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College students gain leadership from service

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When Candice Coulter was a student at Burke High School, the College of Charleston represented another world even though it was only about a mile away.

She felt safe at Burke, where most students were black like her. But she wanted new experiences when she enrolled in college.

Unlike many of her friends in the Class of 2007 who enrolled

cal colleges or historically black universities, she decided to attend the College of Charleston, where most students are white. The shift from a black-majority high school to a predominantly white college was tough at first, Coulter said.

She felt intimidated. She didn't get involved in campus activities and was afraid to talk to professors. But in her sophomore year, she found her niche with the help of the Bonner Leader

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College of Charleston student and Burke High School graduate Candice Coulter (center) plays with her after-school WINGS program students.

BRAD NETTLES/STAFF

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program. The program, which receives funding from the Bonner Foundation, offers scholarships, other assistance and leadership training to students who do service work.

That way, they don't have to work at part-time jobs just for money, said Stephanie Visser, the college's director of the Center for Civic Engagement and coordinator of the program. Students shouldn't have to rule out doing public service work simply because they are not wealthy, she said.

Coulter, now a senior, said she quickly got to know many of the other 21 students in the Bonner program. It helped her connect to a diverse group at the college. She now feels like she has a family there.

She's doing her service work at an after-school youth program called WINGS for Kids. The program helps children in kindergarten through sixth grade develop personal and emotional learning skills. Such skills likely will help them succeed in school and life, Coulter said.

And her work at WINGS changed the direction of her life. She will graduate in May with a bachelor's degree in sociology and wants to pursue a career working with children.

She remembers the moment when she decided on her life's work. She started at WINGS when she was a sophomore. On the last day of school that year, when the children in the program realized they wouldn't see her and the other leaders all summer, they were upset.

"They cried," Coulter said. "It was one of the most emotional days I have ever had. They boo-hoo cried." She knew then she was making a difference. She had found her passion.

On Friday, Coulter and other group leaders were teaching children in the WINGS program at Memminger Elementary School about responsibility. They talked in small groups about being responsible for both good and bad behavior.

And they had a lot of fun participating in dance contests, having snacks and just being together. The youths in Coulter's group, or what the program calls her "nest," came to her for hugs, smiles and jokes. But they listened to her when she told them it was time to be quiet and focus on something.

Visser said word is spreading quickly about the program, which is in its third year at the college. Last year, 75 students applied for six freshman slots. This year, the college so far has received 2,700 applications for six slots.

Students in the program receive scholarships that range from \$2,000 to \$4,000, and a \$1,000 AmeriCorps award. And some of them receive work-study money as well. Visser said that although many students in the program come from low-income families, "It's not a poor-kids program."

For instance, she said, one student came from a middle-class family where four siblings were enrolled in college at the same time. The student didn't receive any financial aid and was working four part-time jobs to get through school.

"The big goal is shifting campus culture to value service."

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