

## **First Generation Students Still Coming to Creighton**

At the core of Creighton University's mission is the desire to educate students who have the skills, ethics and motivation to build a better society. Throughout its 100 year history, the University has proven its dedication to this mission by reaching out to attract the best students from all backgrounds. Creighton's Jesuit mission also comes with an obligation to help ensure an education for the increasing numbers of high-ability middle- and lower-income students seeking admission to college, as well as those who are first-generation college students.

While not all first generation students are minorities or come from low-income households, many do. According to Don Bishop, Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management, of the four hundred first generation students who were admitted to Creighton in 2006, two hundred chose not to enroll, citing financial aid and costs as the number one reason for their decision. These students indicated that Creighton had been their first-choice and that they would have enrolled had they received more support in financial aid. About eighty of these students chose peer colleges that provided more aid. The remaining one-hundred and twenty students settled on a less selective college choice that cost much less. With the support of financial aid provided by the University, 195 first generation students were able to enroll at Creighton in 2006.

Why is it so important for Creighton to continue to enroll first-generation students? One reason, according to Bishop, is that first generation students are typically high achievers; the very kind of student that Creighton – and indeed any institute of higher learning – desires to attract.

“Fifty percent of the first generation students in the class of 2006 accomplished a rank in the top ten percent of their high school, compared to forty-four percent for the entire class,” Bishop said. “In addition, the median high school grade point average of these first generation students was 3.87.”

In addition to academic excellence, first generation students help to bring a diverse set of perspectives to the campus community. They are willing to sacrifice in order to attain their Creighton education and pursue it as a means to elevate themselves and their families. For many of these students, attending another school may have been an easier choice, both financially and academically, but they believed strongly that a Creighton education would better provide them with the future they desired.

First generation college students, Kristina Smith, Luis Vasquez and Millicent Wolf, each made the choice to attend Creighton despite the various obstacles each faced to get here. For them, a Creighton education means not only a better life for themselves and their families, but for their communities as well. Here are their stories:

**Kristina L. Smith, philosophy/political science, Class of 2008**

For too many teenage mothers, the dream of finishing high school and going on to college ends when they learn they are pregnant. For Kristina Smith, it is where her dreams began.

As a high school freshman, Kristina Smith moved from her hometown of Gurnee, Illinois (a Chicago suburb) to Omaha, Nebraska. At fifteen, she gave birth to her son, James, who is now five years old.

“Before I became pregnant, I hadn’t thought much about what I was going to do beyond high school,” said Kristina, 20, now a junior majoring in philosophy and political science at Creighton. “When my son was born, I knew I had to go to college and make a career for myself.”

Kristina’s story becomes even more remarkable when you learn that she is not only a first-generation college student, but the first in her family to graduate from high-school. She came to Omaha to live with her godmother, who had been transferred to a new job with Union Pacific after her husband had died. Juggling high school with raising her son, Kristina’s focused on applying to colleges and universities that would offer her in-state tuition.

Although two other colleges had offered her full-ride scholarships, Kristina stuck with her first choice of Creighton University. “Financially, things might have been easier at another school,” she said. “But Creighton was where I wanted to be. I was so impressed with the university and knew I’d do well in the personal environment that Creighton offered. I also wasn’t sure what type of career I wanted to go into, and felt that a liberal arts education at Creighton would provide me with the most options for my future.”

Currently, Kristina, who in recent years has helped to create both the Peer2Peer mentoring program and a support group for single parents at Creighton, is looking for a way to increase the support non-traditional traditional students receive on campus. While she has received a great deal of support through Student Support Services (SSS), a program that assists first generation college students, low-income students and students with disabilities, the federally-funded program has been limited by recent cutbacks.

“I owe a lot to Student Support Services, because without them, I don’t think I’d have been as successful here,” Kristina said. “They do everything they possibly can to help, but they are already stretched to the limit trying to provide so much for so many. What I want is to help generate additional campus support specifically for non-traditional and single-parent students.”

