Education: Pathway to Success

The Community Foundation of Collier County is building scholarship opportunities to bolster the success of local high school students’ academic careers—boosting the local economy and breaking families out of poverty.

Improving the Quality of Life

IN COLLIER COUNTY

The Community Foundation of Collier County is a tax-exempt, public charitable foundation, established in 1985 to increase private philanthropy in Collier County. The Foundation improves the quality of life in Collier County by connecting donors to community needs and providing leadership on critical community issues. For good. Forever.

In addition to providing scholarships and fostering collaboration, the Community Foundation provides critical grants each year to local organizations working on the forefront of education and early childhood development, including Grace Place for Children and Families, Guadalupe Center, Champions For Learning, Early Learning Coalition of Southwest Florida, FunTime Early Childhood Academy, and Collier Child Care Resources, Inc.

Based on key indicators, Collier County Public Schools is doing its lion’s share in developing scholars with bright futures. Since 2011, it’s boosted high-school graduate rates to 86.7 percent—a 14 percent jump in five years. On the other end of the spectrum, the No. 1 priority in the district’s two-year strategic plan is a focus on early childhood education to get little ones ready to learn and succeed.

Yet, ultimately, does it mean if a graduating senior who’s worked hard and earned the grades can’t afford to go to college? What if that graduate is the first in their family to graduate from high school? Or be accepted into a two- or four-year program? Or a technical college or vocational training program? What if high-achieving college students drop out prematurely, without finishing their degree, after staring down the reality of their rising school-debt burden?

People with higher levels of education typically earn more throughout their lifetime and are productive contributors to local and state economies. In Florida, those with a bachelor’s degree earn a median annual salary of $63,993, compared to $58,065 for an associate’s degree and $35,473 with a vocational certification, according to the research and advocacy organization Florida College Access Network. A high school diploma nets an income of only $26,109.

For many in Collier County, higher education is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to break out of poverty: 67 percent of the public-school student body faces economic need according to federal poverty guidelines.

That’s why the Community Foundation of Collier County has become a game-changer in helping aspiring students not only get to college, but graduate, too. The Foundation has untangled the messy web of scholarship research with its year-old Scholarship Connector. The online website colliercountyscholarships.org allows students to input their information and it automatically searches nearly 260 potential local scholarship opportunities, generating a list of the ones for which that student qualifies.

This cuts down on arduous, time-consuming searches that lead to dead-ends, resulting in frustration to the point that students may stop looking—and that scholarships go unnoticed and never attempted.

“The Scholarship Connector helped to level the playing field,” said Community Foundation Education/Scholarship Director Sharon Bayata. “Not only that, but it gives all students—no matter their background—an easy opportunity to research and narrow their search. Some students don’t know where to begin, but with a tool like this at their fingertips, they’ll be more willing to try.”

University of Florida freshman Bensey Pierre-Louis, who was born and raised in Collier County by parents who emigrated from Haiti, is thrilled with the Scholarship Connector. He earned the Frank and Ellen Daveler Educational Scholarship, which covered half of his tuition. He keeps checking back because the Foundation is continually adding new ones, some deadlines had passed, and some funding opportunities apply to juniors and seniors in their majors.

“The format has been easy for me,” said Pierre-Louis, 19, who plans to become a physician’s assistant. “My parents weren’t able to provide for me, so I relied on scholarships to attend school this year.”

Bensey took advantage of the Champions For Learning’s intensive College and Career Prep Program offered to all 11th graders in the county and worked closely with Bayata. He graduated in 2016 from Lely High School in the top 10 percent of his class—becoming the first in his family to graduate high school.

“This is a significant milestone in my family,” he said as a matter of fact. “Having the support systems really helped me out and pushes me to excel. They are the kind of people who know I have potential.”

The Community Foundation also is a strategic partner in Future Ready Collier, a collaborative working group dedicated to ensuring every Collier County child is ready to succeed academically, from kindergarten through college graduation. “This is a unique time for Collier County in that everyone’s coming together and moving together to achieve these goals for these kids, from little on up,” said Eileen Connolly-Keesler, President and CEO of the Community Foundation of Collier County. The Scholarship Connector was funded by an anonymous donor and is supported by Collier County Public Schools and Future Ready Collier.

