



COURTESY CFES

College for Every Student goes into classrooms in some of the poorest urban and rural districts in the country to encourage students to pursue higher ed.

Bridge to the future

BY SEQUEL STAFF

College works with Vermont group to boost prospects of urban, rural students

When the admissions office pitches Paul Smith's to prospective students, one of the campus' strongest points – its location – also proves a hurdle for people looking for something closer to home. For students in urban and rural communities, though, even the closest college can seem a million miles away.

Making higher education more accessible has been a long-standing goal of Paul Smith's, and it is why the college works so closely with College for Every Student (CFES), a Vermont-based organization that has helped more than 100,000 students from low-income, underprivileged backgrounds attend college.

That partnership, now about five years old, has brought hundreds of students from some of the nation's poorest areas – both city and countryside – to visit Paul Smith's. Every spring, for example, the college has welcomed a busload of students from New York City to campus in an effort to encourage them to consider college as a viable option once they finish high school. And through the college's Advanced Studies Program, Paul Smith's

has reached into North Country high schools, offering rural students a chance to earn college-credit for advanced classes.

"Since the college's inception after World War II, when we advocated education for war veterans, we have offered a skill-based education," says John Mills, Ph.D., the college's president. "Our college has evolved to include business programs and some liberal arts. But the focus has remained the same. We are committed to making education accessible to lower income and underserved students."

CFES works with 200 colleges across the country in promoting its vision. Paul Smith's, though, is exceptional in its commitment, says Rick Dalton, the chief executive of College for Every Student.

"The president goes down and talks to kids and has conversations with kids about college. That is unusual," Dalton says. "So is the hospitality. And the level of welcome."

For urban students, those open arms help allay the impression that Paul Smith's is a tiny college in a tiny place that looks nothing like home. For rural students, Mills says, they already arrive feeling comfortable with the atmosphere – the small

size is comforting.

But there are hurdles rural students face on the way to higher ed that their urban counterparts do not. "We're finding that the rural issues are even harder to deal with than the urban ones," Dalton says. While some find that counterintuitive, he says the data is clear: Not only do rural districts get less money than urban ones, but many of the adults in those communities don't support the notion of college – because they fear that, if their children head off to college, they won't come back.

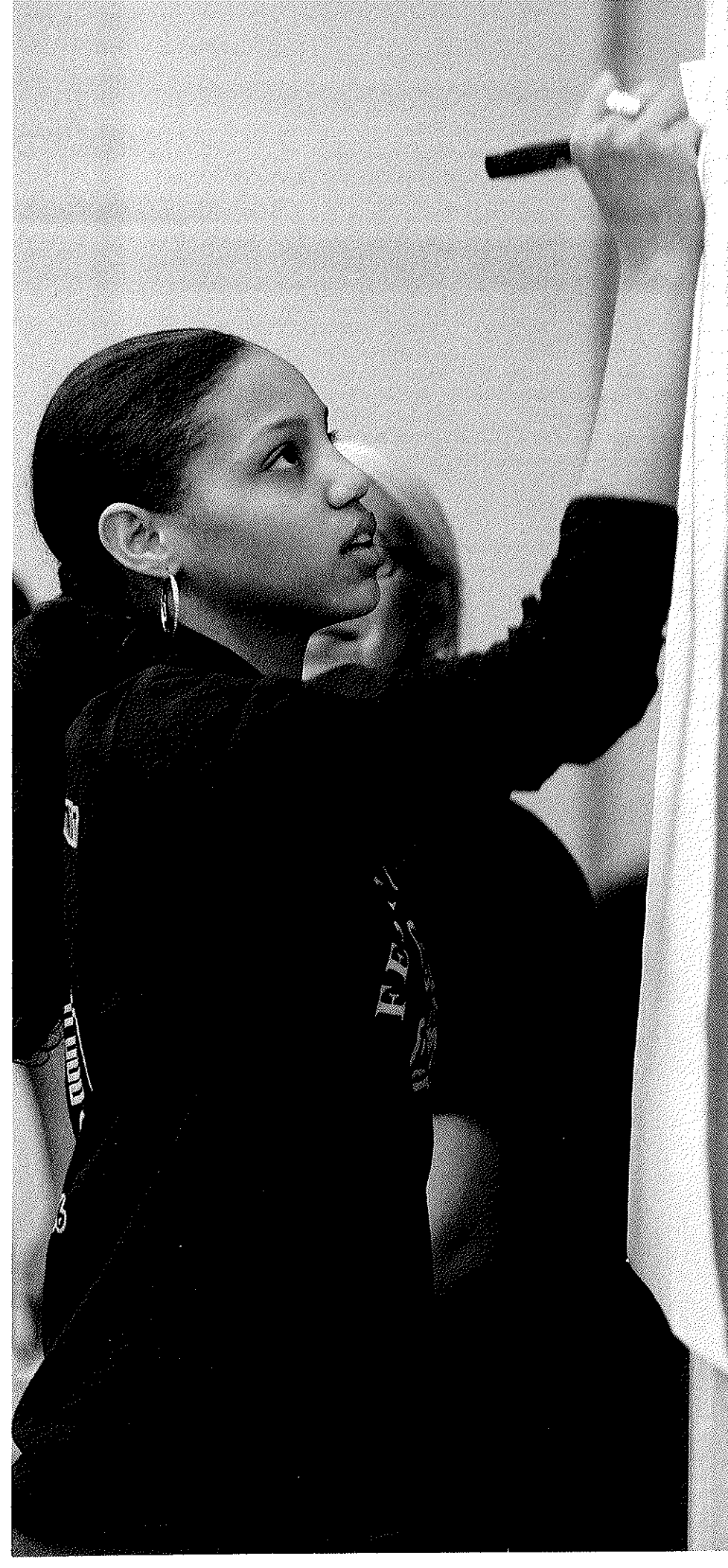
The statistics back up the notion that fewer rural students head to college than their city-dwelling counterparts. According to a survey published by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2004, just 12.6 percent of rural residents 25 and older have college degrees – six percentage points lower than urbanites. Among 25-34 year olds, that gap is even wider – nearly 8 percent.