Some of the specific changes she’d like to see are more affordable day care and on-campus housing options for single parents. “It’s been hard to balance studies with raising a son,” Kristina said. “I don’t have the convenience factor of being able to live on campus or to have my son in day care here, because I couldn’t afford it. This year, James started kindergarten, so that helps a bit financially. But, balancing his schedule with my studies and extracurricular activities is still a huge challenge.”

Despite the many obstacles, Kristina has managed to make the Dean’s list every semester and is a member of the Honor Society of Philosophy and Political Science. In

addition to her on-campus involvement with Student Support Services, she has interned with the Jim Esch political campaign and is a member of the Campus Democrats. Kristina was recently recognized for her leadership with the Pacesetter Award from SSS and the Omicron Delta Kappa Leadership Award. She is also a recipient of the Scholarship for Economically and Educationally Disadvantaged Students (SEEDS), which goes to qualified SSS students.

Never one to take the easy way out, Kristina is still deciding whether she will continue on to law school or pursue a PhD in political science. As a result, she will be spending what little free time she has preparing to take both the LSAT and GRE in June. "I know I should just pick one now and make things easier on myself," Kristina said, laughing. "But at this point, I want to keep my options open."

### **Luis P. Vazquez, chemistry/pre-med, Class of 2010**

Luis Vazquez' story is the story of the American dream. It is also the story of sacrifice – of parents who want only a better life for their children.

Originally from Parral Chihuahua, Mexico (a town of approximately 100,000 just eight hours south of El Paso, Texas), Luis joined his stepfather and mother in Omaha six years ago. His sister, who had been attending college in Mexico, and young niece joined the family a year later.

"My mother and stepfather made sure I understood the reality that many Hispanic people live with – the economic struggles and involvement in dangerous and unwanted jobs – and asked me if I wanted to continue this way," Luis said. "I came to realize that in order to advance the Latino culture here in the United States, I needed to attend college to gain knowledge and be an example to other Hispanics. I also wanted to make my parents proud and to pay them back for all they had given me. I knew that college was the key to accomplishing what I wanted."

As a high school senior with his legal residency status still in process, Luis had begun to lose hope of going on to college after graduation. Creighton University was his first and only choice, but without financial assistance, the dream seemed almost out of reach. Then, the first of many "miracles" occurred in Luis' life.

Shortly before his high school graduation, Luis finally received his legal residency papers. He then met two people who offered him the encouragement and support he needed to persevere through the rigorous application and enrollment process – Veronica Hernandez, a Creighton sophomore who had once been in Luis' shoes, and Tami Buffalohead-McGill, director of Student Support Services at Creighton. With the help of Tami, Veronica and others, Luis not only made it to Creighton, but also became a Diversity Scholar.

Through it all, Luis credits the unwavering support of his family for his success. "I am extremely proud of my parents," Luis said. "They could not attend college because it is extremely difficult to pay for a higher education in Mexico. My mother works as a janitor cleaning business and offices and my stepfather works at a meat packing plant. They did

not wanted me to be involved in the same kind of jobs that they are in now. They want a better life for me and their sacrifice demonstrates their unconditional love for me.”

Because of the sacrifice that his parents have made for him to attend Creighton, Luis feels a great sense of responsibility to make them proud. While Luis’ stepfather never tires of telling others that his son goes to Creighton, his mother also wants her son to remember to help others who are in similar situations.

Now a freshman majoring in chemistry and pre-medicine, Luis hopes to continue his academic success at Creighton and go on to medical school after graduation. He also plans to give back to the school and the community that has supported him this far and to become a role model for others who follow in his footsteps.

“My message is to love God, love life, have faith and fight with strength,” Luis said. “If you fall, get up with more strength. Sacrifice for others and repay those who sacrifice for you. This is something I must do every day if I want to accomplish all of my dreams.”

### **Millicent Wolfe, elementary education, Class of 2009**

Although she grew up less than 85 miles away from Omaha, the life Millicent Wolfe knew before coming to Creighton seems worlds apart. Millicent, or “Millie” as she is known to her friends here on campus, grew up in Walthill, Nebraska, a small community of less than 1,000 residents located on the Omaha Indian Reservation in northeast Nebraska. Out of her high school graduating class of eight, Millie is the only one of her classmates currently enrolled in college.

