

# Bridges could help more students succeed

*Imagine the benefits of enrolling thousands of disadvantaged students statewide in academic and social enrichment programs.*

Education holds the key to South Carolina's ability to compete in the knowledge-based economy. The odds are against us, however. While several indicators of academic rigor and performance have been improving, South Carolina continues to suffer from one of the lowest high school graduation rates in the nation. The proportion of South Carolinians attending college is also near the bottom among the 50 states. Students from the poorest households are the most vulnerable; they are four times as likely to drop out of high school as their higher-income classmates.

Everyone agrees that these disheartening statistics must change quickly. Yet while elected officials continue to debate public policy alternatives, some grassroots efforts are producing striking results. Ten years ago Furman University launched Bridges to a Brighter Future, a holistic academic and social enrichment program focused on high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Its objective is simple: to help promising high school students who struggle against significant financial, personal and cultural barriers earn a diploma and enroll in college.

Bridges is a year-round program that includes a four-week summer residential experience



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at Furman and year-round support through a tutorial and mentoring program called Saturday College. Approximately 25 ninth-graders are selected annually from Greenville County high schools; they remain in the program for three years, until high school graduation. Bridges provides its 75 students with the resources, self-discipline and academic confidence to thrive in high school, higher education and in life.

Since its inception in 1996, the Bridges program has had remarkable success. While every one of the students comes from a household with an annual income of less than \$35,000, all of them have graduated from high school, and 90 percent have enrolled in college.

What is the secret? The Bridges program boasts an incredibly talented and dedicated staff, many of whom are master teachers in area schools. They focus on the students as individuals.

"One young person at a time" is the program's motto, explains Tobi Swartz, the dynamic direc-

tor. "Bridges to a Brighter Future is not a cookie-cutter program. We tailor our activities and our counseling to fit each individual student. Every student has financial challenges, but each student also has unique personal challenges to address and overcome. And each requires individualized instruction and support. The result has been a lot of life-changing success stories."

Katie Nicholas, for example, completed the Bridges to a Brighter Future program three years ago and entered her senior year of high school with a new dream: going to college. She had grown up in a single-parent home and had overcome many challenges simply to stay in high school. Yet Katie fulfilled her dream by enrolling at the College of Charleston. Now a sophomore, she is majoring in molecular biology and planning for a career in medicine. She volunteers each week at the neurology/neurosurgery unit at the Medical University of South Carolina. Katie credits her Bridges experience with broadening her horizons and concentrating her energies.

Jonathan Riascos-Montoya has enjoyed similar success. He had only been in America for a few years when he was accepted into the Bridges program as a ninth-grader. He and his single mother, Hermilda (a lawyer by training), had fled their native Colombia after Hermilda was held at gunpoint by Colombian rebels. For over five years now, Hermilda has worked 12-hour night shifts to provide for her son. A few

weeks ago, Jonathan, now a senior, was awarded the prestigious Hollingsworth Scholarship to attend Furman University.

Jonathan and Katie are just two of many racially diverse Bridges students who have benefited from the distinctive opportunities provided through the Bridges program. The program's 10-year history of helping high school students surmount their circumstances and achieve their intellectual potential provides a model that should be replicated across the state.

Bridges to a Brighter Future has demonstrated that we need to change the way we assess and nurture students from difficult environments. They do not need to be the reason why South Carolina perennially appears at the bottom of national surveys. Instead, they can elevate the trajectory of their lives and in the process enhance the state's economic landscape and social welfare.

The Bridges program is intended not simply to keep students busy during their summer months but rather to help them develop the skills and self-confidence to lead productive, self-sustaining lives. Imagine the benefits of enrolling thousands of students in such comprehensive enrichment programs statewide. Imagine.

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