

In Their Words

Ten Outstanding Student Essays



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final year of high school. My accident placed even more responsibility on me. Now I had to get on top of my

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a tutor willing to come to one of Philadelphia's worst projects to work with me on a daily basis. I was deter-

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in July of 1995, I was still physically challenged, but I didn't reveal my medical problems. While I was working

on the construction projects in the fall of 1995, I was in the process of rehabilitating myself, but I never once

uttered a word about the pain and suffering I was enduring. I was determined to do the work. The pain was

relentless and I wanted to quit many times, but I had to "suck-it-up" because I knew this kind of work was

what I needed to fuel my confidence. In looking back, I felt it was definitely worth the time and effort. My

sweat and tears will forever be with those 5 houses on 15th and Montrose Street. Those houses are a constant

reminder of how my tragedy turned into a positive experience. Through my tragedy, I have discovered that

Celebrating College Summit's Ten-Year Anniversary

The inmost,
in time,
becomes the
outmost.

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

J.B. Schramm

CEO and Founder of College Summit

Dear Reader,

College Summit frequently refers to the students served by our program as being "better than their numbers"—young people whose test scores and grades don't reflect all that they are or can be. That is why, from the very beginning, College Summit has placed enormous importance on developing a curriculum and volunteer-driven process that guides students to produce striking and authentic personal essays as a core element of their college application.

Students' personal essays reveal what numbers cannot: the courage, humor, resilience and strength that make up each of their lives. The creativity and skill they display in their essays illustrate what they are capable of achieving in a safe, supportive and productive work environment. Developed by a Harvard educator and close friend Dr. Keith Frome, College Summit's trademarked writing curriculum is a collaborative effort that encourages sharing, trust, creativity and powerful description.

In celebration of our organization's ten-year anniversary, we have worked with a panel of external panelists to select the ten essays that best capture the promise of our students. As you can imagine, selection was no easy task and we sincerely appreciate the time and careful thought that went into reading and evaluating each essay.

Likewise, College Summit is grateful to the thousands of students, volunteers and educators who participate each year in our program. Our organization has been strengthened by each of their individual and collective efforts, and this book is but a sampling of their stories and promise.

Happy Reading,



J.B. Schramm

CEO and Founder



Keith W. Frome

Headmaster, Elmwood Franklin School

Dear College Summit Community,

Imagine, if you can, my constant surprise at what College Summit has become since it began in the basement of a teen center in Washington, DC. I know, I've read, I've digested the dramatic metrics that draw clients and foundations to College Summit. But these discrete chunks of data will never capture my amazement about what J.B. and his team built from a gathering in 1994 of four, spiritually hungry students and what they made with some notebook paper, pencils, pens, magic markers, masking tape and butcher block sheets. I stand agog at what they've done. College Summit has departments and an organizational chart and regional offices and division chiefs and information systems. It's got its own stationery and logo, man! A strategic plan and a Board of Directors. And--most importantly--10,000 students who crossed a bridge to a place where they have an exponentially better chance to unfold and to become, to reach out and to give back.

Notice I broke a number of grammatical rules in that paragraph. I had to in order to express myself more fully. That's the first message we gave to those first four students in that Adams Morgan basement. "You guys are going to write an essay that illustrates your life and expresses your heartbeat. In order to do that, the first thing we are going to do is throw all of the rules of grammar and structure you learned in high school out the window.

Don't worry--for now--about spelling and punctuation and paragraphs. We'll come back to those rules at the end. Just open your mind and write for ten minutes straight. Just write. Write. Write." And their faces lit up and they flew.

I hold vivid images of that first summit. My first assignment from J.B. back then was to come to DC to teach those four young people how to put together a college application and help them make a list of where to apply. He warned me that the students had less than impressive grades and standardized test scores. They did have a burning ambition to go to college, and they were the lights of their communities and their families. Without scores and grades, I thought, they were left with only their stories as a way to break the barrier of a college's gates. I knew from my work in the Freshman Dean's Office at Harvard College that the application essay was normally the dullest part of an applicant's portfolio. But when an essay was fresh and original and expressed an authentic voice, when an essay sang, that is, the candidate would automatically leap to the front of the pack and get serious consideration. We decided to focus on the personal narratives of these original four, and we set out to nudge them to write in their own voices and tell stories from their lives that even they themselves thought no one would be interested to read.

Those students had never been taught to write a personal essay. They had been drilled to write the classic "three paragraph" composition. While effective for certain audiences, this traditional essay form is deadly for the college admissions officer, who reads thousands of them. This group had to do something different to give their essays some lift. To get them airborne, I created the basis of the College Summit writing curriculum.

The idea is that every piece of student writing should be approached with the same respect as the work of a published writer. In other words, we should assume that there is as much intense meaning to be found in an 11th-grader's composition as in a T.S. Eliot poem. The writing teacher therefore needs to be a gifted reader and interpreter of text more than a compulsive corrector of syntax. I then borrowed the technique of the "free write," which is often used with a young writer to get over his writer's block. You give the student a pencil and paper and tell him or her to write whatever comes to mind for ten straight minutes without stopping.

We asked our first four students to free write in order to break through their inhibitions and to shatter the standardized composition habits they had been taught so that their true voices could be given some airtime. And we read the spill of thoughts of a free write with the same critical intensity we would give to a classic poem. By applying the techniques of close critical reading to the free writes, we not only launched their essays but we proved to the young writers, right before their very eyes, that they held within them, unconscious and flowing, magnificent ideas and profound stories.

I brought those first essays home. My father-in-law, a tough, Italian, raise-yourself-by-your-own-bootstraps immigrant with an 8th-grade education, picked them up and started reading them. His eyes glistened and then he started to rave about the essays; he even read some out loud. I knew then that if these essays could move him, they could certainly move a college admissions officer pinned down by thousands of three-paragraph ditties. And move they did as the essays in this collection will move you now.

These essays represent the spirit of the work done at College Summit workshops throughout the country by thousands of urgent, young souls and hundreds of Writing Coaches and teacher mentors. I am proud to have been among these young writers in body and in spirit.

So, enough of my telling (the cardinal sin of writing); it is time to show. These essays speak for themselves, and they will show, simply and eloquently, as Writing Coach Margot Vincent once put it, souls on paper.

Yours,

Keith W. Frome, Ed.D

"My high school counselor told me I wasn't college material ... but once College Summit put me on a path to college, I was on a mission. I worked harder than anyone else there, determined to open the doors of opportunity for myself."