In May, to help find answers to how to convince more rural kids to head to college, the college and CFES hosted elected officials, college and high-school administrators and others for a two-day »



New York State Assemblywoman Janet Duprey, R-Peru, makes a point during the rural education symposium on campus in May.

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rural education symposium at the Joan Weill Student Center.

"The poorest children in America live in rural places," says Rachel Tompkins, president of the Rural School and Community Trust, an Arlington, Va.-based group that helps build successful relationships between those entities.

Amy Tuthill, the college's CFES liaison, says one thing she took from the conference is that Paul Smith's is already doing much of what colleges can do to maximize the likelihood that high schoolers will opt for additional education after they graduate. Such as the advanced studies program, which currently teaches 17 different courses in 10 North Country schools. About 200 students participated last year.

While not many have enrolled at Paul Smith's, Tuthill says that's almost by design. "We don't want it to be seen as a recruitment tool," she says. "It's more about being a partner in education in the North Country. If they come, that's great, but it's more about putting students on a path to college – any college."

The college offers campus visits for students who are a long way from filling out an admissions application. Tuthill recalled a recent visit from a group of Westfield, Mass., middle schoolers. "They spent part of the day with a student majoring in ecotourism who was well versed in the outdoors," she says. "He taught them compass reading and map orientation. Other kids connected with our culinary students. The idea is to make it fun by experiential learning."

Sometimes, people will ask her why she's bringing sixth-graders to college. "If you do that in the middle-school years," she says, "they can't unhear and they can't unsee what they've seen and heard."

Mills agrees that the spark to go to college has to start with students that young. When he speaks to those visitors, he asks them to consider taking pre-college courses in their own schools, soaking up a bit of the college experience on their own turf.

"I tell them it's like putting money in the bank," says Mills. "If they take college prerequisite courses, they can deposit those courses in the education bank." ■

» Portions of this article have been reprinted from the CFES 2007 Annual Report.

America's forgotten population – rural youth

BY RICK DALTON AND JOHN MILLS

This opinion piece, written this winter, appeared in newspapers in Vermont and New York.

The schools of Ticonderoga, N.Y., have a lot going for them that other places may envy. Their halls are safe. Their children are part of a small community that keeps an eye on them as they grow up.

But they're also hammered by poverty.

Nearly one out of every two students in the town's school system qualifies for free, or reduced cost, lunch. Just 20 years ago, that figure was at 12 percent.

