Bridging THE GAP

Annual Report 2021
This year my primary goal as the new Board Chair of Access College Foundation is to build upon the tremendous accomplishments of the past 33 years. All of our goals are tied to our four-year Strategic Plan, but in particular, I want to focus on a few specific goals including:

- Continuing our work to expand our donor base so we can increase our impact and expand services.
- Continuing our work on academic fit for our students, reducing student debt and engaging our alumni.
- Broadening the volunteer board leadership with involvement in committee work.
- Leading the organization during these unusual times with optimal delivery of services while continuing to adapt to the needs of our students and school districts.

Thanks to our staff, donors, community partners and board members, our impact continued to be strong even during the toughest of times last year. In our 33rd year, we were able to serve more than 15,000 students in middle schools, high schools and colleges and help the Class of 2021 leverage $24 million in financial aid and scholarships. In June, we were able to celebrate the Class of 2021 in an outside, socially distanced environment at Norfolk State University where we awarded $700,000 in Access “Last-Dollar” Scholarships. We were able to get our students to college and kept them in school by impacting retention rates that stood out at 90% in comparison to the national average of 60%. Thanks to our financial aid counseling, our Scholars only have 39% of the student loan debt that other students around the country have.

“Bridging the Gap” was an overarching theme of the 2020-21 school year. From our Board of Directors stepping up financially to assist the Access College Foundation by bridging budget gaps to our team helping students bridge the educational gaps between high school graduation and postsecondary education, we were all working together, and the results were impressive for our students, their families, and our community. Access donors and staff know exactly what commitment to our mission looks like.

In this annual report, you will read about Access donors like Pru and Louis Ryan who truly go the distance both financially and with their time and knowledge about our mission; Scholars like Arionna Holiz who overcame adversity to attend college because of her Access Advisor and scholarship that helped her bridge the gap to higher education; and other exciting accomplishments all for the benefit of our students and our community.

Being a part of Access over the past 33 years continues to enhance my life. When we all join hands, we have the capacity and opportunity to help thousands of students each year attain their higher education dreams. Thank you for helping us Bridge the Gap!
Beating The Odds

ACCESS Scholar-Athlete Leaves Behind Rainy Days For a Brighter Future
eating the Odds wasn’t just the theme for the essay competition that won Arriona Holiz the $25,000 scholarship from Access College Foundation earlier this year. It has been her life’s mantra as she has had to overcome tremendous roadblocks to get where she is today — a freshman at Emory & Henry College studying to be a veterinarian ophthalmologist.

Arriona, unfortunately, fell victim to an unstable childhood very early in her life. Her mother was not a role model for her and her sisters, so during the time that Arriona lived with her grandmother, she often looked to her for guidance and stability. Eventually, Arriona and her sisters went to live with the man who assumed the role of their stepfather at that time on a more permanent basis. In the absence of her mother and grandmother, Arriona had to take on the responsibilities of an adult in the household and oftentimes had to protect her sisters from her stepfather’s abuse.

Over the next several years, Child Protective Services was heavily involved in Arriona’s life due to the abuse she endured from her then stepfather. Arriona developed depression, obsessive compulsive behaviors, and an eating disorder, all of which did not allow her to be successful in her academic endeavors. “I never expected to live past 16, so school was never a big deal to me. I did, however, join the track team in hopes of losing weight. Starting this sport was a turning point in my life that I just didn’t realize at the time.”

Arriona’s life became more balanced because she was going to school consistently and quickly becoming a track star. Her depression, OCD and eating disorder subsided. Although her mother returned to the home for a short time, she eventually left again leaving Arriona in charge of the household and her sisters. With her

“HELP NEVER LOOKS LIKE WHAT YOU THINK, so take it, BECAUSE IT CAN LEAD YOU DOWN A ROAD YOU NEVER THOUGHT POSSIBLE.”

Arriona Holiz
responsibilities at home, school, and with track, her depression returned. In October of 2020, Arriona tried to take her own life. She credits two of her closest friends for saving her. After spending time in a psychiatric hospital, Arriona learned how to properly deal with her mental health issues and eventually went back to school.

All the adversity that Arriona faced up until this point gave her a heightened sense of self-awareness allowing her to finally see who she wanted to be in life. “Healing doesn’t mean the pain never existed. It means the damage can no longer control our lives.” No longer allowing her painful past to control her life, Arriona started buckling down and devoting all her time to school and track. She eventually ended up with straight A’s. Running track and cross country weren’t just activities for Arriona, but lifelines that allowed her to channel her emotions in a healthy way. She became one of the top high school track and cross country athletes in the region and eventually the state. Arriona proved to herself, and to her sisters, that no matter what life throws at you, you can still reach your goals and set new ones.