*~Jahi Davis
College Summit '96
Graduate of Temple University 2002*

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"At College Summit, we create ripples in the pond that ultimately change the entire landscape. What can be better than taking four days out of your schedule to help change the next four years for a promising student?"

*~Jessica Solomon
College Summit '99;
Graduate of University of Maryland 2005*

Pinpoquin Theresa Downey

Connecticut College Workshop, 1995

Theytay. That means “grandfather” in my traditional Tewa language. It’s more than just a definition, though. He’s my culture, my language, my songs, and my dances. He’s a respected elder in my community. When I look at Theytay I see 85 years into my past—85 years still standing strong. He might need to use a cane now, his spirit will never need one. Many elders are leaving this world and yet Theytay is still here. Just last week he had to bury his youngest brother. It was with this burial that I came to realize that my Theytay is getting old.

It never occurred to me before that he could die, but now I realize that all living things will eventually pass away. It is this thought that makes me want to stay with my Theytay every second of every day. He has so much wisdom that hasn’t been shared and I want to know that he knows. I want my children and grandchildren to be able to look into my eyes and see their entire heritage that I see when I look into my Theytay eyes. I want them to see more than brown, Pueblo eyes. I want them to look into my soul and know they are and where they come from, as I do with my grandfather. I want their lives have meaning. I want my life to have meaning.

How can I learn all the things I want to learn when I hardly get to go home and spend time with my grandparents? Boarding school is where I live, because my grandparents tell me that education is important. They want me to be able to “Understand the white society. Someone has to be able to understand that big words used in the white world. People will try and steal this land and someone has to be able to make them understand that it can never be sold.” They chose me to be that “someone.”

It’s very hard to balance between the white world and my Tewa world. I sometimes wonder why it has to be me. There are times when I want to go home for a ceremony, but can’t because there’s a big exam I have to take or a paper that needs to be completed. It disheartens me at times, but it also gives me strength to continue my education.

I never understood why I was encouraged so much to be anything I wanted to be. I guess people realized, at a very young age, that I loved school and I enjoyed learning. Therefore, they pushed me to learn, but also instilled in me my culture and taught me never to forget where I come from and who I am. My Theytay told me that the land is very important to the survival of our culture because without the land we don’t have a home to practice our religion. Native Americans have already been cheated out of so much land due to the lack of education. I feel it is my responsibility to ensure the protection of Native land. With all this knowledge, I have gained the desire to become an environmental lawyer. I feel that as long as I am protecting my land, my culture will survive. My people will survive. I will survive.

I’m not going to let anyone destroy the adobe house in which I live. It is the same adobe house that my grandfather grew up in. It’s my home and it’s all I know. It’s where I belong. My life is built just like my house. It is built from the earth, the land on which we live. Adobe is strong brick made from mud and straw. It is made even stronger when the bricks are laid upon each other, building upward. It takes a lot of hard work, but when your house is built, it is strong and can last to be very old. Long after I have left this earth, my adobe house will still be standing for my grandchildren and generations to come. In this way, my grandfather and the land will never perish.

Jahi Davis

Connecticut College Workshop, 1996

On a rainy night in April of 1995, I was involved in a near-fatal car crash. I was in critical condition for about a week. I suffered a collapsed lung, 3 broken ribs, a fractured scapula, and a broken jaw. I also suffered severe facial and body lacerations. While in critical condition, I was scared because I truly believed that at the age of 17, I wasn't going to make it. My family and friends encouraged me with get well cards and balloons, and I started believing in myself. Their love and this difficult experience brought out something that I didn't know I possessed – courage and strength.

Prior to the accident, I was having a difficult time getting through my final year of high school. My accident placed even more responsibility on me. Now I had to get on top of my school work and get myself back in top physical and mental condition. With my mother's help, I had to find a tutor willing to come to one of Philadelphia's worst projects to work with me on a daily basis. I was determined however to graduate with the "class of 95."

After graduating from high school, I felt as though I needed something more. I wanted to do some type of community service in my neighborhood. I discovered YouthBuild, a 10 month program designed for high school drop-outs to obtain their diploma or GED. YouthBuild trainees work alongside construction foremen on sites rehabilitating abandoned homes in Philadelphia. These dilapidated homes are rehabilitated for low-income families to purchase.

When I applied to YouthBuild in July of 1995, I was still physically challenged, but I didn't reveal my medical problems. While I was working on the construction projects in the fall of 1995, I was in the process of rehabilitating myself, but I never once uttered a word about the pain and suffering I was enduring.

I was determined to do the work. The pain was relentless and I wanted to quit many times, but I had to "suck-it-up" because I knew this kind of work was what I needed to fuel my confidence. In looking back, I felt it was definitely worth the time and effort. My sweat and tears will forever be with those 5 houses on 15th and Montrose Street. Those houses are a constant reminder of how my tragedy turned into a positive experience. Through my tragedy, I have discovered that courage, endurance, perseverance and determination are the keys to a successful future.

I strongly believe that God has preserved my life for a reason, and I give thanks every day. My dreams and aspirations can now become a reality with my second chance at life. At YouthBuild I realized that when houses are gutted and rebuilt from the inside out, they oftentimes turn out to be stronger than when they were originally built. One year after my accident, I now feel stronger and better equipped to deal with my next challenge: COLLEGE.



"College Summit made me realize that I am going to college. It wasn't just a dream. This program made it a reality."

~Yanday Sesay
College Summit '93;
Graduate of Connecticut College 1998

Dale Scott

"I AM"

University of Denver Workshop, 1997

I am a thief, stealing naturally from stores, homes and people with no remorse. I walk down lower Colfax Avenue and sell drugs to others, mainly young teenagers who I have lured from successful lives. I own a gun which I carry at all times and I wouldn't think twice of taking the life of another. I wear an angry face which gives warning that I may snap at anytime. I am naturally inclined to do so. I can't speak proper English and am not capable of succeeding in accelerated classes in high school. I listen to music that speaks only of needless bloodshed, sex drugs, and consumption of human flesh—a lifestyle of fancy cars and expensive clothing. I am everywhere.

I know who I am, and I am not the stereo-type you just read!