By the Numbers: Collier County Public Schools

Where Grads Are Headed

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With its 20-year track record in administering scholarships, the Community Foundation has launched hundreds of futures. This year, the Foundation granted $850,000 in scholarships to 105 students. Bayata points out that “we couldn’t have this arm of the Foundation without the amazing people who start scholarships.”

The Foundation has more than 40 scholarships and is actively working to grow its scholarship resources. “What’s the piece we can help the most with? It’s the scholarship piece,” Connolly-Keesler said.

The Community Foundation hopes to help curb the high rate of students who drop out of college because they become downright frightened by the rising cost of their school debt. In Florida, four-year graduate rates range from a low of 13.5 percent to a high of 67 percent, depending on the institution. The amount of debt students are carrying is jaw-dropping: $61 billion worth of federal loans in Florida alone. The Sunshine State boasts one of the lowest debt loads nationwide, with borrowers owing an average of $24,181. But young 20-somethings may fear embarking on their next life journey laden with such debt.

Despite the fact that both the Republican and Democratic parties pledged to address rising college costs and debt following the Great Recession, the class of 2016 was the most indebted in history, according to Forbes. Florida has the 13th highest student-loan default rate in the country, which has a reverberating effect on government coffers and taxpayers. Last summer, Troy Miller, of the Florida College Access Network, told the Miami Herald, “One of the things that we know is true about students who are more likely to default on their loans is that they’re also least likely to finish their degree.”

Connolly-Keesler doesn’t want to see any of this. “We want students to have access to scholarships so they can get through with the least amount of debt possible, and so they don’t quit. Right now, we’re scratching the surface of what we need.”

The statewide Take Stock in Children scholarship and mentoring program, administered through Champions For Learning, has been a phenomenal success. The Florida Pre-Paid Foundation matches, dollar-for-dollar (up to $500,000), every $4,000 that Champions raises for two-year tuition scholarships for underserved students. The Foundation and Champions are working on a pilot program to match current Take Stock in Children students with donors to provide additional scholarship support so that they can complete their four-year degree. All scholarships will be entered into the Scholarship Connector with the donor’s criteria (career path/field of study, grade point average, higher educational institution, ethnicity, etc.).

“We’re proud of our students,” said Champions For Learning President Susan McManus. “They understand this comes from a generous, caring community. The Scholarship Connector will have an exponential effect. It will engage all of us in ensuring that each young person has an opportunity to seek scholarship support and they will become self-advocates.”

The Foundation also is working to build a sufficient endowment to provide many more scholarships. A $20,000 investment is the minimum required to start granting from a named scholarship immediately; it would generate a $1,000 educational gift to a student in need each and every year if the fund is endowed. Smaller donations bolster existing scholarships based on the donor’s interest. “We would love to see people create legacies for themselves, their children, their school, a teacher,” said Connolly-Keesler.
The first five years of life is the crucial developmental period for forming neural pathways and social and emotional connections. This is the time of development that lays the foundation for future learning. "Think about this: The earliest years are the most formative years in a child's life. The brain grows 90 percent, so many habits form those first five years," said Niccole Howard, executive director of Collier Child Care, a partner in Future Ready Collier.

Best estimates, Howard said, is that there are 17,000 children under the age of 5 in Collier, which has about 200 early-learning providers. The state subsidizes school-readiness for fewer than 1,000 of them. The federal Head Start pre-K program benefits about 800, according to Fun Time Early Childhood Care, a partner in Future Ready Collier.

Currently, there are approximately 5,000 children under 5 in low-income families, at least 4,000 of them aren't accessing early-education programs—at all.

An estimated 67 percent of public school students come from poor families. But the rate of poverty is even higher for families with pre-5-year-olds, Howard said. "Parents are the first teacher," said Howard, whose nonprofit organization runs four sites and offers professional development for early-childhood teachers and social workers. “What we focus on is providing the highest-quality early start to families that otherwise couldn’t afford it,” she said, noting that 75 percent of Collier Child Care’s student come from low-income or working-poor backgrounds.

