

May 13, 2009

Dr. Herman Eure
Associate Dean for Faculty Development
& Dean of the College
1834 Wake Forest Road
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Dr. Eure:

I am pleased to offer a recommendation for Sharon Forrest as Director, First Generation Student Scholars Program at Wake Forest University. As her supervisor, I was fortunate to have someone as capable as Sharon serve as the Development and Events Coordinator for Commonwealth Scholars, Governor Timothy Kaine's version of a premier federal education enterprise, the State Scholars Initiative. Virginia was one of 24 states participating in SSI, a program which recruited, trained and equipped business leaders with a nationally prepared presentation encouraging eighth grade students to complete a rigorous course of study – one that prepared them for work or college.

To explain the importance of Sharon's work I selected an e-mail sent to our staff from Deputy Secretary Judith E. Heiman when Commonwealth Scholars was 18 months old:

"I want to thank you for your extraordinary work over the last year and a half to build the Commonwealth Scholars program from the ground up, to the exciting program that it is today, with localities lining up to participate. You jumped in on short notice at the request of our office, and have let nothing deter you from developing a high quality program that advances the principles so dear to Governor Kaine and the rest of us – a true business education partnership, promoting rigor, relevance and relationships, raising the aspirations of Virginia's young people and helping them to achieve higher goals. Your work exemplifies the "excellence" in the Governor's vision for education. You have helped hundreds of Virginia students already, and have raised the profile of Virginia on the national education landscape. The seeds you are planting will help thousands of students and our commonwealth will be better off as a direct result. It has been a personal as well as professional privilege to work with you."

As this quote illustrates, the importance of properly preparing today's students is perhaps greater now than ever before and the pilot project we conducted for the Office of the Governor clearly gave meaning to expanding the program beyond 18 school divisions. As Sharon and I developed a strategic plan for program expansion we targeted school divisions with high free lunch populations. Three years of data gathered reveal that 44 percent of Virginia students participating in SSI were also considered disadvantaged. We knew that disadvantaged youth encounter barriers in qualifying for college, paying tuition, and ultimately succeeding, but we also knew that Pell-eligible students completing the college/career ready curriculum also qualified for Academic Competitiveness Grants, almost \$2000 during their first two years of

college. In real dollars, postsecondary education can help disadvantaged young people increase their economic opportunity.

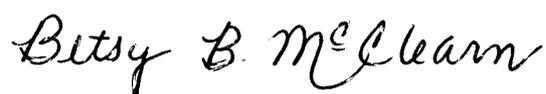
Fortunately for students in Virginia, our three years of data validate Commonwealth Scholars' successes, and I must say that it was Sharon Forrest who guided the initial expansion through Workforce Services. The connections she helped create from the Initiative to vital support systems in the state were invaluable. We built successful models for national replication and presented our work at the United States Department of Education 2007 Educational Briefing Series and at the 2008 National Summit on Rigor and Relevance. In March 2009 the expansion model was highlighted in the E-Letter from the Office of Vocational and Adult Education. At our final monitoring meeting Secretary of Education Thomas Morris announced that we must institutionalize the program; we are in the final stages of transitioning Commonwealth Scholars to the Virginia Community College System.

I have launched many successful programs during my 35 year career in education; however, with Scholars, I learned to navigate the political landscape. Through her political savvy and knowledge of political landscapes, Sharon had me where I needed to be. The bi-partisan nature of our efforts was widely noticed and appreciated, particularly by the Governor's P-16 Council.

Finally, traveling statewide with Sharon gave me the opportunity to know and observe her on different levels. She is an insightful thinker and strategist who draws from a broad perspective and range of experience when offering advice. She has a keen understanding of barriers that disadvantaged youth encounter in qualifying for college, paying tuition, and ultimately succeeding. The message she helped deliver to eighth grade students in 18 pilot school divisions resonated strongly with Sharon Forrest not only as a leader in the program but as a student and parent herself.

Sharon repeatedly illustrated that she possesses the knowledge and skills set to work not only with students, parents, school leaders and counselors but also policymakers, and business leaders. Without question she can continue to prepare disadvantaged students for the academic rigors students will encounter at your highly regarded institution. Therefore, I offer my highest recommendation of Sharon to you both as her supervisor and as her colleague for your consideration. If you should have any questions or need any additional information, please contact me at betsymcclearn@aol.com or 540-529-3921.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Betsy B. McClearn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Betsy Blizzard McClean
State Director
Commonwealth Scholars
818 Eddies Road
Salem, VA 24153