"Everyone thinks I'm crazy for wanting to go to the University of Maine instead of UMass Boston," Kyesha Slaughter said to me last week, clutching an envelope. "Can we talk about it? I have to mail my deposit today."

"What about the money?" I asked.

"It would cost the same. Maine gave me a good package that includes room and board. I went to visit UMass Boston and it's a good school too, but I want to live on campus and try living in a new place."

Codman Academy Charter Public School students are mainly first-generation, low-income students of color. They have done well at UMass Boston. This winter Chancellor Keith Motley came out to support the senior class when they took on the French Consul over the travel advisory issued by the French government to its citizens against visiting our community. We work with Bottom Line to support our students who attend Massachusetts state colleges and universities to increase college completion rates. Kyesha would have the advantage of built-in supports in-state.

I had never even looked at the website for University of Maine. I wasn't sure how far away Orono is. (Four hours.)

"Did Lianne [our Dean of College and Alumni Advising] recommend University of Maine to you?" I asked, remembering Kyesha's insistence on going out of state.

"I found it myself and insisted it go on my list," Kyesha answered.

"Did you visit University of Maine?" I asked.

"No, I couldn't because I had to work on the visiting days."

"It would be like you're a student coming from a foreign country," I said. "Maybe that's a helpful way to think about it if you go -- reach out to other foreign students, too."

"It's a really beautiful campus and it has everything," she excitedly explained, pulling up a chair so we could look at the website together. "I've been in a small school and only lived in Boston. I want to go to a big school in a new place. Look at what they have," she guided me through the site, "every major I could possibly want. It says in January it is only 3 degrees colder than Worcester."

"Yes, but under 2 percent of the student body is African American," I countered.

As the photographs of accomplished alumni -- Senator Olympia Snow, author Stephen King, etc. -- rolled on the screen, Kyesha declared, "They're going to have my photo there someday. I'm going to do something big."
Our experience and data predict Kyesha's chances of graduating from UMass Boston are much higher than at University of Maine. But I also know Kyesha and how determined she can be when she makes up her mind. Last spring, she had taken me to task for not nominating her for special programs, and so we had a heart to heart. "If I do," I told her then, "will you follow through and go?"

I nominated Kyesha for the American Youth Foundation's national youth leadership program at Camp Miniwance in Michigan and she had flourished. If she hadn't, I would have argued for her to stay nearby for college. She had proven something to herself and to me by her success in a distant program I knew well. As a junior, Kyesha had also attended a spring vacation philosophy program, Open Minds at Harvard University, where she had been so thoughtful that she was being invited back this summer to work as a counselor.

"I'll wear more layers when it's cold. I loved camp and they had a lot of white people," she argued.

"University of Maine is even whiter," I said.

"They're just people," Kyesha said. "I'm good with people. I want to do junior year abroad. I want to see the whole world. This is my chance to start. And it's a lot like Codman, too. They have special themed housing you can apply for and I'm looking at the one that is focused on wellness."

"What does your mom say?" I asked.

"She says it's really cold and really white," Kyesha laughed. "But if I want to go, she says I should."

"There will be bumps and hard times so find people there who can help you and let us be here for you too. You may have to get student life to get someone to come up there once a month so you can get your hair done," I smiled. "But if you're really sure, mail the letter."

It's not the advice I would have ordinarily given, because we have learned -- and data are born out nationally -- that many historically white colleges do not support our students' success through to graduation.

And then there's a pioneer. We send Kyesha north with love.