By the Numbers: Collier County Public Schools

Demographics

Students enrolled in the Voluntary Pre-kindergarten program at “Child’s Path, A CCCR Early Childhood Development Center” have fun while becoming kindergarten ready

Howard, executive director of Collier Child Care, a partner in Future Ready Collier. Students enrolled in the Voluntary Pre-kindergarten program at “Child’s Path, A CCCR Early Childhood Development Center” have fun while becoming kindergarten ready

The books are dense with data on the importance of early learning. And Howard can tell you the many issues negatively impacting early childhood education in Collier: lack of infant-care and toddler slots, poor pay and a wide wage disparity between early childhood and public school teachers; the expense of daycare; lack of transportation or understanding about local resources; and a dearth of funding across the board.

The biggest need is scholarships or tuition assistance to underwrite admission costs because early childhood providers follow state regulations specifying child-to-teacher ratios, while balancing their budgets, Howard said. The Community Foundation granted Collier Child Care $15,000 last year and $11,000 this year, in addition to two donor-advised grants of $10,000 each, for tuition assistance. Howard would grow her operation if funds permitted, but she feels lucky. “It’s very hard for private providers. We’re fortunate that I can write grants and fundraise. They can’t,” she said. “There’s a need for more providers that offer scholarships to families.”

Future Ready Collier has two working groups—one addressing gaps in early childhood education. The other is focusing on how to get more high school graduates into—and all the way through—college, vocational schools and professional certification coursework. “By aligning our work, we all benefit from the collective lift in the key areas of early childhood education and college and career readiness,” said Collier County Public Schools Superintendent Kamela Patton, Ph.D.

Future Ready Collier is a network of more than 35 organizations, businesses, schools and community members. “What is inspiring about this collective work is that we are learning from each other and leveraging resources to better serve our children and young people toward these community-wide goals, with the end in mind—young people who are well-prepared to be contributing members of their community,” said Champions For Learning Vice President Lisa Church.

The Community Foundation of Collier County has been selected as a recipient of a $50,000 challenge grant from Florida Philanthropic Network as part of its College Access & Success Initiative. Included in the funding is a $5,000 grant for Future Ready Collier’s administration costs including: convening, collaborating, facilitating, and communicating among the Future Ready partners.
For successful CEOs, business owners and professionals, it is easy to be humbled, and inspired, by driven students like Bensy Pierre-Louis and Angie Michelle Zavala Santos, a Lorenzo Walker Technical High School senior with a goal to pursue a passion ignited by learning to sew from her grandmother: fashion. “I was amazed at the things she could create with a piece of fabric,” said Angie, 17. She has decided to meld her entrepreneurial and marketing spirit unleashed at Lorenzo Walker by pursuing fashion business management. Angie ultimately wants to open her own clothing boutique.

Like Parre-Louis, she will be the first from her Honduran family to attend college. Like him, she found randomly searching for scholarships “super hard” until utilizing the Scholarship Connector and applying for 20. In March, she received word that she had received at least one of them: a $1,000 gift from the Forum Club. “My mom was like, ‘There’s hope for all of us. We may not have the financials but at least you are going out of your way to find those resources.’” Her parents erroneously thought a scholarship meant all of the costs were covered. “It’s been difficult to explain to them what I am doing. They don’t understand. They think one, and it’s covered. ‘It’s been difficult to explain to them what I am doing. They don’t understand. They think one, and it’s covered. ‘It’s been difficult to explain to them what I am doing. They don’t understand. They think one, and it’s covered. ‘It’s been difficult to explain to them what I am doing. They don’t understand. They think one, and it’s covered. ‘It’s been difficult to explain to them what I am doing. They don’t understand. They think one, and it’s covered.’”