With college being the next goal, she reached out to Access College Foundation for help to get there. Her Access Advisor, Christian Howton, helped her apply for every scholarship for which she qualified and encouraged her to write a “Beating the Odds” essay that eventually won her the $25,000 Margaret M. “Peggy” and Conrad M. Hall Access Scholarship.

Christian recounts:

“I was able to work with Arriona during her senior year helping her through the financial aid process, college applications, and then the Access Scholarship application towards the end of her senior year. She was always very bubbly and personable, and I had grown to be very impressed with the student that she was and knew she had a bright future ahead of her.

However, when I read her ‘Beating the Odds’ essay in April, I was even more impressed with the person that she had become.

Some of the things that she talked about in her essay could have made a huge negative impact on the average student and severely impacted their high school career. Personally, I don’t know if I could’ve gone through some of her experiences and maintained the level of determination and focus to finish school and go on to college to be a student-athlete. Given that she had overcome so much in such a short amount of time in her personal life and maintained her positive attitude and her great grades/extracurricular activities, I knew she truly embodied the ‘Beating the Odds’ spirit to win our special scholarship.

One of the lines that she wrote in her essay that has stuck out to me ever since I read it was, ‘Every day is not rainbows and sunshine still… perspective is what I have now. Those rainy days, I have learned to just put on my rain boots and go splash in a few puddles.’ I noticed so much maturity in that one line and knew that she was going to do some amazing things in the future.

The coolest thing is, now as a College Success Advisor, I get to work with Arriona through her college journey at Emory & Henry College. One of the more exciting parts of transitioning to the College Success Team from the high school side of Access is knowing that I am going to be able to continue to work with her and have a front row seat to everything she accomplishes during her college career.”

Arriona is now working toward her dreams of becoming a veterinary ophthalmologist and running cross country for Emory & Henry.
For nearly two years, students across the U.S. have endured virtual learning at every educational level. Some have thrived while others have suffered. With our country’s shift in the academic learning environment, students have been forced to adjust their learning styles accordingly. This is called the virtual struggle and it has never been more real.

Program Specialist and College Success Advisor at ACCESS College Foundation, Rachal Weaver, had this to say about the virtual struggle she sees among her students, “Our team here at ACCESS honestly feels like all of our students who were able to make it through online classes during the height of the pandemic overcame the struggles of virtual life. We still have many students who have chosen to stay virtual this year. Time management and establishing a routine were two things that we encouraged our students to focus on while taking online classes.”

Some students have benefited from the advantages that virtual classes present. Alex Moss, a current senior at VCU, even landed an internship through a connection during one of his online classes. “My department had people from all over the world join us virtually. I was later able to connect with one of the speakers who helped me get an internship in my field of study. Virtual classes were no easy task. They had their highs and lows. One thing I learned that helped me a lot was time management. I was really planning out my days from beginning to end. That helped me immensely with handling classes online.”

While the virtual struggle continues to be a reality for some students, others like Alex have been able to get a head start in planning their career path thanks to connections made during their online classes. Also attributing to their success was a strong support system from parents, professors, ACCESS Advisors, and other influential people.

Alex Moss
Grassfield High School Class of 2018
Current Senior at VCU Class of 2022
Majoring in Fashion Merchandising
Minoring in Spanish
In Their Own Words...

Briona Feltes
“Thank you so much to my Access High School Advisor, Ms. Allen. In a year where we didn’t have a guidance counselor at our school, I always knew she was there with any answers or resources I needed, and I couldn’t have done it without her. THANK YOU!”
Attending University of Virginia

Reginald Nolan
“I want to say thank you to all the Access Advisors out there, specifically to my Access Advisor at Grassfield High School. Thank you for giving me all the information I needed to pursue my college dreams. Thank you!”
Attending Virginia Tech

Luke Williamson
“A special shout out to my Access Advisor, Ms. Harvin. Thank you very much for making my college dream a reality. It means a lot!”
Attending Tidewater Community College

Olivia Newton
“A special shout out goes to my Access Advisor, Mr. Mann. The college application process was not something I was familiar with, and he made sure to help me every step of the way and answer any questions that I had. Thank you so much for getting me into the college of my dreams!”
Attending Longwood University
The Ryan Family

There are many influential people in the Hampton Roads community. Prudence “Pru” and Louis Ryan have been instrumental pillars in our local community, having their hands in major philanthropic projects across many avenues of giving. Focusing primarily on educational and environmental causes, the Ryans are, in every way, extraordinary in their generosity and kindness.