Ticonderoga, a town of 5,100 on the banks of Lake Champlain, struggles every day with something more and more rural communities are forced to confront: A surging tide of poverty that threatens to keep those students from ever attaining a college education.

This tide is eroding what communities expect of their children, and hope for their futures. It's keeping them from college not so much because they can't afford it, but because they can't imagine it. And while we don't know how to fix poverty, we have developed a proven track record of how to overcome its effects.

In recent months, a growing chorus has expressed concern about the rising costs of attending college, and the menace this poses to accessibility. Congressional legislation is on the horizon to cut college costs. Harvard University and several other schools have announced changes to their financial aid policies to make a college education more affordable. These are important steps, and we know from our work with school districts across the country how expensive a college education can seem.

For many rural children, though, tuition is just the final hurdle they face on the road to college. Drug use, dropping in cities, is increasing in rural areas. Teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases are on the rise, also. The common denominator these areas share is poverty: Of the nation's 250 most impoverished

counties, 244 are rural.

The key to developing rural communities is to develop the people who live in them. It all starts with education – and all of us must get started.

At CFES, we form working partnerships between rural schools and colleges that introduce children from kindergarten through 12th grade to the possibilities that higher education can bring. In Ticonderoga, and throughout the Adirondacks, students and instructors from Paul Smith's College mentor younger students, coach them on community service projects, make regular

rural America, depend on one.

Perversely, this is one of the very reasons we find that expectations for rural students are so low. In urban areas, families increasingly understand that sending a child to college gives that child a chance to move ahead. The children recognize it, too. On our visits to high schools in New York City, we have read essays students have written about their aspirations. Each has a similar tale and theme: the student sees college as a pathway to a better life in spite of their incarcerated fathers, overburdened mothers, dangerous neighborhoods.

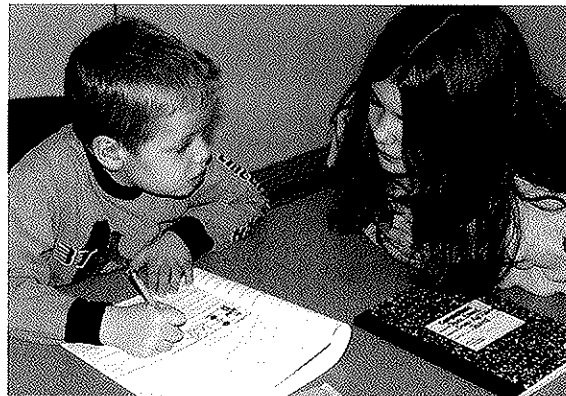
But rural families often feel threatened when their children want to go off to college – because when they go, they may be leaving for good. They don't pass the dream along to their children. And the children don't pick it up on their own.

We can't ensure a child who goes off to college will come home. But we all have a practical interest in seeing that this portion of our social and economic base is not left behind. And we have a moral obligation to students in rural schools to give them the chance to make the decision of how to live their

lives, rather than imprisoning them in a cage built of our own neglect.

What CFES does isn't rocket science, and our practices are hardly patented. Any community with the right resources – time, interest and care, more than anything – can accomplish similar results. These partnerships depend on the hands-on implementation and sustained support of these programs by community leaders, educators, and parents. Much of our work starts with convincing parents that these are worthy goals that can be achieved. Once they believe that, we are well on our way to changing the learning culture at a school and the educational aspirations of the young people involved. ☐

» Rick Dalton is president and CEO of College for Every Student. John Mills is president of Paul Smith's College.



PHOTOS COURTESY CFES

CFES believes in starting students early on the road to college.

appearances in their schools and, perhaps most importantly, bring high schoolers to campus to expose them to worlds they have never seen before.

Results tell us these measures work. Last year, we worked with 15,000 students across the country. Almost all of those students come from low-income families who have never sent anyone to college. Many of them attend rural schools. This December in Ticonderoga, the high school was ranked among the top 2 percent nationwide by U.S. News & World Report.

Of the 700 high school seniors we worked with, 97 percent are now in college. That's nearly six times the typical rate for that demographic.

Today, it is almost impossible to break out of the poverty cycle without a college degree. Good, well-paying jobs, the kind that are becoming so difficult to find in