"It feels good out here!" I couldn't help but say it twice to my friends Chris, Mike, and Jay. We had been in the house since early evening playing John Madden football on Sega entertainment game system. We decided to make ham sandwiches and go sit out on the front porch. We went outside at around 10 o'clock with our food and some Pepsi to enjoy the nice cool night. The time passed so quickly that what seemed an hour turned into three. Around 1:15 a.m. we noticed a decline in the warm temperature so we decided to head inside for the night. On the way in we were startled by the slow creep of what we thought were three police cars, but that number changed to five and before we could speak or move we were blinded by their extremely bright lights. My personal reaction was to stay on the porch and wait for Chris's mother to come outside. Meanwhile Chris and Jay walked out onto the lawn while Mike and I watched on. They talked to Chris and Jay for around ten minutes and just as I decided to go get Chris's mother we were ordered to come out on to the lawn. By then Chris and Jay were in the street but they didn't look troubled at all and an awkward feeling came over me. I thought everything must have been a misunderstanding of some sort.

Just then an officer asked me for an ID while another officer took Mike to the middle of the street with Chris and Jay. The officer placed my ID in his pocket and asked that I remove everything from mine. I didn't say anything to him and emptied my pockets. The officer then remembered my jacket and began to frisk me. This being my first police encounter, I was a bit nervous, not to mention cold (it was 2:00 a.m. by this time). The officer patted my upper half, my legs, and groin area. He felt around my penis and it was such an uncomfortable and surprising feeling that I said: "Hey man!" My reflexes caused a slight jerk and I was immediately tackled and cuffed. By then I was terrified and began to break into hives. Another officer came over and together they picked me up and forced me into the police care. My two white friends and one other who looked white still stood in the street in astonishment at what was happening to me. Chris's mother never came out of the house and not one in the army of officers thought to knock on the door to see if a parent was home. The officers wrote us all curfew tickets and let us go back in the house.

I remember looking in the mirror at my face—sad and angry about what had happened. I had to look past the scratch from the officer's watch and the hives which caused my entire face to swell and itch to the point where I couldn't touch it. I looked past all this to see myself, to see my soul. I noticed that my soul had been marked from that incident. I've realized that I can't control the stereotypes of others, I understand that it is not my issue to deal with. It's basically just people and their prejudices. I have healed many of the marks that have been scarred on my soul. Now that I understand people, I know that the stereotypes will never stop, so I can learn from them and use the negative energy to fuel my drive to be successful.

I am a thief stealing knowledge from books, teachers, the minds of others and any other place where knowledge is present. I walk down lower Colfax attending my church, volunteering and appreciating my city. I own my mind, body, opinions, responsibilities, weaknesses and short-comings. I wouldn't think twice about helping another along the way. I wear a pleasant smile which shows love, care and the readiness to commit good deeds at anytime. I am naturally inclined to do so. I speak proper English and even Spanish at times, and I do quite well in accelerated classes in high school. I am an open person and listen to music of all kinds, from all kinds of places. I am everywhere.

Kpodon J. Patterson

"Petie"

Colorado College Workshop, 2000

He was given to me about seven years ago for my birthday. Yellow, white, green, and black were the colors that covered his soft-feathered body. His songs were so delicate and beautiful that sometimes one would think that they were in Egypt or some other exotic country. My pet parakeet Petie was the only thing I could call my own. I was kind to him; in return he was kind to me. I have him his tan colored seeds and he would eat any insects that were in sight. If you let him out of his gold and peach colored cage, he would walk right up to someone and just jump into their lap. I assume that Petie liked to be around the warmth of a friend. His delicate, frail, small body did love to sit on my shoulder.

I remember coming home from school one day in February. The day was partly cloudy and the wind rustled against my face; there was not a leaf to be seen on the trees. I was on the school bus, just thinking about how Petie and I would enjoy watching TV, and doing my homework. As I approached the house on the corner of Pensacola Place, I noticed that the peach colored door was open, so I went in and walked up the steps, which were right in front of the door in the front hallway. I looked into the brilliantly colored cage and Petie wasn't there. My thought was that he was with my brothers downstairs.

"Kpodon," my brother said in a dull unsophisticated voice.

"Yeah," I yelled.

He started walking up the steps with a cloth in his hand. The cloth took on a shape that was like a fairly large egg. My mind was wondering where was Petie. He wasn't in the cage. I was quiet the whole time he walked up the steps.

"What is it?" I asked.

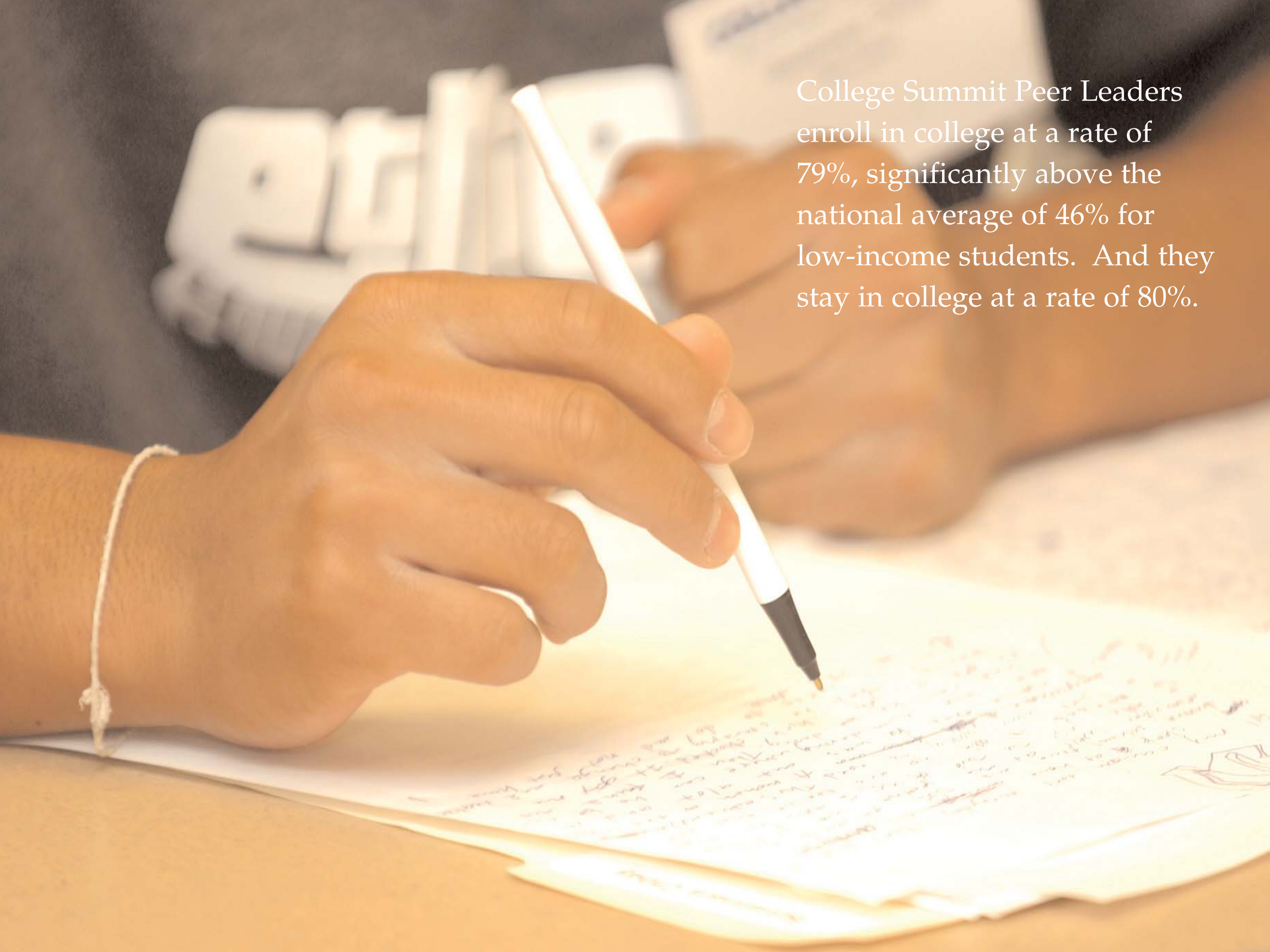
"Petie" he said. "I accidentally stepped on Petie. I didn't see him on the floor," my brother said. Almost instantaneously I started crying and I had to check to see if it really was Petie, my responsibility. The only thing I could call my own was gone, dead. It felt like my childhood was taken away and not be given back to me.

