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College Summit encourages low-income high school seniors with average grades

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"I'm a natural born-hustler," begins the essay written by Inglewood High School senior Marquise Foster. "The only lesson I ever learned from my family is the 'art of hustling.' It's an art that has been perfected in my South Central neighborhood for generations. . . . The word 'hustle' is often portrayed negatively, as something associated with crime or wrongdoing. In my community, a hustle is a means of survival."

Marquise, 17, carefully crafted a powerful story of tragedy and accomplishment, of his drug dealer father shot dead by police, of his hard-pressed

mother placing him in foster care, of recommitting to his faith.

He hopes that his introspection will catch the eye of college admissions directors, that they'll see potential in a young man with average grades but plenty of self-confidence.

Marquise is among 250 seniors from local high schools who spent part of their summer at college application boot camps where students received one-on-one counseling and left with a portfolio that included a draft of the all-important personal essay.

The sessions were sponsored by College Summit, a nonprofit organization that partners with schools to increase college enrollment among low-income students with middling grades but strong leadership qualities.

Founded in 1993, College Summit operates in 170 high schools in 13 states, including six schools in Southern California, in the Los Angeles and Inglewood districts.

Its goal is to create a culture in which college is expected of all students, not only those with high grade point averages and test scores.

Krystal Greene is the College Summit advisor at Inglewood High School. She helps students work on their college applications and plan long- and short-term goals.

"Many come in the door saying, 'I'm going to this two-year school because my cousin went there,' and they haven't done any research," said Greene, who also teaches AP English literature. "They need to know that even if you have [a grade point average in the] twos, you can still go to a college; you can go to a Cal State. I see more students who are excited and expecting to go to college now."

A report by the Washington-based Education Trust said that the highest-achieving low-income students go to college at about the same rate as the lowest-achieving students from wealthy families. College Summit schools are seeing improvements, though, having raised the college-going rate of low-income students by 15% in the last two years, compared to a 4% rise among low-income students nationally.

Morningside and Inglewood high schools, where the program is in place, had an increase of 7% and 10%, respectively, in enrollment at UCs, state colleges and state community colleges between 2004 and 2006, according to data collected by California education agencies, College Summit said.

Next year, Inglewood and Arleta high schools will become the first College Summit partners in Southern

California to begin measuring college enrollment for all students. Sylmar, Crenshaw and James Monroe high schools are the program's other local partners.

"There is a lot of untapped talent out there," said College Summit founder J.B. Schramm. "For some students, the lightbulb comes on in the fifth grade, and for some it's in the 10th grade. Everybody has their unique path. We need to have a system in schools to help these students."

Schools are selected based on the support of districts and principals and on need, including graduation rates, college enrollment rates, access to Advanced Placement classes and numbers of classroom computers and college counselors. At least 40% of the students should qualify for free and reduced-price lunches.

College Summit provides a yearlong college planning class during the senior year, trains students to be role models for their peers and equips teachers and counselors with college resources. The program begins in the summer with four days of workshops that focus on writing essays.

"College Summit allows students to do the kind of introspection we look for during the selection process," said Matt Ward, dean of undergraduate enrollment at California Lutheran University, which held a recent College Summit workshop for 50 Sylmar and Inglewood students. "Obviously, we want to make sure students can do the work so they thrive here, but we also want to know what attributes they bring to the table to make our campus a better place."

During the writing session, coaches helped students mine their personal histories, personality traits, likes and dislikes and painful emotions to create compelling narratives.

"We're empowering them to feel like they're writers," said coach Celso Delgado Jr., a volunteer who works as a mental health occupational therapist. "Some of them walked out today and said they had never written that way before or told anyone these things."

In Marquise Foster's essay, he wrote of hustling his first job at age 13 as a sign holder for Cingular Wireless -- telling a "white lie" that he was 16 to get the job. Five months later, when the company caught on, he went to work at a Creole restaurant as a busboy, leaving three years later as assistant lead cook.

Eventually, he succumbed to the gang scene: "That thug lifestyle my father perfected had slowly but surely worked its way into my bloodstream and changed the child my mother raised into a menace to society."

After entering the foster care system, Marquise made school and God a priority.

"I'm taking my newfound knowledge about life and the personal growth I've had, and running with it," he wrote. "I'm confident that at the end of my route I'll find success waiting. Once found, my success will become my life's true hustle."

Craig Best, 16, also an Inglewood senior, wrote about how a library book he happened upon -- "The Girl in a Swing," by Richard Adams -- led to a personal epiphany.

"I would stop and reread a line," he wrote. "Reread it, inhale it and begin to dream. I dreamt of a world entirely different from my own, calm, simple and undoubtedly serene. . . . I found that if I could be exposed to something as powerful as that, by doing something as little as picking up a book, there had to be an infinite number of sensations out there, waiting for me to uncover them."

Best said that before the writing session, he didn't feel he had anything interesting to put into a personal essay. He was encouraged to write not about what he thought a college wanted to hear, but about what he thought was important.

He didn't try to make it sound good, he said. But it came out that way.

"I now see the world as an unsolved jigsaw puzzle, with an infinite array of pieces suspended above me," he wrote. "All I have to do is reach up and grab them. They are waiting for me, they are waiting for all of us."

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