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### **Nonprofit group helps to boost college enrollment**

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — Since the second grade, teachers and others told Nicole Whiting that she would never go to college.

“People are always telling you you’re dumb because you’re in special ed,” said Whiting, who has a learning disability that makes language comprehension and spelling difficult.

“Not my mom, but teachers would be telling me that I should go to community college. They said I wasn’t going to make it” at a four-year college.

Whiting stopped listening to that sort of talk after attending a free four-day College Summit conference that guided her through the college application process.

“It was so good to find this group of people who wanted me to go and accomplish my goals,” Whiting said. The 23-year-old is now a criminal justice and sociology double major at Marshall University, with a minor in history.

College Summit, a nonprofit organization, is helping nearly 2,000 West Virginia seniors — with or without learning disabilities — navigate the college application process this year. From choosing schools to applying for financial aid, the program encourages students at 17 high schools who might not otherwise pursue higher education to apply.

“More than 200,000 low-income high school graduates in the United States don’t try to enroll in college, when they could succeed there if they just tried,” said Randy Shillingburg, executive director for College Summit in West Virginia.

“In West Virginia, we target schools that have low college enrollment rates. Some of the schools we’re working at as of this year are Big Creek, Matewan and the new Lincoln County High School.”

Seniors are presented with a step-by-step curriculum and a workbook that leads them through career exploration, college selection, application completion and financial aid procurement. Teachers are also given training on how to lead their classes through each step.

“We are working with the schools, we’re providing tools, ongoing reports, online tracking, college immersion workshops in supporting these schools in college enrollment but it’s the schools themselves that are doing the work,” Shillingburg said.

In addition to the curriculum, up to 20 percent of students in each school's program are admitted to the four-day workshop each summer before senior year starts, so that they can share their experience with fellow students. These students are usually ones who are "better than their numbers and grades show, and influential to their classmates," Shillingburg said.

Though long-range data is limited because the program has only been in place in the state since 2004, there have been clear advancements in West Virginia, according to Stephanie Kehrer, a strategic initiatives manager in the organization's national offices.

In the 2004-05 school year, four Kanawha County high schools had all 750 of their seniors participate in College Summit. Of those, 65.5 percent went on to enroll in college. The statewide average for the same year was 59.3 percent.

Kanawha County Superintendent Ron Duerring said the program is offered in all of the county's high schools "because some of our culture in West Virginia doesn't see our kids going beyond high school."

Students have told Duerring that they would never have gone to college without College Summit.

"To think that you make that kind of change in a person's life is really something," Duerring said. "We all know that if they get a college degree, they will make more money and that is going to help them their entire lives."

Fourteen of 17 high schools in West Virginia have total participation among seniors.

Nationally, the program is in place in 11 states and the District of Columbia.

Nearly \$1.5 million from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, Energy Corporation of America, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation and All State Insurance is funding the West Virginia program for the next five years.

State legislators turned down a request to provide funding for College Summit last year, but Shillingburg said he plans to try again this year.

"There is a lack of college-going culture in West Virginia, and that takes time to change," Shillingburg said. "But letting students know that they can go and giving them the tools and confidence to try is what we try to do."

For Whiting, who went on to help counsel students for College Summit, that confidence made all the difference.

"It was so good to feel that someone cared," Whiting said, adding that she has

been inspired by her experience with College Summit to work with troubled children in the juvenile detention system.

“I want to help the ones that we have forgotten about already,” Whiting said. “They need a chance, too. Everyone does.”