Due to a variety of financial and cultural factors, obtaining a four-year college degree is rare among much of the Native American population. The Wolfe family, however, may prove to be the exception to the rule. Millie is now a sophomore majoring in elementary education at Creighton University. Her older stepsister, Venetia, graduated last year from Bellevue University and her younger brother, Vincent, plans to attend Haskell Indian Nations University after high school. (Her younger sister, Guadalupe, is in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and still undecided about her college plans.) And, although neither of her parents have a four-year degree, Millie’s father did receive his Associates Degree in Liberal Arts from Haskell.

“Going on to college was always important to my parents,” Millie said. “It was important because they wanted me to be well-educated, to have a good job and live a decent life. They wanted me to do better than what is usually expected of a Native American living on the reservation.”

Her desire for a life beyond the reservation prompted Millie to begin preparing for college when she was in the eighth grade. “Not only were my parents expecting me to go on to college, but I knew I wanted to experience the college life,” Millie said. “I wanted to do better and be able to get a good job and live a great life.”

Financial, academic and cultural obstacles make it difficult for many first generation students to make it through college, and Millie’s case was no exception. First and

foremost was to find scholarships to pay for her education. Academics were also an issue, because although she earned good grades at her small high school, Millie knew that her college studies would be much more challenging. She also feared that the transition from her small reservation community to life on campus at Creighton would present a bit of a culture shock.

With the help of family and friends, Millie has made a successful transition to college life. She is now a Gates Millennium scholar, which has helped to make her education at Creighton possible financially. With hard work and academic support through programs like Student Support Services, Millie has also been able to maintain the grades she needs to stay at Creighton and keep her scholarship. As for culture shock, Millie says that the people at Creighton have been so great and welcoming that the adjustment was far less difficult than she had anticipated.

Reaching out to the Native American population has been a major priority at Creighton University for many years. In fact, Creighton was the nation's first Jesuit university, and the first college in Nebraska, to offer a Native American studies major. Creighton's Native American Retreat also brings high school students from all over the country to experience college life and allows for the exchange of ideas, network and dialogue on issues particular to them.

Programs like the Retreat have helped students like Millie realize that their dreams of college life are indeed possible. Since 1995, enrollment of Native American students has increased by 500 percent. "I've come to Creighton's Native American Retreat every year since I was in the eighth grade," Millie said. "Since then, Creighton has felt like a second home. There was less of a culture shock for me as a freshman because I was already familiar with the campus and enjoyed the environment and people here."

When she graduates from Creighton in 2009, Millie plans to pursue her master's degree in school administration. From there, her plans are less clear, but she does intend to pursue her doctorate in an undetermined field of study. "In the end," says Millie, "I want to return to my reservation to teach and to help more Native American students go on to college."

Above all, Tami Buffalohead-McGill, director of Student Support Services, stressed the value of the tremendous gifts that first generation students like Kristina, Luis and Millicent bring to the Creighton campus. "These students bring leadership, heart, dedication, diversity, a love of Creighton and the realization of Mary Lucretia Creighton's dream," she said. "I believe she would be proud to know that students of talent, who wouldn't otherwise have access to higher education, are being given that opportunity here at Creighton."

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Sidebar info:

## **Supporting First Generation Students at Creighton**

**Student Support Services (SSS)** is one of the five federally funded TRIO programs at Creighton University under the Department of Educational Opportunity Programs. For over 25 years, SSS has provided quality assistance to approximately 4,000 students who are economically disadvantaged, first generation college students and students with disabilities. SSS is grant funded through the Department of Education to provide comprehensive services to help students achieve a successful college experience by increasing academic performance, retention and graduation rates.

