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## New scholarship non-profit partners with WPS to secure local careers for low-income students

By ANNA MEROD The Winchester Star  
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Members of the nonprofit Opportunity Scholars met at John Handley High School on Friday to discuss how their organization will help local students and families from low-income settings get the local education required to obtain good paying jobs in the Winchester community. From left are: Knox Singleton, CEO; James Gibson, career coach; Bibiana Vazquez, counselor and program specialist.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star

**WINCHESTER** — A new nonprofit seeks to help low-income students train for well-paying jobs.

Opportunity Scholars, founded in 2019 by John Knox Singleton, of Winchester, and Scott Miller, of Loudoun County, aims to help students from low-income backgrounds attain the local education required to start a well-paying career in their community. Opportunity Scholars recently announced a partnership with Winchester Public Schools to help make it happen.

The goal is to guide middle and high school students in WPS to decide on a vocational skill, a technical certification or degree or a professional degree program to pursue locally. Opportunity Scholars will then provide financial resources as well as career counselors to help students obtain vocational training and/or an educational degree from Lord Fairfax Community College or Shenandoah University.

Opportunity Scholars will help pay for dual-enrollment fees, exams, test preparation and other related educational materials. It will also help students and families apply for federal financial aid for higher education degrees.

The ideal candidate would be someone who wants to build a career in the Winchester area. Students who qualify for free and reduced lunches will be considered for the program.

Once a student obtains a local well-paying job, they will be expected to enter an Income Sharing Agreement (ISA) with Opportunity Scholars. An ISA essentially requires someone to pay a percentage of their salary to the entity that paid for the program or degree. It's an alternative to taking out student loans. Some other higher education institutions, such as Purdue University, have implemented this financial aid model.

The exact parameters and expected future payments have not yet been set for the ISA, said Singleton, but if a student is not able to complete their vocational or degree program, or they can't find a well-paying job shortly after completing their training or education, they won't be expected to pay a percentage of their salary.

Within the next three months, the first class of Opportunity Scholars will be announced. Singleton, the nonprofit's interim CEO, expects to announce the first group of middle school students in the beginning of the summer and the first group of high school students by the end of the summer with the goal of offering an orientation program before school begins for the 2021-22 school year.

Singleton said the program will likely start with 40 to 50 students, but he wants that number to grow quickly.

"We're just trying to get as many students as we can who we think can take advantage of the opportunity," Singleton said.

Opportunity Scholars has received financial pledges and donations to cover the first three years. The budget this year at Opportunity Scholars is about \$300,000, Singleton said.

“It will grow as the program grows,” Singleton said.

The program also seeks to assist underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Opportunity Scholars’ four career coaches and counselors come from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Most of the coaches and counselors are first-generation college students themselves.

Bibianna Vazquez, a counselor and program specialist for Opportunity Scholars, graduated from Handley High School in 2013.

“We have walked the journey, and we have overcome those challenges and barriers,” Vazquez said about navigating the path of being the first in her family to graduate from college.

For Vazquez, who is Hispanic and has immigrant parents, it was important for her to return to her community and help students with similar backgrounds.

“I can change the generational cycle of our family,” she said. “I can make a generational change not only for our family but really provide that generational change for other families.”

Carl Rush, the equity, engagement and community coordinator for WPS, said that Opportunity Scholars makes it a community effort to help students in the program figure out their future.

“What this really does, especially for first generation college students is it says that we are all family here in Winchester,” Rush said. “It isn’t just you navigating this or your parents navigating this, but now you have experienced ones that are at the table that can help to navigate through this.”

It’s hoped, he added, that these scholars will want to do the same thing for the next generation.

“It’s more of a structure in place for the benefit of the community,” Rush said.

For more information or inquiries about applying for Opportunity Scholars, visit [www.opportunityscholars.org](http://www.opportunityscholars.org).

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