



**University.**

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## College invests in students' success New program helps students reach for higher education

**By Jenna Gibson**

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WINONA — Students sitting at desks, diligently writing — it's a scene that will become more common in a few weeks, but a group of kids in Winona got an early start.

For two weeks, St. Mary's University of Minnesota in Winona played host to 25 middle school students from inner cities across the nation. They were the first to participate in the university's new Countdown to College program, a camp designed to prepare these students for opportunities in higher education.

Other colleges have similar programs that prepare students, but few are as comprehensive as Countdown to College, said Brother Edmund Siderewicz, the program's director.

"The reason these students often don't go to college or finish college is not ability, because they have great potential," he said. "The reason is they fall through the cracks."

That's why Countdown to College is a four-year program, to continue supporting the kids as they learn and grow.

"The idea is not to bring them here for a solitary experience, but it's to build relationships with the kids," he said.

Deb Nahrgang, the university's director of communication, agreed.

"They have the potential, they have the drive,

they want to go to college,” she said, but they’re facing many challenges at home. Some do not have parent support, some live in gang-ridden neighborhoods, some have to avoid drug dealers on a daily basis.

Nahrgang hopes this program can help change a small group of students, who can then help change their families, their communities, and maybe even the whole country.

“This is how it all starts,” she said.

### **Getting to camp**

For this first year of the program, the university reached out to its sister schools in the NativityMiguel Network of Schools. Students at NativityMiguel middle schools could apply by writing an essay and submitting an essay from their parents. The papers, along with counselor recommendation, helped narrow the field to 25 students.

The middle schools have given the students the desire to go to high school and college, but they might already be behind in some areas, especially in reading, writing, math and vocabulary, Anderson said.

The students spend four hours a day in class and have one hour of study hall each day. But they also have time for fun, including water balloon fights, a talent show and the chance to ride on a zip line.

### **Dedication**

The camp is part of the university’s new First-Generation Initiative, aimed at supporting students who are the first in their family to attend college. Along with college preparation, the initiative has started providing full scholarships. When the Countdown to College kids graduate from high school, they’ll be eligible for the scholarship to come back to St. Mary’s, Anderson said.

Arshad Williams, a ninth-grader from Chicago and a Countdown to College student, said he’s dedicated to doing well in school and working toward the scholarship to help his mom, who raised him and his siblings by herself.

“I think she would be very proud of me and relieved because she’s been doing so much on her own,” Williams said. “I want to take a little weight

off of her shoulders so she doesn’t have to worry so much.”

As camp was wrapping up, Anderson said it was a successful first year.

“I’m real pleased with where they came in two weeks,” she said.

