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Program Helps Student Achieve Goal: College Summit Eases Transition, Provides Skills and Finds Funds to Allow More Youth to Succeed

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Nicole Whiting overcame her learning disabilities and proved skeptics wrong when she graduated from Marshall University this spring.

She attributes her success to College Summit, a national program that helps challenged students achieve their goal of going to college. She took part in the program in 2001.

Whiting, 24, was enrolled in special education classes from the second grade up to her 2002 graduation from George Washington High School. Nevertheless, the girl who was always told she wasn't college material received a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and sociology as well as a minor in history.

"I had a lot of people that just entertained my idea about it (going to college)," Whiting said. "They didn't really believe I could do it."

She continued, "Teachers wanted me to go to technical school. That's not what I wanted. I wanted to go to college."

College Summit helped her achieve her goal, she said.

She was one of the first in West Virginia to take part in the program after Energy Corp. of America introduced College Summit to West Virginia in 2001. Ten upcoming seniors from Kanawha County and two teachers flew to Colorado to attend a summer workshop, said Randy Shillingburg, executive director for College Summit WV.

Whiting was one of the 10 who attended the Colorado conference.

She learned about the possibility through George Washington High School counselor Kackie Eller, who knew she didn't have a lot of money but thought she was a pretty good student.

"She thought I was exactly what they were looking for," Whiting said.

Shillingburg says the program plans to work with more than 3,000 students during the 2007-08 school year.

"It's changing some kids' lives, it really is," Shillingburg said.

The program is intended to help students transition from high school to college life. In 2006, 90 West Virginia teachers were trained to deliver the curriculum to 26 high schools in 12 different counties.

"College Summit partners with schools to implement a post-secondary planning course for seniors," Shillingburg said. "It trains teachers and counselors to deliver a step-by-step curriculum and to utilize sophisticated online data management and tracking tools."

"We provide ongoing support to schools and train up to 20 percent of a participating school's rising senior class to become 'peer influencers.'"

Whiting had struggled with comprehension of language, spelling and reading from an early age.

She said she was motivated at the workshop and began taking the necessary steps for college application. The workshop helped her overcome two main obstacles: writing her essay for admission and finding a source of funding for college.

"I had an enlightening experience," Whiting said. "They helped get my story out and on paper, which was very difficult for me because I have always had a hard time getting my thoughts on paper. Most of the colleges I applied to had to have an essay. It gave me a stepping stone on writing."

Whiting applied to 10 colleges and was accepted by eight before she decided on Marshall.

"I was just going to apply and go to which ever one was cheaper. They made me realize there were grants and scholarships out there that I would be able to qualify for because I was lower income."

Whiting lived with her disabled mother during high school and in a dorm all five years in college. She has three older brothers, one of whom is autistic.

While at the workshop, Whiting also learned about Marshall's Higher Education for Learning Problems program, which works with disabled students. Participating in the program helped her land regular appearances on Marshall's honors list.

"They knew that program was there," Whiting said. "I didn't."

College Summit's goal is to help schools get more young people successfully into college, said J.B. Schramm, founder and CEO of the program.

College Summit was started in 1993, when Schramm worked as the director of a teen center in the basement of a low-income housing project in Washington, D.C. The non-

profit organization now has programs in 10 states. Within the past 10 years, more than 15,000 students have benefited from College Summit.

The program relies on the support of individuals, businesses and foundations.

"In every state we work in, from California to New York, we see a lot of lost talent - talent that could be successful in college - not going to college," Schramm said.

Schramm said he is impressed with the bravery of students from West Virginia and the creative ideas that come from the state's schools.

"The courage to imagine themselves doing something no one in their family has ever done," Schramm said. "I think the leap that many of our students have to make is greater here than in most communities."

There are 10 summer workshops planned for West Virginia students this year. Ohio Valley University, Glenville State College, West Virginia University-Tech, Bluefield State College, West Virginia University, Fairmont State University, West Virginia State University, West Virginia Wesleyan College and Concord University will conduct workshops in June through August.

"For first-generation college-going kids, College Summit gives them hope," said Ron Duerring, Kanawha County schools superintendent.

Whiting now is working with the rehabilitation center in Institute, preparing her resume, along with recommendations and portfolio, for employment.

"I still have my learning disability and will always have it. I just work through it," Whiting said.

She anticipates getting a full-time job by the end of the summer. She wants a juvenile justice or social work position.

"I plan on still working with the younger population," Whiting said. "Why not work with troubled teens and try to give them a chance? I don't think there is any time to give up on a child."

She also stays active with the program that got her where she is today.

"I still work with College Summit every summer," Whiting said. "I believe in the program and want to help other students see their potential. It's like a family to me."

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