I wasn't angry or mad at my brother because I knew he loved Petie too. I forgave him, and was really thankful for that. I guess what helped ease the pain was that I knew that he was in a better place. A place where the sun never dies out. He now has wings that will let him fly higher than the wings in this life would ever let him.

It's not often that I think about Petie any more, except when times are really hard. It was about one year ago that my life was changed very drastically. My family separated because of issues with my mom and dad. Some members of my immediate family moved 20 miles away, 10 miles away, and others 3 miles away. It was particularly hard because I wasn't prepared. Even though I knew that my family did have arguments, it was so sudden, the death of my family. My mom and dad went their own ways and so did my brothers (all of them are older than me). I went with my dad not by my own choice but because he was the only one who had another place. I used to hate him because he was the one that initiated the whole transition.

Summer ended and school was just starting as I entered the 11th grade. My studies for first semester went pretty well except for one class. I tried to maintain my academics throughout all of my stress. I was taking three advanced placement classes; I had a job after school to support myself. I only saw my family on average about 5-6 hours a week, sometimes not at all. When second semester came I tried, and tried but my family problems kept arising. My grades were slipping and I was making it to class less and less. My A.C.T. scores and final grades were far less than what I imagined. Despite losing my way, when senior year did come I found my wings through a combination of the college programs I'm in, and by talking and opening up to friends.

Day by day is how I'm now taking it. I am in one Pre-Collegiate program and the Daniel's College Prep Program. I realize that it's up to me to make my future despite the death of my family. With a combination of these two programs and good friends, I know that I can soar high above the clouds with wings of an eagle. I can see Petie just ahead of me as we begin to play and fly with each other even though I'm still in this life and he's in the next. Here's looking at you. ONE DAY. ONE DAY.



College Summit Peer Leaders enroll in college at a rate of 79%, significantly above the national average of 46% for low-income students. And they stay in college at a rate of 80%.

Endemecio Santana

"Music"

Colorado Christian University Workshop, 2001

Seeing my best friend walk out of our sixth grade gym class got me interested in where he was going. I asked the teacher, after I got the courage to, "where is Manual going?" "He's going to band practice," he answered. I didn't know what he meant by that. This was the first time I had heard about band. Three days later I asked to enter the band program. I didn't know what I was getting myself into. The first day, which was two days later, I sat in the band room, which was in the cafeteria. I was so nervous that I was sweating like a piece of meat on a hot grill. I looked around the room seeing all these shiny instruments held by my friends. The light reflected off of the instruments like the sun reflecting off the ocean water. The teacher walked up to me after the tardy bell rang. "I heard that you want to join the band. Do you know what kind of instrument you want to play?" she asked. I pointed at the shiny silver-coated brass instrument that Manual was holding and said, "That one," not knowing it was a trumpet. At that time I didn't know the name of any instrument.

One week later, the teacher gave me an instrument, which she called a baritone. "This is the only one left to play," she told me. It was in a four-foot black box. I started to unlock the box and take the huge monster-like instrument out. It was a snake of tangled brass tubes with two openings. One opening was at the top facing the ceiling. I swear it must have had a radius of about twelve inches. "I can stick my entire head in this," I told Manuel, my best friend. The other opening was about one inch in diameter. "How in the world am I going to take this thing home and bring it back?" I told myself. I paused and thought, "I can do this. I have never done anything. This is my chance to do something. I will learn how to play this twenty-three pound piece of metal and no one will stop me." I carried the monster down the hall from the band room, up the stairs, and straight to the sidewalk where I waited for my ride. When my ride arrives I put the monster in the car and go home. I unloaded it and put it in my room until time to practice. To take it back to school, I had to take the monster out of my room, put it in the car, go to school, carry it up the front stairs, in the front door, down the hall, and into the band room.

The first time I played the baritone it sounded like two 4x4 trucks honking at each other before they crashed into each other. It was so bad that I turned red when everyone laughed at me. At home the sound seemed to be magnified by the walls of my room. No one in my house wanted me to play. One Saturday morning after I woke up and ate breakfast I went to my room ready to practice. I entered my room

and looked for my baritone but didn't find it. I got scared thinking someone had stolen it. I looked for my mom to ask if she had seen my baritone. I found her in the garage trying to hide it. "What are you doing?!" I asked her. "I don't want to hear the noise anymore," she answered. I took it from her and ran as fast as I could to my room with my mom behind me screaming. "Don't play, don't play!!!" that day I practiced for 3 hours straight. Everyone screaming at me every 5 minutes: "Shut Up!!" I practiced and practiced. I told myself, "I will not let anyone stop me. I will do this. I will team this beast of brass."

