Whether a Rainier Scholar has moved ten minutes away from home to attend the University of Washington or over 3,000 miles to Columbia University in the heart of New York City, the College Support (CS) phase helps them move from a state of dependence — on parents, family, friends and school — towards their own particular style of independence.

As Aisha Cathcart, a CS Academic Counselor observes, “In college, students are often shocked at how much freedom they have to choose classes, make financial decisions, cook, clean and advocate for themselves.”

Amidst this shock of endless ramen dinners and stacks of dirty laundry, there can be also be a sense of liberation. Consider Renea Harris-Peterson, a freshman at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. She says, “I have more responsibility now and I feel like I have more choice in deciding where I want to go in life. I miss the familiarity of home but I know that being here and breaking out of my comfort zone will benefit me. I know this is the right place for me and I love that feeling!”

Or Kathia Vivar Acevedo, a sophomore at the University of Washington, Bothell. While working two part-time jobs, continuing to check in on her two younger siblings and her mother, who lives close by and works full time, she juggles her classes, meets with professors, joins clubs and yet seems undaunted by the challenges of college. “I feel free,” she says, “free of feeling like someone is watching over me, but at the same time I know I have people behind me in case I have questions about what to do next.”

Some of these “people” behind Kathia and the other 170 Rainier Scholars in college are Director of College Support Fred Capestany, Academic Counselors Aisha Cathcart and Milena Flores; and Kimberly Petersen and Giovanni Milan, who provide career guidance. The CS team helps scholars flourish in their new college environments. Personalized College Care Packages deliver time-honored collegiate essentials, such as chocolate, gift cards, and laundry detergent; the College Career Connections Program matches students with professionals in their particular fields of interest; and the College Internship Program introduces students to much sought-after summer job opportunities. These services are necessary, but would be insufficient without the personal relationships each staff member cultivates with his students.
or her own cadre of students. The heart of College Support is embodied in the regular phone calls, emails, texts and campus visits that keep Fred, Aisha, Milena, Kimberly and Gio dialed into the challenges, and the dreams of their students.

As a sophomore at Carleton College in Minnesota, Tony Ngo is starting to find his groove, having made a community of friends and, as he says, “broken out of my shell and become less shy and academically. I’ve had the opportunity to take classes I never thought I would (Sociology of Modern Families and Understanding Religion). Those classes have taught me to view problems with different perspectives and find new ways to approach and understand them.”

Jessica Cai, a junior at Pomona College in California, says, “Since coming to Pomona, my interactions with students from all over the world have made me more aware of my own upbringing — the privileges I’ve never thought about. I have realized there are greater things happening all around me, and it has taught me not to be so worried about my grades, and to just enjoy the learning experience.”

Each of these students seeks to find his or her own equilibrium amidst the push and pull of the dependency of their youth and this newly found independence. CS helps them understand how this new dynamic works, and what it means. As Aisha tells her students, “Going to college is not about you just getting a degree, it’s also about learning how to be an adult and learning how to ‘do’ life.” Fred Capestany calls this “adulting” and a large part of that is learning to be interdependent. This, in Fred’s opinion, is what can be transformative about college.

He says, “Those who succeed understand how to do things on their own, but also understand how to remain part of a community — know how to reach out, how to connect, to take risks and develop their own personality, but also ask for help when they need to.” Nothing could be more personal.

This spring, another class of Rainier Scholars will graduate from college, joining the ranks of over 200 alumni. Many will move away from where they grew up, but their sense of belonging and purpose as members of the Rainier Scholars community will travel with them. They may have newfound economic prosperity, but will remember the importance of giving back and the difference access to opportunity can make. Though they have finished the formal 12-year program, they will remain part of an ever-growing network of lifelong Rainier Scholars, who embody the promise of the mission and the transformational power of education.

Going to college has taught me so many lessons that have transformed me into a better person. College has taught me how to speak up for myself, the importance of being on time, the importance of taking risks in life and how to hold myself accountable for my decisions!

Jalen Wright
Senior, Morehouse College
Executive Director’s Perspective

Growth Mindset

There are predictable moments every spring that remind us it is a season of renewal and possibility. As flower buds burst forth from the ground and cherry blossom anticipation takes hold, we begin planning our annual luncheon. Our high school seniors receive news from schools around the country and college seniors are hearing from future employers.

While these milestone moments (and bursts of color) naturally capture our attention, I find myself reflecting back to when the seeds of possibility were planted — the moment in which scholars and their families decided to embrace the opportunity for educational access and excellence, entering into a partnership with Rainier Scholars to work together to ensure that a child becomes the first in their family to earn a college degree, and ultimately, to become a voice of leadership for our community.

Children grow in many ways during the 12-year span of our program and this never ceases to inspire me. On any given day, ten-year olds in our academic enrichment phase grapple with character development in novels, solve complex algebraic equations or engineer a bridge designed to withstand great weight and pressure. These same students are just beginning to set ambitious goals for themselves and articulate a vision for the future world they hope to help create.

Our youngest scholars recently received important news regarding their future options for middle school. We celebrate them and the opportunities they have earned, thanks to their own hard work and the support of the people who championed their success.

There are several opportunities this spring to see our scholars flourish. Please join us at our April 23rd annual luncheon or on a school visit, where you can witness inspiration in action. Thank you for all that you do to help make our work possible.

Sarah Smith
Executive Director

Sarah Smith, Executive Director
Milena Flores
Academic Counselor, College Support

Milena Flores joined Rainier Scholars as an Academic Counselor in the College Support Phase in September of 2018. She grew up in Snohomish, WA, attending Snohomish High School, where she earned an athletic scholarship to play basketball at Stanford University and became the first in her family to graduate from college. Milena received a BA in Political Science, went to the NCAA Final Four in 1997 and was a team captain her senior year. Milena returns to Washington after 11 years as assistant coach for the Princeton Women’s Basketball program.

