

## Tapping the potential of high school students

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By Guest Columnist **CHARISSE M. WILLIAMS**, *director of Posse Atlanta — the local arm of the Posse Foundation, a national non-profit that recruits young leaders in urban public high schools and helps them enroll and excel in college.*

As we look ahead to the upcoming college season, there are many high school students in metro Atlanta and throughout the country without any post-secondary education plans.

The earning potential of these young people is bleak. A person without a college degree is more than twice as likely to be unemployed as someone with a college degree.



For minorities, the outlook is even more dramatic. At a time when national unemployment is close to 10 percent, the rate is a staggering 16.5 percent for Blacks and 12.5 percent for Latinos.

However, a college education remains elusive to many urban high school students. Among the many barriers to attaining a college education, three major hurdles are access, preparation and affordability.

The non-profit Posse Foundation was founded in 1989 to help students overcome these challenges. Posse's Atlanta office was launched in 2007 and is addressing a crucial need in the community.

To date, Posse Atlanta has awarded 87 students from across the Atlanta region full-tuition scholarships worth over \$10 million. These scholars are rising freshmen, sophomores and juniors at Bard College, Boston University and The College of Wooster.

Posse identifies public high school seniors with extraordinary academic and leadership potential who may be overlooked by traditional college selection processes.

Posse extends to these students the opportunity to pursue personal and academic excellence by placing them in supportive, multicultural teams—Posses—of 10 students.

The Posse Foundation's partner colleges and universities award Posse Scholars four-year, full-tuition leadership scholarships.

Posse's unique, three-part selection process helps remove the access barrier.

Posse helps colleges identify student leaders who fly below the radar of standardized tests. There are many high school students with the potential to succeed at a top college or university who do not score high enough on the SAT to even be considered.

Not surprisingly, there is a strong correlation between SAT scores, race and family income, with lower-income and Black and Latino students scoring lower than their higher-income or white counterparts.

In addition to assessing academic potential, Posse's unique interviews allow us to assess the complete student, including his or her leadership, drive and team-building skills. The results enable Posse to successfully predict which ones will do well and graduate from college.

Secondly, Posse helps address the issue of affordability.

For the 2009-2010 school year, the cost of a college education averaged around \$39,000. With tuition costs rising much faster than the median family income, for many students the cost of college has become prohibitive.

Enter the Posse Scholarship—a four-year, full-tuition scholarship based on leadership and merit from our partner colleges and universities. In addition, Scholars also qualify for need-based financial aid.

Colleges and universities that are truly committed to attracting students from diverse backgrounds recognize the importance of scholarships and comprehensive financial aid packages.

Finally, for all students, regardless of background, adapting to college life can be challenging.

The newfound freedoms, increased academic rigor, and social and cultural adjustments entail a lot of change.

Posse provides an 8-month Pre-Collegiate Training Program that prepares Scholars to face these challenges, while building the bonds of the members of the group. The Posse serves as a traveling support system, which helps Scholars navigate the challenges of college once they leave home together.

Posse works.

Posse Scholars are graduating at a rate of 90 percent and entering the workforce ready to take on leadership roles.

The Posse Foundation started in 1989 because of one young man who said: "I never would have dropped out of college if I had my Posse with me."

Since then, Posse has expanded from New York City to six other cities including Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, D.C., Los Angeles and Miami. Posse has awarded 3,148 students full-tuition scholarships worth over \$330 million.

In March 2010, Posse was recognized by President Obama when he chose it as one of 10 organizations in the United States to receive a portion of his Nobel Prize money.

The Posse concept is rooted in the belief that small, diverse groups of talented students, carefully selected and trained, can be powerful change agents.

As the United States becomes an increasingly multicultural society, Posse believes that the leaders of this new century should reflect the country's rich demographic mix. The key to a promising future for our nation rests on the ability of strong leaders from diverse backgrounds to develop consensus solutions to complex social problems.

Posse Scholars are these leaders.

On behalf of Posse Atlanta, I would like to congratulate the high school class of 2010 and wish each of them the best of luck in their future endeavors.

We eagerly await 2012 when Posse Atlanta's first two Posses will graduate from Boston University and The College of Wooster ready to take on the world!

To learn more about the Posse Foundation, go to [www.possefoundation.org](http://www.possefoundation.org).