After one month of playing I started to sound great and I loved it. I felt that I had improved from blowing air to playing music. It felt like the first time learning to read and write. It opened my mind to new thoughts and ideas. It led me to enrich the sound quality of my playing. My view of the beast changed. It morphed from a tangled hunk of metal to a beautiful music maker. The baritone and I became one. Without the baritone I would just be another human being. Without me the baritone would just be a piece of tangled brass tubes. Together we are more than just a human and metal. We are now a musical entity.

Sitting in a hot cafeteria this last spring, I practiced nervously with other students to be called to perform their solos. I warmed up my lips and the instrument. I waited anxiously until 20 minutes to walk down the hall in this three-story school building colored tan and blue. I walked to the room where the judge was waiting. The nervousness made my hands sweat like a sponge being squeezed dry. The judge's tall, beautiful, African-American assistant called me into the room. I entered; he waited for me at the table. "He must have been a hundred years old," I thought to myself. He dressed like a businessman that day. In the room where all the chairs and table were at the far end of the room and the sun shining through the rear windows, I began to play. My sound came out beautifully. I played and played. The piece I played lasted two and a half minutes. Now finished I walked out the room and back down the hall to the cafeteria. I put my instrument back in its case and waited. "I made a 2 not a 1. I wasn't that good. I put my teacher down." I told myself. One and a half hours later the judge came and wrote the scores on the wall. I walked slowly to the wall, sweating and looked for my name. "I got the 1,1 got a 1." I screamed. I told everyone that was with me that I got a one. I was so proud of myself that I felt like taking everyone out to eat. I jumped up and down with joy. This was the first time I ever received something that I truly deserved.

Back in the car on our way home I started to think to myself. I realized, although there were many obstacles trying to stop me from playing, I did not stop. I continued to move forward. My fears of people wanting me to stop gave me strength to continue to play, led me to receive a one at a U.I.L. Solo Ensemble Contest last spring.

Brittany Foster

"Everyday Epiphanies"

Stanford University Workshop, 2002

I'm an avid junk store junkie. I love cheap clothes with a history. I like being able to take something out of date and unfashionable, and change it into something different and funky.

Near where I go to school, there is a Family Thrift Store, next to the only bowling alley for miles, right on the edge of the middle of nowhere. Every Wednesday is Discount Day - 30 % off- and the blue tags are like gold- 75% off.

In front of the store, a bunch of dirty kids played in an abandoned fireworks stand. The parking lot was full- everyone knows about Discount Wednesday. Plump brown women come to the store and outfit their entire families, furnish their houses, stock their bookshelves, and cover their tables in beautiful useless trinkets.

The store smells like people and sweat, and the swamp cooler sucks up the air and spews it back at you, and it covers your skin like a film. When you leave, you smell real. Books and useless junk sit on the blue metal shelves beneath faded prints of rainbows with inspiration and unprofessionally painted bowls of lopsided fruit. Most of the clothes in the store are loud and out of style or gigantic, brand name castoffs from women who joined Jenny Craig and donated their clothes to the store after losing 72 pounds. I found a book and a pair of jeans I could make into a skirt a size too big so it would sling low on my hips.

When I was standing near the shoes inventing their histories, a man swayed into the store. He was very wide, with very broad shoulders, but the rest of his body was thin and birdlike. His hair hit his middle vertebrae, silky with a sheen that contrasted with his dingy Oakland A's baseball cap. He was wearing a Hard Rock Café, Vermont t-shirt, with khaki shorts. His white hairless legs were stark white against his dirty white socks and clean yellow Converse tennies. His teeth were spaced and uneven, the same color as his shoes, in a wide mouth below his pointed nose below his amazingly lucid blue eyes. A constellation of tracks ran up his right arm. The man was striking. His presence was amazing and clear and confident.

I followed him through the men's shoes and the broken typewriters into the women's clothes. I was fascinated. It wasn't the sick obsession people have with an accident on the side of a road- I was looking at him the way a person might look at a sunset or the Grand Canyon- something so largely and wonderfully beautiful it catches your breath. He was beautiful. Insanely, obscenely beautiful.

I watched him while I was in line try on black heels and hold a dress up to his body. Once he caught my eye, and shot me an accusing look. I felt a pang of sadness sock my stomach. I did not want him to think that I was staring at him because of his choices, like so many people do. What I was feeling was the exact opposite. When he glided past I caught a whiff of cheap perfume, and was moved to tears. I thought I was losing my mind. I wasn't. But I did come to the realization that I have something that is a gift.

I want to be a writer. A writer's job is to be able to pull words from the air and set them down in a manner that reveals and reflects an image back to the world that it may never have seen. It is to shine a light in the dark places of people's minds and open them up. I have the ability to find beauty where others may not. I want to show that to the world. To take something flawed and expose its perfect imperfections and say, "Look. This is what I see." I want to be able to show people the purity in that man, the sweet, sad humanity of him. By being a writer, I can do this; show the epiphanies I find in the everyday, the extraordinary in the ordinary.

I want to experience new things, new people. I have a desire to subject myself to circumstances I have never encountered before. Diversity appeals to me- the different cultures, religions, politics, everything. It appeals to my sense of wanting. I don't want to just be a member of the audience- I want to get up on the stage, act, interact, and be a part of the world - to understand, to be a part of it all.

I have resolved to make a mark- not one that is made by taking something away, like a scratch or a gouge, but by adding something, and more importantly, revealing what is already there.

Every year, 200,000 low-income, college-capable high school students graduate and do not pursue a higher education.



Rachel Babcock

Loyola Marymount University Workshop, 2003

As I walk into the cathedral, the air thickens and crackles with static. Four other choirs sit in the audience, joined by some people who walked in off the street. As we march single file up the stairs to the altar, I can feel my stomach tighten with tension so I breath deep, just like I was taught, relying on the discipline of long, grueling hours of practice and the comfort of a well formed habit to force my muscles to relax one by one, and get back to basics.

