

Freshman seminar provides impetus to found business

by Sara Peters

Most high school students have some way of gathering information about the college application process. They may even have a crack team of experts: an older brother, who is also the essay editor; a father, who is also the financial aid adviser; a guidance counselor, who is also the AP test expert. They may even have a few hefty books on the subject. Yet is it enough?

Understaffed schools, busy families, and financial limitations often leave students missing crucial information that may be the key to admission into their top-choice school.

These students now have a new Website to help them fill in the blanks, thanks to the efforts of two Princeton sophomores.

ROBERT J. MOORE, an operations research and financial engineering major, and **ADAM LUDWIG**, an undeclared A.B. student, officially launched YesLetter.com in September.

Words of wisdom

YesLetter.com provides articles and information to help students go to their top-choice school. It includes helpful tips, success stories, and horror stories about essays, applications, testing, interviewing, and more.

The staff writers are students of several Ivy League and other top-tier schools who struggled through the dangerous jungle called the application process and made it to the friendly, verdant campus of their choice.

In a way, the project was conceived in *FRS 129: Sex,*

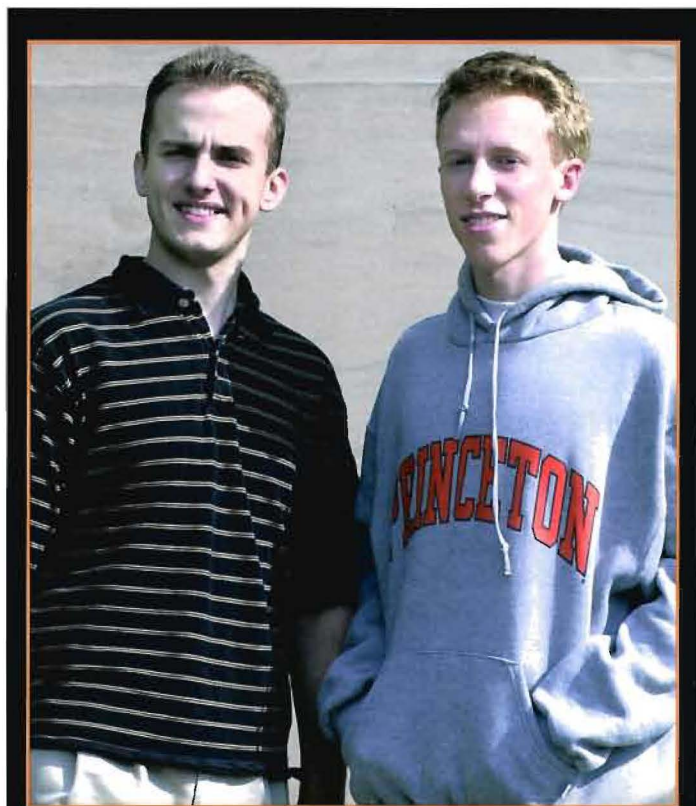


Photo by Frank Wojciechowski

Student entrepreneurs Robert Moore and Adam Ludwig founded Yes.com after taking *FRS 129: Sex, Money and Rock 'n Roll: Information Technology and Society*.

Money and Rock and Roll: Information Technology and Society, a freshman seminar taught by Computer Science Professor **DAVID DOBKIN** and Sociology Professor **PAUL DIMAGGIO** (see winter '02-'03 *EQuad News* at www.princeton.edu/~seasweb/eqnews/winter02-03/feature2.html).

Bob and Adam were classmates in the course, in which they thought a great deal about the Internet and how it can serve society. A group of *FRS 129* classmates decided to create a Web business to enter into the Princeton Business Plan Contest (*EQuad News*, spring 2003).

As college freshmen at the time, the headaches of the

application process were still fresh in their minds, and so the idea for YesLetter.com was born.

"We decided that a Website devoted to college admissions advice would be a great idea because there are tons of students who are hungry for this kind of information, but it isn't widely available," Adam said. "To get it you usually have to spend some big bucks."

Market research

For their business plan, Bob and Adam researched other options available to students, including books, Websites, and personal admissions strategists.

They found that while free Websites and books are more economically feasible for most families, comprehensive information covering all topics is limited. Conversely, admissions strategists provide extensive, personalized information and advice, but fees can range up to \$18,000 per student.

"And people spend the money," Bob said. "The market for that high-end, expensive service is out there. On the other end, there are the free Websites that offer the low-end option, and if you don't have the money, then you go that route, even if you know you're not getting all the info you need. So what we've done is plopped ourselves right in the middle."

Membership required

Most of the information provided on YesLetter.com is only accessible to members. A three-month subscription to YesLetter.com costs \$70, yet they do offer a fee waiver program for students who suffer from extreme financial hardship. They also offer special rates for schools to get a membership to serve their entire student body.

Their pricing is not aimed at making the business a large money-making enterprise, and Bob and Adam suspect that may have been seen as a weakness by the business plan contest judges. They did not win any awards, although they did come away with valuable feedback.

"The feedback from the judges was really helpful," Adam said. "We felt this was a viable business—maybe not on a multimillion-dollar level like the winners, but still viable, and we wanted to do it."

Bob and Adam spent their summer evenings turning YesLetter.com from an idea on paper into reality. They each

devoted a few weeks' salary from their summer jobs to the business, but the greatest commitment was time.

Bob tackled all the technical challenges of establishing the site.

"Credit card processing, authorization, registration, et cetera, et cetera," he said. "It was a huge endeavor."

Yet some of the most important work for the site was gathering the information for the articles. This required extensive research, as well as creating a network of students to provide the advice and insight the high-schoolers need.

"The one thing that could injure us is credibility," Bob said. "We need to prove that we are not only aware of what it's going to take to get people into colleges, but that we've got an expansive network of minds. So, we can show that our ideas have really matured and been agreed upon by a lot of different people."

Creative articles

Some of the articles created by this network of minds include the essay-related "Poetic Justice: Being Too Risky," and "Quick Tips for a Stellar Essay;" the interview advice piece, "The Full Package: What You Don't Say Matters;" "Asking With Class," which suggests ways to get the most out of your letters of recommendation from the people who write them; and "Hiding Your Money," which

gives tips about acceptable ways to receive better financial aid.

"We built this philosophy that the entire process is like a jigsaw puzzle," Bob said. "We talk about the big picture and about how to market yourself, how to have a consistent approach. We try to make our members think about how they want to present themselves, what they want their picture to be, and then give them all the smaller pieces they need to show that. They're putting their own puzzles together."

YesLetter.com also offers a \$1,000 scholarship awarded for "outstanding service to one's peers."

Adam and Bob aim high, trying to find time for YesLetter.com in between classes and activities. They're now focusing on advertising the site and the scholarship, expecting it will be popular once students know how to find it.

"This year we're establishing our brand," Bob said. "Next year we'll take over the world." 🍀