



On Higher Ground

College Summit Propels Students to their Peak.

Marlena Tibbs knew she wanted to go to college. She just didn't know – or at least hadn't taken – the steps to get there. All that changed in the summer following her junior year at Charles H. Flowers High School (CHFHS) in Springdale, Md. That was the summer she was introduced to College Summit.

College Summit, developed by J.B. Schramm in 1993, is a program dedicated to helping low-income students make the transition from high school to college, thereby closing – or at least narrowing – the achievement gap between those with the most money and those with the least.

Fast Fact: Oscar-nominated actor Don Cheadle is a College Summit board member and spokesperson.

And it's a large one. According to the College Summit Web site, students from high-earning families that receive Ds on standardized tests have the same college-going rate as students from low-income families who receive As on the same tests.

Dr. John Deasy, the superintendent of Prince George's County district schools sought out College Summit's help shortly after beginning his tenure in Maryland.

Previously a superintendent in Southern California, he had heard of the organization and knew it would be a great asset in his new post.

Prince George's district serves 133,000 students. At some of these schools, the poverty rate is 100 percent, Deasy said. The overall rate of poverty for the school district is in the mid-60s. "They [College Summit] have unquestionably the best record of helping youth, particularly youth who live in circumstances of poverty and they're best in getting them into college through the process that they have developed," Deasy says.

College Summit is getting results on a national scale as well. According to its Web site, high schools participating in the program saw an 18 percent increase in the number of students applying to college in the 2006-07 school year compared to the year before.

Despite its success, College Summit is still limited to less than a dozen states: Missouri, New York, West Virginia, Virginia, South Carolina, Colorado and California. Plans for programs in Wisconsin, Indiana, Florida and North Carolina are in the works. Georgia Gillette, marketing director for the program, says this is because rolling out new pilot sites is a painstaking process and typically only one site is launched per year.

"College Summit is not just kind of an add-on program that somebody can just purchase off the shelf and run with. It's a real partnership," Gillette says. "It takes us a lot of time to make sure there is the buy-in at the district level, that there are enough colleges in the community to support the initiative and enough philanthropic commitment from an individual place."

Proximity to area colleges is also important because of College Summit's signature summer workshops, or, in College Summit-lingo, "college application boot camp."

Learn More: TakingITGlobal.org is an online community that connects youth to find inspiration, access information, get involved and take action in their local and global communities. It's the world's most popular online community for young people interested in making a difference, with hundreds of thousands of unique visitors each month.



The program will accept about 15 percent of a school's senior class – students who Gillette describes as “better than their numbers.”

“[These are] typically not your 4.0 students, they’re not your football captains, but they’re kids who teachers know that there is potential there,” Gillette says. The students spend four days sleeping, eating and working on a college campus. For many, this is an experience in itself.

Each workshop has three components. The first is called a “wrap session,” where facilitators help students overcome personal – and often painful – life experiences. The second is an intensive, team-based writing process, the outcome being a professional personal statement that is crucial for college applications and scholarships.

Tibbs attended her workshop at Morgan State University, which is about an hour from CHFHS. She says the workshop helped her write about things a college might typically ask in a clearer way. Students were also encouraged to share about themselves. “Everybody thinks that they have this hard or, you know, this isn’t going right for them and it’s just to find out how alike

everybody really is,” Tibbs says of sharing personal stories with others.

Lastly is the leadership component, which trains students to go back to their high schools and be role models for other students and help teachers teach the College Summit curriculum in the classroom. This part in particular has been very successful. “Some of them [the students] have started things like breakfast clubs where they get their peers together in the morning before school and read each other’s essays or they have FAFSA drives when the financial aid applications are due,” Gillette says.

Deasy says the feedback from the students has been extremely positive. “It’s remarkable what they get from this program that affects them not only in obviously college access, but in the school year as well.”

Tibbs stresses the importance of following through with the program after the workshop ends. “There were a lot of people that did the workshops, but then didn’t come back and do anything at the school and the benefits are crazy.”

Although the workshops are a big part of the program, Gillette says they are really

a conduit for the ultimate goal: equipping school districts and communities with the support they need to be self sufficient in getting their students to college.

While college attendance is important to the program, it’s not the only focus. Gillette says finding a path that is most suitable for the individual student is the most important thing – whether that be a four-year university, community college, the military or another option.

“The ultimate goal is just to get kids to see beyond high school and to have a plan that prepares them for the next step.”

And that’s exactly what Marlena Tibbs did. Through the College Summit program, she had a college call to recruit her. Now a freshman at Barry University in Miami Shores, Fla., she found the college of her dreams. “I was very close minded about where I possibly could go [to college] and through College Summit I found the school I am currently attending. And I absolutely love it.”