I focus on the melody that I know so well; it has become ingrained in my being. It's my melody, because I have made it mine. All the staccatos with their bumps and sharp edges. But somehow they all smooth away when I sing. All of my self-doubt and the nagging worry that all of the critics in my life are right go away. It allows me to let go of my baggage and be me. The music doesn't care if I wear designer clothes, it doesn't care if I am a certain weight or body type. All it cares about is telling its story, and being heard. So as I tell the story I can pour all of my frustration and joy into the fortes, all of my sorrow into the pianissimos, and as we work towards the crescendo, the release, there's nothing left. No more worries, no more frustrations, just the story.

So the music becomes my safe place, my sanctuary, it is also my connection. My connection to people I don't know and will never see again, the people who hear the story. It allows me to grow and expand into something bigger than myself and to work towards something great.

The energy in this place is so thick it becomes tangible and I have to stifle the urge to reach out and touch it. Our choir director smiles at us to try to get us to relax. And then it's time. Time to do what we came to do, time to fly. The piano plays our starting pitches and our choir director holds up his hands in expectation. And then the entire world disappears. The audience gets dim and the sounds of outside traffic diminish into nonexistence as we sing. It starts out soft and tentative and grows into a thriving entity with wings of its own, as it soars to the back of the cavernous cathedral to echo in eternity.

My eyes glow and my soul brightens as I hear our voices weaving and interlocking to become one sound as we tell a story as old as time itself. Then nothing else matters. No more school, no more challenges, just perfect peace. The ring of the final chord echoes and continues long after we have stopped, as if in thanks for bringing it to this beautiful place.

The quiet awe and wonder is the epiphany of all our hard work and dedication. The Mexican couple in the back stand to clap with everyone else, but something about them catches my eye. And then I notice the silent tears streaming down that man's face in complete accord with my heart and I know that I made at least one connection; that I had reached something great. I was more honored by his tears than anyone else's applause.

We left that sanctuary with the highest score of any other choir there, but that didn't matter. The tears in the back row and the haunting echo of the last chord are what stay with a person forever.

Matthew Cruz

"Holding to Values"

Elmhurst College Workshop, 2003

It was Thursday, roughly a year ago, when I decided to take a walk out of extreme boredom. The sun was shining bright and it was a cool spring day in Chicago. The fact that I had enough money to buy an ice cream cone added to my happy disposition. I began my search for the ice cream truck, and on my way I met a new face in the neighborhood.

His name was Rufus Elston III, and he was African American. We talked about the usual things you talk about upon first meeting someone. I asked him where he was from, when he moved in my area, and what are some of his interests. When I asked him where he was headed he turned to me and said "Nowhere really, but I might head to the corner store and pick up some ice cream."

That's when I realized this kid was a regular Joe like me. I told him just walk with me, and we'll find the ice cream truck. "The store is way too expensive, and they skimp you on the ice cream," I said, "So lets just wander for a minute. We'll find the truck soon enough." Eventually we found the truck, bought our cones, and decided to walk together to eat.

While walking down a particular street I noticed a group of young Mexicans, who were in a gang and predisposed to getting into trouble. Rufus and I crossed the street to avoid them. We walked without talking as they drew closer but it made no difference. Looking in their direction I saw that they were crossing the street to confront us. When they reached us, they completely ignored me and decided Rufus would be their sole target. I had a strong feeling it was because he was black. They shouted racial slurs, insults, and I was beginning to get nervous. The peculiar thing was they where ignoring my presence.set of values. I knew I had no choice but to act.

We went home that day, Rufus and me, both with enormous black eyes and several other wounds. The pain from my shoulder and my eye, both on my right, caused me to sleep on my left side that night, but it was a pain I considered necessary. Even though I was sore, sleeping easy was not a problem. It would have been had I decided not to stand up for my values and beliefs that day.

Upholding my values has to be my most important priority. Honor, respect, commitment, and determination, (all equally important) are the guidelines that I strive to live my life by. If I didn't stand up for Rufus that day, then I couldn't consider myself the person I am today. Even if I were to do one thing against my set of standards I would be completely disappointed in myself, and strive to change the behavior that caused me to fall. My father once said, "There's God's law and then there's your values. As long as they coincide then you live by both."

I have been striving for quite some time to do just that.

"Now that I have been through college, I see my four-day workshop as kind of a 'dress rehearsal' for the real thing."

*~Nia McLean
College Summit '97;
Graduate of Howard University 2003*



Caitlin Keesee

West Virginia University Workshop, 2003

As Mom drove me home from work that night, I kept the conversation going. It didn't matter what the topic was, as long as she didn't bring up that day's visit to the doctor. It was almost as if I didn't want him to recover from his alcoholism. I felt like if he did, then I'd have to forgive him. Lord knows it would take everything in me to even think about forgiving him. I felt awful for thinking this way, but no matter how hard I tried, all I could remember were the bad things he had brought into my life. I just wanted to get away from him and any memories I had of him. Even when I tried to think of good things, it only led me to remember a man who was completely drunk everyday by six o'clock, a man who put me down all the time, a man who had shown physical violence toward both my mom and me. But since I knew I could never ask my mom to leave him, I would just have to forget. I couldn't forgive him anymore; I just had to try and forget.

My mom, on the other hand, would always forgive him. After all the things he'd done to us, she continued to trust him and let him come back into our lives again and again. I understood why she did it. She was afraid to be alone. She was scared that without him, our financial situation would become worse. He owned the trailer that we lived in, and if he were to kick us out, where would we go? Even though he only brought home around \$100 a week, it did buy groceries when no one else had the money, and sometimes it kept the electricity on until we could afford to pay the bills in full. I hated to see my mother so trapped, and I wished she'd had more options. I didn't want her low paying job or her low self-confidence to keep her tied to a man who continually degraded both of us.

Even though he was a big shadow of darkness upon our home and family, he was also the ray of light that I use to shine my way out. When I saw the way he hurt my mother, I was given fuel. Fuel to light the fire for my dreams.

When I think of my future with someone, I know it can never be like that. I know that I have to do well in school. I know that I have to go to college. I cannot keep living in poverty where I have so few opportunities. I never want to rely on

anybody else to take care of me. I didn't want to become trapped as my mother and so many other women before me had.

Now I finally know my way out of this situation. I have to push my education past high school. I have to do well in college. I have to find a rewarding job that will bring up my self-confidence. After doing all these things that I have to do, then I will get to lead a happy and fulfilling life.

