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Learning to Succeed

College Success Foundation helps low-income students with school and life

Starting at age 15, Zuri Cambron spent her summers doing low-wage jobs similar to her parents' regular jobs, such as heat-pressing numbers onto garments at a warehouse and working in fast food. As her parents had taught her, she worked hard, but she felt discouraged when she realized it was the kind of employment she might have to accept her whole life. "My parents didn't want me to have that as my future," she says, but they didn't know what to do.

Then, as a high school junior, she learned about the College Success Foundation (CSF), a Seattle area-based nonprofit that provides a pipeline of support services and scholarships to low-income and underserved students. CSF's goal is to inspire students to finish high school, graduate from college and succeed in life, says CSF President and CEO Yolanda Watson Spiva, who has a Ph.D. in higher education.

"I had no idea college was even possible for me until I heard about CSF in 11th grade," Cambron says.

CSF College Prep Advisor Randy Nuñez gave a presentation about the foundation at an event Cambron attended, and afterward, Nuñez, who was with CSF from 2003 to 2010, encouraged Cambron to apply for one of CSF's programs. The student was

matched with a mentor who encouraged her in her high school studies, and helped her and her parents with the college-application process, from the personal essay to applying for financial aid, to applying for scholarships administered by CSF and others.

"I see college as a key to unlock the American dream," says Cambron, who received a scholarship administered by CSF, and in 2011 graduated from Eastern Washington University with a bachelor's degree in communications. With networking and resume-writing assistance from CSF, she eventually landed a job with an online travel company, focusing on Latin American markets.

"Nobody would have given me this opportunity without the college degree," she says. "And college wouldn't have happened without help from the College Success Foundation."

Most of the students CSF assists are from families below the federal poverty level, says Riley Haggard, CSF senior alumni relations officer. These students share a common disadvantage, he says. "Typically, no one is telling them to sign up to take the SAT [or other college-entrance exams] by a certain date. No one is saying,



Zuri Cambron.

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'Start visiting colleges; start the application process.' The stuff their more privileged friends can take for granted, they never hear, at least not in most of their homes."

Founded in 2000 in Issaquah, a Puget Sound-area community east of Seattle, the College Success Foundation is dedicated to erasing the opportunity gap, says CEO Spiva. She notes that society as a whole also benefits. "**First-generation college grads likely go on to be first-generation homeowners, first-generation investors, first-generation retirement-account holders.** Exposed to opportunities that result from a college degree, these kids can now imagine themselves living

By Scott Driscoll

College Success Foundation By the Numbers

97% of students who join the CSF high school program obtain a high school diploma (overall, approximately 80 percent of public high school students nationwide, from all income levels, graduate from high school).

76% of CSF Scholars enter college the first fall after high school graduation, and 60% of those CSF Scholars succeed in obtaining bachelor's degrees; some continue to postgraduate degrees (overall, 63% of high school graduates nationwide, from all income levels, enter college the first fall after high school graduation, and less than 11 percent of low-income students nationwide earn bachelor's degrees).

43,893 students have received assistance from CSF—ranging from support services and mentoring to scholarships—over the past 15 years. In 2015, CSF has assisted more than 12,000 students.

95% of middle-schoolers who have contact with CSF programs report believing that college is a possibility for them.

—Source: CSF (collegesuccessfoundation.org)

in a more prosperous world. When they spread that influence to their families, they begin to break the generational cycle of poverty.”

The foundation, celebrating its 15th anniversary this year, was begun by Bob Craves and Ann Ramsay-Jenkins as the Washington Education Foundation, with the help of a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Craves and Ramsay-Jenkins were serving on the board of a state agency devoted to improving higher education. The goal of their new foundation was to provide scholarships to increase the number of college-bound students from 16 predominantly low-income public high schools in the Puget Sound area.

After five years, the organization recognized that scholarships alone were not successful in boosting college-completion rates among low-income students. “We saw the need to have programs that offered multiple touchpoints along the way,” Haggard explains. “We needed to be constantly in their ear, pushing college.”

The name changed in 2006 to the College Success Foundation, and the focus broadened to include mentoring and outreach—talking to kids about college and how to prepare for college, as well as about scholar-

ships administered by CSF and other sources—starting as early as seventh grade.

Additional information and support through 10th grade help prepare students to apply for CSF’s Achievers Scholars program for high school juniors and seniors. **The upperclassmen meet monthly with community volunteers known as hometown mentors—successful business-people who may have attended the same high school as the students or have come from a background similar to theirs.**

The mentors facilitate conversations about college, and their presence models for the students what success can look like. Achievers Scholars also meet regularly with a CSF staff member assigned to their school, who helps them with college preparation, including making sure they take college-entrance exams on time.

Another service—often utilizing past Achievers Scholars who are now juniors and seniors in college—has been added to help keep students on track once they begin their postsecondary-school studies. The upper-level students, paid a stipend, are trained to mentor the college freshmen and sophomores. Activities range from holding discussion groups to assisting the newer students with paperwork for retaining federal financial aid, to game nights that provide social networking.

“Students can feel isolated on campus,” says Kellie Nakano, CSF’s regional director of program fidelity and quality, who notes that CSF-assisted students are attending colleges across the country. “Our mentoring program helps them feel included as part of a familiar group.”

