

In the first year after he graduated from CLA's Honors Program, Ochs founded Breakthrough Saint Paul, a nonprofit organization that prepares traditionally underserved students for college. The program is based on the educational model of the Breakthrough Collaborative, a national organization that now has 28 affiliates across the country. Students in Breakthrough programs commit to at least two years of tuition-free summer sessions and after-school programs, focusing on core academic subjects. They're taught by smart, energetic college and high-school students, 72 percent of whom go on to professional careers in education.

#### The Comfort Zone Paradox

For Ochs, the road to this kind of meaningful, mission-driven work started with the click of a mouse. During his first year in CLA, Ochs received an e-mail from the CLA Honors Program about a teaching internship at LearningWorks, a tuition-free summer program for highly motivated students from traditionally underserved groups. "Prior teaching experience is not required," the e-mail said. "All majors and interests are welcome to apply."

Ochs applied, was accepted, and spent the summer teaching in a program that changed the way he thought about life—and education.

"I was completely out of my comfort zone every second of the day," says Ochs, who graduated *summa cum laude* in 2004 with a B.A. in history. The crash course in teaching demanded that he answer a lot of



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questions in a short amount of time. How do I get middle schoolers excited about studying Vichy France? How do people learn best? What do at-risk students need from me in order to succeed?

"That summer I started understanding what I call the comfort-zone paradox—coming to a point in your life where being outside your comfort zone is within your comfort zone," he says.

Comfortable with discomfort, Ochs, who is now 25, began his sophomore year eager to learn and to take on new challenges. He was so inspired by the program's positive effect on students and aspiring young teachers, he says, that he began to envision ways to make this opportunity available to other Minnesota communities—starting next door, in St. Paul.



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diagram. “You make a lot of mistakes. It’s messy.”

But the payoff is significant. Take Tho Bui, for example. An eighth-grader who hopes to become a math professor, Tho came to the United States from Vietnam with his family when he was in second grade. Staff members at Breakthrough St. Paul helped him apply for the Young Scholars award from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

In 2006 he became the first Minnesotan to receive the prestigious scholarship, which provides guidance and financial support for his entire academic career, even through graduate school, if he keeps his grades up.



### Breaking Through

Those visions became a reality two years later when, as a senior, Ochs worked with University faculty to create a proposal for what would become Breakthrough St. Paul.

Not only did Ochs get university credit for the proposal through the U’s Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, he also convinced Mounds Park Academy to host it and the national Breakthrough Collaborative program to back it.

“Creating my own job was really a dream come true,” says Ochs. But that’s not to say it’s been challenge free. He is, after all, working to reverse long-standing educational trends in underserved populations.

“The transition into middle school is a really hard one for kids who are smart,” says Ochs. “We found that a lot of kids who had been identified as gifted and talented, especially minority kids, were not enrolling in honors courses in seventh grade.” In fact, in St. Paul schools, only seven percent of students take honors classes and pass them. So it’s a testament to the success of the program that within its first year, every student in Breakthrough St. Paul had enrolled in and passed an honors class at his or her own school. This year, 65 percent are taking more than one college prep course.

Ochs may have progressed to a new comfort zone, but there are still moments of disorientation. He compares the process of learning to lead a non-profit at the age of 22 to learning origami from a

### Taking the Torch

Now that he’s coordinator, Ochs is the one sending, rather than receiving, recruitment e-mails. One of them reached recent CLA graduate Adrienne Baker.

Since March 2006, Baker has been the organization’s student and family liaison. She visits schools, talks with students and their families, and makes sure students are able to take advantage of resources available to them.

“I knew coming into college that I wanted to serve diverse urban populations,” says Baker, who declared both of her majors—journalism and cultural studies and comparative literature—in her freshman year. “I wanted to give people information to make informed decisions, to enrich their lives and experience, and to have power within their own communities.”

“We set a goal and the next day we start to go for it,” says Baker about the small staff that accomplishes so much. “We don’t think about limits very often. We consider our obstacles, but if there’s something important that needs to happen for these kids and for their success, we make it happen.”

Baker sees a future career in writing—in fact, she’s teaching journalism at Mounds Park Academy—but right now, she says, she’s committed to community service. So is Ochs, who hopes for a future of social entrepreneurship, building innovative organizations with social justice missions.

They aren’t resting on their laurels. But already, these recent CLA graduates are doing nothing less than changing the faces of higher education. ∞