After being introduced to the Access College Foundation through his former boss and co-founder of Access, Frank Batten, Sr., Louis and Pru became supporters in the mid-1990s. Hearing the stories of the students involved in ACCESS and never leaving an event with a dry eye, the Ryans decided to be more actively involved with the ACCESS Program. Louis took it a step further and deepened his involvement in the early 2000s by having a role in the foundation’s strategic planning and from 2002 until 2005, Louis served as head of the Board of Directors.

Through the years, the Ryans have provided monumental support through generous donations to multiple campaigns and special events, including the 25th Anniversary College Changes Everything Campaign, 30th Anniversary and the most recent Bridging the Gap Campaign. Their leadership gifts played a major role in supporting program expansions, enhancements, scholarships, and most recently, operating support to ensure all current programs are stable throughout and beyond the current uncertainty the COVID-19 pandemic has created.

In 2013, the Ryans enlisted two other families to join them in endowing the Bonnie B. Sutton Scholarship fund which awards up to ten scholarships to graduating high school seniors each year. Since 2017, the Ryans have also funded other ACCESS "Last-Dollar" Scholarships to include the Cheryl L. Jones Scholarship.

"For more than 20 years, I have been able to count on Louis and Pru to embrace and support the ACCESS mission,” says Bonnie Sutton, President and CEO of ACCESS College Foundation. “While Louis admittedly becomes emotional at ACCESS student events, I shed tears of joy when he and Pru gave a major gift in honor of my 60th birthday to increase the Bonnie B. Sutton Endowed Scholarship Fund to reach the $1 million mark! The Ryans are two exceptional human beings — kind to the earth, kind to others, and downright amazing for young people who need help with their educational journeys!"

Because of the Ryans and others, the ACCESS College Foundation will continue making higher education possible for students in the Hampton Roads community for many years to come.
Since its inception, Access College Foundation has partnered with some incredible businesses throughout the Hampton Roads community. These corporate partners have played a major role in Access being able to sustain its impact for over three decades.

TowneBank has been one of those corporate partners for nearly 20 years and has a long history of not just being a financial supporter, but also sharing their leaders’ time and talents on the Board of Directors as well as being the primary banking partner for Access.

“The entire TowneBank family is pleased to provide continued support to Access College Foundation. Helping to ensure that low-income and first-generation students throughout Hampton Roads have access to all types of education after high school is essential, in the challenging times we see today as much as any other time,” said Bob Aston, TowneBank Executive Chairman.

TowneBank has come together with many local businesses in support of Access Programs throughout the years. In 2002, they provided a lead gift that was instrumental in securing our program expansion to the public high schools in Chesapeake. In 2014, TowneBank made a substantial multi-year pledge in support of a special endowment campaign to enhance the four separate initiatives that form the core of Access services: Early College Awareness Program; High School Program; College Success Program; and “Last-Dollar” Scholarships.

Most recently, TowneBank increased their generous ongoing annual support to ensure that current and future generations of local students reach their fullest potential through educational training and programs beyond high school.

“We are so thankful for corporate partners like TowneBank who have been dedicated supporters of Access, helping us to expand our footprint and increase our impact,” says Bonnie Sutton, President and CEO of Access College Foundation. “They have helped us enhance the quality of life for our students, their families, and this community through their financial support and board participation.”

Over the past 33 years, Access College Foundation has relied on the generosity of its donors to further the mission of providing higher education to students who otherwise would not have access to those opportunities. As experts in the field of college access and educational success, Access College Foundation has continued to provide vital services to students for decades through the phenomenal support of individuals and corporate partners such as TowneBank.