Angie earned As and Bs and worked two jobs, one at Grace Place, where her mentor had fashion merchandising expertise. She also participated in Champions For Learning’s College and Career Prep Program. She assumed these types of opportunities are available throughout the state, though they are specific to Collier County’s vision and philanthropy. “I thought every county had all the resources I had,” said Angie, who applied to five schools and had plans in place to maneuver the scholarship application process. Now, she said, “I thought every county had all the resources I had,” said Angie, who applied to five schools and had plans in place to maneuver the scholarship application process. Now, she said, “I thought every county had all the resources I had,” said Angie, who applied to five schools and had plans in place to maneuver the scholarship application process. Now, she said, “I thought every county had all the resources I had,” said Angie, who applied to five schools and had plans in place to maneuver the scholarship application process. Now, she said, “I thought every county had all the resources I had,” said Angie, who applied to five schools and had plans in place to maneuver the scholarship application process. Now, she said, “I thought every county had all the resources I had,” said Angie, who applied to five schools and had plans in place to maneuver the scholarship application process. Now, she said, “I thought every county had all the resources I had,” said Angie, who applied to five schools and had plans in place to maneuver the scholarship application process. Now, she said, “I thought every county had all the resources I had.”

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The work of Ana Mejia, the Homeless & Runaway Youth Program case manager at Youth Haven, is also humbling and inspiring. She works with teens ages 16 and older who have fled a toxic home or aged out of the foster care system. They have no positive, familial role models—but still have a vision for their own future. “These are teens who didn’t want to call the state. They have very difficult home situations, but because they are older, they chose to take matters into their own hands and removed themselves from the situation,” Mejia explained.

The Community Foundation has provided grants for the Homeless & Runaway Youth Program, which has aided 30 since its inception in 2014 and is currently managing 10 teens. “We help them become self-sufficient. Our priority is education. It’s No. 1 on our list. Not everybody needs the same assistance. Some don’t want to go beyond high school,” said Mejia, who taps into the National Association for Education of Homeless Children and Youth and the Scholarship Connector. She pairs tutors with driven students to help them graduate or obtain their General Education Diploma (GED)—and go beyond. Mejia can tell you about clients who have been accepted to Hodges University, Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida SouthWestern State College, the University of North Florida, and out-of-state schools. She will tell you how they achieved their GED and what it means to them. “Some of our teens, once they have stable housing, they can focus on school and apply themselves and do so well,” she explained. “Once they have their basic needs met, including medical and dental hygiene, and mental health counseling, they feel they have adults supporting them in a positive way, and they blossom as a student. You’d be surprised they want to be in school because they struggled so much to get to school. They don’t want people to know they are homeless.”

The success stories of first-generation college students and struggling teens can be paired with the success stories of Collier County residents who want to have a lasting impact by supporting the rising generation. “It is personal dream that every student that graduates from a Collier County high school can go to college or technical school or get their professional certification and that they would be supported in that endeavor. It is my personal dream because it’s so daunting,” said Bayata. “Scholarships have ripple effects that continue throughout the community and families. Scholarships are truly a reminder that someone else believes in you, other than yourself or parents. That’s an incredible motivation. They succeed because other people believe in their potential.”

Invest in Future Success
You can invest in local students and make an impact in the future of our community.

Your donation to the Community Foundation of Collier County could provide:

- **$500**: A college student’s books for one semester
- **$1,000**: Support the existing Community Foundation scholarship of your choice or the Community Foundation’s General Scholarship Fund
- **$2,000**: An electronic device such as a scientific calculator or iPad mini for 8 students to succeed in school
- **$3,400**: One semester of college for a student at local college
- **$20,000**: A scholarship in your name in honor of a loved one for an area of education of your choice that can begin granting immediately
- **$100,000**: One year of preschool in a kindergarten readiness program for 11 children
- **$1 million**: $50,000 in educational grantmaking per year, in perpetuity
- **$6 million**: A one-time $2,000 scholarship for every 2017 Collier County graduating senior

You can make a difference. Contact the Community Foundation at 239-649-5000 or visit cfcollier.org to find out how your donation can help local students of all ages; create a fund in your name for educational grantmaking; or create an estate plan for future support of the educational dreams and aspirations of our students. To see local scholarship opportunities, visit colliercountyscholarships.org.