

Centennial Scholar Program Makes The Grade

By Janet Smith, Office of Public Affairs

Two hundred strong, they are "The Centennials," smart, committed James Madison University students who are the beneficiaries of a program to improve access to higher education.

They are members of JMU's Centennial Scholars Program, which was established in 2004 after JMU's Commission on Diversity found that financial need was preventing many qualified students from even applying to the university. Each Centennial, as the students are called, receives a financial aid grant package to cover tuition, fees, room and board.

Students must first be admitted to JMU before they can begin the CSP application and interview process, according to Diane Strawbridge, who has served as Centennial Scholars director since October 2004, shortly after the first 50 scholarships were awarded. In addition to passing academic muster and proving financial need, students are considered for the program if they are Virginia residents and demonstrate aptitude and interest in program activities.

The inaugural cohort consisted of 40 freshmen, six transfer students and four first-year graduate

students, a distribution that has remained fairly consistent in the program's subsequent three years.

JMU's support is more than monetary. Because many Centennial Scholars are first-generation college students, the university is committed to making sure people and services are in place to ease the students' transition into college and to assist throughout their years at JMU.

"We have a lot of built-in support systems in the program," Strawbridge said. Strawbridge directs a team of 13 graduate assistants who each mentor 12 to 14 underclassmen. Meeting every other week, the groups build a network to help each other navigate the college world and understand that their initial concerns are often common among new college students.

In addition to the graduate assistants' support and weekly meetings with Strawbridge, each Centennial Scholar is paired with a "buddy." In a new venture this year, the CSP Buddy System is a one-on-one arrangement that matches an upperclassman mentor with an underclassman. The goal is for the two to develop a deeper relationship in which the newer student can learn from the experiences of his or her personal mentor.

"That has worked really well," Strawbridge said. "It has given the 'big buddies,' the upper-class students, the realization that they are capable of working with

younger students. They help their buddies avoid pitfalls, share knowledge of resources and just be there as another friend on campus."

Another support mechanism, the Student Administrator Instructional Faculty Partnership Program (SAIF), pairs Centennials who volunteer for the program with high-level JMU administrators and faculty, including President Linwood H. Rose, to meet occasionally for lunch and other informal meetings. "It's another level of support that shows the students that many people at JMU want them to succeed," said Strawbridge.

"Being a Centennial Scholar has given me the opportunity to be a part of a family of support and encouragement," said Gothami Gunasekera of Reston, a senior majoring in finance with a minor in economics.

The director attributes the Centennial Scholars Program's impressive 95 percent student retention rate to the layers of support each student receives. "We are trying to give them everything that they will need to be successful here at JMU, to graduate from JMU and to be successful in life," Strawbridge said. "That is our goal in this program."

Much is expected of the Centennial Scholars. Each must maintain a minimum grade point average of 3.0, perform 100 hours of on- and off-campus community service annually and actively participate in CSP-organized group presentations that increase the

students' awareness of JMU and provide inspiration and challenge. "Our large-group meetings, which are held every other week, focus on important topics such as lifelong learning, critical thinking, problem solving, communication with people in all walks of life - skills that will help the Centennials to represent themselves well," Strawbridge said.

About 15 Centennial Scholars who enrolled at JMU as transfer and graduate students have already graduated. Some are continuing their formal education, including Hyun Eui Lim of Springfield, who graduated a semester early with a degree in marketing and is currently studying at Parsons The New School for Design in New York.

The 40 students who constituted the first four-year cohort will graduate May 3.

Vanessa Cisneros of Herndon, who is double majoring in Spanish and communication studies with a concentration in cultural communication, describes her four years at JMU as "a transformative journey" as she has learned inside and outside the classroom.

When she enrolled in 2004, Cisneros was considering careers in Spanish/English translation or corporate human resources. "My experience as a Centennial Scholar has been an amazing blessing to me in more ways than I think I could ever know," Cisneros said. "As if it was not enough that I was given the amazing gift to attend my top choice school with this

scholarship, I was also given an incredible cultural experience serving in the community, I was given the opportunity to hear wonderful speakers, I was given opportunities for tutoring in my difficult classes, but most importantly, I was given the gift to meet certain individuals who have forever left their imprint of support, service and deep caring on my life and future."

Cisneros gave back to her college community by working with young Hispanic high-school girls in Harrisonburg through Young Life, a nondenominational Christian organization. She also joined Chi Alpha, a campus ministry, and began singing at church services. Following graduation, Cisneros will take seminary and music classes at Forerunner Music Academy in Kansas City, Mo., in preparation for a future as a missionary in South America. "If it were not for the Centennial Scholarship, it would be many years - because of paying off student loans - before I could further pursue my heart's passion ...to help those who are in need," Cisneros said.

"Aside from the obvious financial benefits, the Centennial Scholars Program gave me the opportunity to serve in the JMU recruiting office (Career and Academic Planning)," said Robert Lee, a quantitative finance and economics double major from Annandale. "I am in my fourth year of community service in the offices at Sonner Hall, where I had the opportunity to play an important role in the daily activities of on-

campus interviewing."

Lee capitalized on his office service and his mentoring experience with College of Business professors to land a job at Freddie Mac. Two months after graduation, he will begin a rotational program in investments and capital markets.

A combination of community service experiences and academic counseling led Erica Ross of Bedford to seek a career in social work. Now the mother of an almost 2-year-old daughter, Ross is especially grateful for the financial and emotional support she received as a Centennial Scholar. She is completing her JMU studies on time despite taking a semester off for the birth of her child.

"With the help of my family and the support of the people in the Centennial Scholars Program, I am happy to be graduating with my class," Ross said. Her required community service at the Salvation Army and at Keister Elementary School, where she tutored kindergarten students, coupled with her personal experience have led her to plan a career in social work specializing in maternal and early childhood health.

Gunasekera, the senior finance major, has already received a job offer from Fannie Mae. Like Lee, Gunasekera points to the relationship with her COB mentor as critical to her success at JMU. "Dr. (Marina) Rosser has been a great resource and a wonderful voice of support," Gunasekera said.

"They are going to be the people who really shape our future," said Strawbridge of the Centennial Scholars. "I hope they are going to continue community service and giving back to their communities. I hope they are going to be ambassadors - all of them - for JMU in particular but also for higher education in general."

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