Appearing in photos on the right: Dawn Glynn, President, TowneBank Hampton Roads and Outer Banks; Bonnie Sutton and Bob Aston.
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## 2020-2021 Accomplishments

### Early College Awareness Program

- **4,000** 7th and 8th Grade Participants
- **28** Low-Income Middle Schools Served
- **100** Families Awarded Last-Dollar Scholarships

### High School Program

- **11,300** High School Students Who Met Individually or in a Group Activity with Advisors
- **33** Public High Schools Served by 26 Advisors
- **$24M** Funds Leveraged in Scholarships Awarded/Financial Aid

### “Last-Dollar” Scholarships

- **$700K** “Last-Dollar” Scholarships Awarded to the Class of 2021
- **110** New Scholarship Recipients
- **366** Additional Scholarship Renewals
- **476** Scholars Awarded for this School Year

### College Success Program

- **13** Virginia College Campuses
- **387** Students Received Advisory Services
- **90%** Six-Year Retention Rate

### Career Connection Program

- **116** ACCESS Scholars in College Participated in Career Development Activities
- **24** Secured an Internship or Job in Their Intended Career Field

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*National average is 60%*
Defining moments. Life is full of them. We may not recognize them at the time, but looking back on the moments that led us to face life-altering decisions, we are reminded that choices we make define us and shape us into the people we are today.

Don J. Carey III has led a life full of defining moments. Having grown up in the Norfolk area, he eventually went on to have a successful career in the NFL before returning to Hampton Roads to become a real estate mogul and member of local government — currently a councilman for the City of Chesapeake. Someone with that pedigree had to have defining moments that led to where they are today.

One moment in particular led him to make the decision to continue his pursuit of education in a way he never thought possible. After
his football highlight videos did not pique the interests of college recruiters, Don’s dreams of attending college on a football scholarship quickly faded. It was with the help of his ACCESS College Foundation Advisor, Heide Felder, that he realized there were other ways to get into a great school. His decision to work with her to get into college instead of giving up and going the military route was a defining moment for Don.

“ACCESS is unparalleled when it comes to time spent helping students get to college,” Don says. “Moments define us and that moment when the ACCESS Advisor came to my house and sat with me, forcing me to fill out college applications was the moment in my life that gave me a path to the life I have now.”

Because of Heide’s refusal to let Don give up on going to college, Don applied and was accepted to Norfolk State University and ended up still playing football. Completing his college education with a bachelor’s degree in building construction technology, Don was a 2009 NFL draft pick and was selected by the Cleveland Browns.

“Never think that you have one path in life or that there is only one way to get there,” Don explains. “My entire focus growing up was football. I thought that football was my ticket to college, but my ACCESS Advisor showed me that I was able to achieve my college dreams walking down another path. If someone is going to take the time to show me another way to achieve what I want in life, then I should be able to take the time to listen.”

Don has since retired from the NFL, having played for the Jacksonville Jaguars and the Detroit Lions for most of his career, and now resides in Hampton Roads with his wife LaKeisha and son Victor. Don founded The Don Carey REECH Foundation, Inc., which uses sports as a catalyst to connect with and educate students about careers in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) fields. He has also become a motivational speaker and gives lectures at different schools of every level; challenging, teaching, and inspiring the next generation of leaders around the country.

A published author, Don’s first book, “It’s Not Because I’m Better Than You,” shares his personal story and the principles he and others have used to achieve success. The book, released in 2017, has been met with extremely positive reviews.

In 2018, Don received Norfolk State University’s Graduate of the Last Decade award and, in 2019, was inducted into the NSU Athletic Hall of Fame. He continues to serve the community of Chesapeake, sitting on various boards and participating in several organizations that spearhead positive change across the city.

Most recently, Don was elected to Chesapeake City Council for a four-year term, which began July 1, 2020.

Defining moments. Where would we be without them? Would Don be where he is today had he not followed the guidance of his persistent ACCESS Advisor? It’s hard to say, but because he did, that decision led to his next defining moment, and so on. Now, Don J. Carey III is a staple in the Hampton Roads community and a role model to local youth.

He is living proof that defining moments, big and small, can make a huge impact on who you become and your footprint on this earth.

“Don’s story is one we see every day in our work at ACCESS – a local student encounters an everyday hero (ACCESS Advisor) and goes on to achieve amazing success in their chosen path of life,” says Bonnie Sutton, President and CEO of ACCESS College Foundation. “We are proud to call Don one of our Access Alumni!”
At Access College Foundation
We believe that any student who dreams of continuing their education after high school should have the opportunity.

We’re committed to helping every student in the communities we serve, from any walk of life, follow the necessary steps to achieve their educational goals.

We need your help to bridge the gap for local students who need us more than ever. Here are some ways to make an impact:

**Every Dollar Counts!**

- **$50** ONE SAT/ACT REGISTRATION FEE
- **$200** UP TO FOUR APPLICATION FEES FOR ONE STUDENT
- **$1,000** A COLLEGE TOUR FOR 50 STUDENTS
- **$5,000** ONE “LAST-DOLLAR” SCHOLARSHIP

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