As an Academic Counselor, Milena is responsible for monitoring the progress of over 50 Rainier Scholars attending college around the country. The job entails much more than just asking how their grades are. “It’s finding out how they are feeling as a student of color on campus, what clubs they’re involved in and helping them understand where their resources are,” she explains. Milena knows it is important to be supportive, but, as was true when she was coaching, she knows it is important to be someone “who challenges and pushes students out of their comfort zone, encouraging them to take risks and learn how to take advantage of everything that college can be.”

In fact, what Milena appreciated most about her time as a coach was working with first-generation college students. It was, and is, very personal. She has an affinity for these students, having walked and played in their shoes. As she says, “I absolutely love this age group. They’re finding their voices, learning the power of their words and their ideas, and learning how to assert their will, all the while learning they’re also going to fail a little bit, too.”

It’s a world that Milena knows well, and Rainier Scholars is fortunate to have her on its team.

Aisha Cathcart
Academic Counselor, College Support

Aisha Cathcart joined Rainier Scholars in June of 2016, but her connection to the program goes back to the very beginning, and to founder Bob Hurlbut. After graduating from Washington State University with a BA in Speech and Hearing Sciences, Aisha went to work as a Family Support Worker in the Seattle School District. Over her 16 years of work at the District, she got to know Bob and Rainier Scholars through his recruiting efforts among the parents and teachers of her elementary school students.

Aisha’s focus at the District was working with families, advocating, supporting, and providing resources for the adults. She feels a direct connection between that experience and her current role as an Academic Counselor for the College Support Program. “Now my goal is to help our students who have come from those low-income families of color get that degree and avoid the cycle of poverty that affected their household growing up,” she says. She sees herself as a guide, one who lets the students walk the path that is their individual journey, but remains close enough to each of them to challenge, suggest and nudge them to consider alternatives when necessary. “I love supporting people who want to be supported, but I tell my students that they need to connect with the resources and support that are available to them.”

Not much of a traveler before joining Rainier Scholars, Aisha has expanded her comfort zone, as she travels the country — Alaska, Ohio, New York and Georgia — to visit her students. She finds the experience both nerve racking and a dream come true, making it easy for her to relate to the far-flung college scholars she supports.
Kimberly Petersen
Career Programs Manager

Kimberly Petersen joined Rainier Scholars as its Career Programs Manager in October 2018. With her years of experience counseling college students, most recently at Seattle Pacific University, Kimberly is looking forward to working with Rainier Scholars as they make their way from the academic world into the workplace. As she says, “My true love is career and life transitions. When people are in transition, they are more open to explore and re-evaluate. It can be a very vulnerable time, but also one of tremendous creativity.”

Kimberly’s goal is twofold: first, to work closely with students to find and understand the balance between their skills and their career aspirations, and second, to help them make as many job and career-related connections as possible because, as she says, “85% of jobs are filled through networking.” She is quick to point out, however, her role is not to be a job placement service or a recruiter, but rather, “to teach students how to be highly professional; how best to present themselves in their LinkedIn profiles and resumes, and to hone their interviewing skills — skills that are not just important now, but will be throughout their lives.”

As one whose entire life has been about helping people find the right opportunity at the right time, Kimberly feels fortunate to be where she is now, and looks forward to working with students whose backgrounds and talents are diverse, complex, and ultimately of incredible value, not just to the companies who hire them, but to the communities in which they will live. “The idea of being part of the process of adding new narratives to the workplace, to open doors, offer access and provide support as students transition from the structure of school into their adult life, is an incredible privilege.”

Giovanni Milan
Career Services Coordinator

The first thing you notice about Giovanni (Gio) Milan is his smile, and the way he leans in to engage in a conversation. He makes it easy to connect, and that is an important attribute, given his job managing the college internship program offered to the 170 Rainier Scholars currently in college around the U.S. A graduate of Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington, he loved everything about his college experience. He was a member of the Filipino-American Student Association, worked in the admissions office and, after graduating in 2014, took a job in WWU’s Ethnic Student Center before joining Rainier Scholars. As he says, “Ever since high school, I have loved working with people and, being a student of color, I feel I can take my experience and help shape other students’ experiences a little bit.”

Gio joined Rainier Scholars in 2016 as an Academic Counselor in the College Support Program and was recently promoted to Career Services Coordinator. His current responsibilities could be summed up as being a “vocational matchmaker.” As he says, “I love to connect students with the right people, the right resources and the right jobs.” He works hard to get the message out that the job market is very competitive, particularly for those without relevant work experience. His challenge is to simultaneously suss out students’ interests, while motivating them with the information and support they need to be ready for internship opportunities. On the employer side of the equation, Gio works to make sure meaningful summer work experiences exist for the students, while also fostering relationships with public, private and nonprofit organizations who have partnered with Rainier Scholars in the past.

Every day Gio feels fortunate to have a job where he can make a difference — and that is a lot to smile about.

I love to connect students with the right people, the right resources and the right jobs.
Program Phases

The 12-year Journey to College Graduation and Community Leadership

2019 Highlights:

- We received nearly 500 applications for Cohort 19 — our highest number of applicants for a single cohort since 2011.

- There was a 150 percent increase in the number of Black American applicants who advanced to Round 2 of the recruitment process.

- 88 percent of Cohort 18 scholars were admitted to sixth grade highly capable public school programs and independent private schools for next year*

- 92 percent of Cohort 16 will be enrolled in ninth grade highly capable public school programs and independent private schools next year*

- 96 percent of high school seniors received one or more college acceptances*

*as of March 26

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