CSF has also expanded its geographic scope to now include the Seattle, Highline, Tacoma, Yakima and Spokane school districts in Washington state, and to provide a slightly different version of CSF services for Wards Seven and Eight in Washington, D.C. Administrators for the school districts and wards determine which of their schools will participate in CSF programs.

Nico Roach, a 17-year-old 11th-grader at a D.C. high school, started benefiting from CSF programs when he was in middle school. CSF advisers visited his school each year to talk to students about going to college, and scholarships they could apply for. For eighth-graders, CSF also presented four extensive lessons during the school year to help students understand the specific steps that would prepare them to apply for college.

In addition, when Roach was in eighth grade he joined a CSF program in which advisers regularly met one-on-one, and in small groups, with him and other eighth-, ninth- and 10th-graders to explain and promote college opportunities, and **encourage students in the belief that through their efforts they could overcome economic or social barriers, and be successfully college bound.** Among other things, the students learned how to prepare academically, complete homework, study for tests, ask questions in class and manage their time.

“Nico grew up in poverty, far away from opportunities,” says his father, Anthony. “[CSF] has been a great help to my son.”

Now Nico is in the process of fulfilling requirements to apply for a CSF scholarship. The application process includes writing four 150- to 300-word personal essays, as well as being interviewed by a panel.

During the 2014-15 school year, Jonathan Hayden, the CSF adviser at Roach’s school, also encouraged Roach to apply for the U.S. State Department’s Central American Youth Ambassadors (CAYA) student-exchange program. Roach was one of the select group of students chosen this year from applicants across the United States. The high-schooler spent 10 days in the Dominican Republic and 10 days in Nicaragua.

“The D.R. was an eye-opener,” he says. “They didn’t have much ... no hot water, not much food. A lot of kids were homeless. There were people with no shoes.”

In Nicaragua, a boy making souvenirs out of palm flowers at a local market gave one to Roach. “He didn’t ask for money,”

Roach says, “[but] I saw he didn’t have any shoes, so I gave him money anyway. He said, ‘Thank you: This [being given funds to buy shoes] is the nicest thing I ever had.’”

The CAYA program made a big impression on Roach, who hopes to study mechanical engineering in college. “Once I earn my degree, I plan to go back to Nicaragua to start programs to teach them what I’ve been taught, how to find help into a career,” he says. He will learn this spring if he has received a CSF scholarship, and if that doesn’t pan out, CSF will help him apply to other funding sources, Hayden says.

Elwis Johnson, now a vice president with a corner office at a Puget Sound-area financial institution, was a 2001 graduate of one of the 16 original CSF-supported high schools. In his senior year of high school, when he first learned about CSF, he was fortunate to already have an acceptance letter

from Washington State University, but he didn’t see how he could afford to attend. “I couldn’t pay, so I assumed I wasn’t going.”

When CSF awarded him a scholarship, everything changed, he says. He began studying harder and looking forward to a better future. “The scholarship put the pedal to the metal.”

The first two years of college didn’t go well for Johnson, who was pursuing a marketing degree. He overloaded his schedule, nearly failed, and had to retake some courses in summer school. “I was struggling. I thought about dropping out. It was the CSF adviser who convinced me to stay in.”

The adviser, Pam Gant, helped Johnson revise his course load, and after Johnson received his bachelor’s degree in 2006, she helped him write a resume and cover letters for job applications. “She even taught me

how to negotiate salary when I went to interviews,” says Johnson. He has, in turn, helped other students. From 2006 to 2009, he served on the CSF Alumni Board, and this year he began co-teaching, with CSF’s Riley Haggard, a series of classes on financial goal setting for adults who participated in CSF programs when they were high school and college students. “CSF helped make me who I am today,” Johnson says.

While college completion is not a guarantee of economic prosperity, CSF believes it is the best pathway to opportunity. “If we don’t see college completion, we’re not successful,” Haggard says, adding that if a generational cycle of poverty

is to be broken, the final leg of the CSF pipeline should include passing on the education legacy.

Zuri Cambron encouraged her brother, Luis, three years her junior, to follow her example. He visited her while she was at

college, and she counseled him to apply for CSF’s Achievers Scholars program and work toward postsecondary education.

Her persistence paid off. Luis received a CSF-administered scholarship and went on to graduate from the University of Washington this year with a bachelor’s degree in medical anthropology and global health.

“Now I mentor my cousins,” Zuri Cambron says. “I tell them: ‘You, too, can go to college, travel, do all the things you see me doing.’”

“We strongly believe that a college education creates opportunity,” says CSF CEO Yolanda Watson Spiva. “The ZIP code into which a child is born should not be a predictor of his or her future success.” ■

Scott Driscoll lives in the Seattle area. For more information on the College Success Foundation, visit collegesuccessfoundation.org.



Elwis Johnson.

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A black and white photograph of a man in a suit leaning against a stone wall. The man is looking upwards and to the left. The wall is made of large, rectangular stone blocks. The lighting creates strong shadows on the wall.

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Laird Norton Wealth Management is proud to support the College Success Foundation (CSF). For 15 years, CSF has been providing a unique system of supports and scholarships to inspire underserved, low-income students to finish high school, graduate college and succeed in life.