

JAMES P. CLEMENTS

The first in the family

WVU is committed to educating first-generation students

My grandfather was a Pennsylvania coal miner.

My mother was a homemaker.

My father was a government employee.

Neither my parents nor my grandparents went to college.

But as a child, I knew the importance of higher education. I understood that earning a college degree unlocked opportunities that otherwise might not be available, or even imaginable. It was a lesson my parents taught my brother, my sisters and me when we were young. For us, the question wasn't whether we would go to college, but where we would go to college.

This year, when my sister finishes her master's, we will have 11 college degrees among us: four bachelor's, five master's, two Ph.D.s and a pair of proud parents.

Today, I am the president of West Virginia University, an institution that believes the same thing my parents did: Education is the foundation upon which success is built, and it should be available to anyone who is serious about their studies and wishes to pursue them.

As a land-grant institution, educating first-generation students who meet our criteria for admission is part of the WVU mission. We offer, and we value, access and affordability. As the largest university in the state of West Virginia, we also consider educating first-generation students a great responsibility because these are often the students with the largest financial and cultural barriers.

West Virginia, despite its many triumphs, still has educational obstacles. Recent data show that for every 100 ninth-graders, only 16 will graduate from college.

That number has stirred this state to action. The governor and the Higher Education Policy Commission have announced initiatives to improve such statistics. WVU is recommitting itself to educating all qualified students who want to go to college.

Last fall, one in five students in the freshman class reported they are the first in their families to go to college. We must help these students realize their dream of a college degree because a better college graduation rate not only opens opportunities for individual residents of West Virginia, it also opens opportunities for the state and for the entire region. An educated workforce is necessary for a healthy economy, and a healthy economy is vital to the success and prominence of our state.

Part of our commitment to students and to the region comes in the form of financial aid. WVU students receive almost \$320 million in grants, loans, work study, fee waivers and scholarships each year. About 70 percent of WVU students receive some financial aid, and nearly half of that is given to resident undergraduates come as grants and scholarships, not loans.

At a time when many families are feeling the effects of a sluggish economy, WVU has increased its help. New institutional funding was provided this year to students whose families have been negatively impacted by the economic downturn.

For those students who still say college isn't attainable, for those students who say, "I can't," I say, "You can."

I'm able to say that because I've traveled the same path these first-generation students will travel. So have many of my colleagues. It's not always easy. It's not always fun. But it's possible, and it's certainly worth it.

Ask Andrew Higgins. He's a senior in WVU's nationally renowned physics department who recently won a Goldwater Scholarship for promising young scientists. He also was named a NASA Space Grant Scholar for his work on spintronics, which he conducted with the help of a WVU research advisor. He's from Grafton, W.Va., the son of a retired soldier who's now a salesman and a school program assistant.

Ask Mollie McCartney from the small town of Walkersville,

W.Va. She recently won a Jack Kent Cooke scholarship for exceptionally promising low-income students so they can reach their full potential. Mollie is a second-year medical student who graduated summa cum laude with bachelor's degrees in biology and history. She plans to dedicate her career to rural health in Appalachia and in other countries.

Ask Katasha Legget of Pittsburgh, or John Armour, who grew up in Maine. Their parents didn't go to college either, but they have achieved academic excellence and been rewarded with prestigious scholarship opportunities alongside some of the best students in the country.

Katasha's Gilman International Scholarship allowed her to study abroad in Spain, where she came a step closer to her dream of becoming fluent in the Spanish language and culture.

John's education taught him the importance of public service. John grew up in a poor, rural part of Maine and now dedicates his time to Habitat for Humanity in Morgantown. The recipient of a Truman Scholarship, he wants to work for the Federal Emergency Management Agency and help create innovative solutions and effective policies for dealing with disasters.

The opportunities and lessons experienced by these first-generation students may not have been possible anywhere else and I'm extremely proud that caring, supportive faculty and staff, along with enriching undergraduate research and academic offerings at WVU, helped lay the groundwork for these success stories. Even though we are a large public university, the tight-knit, nurturing community of WVU is quite amazing.

There are thousands of examples of successful first-generation students at WVU. In the years to come, we hope there will be thousands more.

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