Dorina Arapi

Elmhurst College Workshop, 2003

My brother Sali and I are in the living room watching Barney and Sesame Street. There is loud banging at the door. I hesitate to open it; my mother always told me not to open the door for anyone. But the knock becomes louder and a woman calls out: "Open the door." Terrified, I obey. As I slowly open the door I see a blond haired, skinny woman. She is dressed in a navy blue uniform. On the far left side of her chest she wears a sophisticated gold and silver pin. On the far right side of her chest she has a nametag that says, Officer Terry. Her eyes are ice blue and her hair braided in under her police hat. "Are you alone?" she demands.

I am an Albanian-American. My family and I came to the United States 10 years ago to have a better life. I did everything I could to fit in the American culture. Each night the first year in America, I sat with my mom until twelve o'clock at night learning how to read English. I first wrote down every word I did not know and early looked it up in the dictionary. Then I memorized each word and went back to translating the story in Albanian in order for me to comprehend it. I felt like I was an adult before a kid. I never had a break to go to the park or ride bikes like normal eight year olds. I had to perfect my English in order to fit in. Little did I realize wit would be in this new culture that I would almost lose everything that made me who I am—my family.

"How old are you," Officer Terry questions. I want to lie to her and tell her that I am twelve, but I can't. I tell her that I am eight. She looks around and sees my brother cross-legged in front of the T.V. and asks how old he is. Again I want to lie, but I can't so I tell her he is two. In a frigid, solid voice, she says, "You're both coming with me." Her cold, strong hand grasps my wrist, and I feel her forcing me out of my house with my brother. Enraged, I pull back from her. We are in a tug of war. I am fighting a battle for my family.

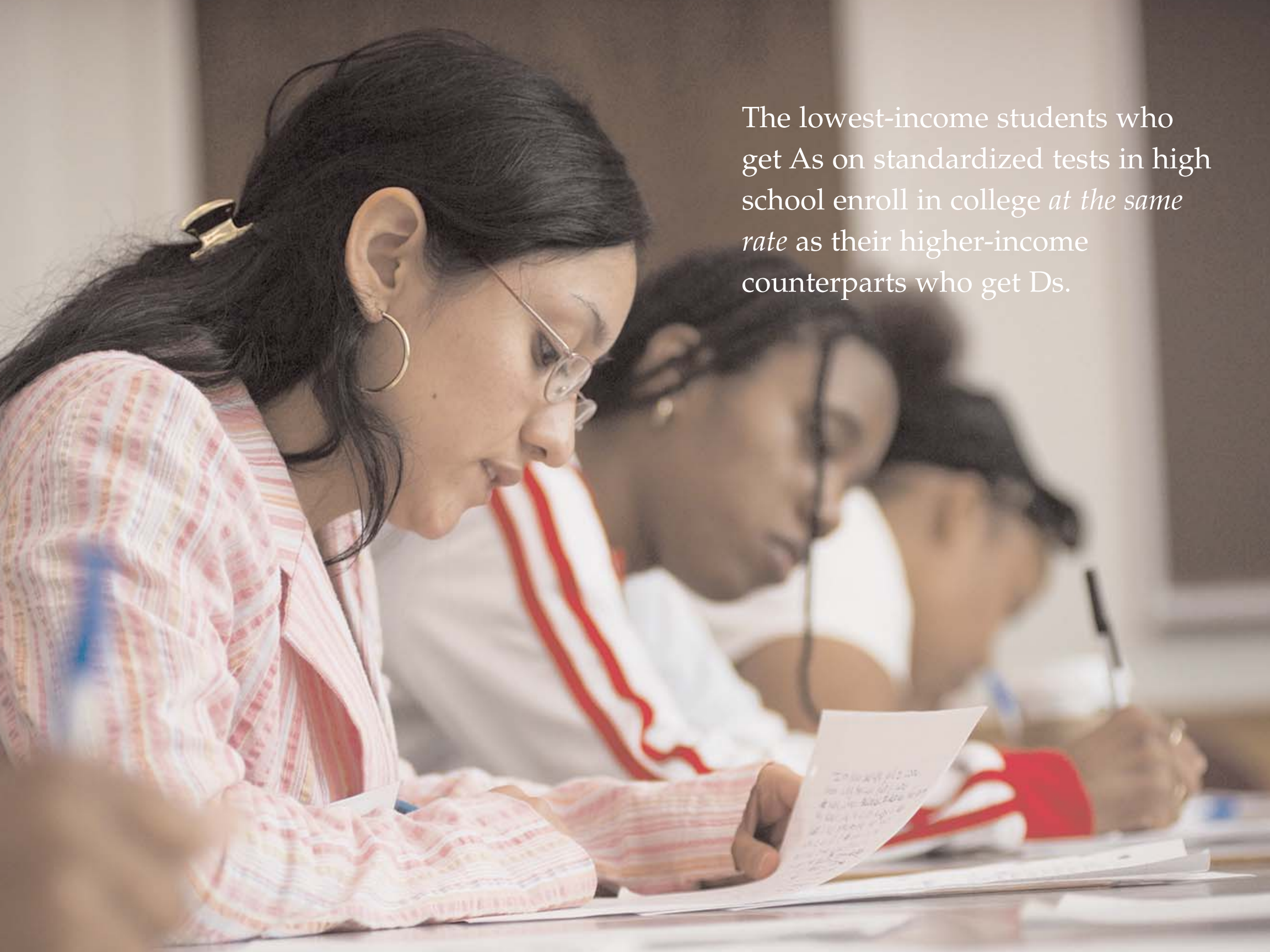
Every day starting from when I was eight years old, my mom left me to take care of my brother alone in the house. My mom did not want to work. She felt uncomfortable leaving my brother and me alone for two hours a day, but she had no choice. People might say, "Big deal. It's only two hours." But to me it felt like 200 hours. Again, I was only eight and had to care of my younger brother. I did

not know what to do most of the time. I needed an adult to figure to protect me, take care of me, and let me be a child once in awhile.

I know that I am losing this horrendous battle as the officer pulls me towards the car. I am drowning in my tears and choking on my breath. People on the street curiously crawl around me like black cockroaches. Their inquisitive eyes burn my flesh with embarrassment and failure. I am looking for just one face—one face that will tell me everything will be alright.