***For the 2005-2006 academic year, 94% of SSS participants are first generation college students (neither parent earned a four-year college degree).***

The strength of the SSS program is providing comprehensive support to under-represented students at Creighton University who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have the ability and desire to succeed, but who would benefit from additional advocacy, academic, personal, financial and career support. SSS is a resource that provides personalized and comprehensive support services for eligible participants to help them achieve their full potential.

According to Tami Buffalohead-McGill, director of Student Support Services, recent cuts in federal funding have threatened various TRIO programs and limit the help that SSS can offer to participating students. While Creighton does provide SSS with money to award scholarships to first generation low-income students, as tuition increases and federal and state aid decreases, the financial gap for these students will continue to widen, making private donations even more important.

### **Scholarships for First Generation Students**

According to Don Bishop, Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management at Creighton, the median household income of enrolled first generation students for 2006 was \$60,000, compared to the University median of \$116,800. Even with grants and scholarships (many of which are provided by Creighton), these families may still amass \$30,000 or more in student loans by the time a student graduates.

Cuts to federal funding, such as the Pell grants that many first generation students receive, will make the need for scholarships even more necessary. To address this need, the Campaign for Creighton seeks nearly half its overall goal -- \$162 million -- in endowments for people and programs. There are also various scholarships available for first generation students of certain racial and ethnic backgrounds, such as the Diversity and Gates Millennium scholarships earned by Luis Vasquez and Millicent Wolf.

- Diversity Scholarships are awarded for outstanding multicultural students of African American, Latino and Native American descent. These scholarships are awarded primarily on the basis of academic merit, community service, school activities and leadership. Financial need may be considered as well.
- The Gates Millennium Scholars (GMS), funded by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, was established in 1999 to provide outstanding African American, Asian Pacific Islander American, Hispanic American and

American Indian/Alaska Natives with an opportunity to complete an undergraduate college education in all discipline areas and a graduate education for those students pursuing studies in mathematics, science, engineering, education, library science or public health. The goal of GMS is to promote academic excellence and to provide an opportunity for thousands of outstanding students with significant financial need to reach their fullest potential.

Over the past two years, Creighton University has reached out to prospective college students in Nebraska and several other states by assisting them in applying for the Gates Millennium Scholarship. Because the application for this scholarship is exhaustive, Creighton provides a workshop in which our faculty, staff and students assist prospective college students and their parents in navigating through this complex and challenging process. These workshops have helped 250 students each year to complete the Gates application process. Over the past two years, twenty-seven Nebraska residents have won the Gates scholarship (twenty-three of which participated in the Creighton workshops). Of the twenty-seven Nebraska winners, thirteen went on to enroll at Creighton.

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Sidebar #2:

## **Sharp downward trend in Federal funding and state funding over the past decade**

Between 1996 and 2006, Federal Pell Grant support for qualifying students has fallen from supporting 20% of the costs of Creighton to just 12%, creating an additional shortfall of \$3,600 in today's dollars for Pell eligible students.

In an attempt to bridge this additional gap as much as possible, Creighton University is working to build up the endowment for financial aid grants for all needy students, including all Pell eligible students and the vast majority of first generation students.

Nebraska students with high need have been hit even harder by sharp decreases in state aid and a relatively low investment by the state for its lower and middle income families.

- Ten years ago, about 80 freshmen from Nebraska received state grants that provided about \$1,200 per student (7% of the costs at Creighton). Due to cuts in funding, the 80 neediest Nebraska students now receive an average of approximately \$500, which only covers about 1.5% of their total college costs.
- In many states, the neediest students attending in-state private colleges receive state grants averaging between \$4,000 and \$9,000. In Nebraska, where 36% of Creighton students come from, the neediest students receive an average of just

\$500. In order to ensure that a Creighton education remains a possibility for these students, the University must bridge the gap itself with funds from its endowment and general budget.

Between federal reductions in funding and lower grants for in-state students, many Creighton students today face an ever increasing challenge to financing their college education. Creighton remains committed to its mission of providing an education to all deserving students, regardless of their ability to pay, and will continue to draw upon whatever resources are necessary to do so.

*(Information provided by Don Bishop, Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management, November 2006.)*

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