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-plus year history, the University has proven its dedication to this mission by reaching out to attract the best students from all backgrounds.

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, Smith moved from her hometown of Gurnee, Ill. (a Chicago suburb) to Omaha. At 15, she gave birth to her son, James, who is now 5 years old.

"Before I became pregnant, I hadn’t thought much about what I was going to do beyond high school," said Smith, 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."

Smith’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, Smith focused on applying to colleges and universities that would offer her in-state tuition.

Although two other colleges had offered her full-ride scholarships, Smith 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

Kristina Smith
Philosophy/Political Science — Class of 2008

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 desire.

First-generation college students Kristina Smith, Luis Vazquez and Millicent Wolfe 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.

Creighton’s Jesuit Catholic mission also comes with an obligation to help ensure an education for the increasing numbers of high-ability middle- and low-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 400 first-generation students who were admitted to Creighton in 2006, 200 chose not to enroll, citing financial aid and costs as the No. 1 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 80 of these students chose peer colleges that provided more aid. The remaining 120 students settled on a less selective college choice that cost much less. With the support of financial aid provided by the University, 199 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 10 percent of their high school, compared to 44 percent for the entire class," Bishop said. "In addition, the median high school grade-point average of these first-generation students was 3.387. 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.

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Federal, State Aid for Students Continues to Decline

Between 1996 and 2006, Federal Pell Grant support for qualifying students has fallen from supporting 23 percent of the costs of Creighton to just 12 percent, 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 percent 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 percent of their total college costs.

In many states, the neediest students attending in-state private colleges receive state grants averaging between $4,000 and $8,000. In Nebraska, where 36 percent 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.)

Luis Vazquez
Chemistry/Pre-med — Class of 2010

Luis Vazquez’s 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.” Vazquez 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, Vazquez 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 Vazquez’s life. Shortly before his high school graduation, Vazquez 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 Vazquez’s shoes, and Tammi Buffalohead-McGill, director of Student Support Services at Creighton. With the help of Buffalohead-McGill, BA’89, Hernandez and others, Vazquez not only made it to Creighton, but also became a Diversity Scholar.
Helping Students Achieve: Student Support Services a Valuable Resource

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 percent 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.

Through it all, Vazquez credits the unwavering support of his family for his success. “I am extremely proud of my parents,” Vazquez 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 businesses, and offices and my stepfather works at a meat-packing plant. They did not want 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, his mother also wants her son to remember to help others who are in similar situations. “My message is to love God, love life, have faith and fight with strength,” Vazquez 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.”

“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.” — Luis Vazquez

Millicent Wolfe

Elementary Education — Class of 2009

Although she grew up less than 85 miles 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, Neb., 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. Wolfe family, however, may prove to be the exception to the rule. Millicent 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 eighth grade and still undecided about her college plans. And, although neither of her parents have a four-year degree, Millicent’s father did receive his associate’s degree in liberal arts from Haskell. “Going on to college was always important to my parents,” Wolfe 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.”
First-Generation Students

Willing to Excel: Support Student Scholarships

From its earliest days, Creighton has pursued its fundamental mission to educate students from all parts of society — even remaining tuition-free until 1924. This commitment, which grows out of the Jesuit, Catholic educational tradition, provides access to a signature Creighton education for talented students of all socioeconomic levels and all backgrounds as they develop to their fullest potential.

To continue to attract a diverse community of bright, talented students, the Creighton University fundraising campaign seeks additional support for endowed scholarships and financial aid. For more information on how you can assist first-generation students like Kristina Smith, Luis Vazquez and Millenic Wolfe, and other deserving students like them, please call the Office of Development at (800) 334-8794 or (402) 280-2740.

Scholarships

Bridge the Funding Gap

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 $16,800. 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 Cam is on for Creighton, works 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 Vazquez and Millenic Wolfe.

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 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, 25 Nebraska residents have won the Gates scholarship (23 of which participated in the Creighton workshops). Of the 27 Nebraska winners, 13 went on to enroll at Creighton.

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Willing to Lead

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