All of a sudden my mom walks up. There are no words to express how relieved I am to see her. My eyes light up and I run into her arms. At that moment I feel like no one can hurt me or touch me. All the pain and anxiety stored inside of me is released. I touch her soft, white skin and smell her brown hair. When she lets go she has a painful look in her eyes that shifts to heartbreak. She feels like the enemy threatened our army of four. The first shot was fired and two soldiers are wounded.

My parents work indefatigably everyday and night trying to better our lives. The reason they came to America in the first place was to see my brother and me succeed. Sadly, it was in America that we almost lost each other. Ever since that terrible day when Sali and I were almost separated from our parents, I have vowed to apply myself entirely at every opportunity that comes my way. My driving force for success is the love I carry for my family. I will always strive to fulfill my parents' dream.



The lowest-income students who get As on standardized tests in high school enroll in college *at the same rate* as their higher-income counterparts who get Ds.

Thank You

College Summit is especially grateful to our distinguished volunteer panel of judges who carefully and thoughtfully read all of the finalist essays and evaluated their comparative strengths. Selecting the ten most outstanding essays in over a decade of programming was no easy task, and we greatly appreciate their attention to detail, thoroughness, and commitment to College Summit.

As we coach our students to do in composing their personal essays, these judges truly exemplify the College Summit credo of “showing” and not just “telling.”

Their passion for our students and their stories is appreciated.

Gratefully,
College Summit

Panel of Judges:

Randy Cohen

Columnist, The New York Times

Debra Dickerson

Author
College Summit National Advisory Board

Kevin Martinez

Director, Community Affairs; The Home Depot

Diana Roesch

Journalist

Honorable Mentions

Of the more than 5,000 student essays in the College Summit database, staff and panelists selected twenty outstanding essays that typify the desired end product of our writing curriculum, and that compellingly paint a whole picture of a young person; someone that is indeed “better than his numbers.” In addition to the ten essays in this book, the following also received consideration:

Magdalene Kellywood

University of Southern Colorado
Workshop, 2001

Adam Price

West Virginia State University
Workshop, 2004

Jonathon McWilliams

Metropolitan State College of Denver
Workshop, 2004

Rosa Ayala

California Lutheran Workshop, 2004

Charlie Nesselrotte

Regis University Workshop, 2001

Ashley Hicks

Concord University Workshop, 2004

Kisha Stewart

Connecticut College Workshop, 1995

Kim Ngo

Southern Methodist University
Workshop, 2002

Nickalus Sanders

Connecticut College Workshop, 1995

Jenna Padilla

Northwestern University Workshop, 2001

Brion Callister

Connecticut College Workshop, 1995

Koyan Jackson

American University Workshop, 2004

Sean Johnson

University of Illinois at Springfield
Workshop, 2005

Jason Barnes

Trinity Workshop, 2002

"I am part and particle of
everything I have lived."

~Malcom X

...ing my best friend walk out of our sixth grade gym class as we were interested in where he was going. I asked the teacher, after I got the courage to, "where is Manual going?" "He's going to band practice," he answered. I didn't know what he meant by that. This was the first time I had heard about band. Three days later I asked to enter the band program. I didn't know what I was getting myself into. The first day, which was two days later, I sat in the band room, which was in the cafeteria. I was so nervous that I was sweating like a piece of meat on a hot grill. I looked around the room seeing all these shiny instruments held by my friends. The light reflected off of the instruments like the sun reflecting off the ocean water. The teacher walked up to me after the tardy bell rang. "I heard that you want to join the band. Do you know what kind of instrument you want to play?" she asked. I pointed at the shiny silver-coated brass instrument that Manual was holding and said, "That one," not knowing it was a trumpet. At that time I didn't know the name of any instrument. One week later, the teacher gave me an instrument, which she called a baritone. "This is the only one left to play," she told me. It was in a four-foot black box. I started to unlock the box and take the huge monster-like instrument out. It was a snake of tangled brass tubes with two openings. One opening was at the top facing the ceiling. I swear it must have had a radius of about twelve inches. "I can stick my entire head in this," I told Manuel, my best friend. The other opening was about one inch in diameter. "How in the world am I going to take this thing home and bring it back?" I told myself. I paused and thought, "I can do this. I have never done anything. This is my chance to do something. I will learn how to play this twenty-three pound piece of metal and no one will stop me." I carried the monster down the hall from the band room, up the stairs, and straight to the sidewalk where I waited for my ride. When my ride arrives I put the monster in the car and go home. I unloaded it and put it in my room until time to practice. To take it back to school, I had to take the monster out of my room, put it in the car, go to school, carry it up the front stairs, in the front door, down the hall, and into the band room. The first time I played the baritone it sounded like two 4x4 trucks honking at each other before they crashed into each other. It was so bad that I turned red when everyone laughed at me. At home the sound seemed to be magnified by the walls of my room. No one in my house wanted me to play. One Saturday morning after I woke up and ate breakfast I went to my room ready to practice. I entered my room and looked for my baritone but didn't find it. I got scared thinking someone had stolen it. I looked for my mom to ask if she had seen my baritone. I found her in the garage trying to hide it. "What are you doing?!" I asked her. "I don't want to hear the noise anymore," she answered. I took it from her and ran as fast as I could to my room with my mom behind me screaming. "Don't play, don't play!!!" that day I practiced for 3 hours straight. Everyone screaming at me every 5 minutes: "Shut Up!!" I practiced and practiced. I told myself "I will not let anyone stop me. I will do this. I will tame this beast of brass." After one month of playing I started to sound great and I loved it. I felt that I had improved from blowing air to playing music. It felt like the first time learning to read and write. It opened my mind to thoughts and ideas. It led me to enrich the sound quality of my playing. My view of the beast changed. It no longer was a tangled hunk of metal to a beautiful music maker. The



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Without me the baritone would just be a piece of tangled brass tubes. Together we are more than just a human and metal. We are now a musical entity. Sitting in a hot cafeteria this last spring, I practiced nervously with other students to be called to perform their solos. I warmed up my lips and the instrument. I waited anxiously until 20 minutes to walk down the hall in this three-story school building colored tan and blue. I walked to the room where the judge was waiting. The hot vouchness, my hands sweat like a sponge being squeezed dry. The judge's tall, beautiful, African-American assistant called me into the room. I entered; he waited for me at the table. "He must have been a hundred years old," I thought to myself. He dressed like a businessman that day. In the room were all the chairs and table were at the far end of the room and the sun shining through the open windows. I began to play. My sound came out beautifully. I listened and played. The