

# BELIEF Conference 2020

## Dornsife Center for Community Engagement



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### Project & Goals

BELIEF hosts high school students from Rogers, North Central, and The Community School once a year at Whitworth where they can experience a holistic view of what higher education entails. The goals of the conference are the following:

- For students to become inspired to pursue higher education
- For students to become aware of the different higher education options in the area
- For students to grow confident about their own strengths

### Background

BELIEF was established in 2010. The conference grew from just 14 students from one high school to 51 students from three high schools. BELIEF partnered with Spokane Public Schools to work directly with students. The four students that created this program recognized a need within the education system: more readily available and sustainable information and more educational support around the transition from the K-12 system into higher education.

### Partner Organization

The BELIEF Conference is a college-preparatory conference for local high school students and is hosted at Whitworth University. The purpose of the conference is to expose higher education resources to students in Spokane schools. Our conference addresses educational equity issues, while empowering students to fulfill their potential.



Figure 1. Students from John R. Rogers arrive at opening ceremonies

### What I Did

The 2020 BELIEF Conference brought 51 high school students to Whitworth. In two days, this included:

- hour long mock-lecture by Whitworth professor
- YWCA held a workshop on the importance of relationships and Whitworth's Cultural Diversity Advocates presented a workshop on Identity.
- Student panels, a T-2-4 fair (5 universities and 2 community colleges), resume building and strength-based workshops, performances by Cool Whip, Gonzaga's dance team, and more!

Those involved with the 2020 BELIEF Conference got to see the lives of these students change, as 100% of attendees left motivated to graduate from high school and pursue their futures with, on average, a more representative picture of what education is with increased interest and ability to be successful (as seen through varying interest levels for each educational type represented in pre and post conference surveys taken by each student).

### What I Learned

The schools BELIEF partners with are all committed to ensuring a holistic learning experience for students in ways that open academic doors post-high school. A significant issue we encountered was the perception students had of their limited prospective academic options post-high school. In turn, we had a conference theme of "What is your story?". We had our conference built around the idea of these students being able to change their story, the workshops and lecture played into the theme as well. Our conference revolved around empowering students to not only believe in their ability to attain higher education, but to also appreciate the many ways in which they may attain it. Learning about alternate routes to higher education such as trade schools and community college involved researching these institutions in order to explain them and understand why they may apply to the students we mentored. Without learning about alternative routes to college, we would effectively perpetuate the limited perceptions prevailing with students. In doing this, we aim to extend the T-2-4 initiative. Often students don't see higher education as an option if their parents did not go to college, but in reality, they have the potential to take on any path... sometimes all they need is to believe it.



Figure 2. BELIEF Conference Group Photo

### What is Next?

This year we had planned to make BELIEF more than just a conference by establishing a after school "program", this way mentees and mentors can reconnect with one another. Also, through this program is another way we wanted to show the students we are there for them and we truly want to see them succeed. This was unfortunately cut short this year due to COVID-19, but it is in the works to be established next year.

Another step that we would like to take for the conference next year is to focus on the retention rate, I think it is important that we get students to go to higher education, but it does not mean much if they drop out after the first year. Our conference took a step in this direction this year with adding the YWCA workshop because in college and in life it is all about relationships. This workshop displayed the importance of healthy relationships and getting rid of the toxic relationships. I would like to develop this further with more workshops built around succeeding in college and in life.



Figure 3. Students at BELIEF Conference Mock Lecture



Figure 4. BELIEF Conference Whitworth Student Panel

### Civic Perspective

The BELIEF Conference allows mentors and coordinators to learn about a variety of topics relating to educational equity. Mentors attend trainings hosted by coordinators and learn valuable techniques to use with their mentee and beyond. The conference allows Whitworth students to interact with students from local schools and hear their stories. Each student brings a unique perspective to the conference and learning about these perspectives benefits both the mentor and the mentee.

### Academic Perspective

The BELIEF Conference allowed us to implement our knowledge of asset-based development in order to recognize the strengths that each school and individual student had in order to encourage them to pursue their dreams. This conference allowed us to struggle with the fact that this approach to development can be restricted by the ability to build relationships with our community partners.

### Personal Perspective

A personal strength we revealed from the conference is our ability to prepare we had it organized and planned out nearly perfect. A weakness that was revealed during the conference is the conference did lack communication from coordinators to mentors, the conference was so focused on the mentees often mentors were just in the background. We developed the skill of accommodating different needs. The attitude for the conference was great; we all were very excited for both the students to come to receive this great opportunity and ourselves seeing all our hard work come together successfully.