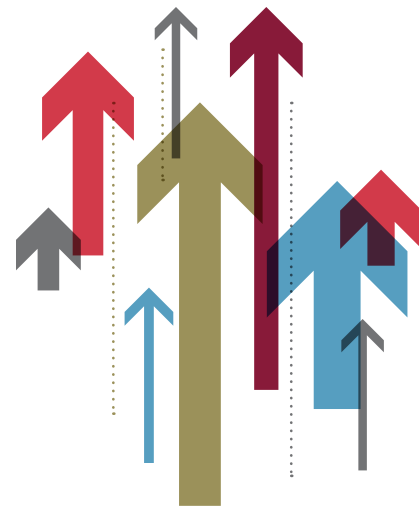


# Higher Purpose

*As Founder of The National Society of Collegiate Scholars, Steve Loflin has gotten students involved in helping other students.*

by IVY HUGHES



Photos courtesy of NSCS

**Go to class and get involved. This is what every college student hears during freshman orientation. They're also given campus maps and welcome packets, but the resounding message is that if they go to class and get involved, they will succeed.**

Though not always practiced, the concept of attending class is easy. Getting "involved," on the other hand, can be nebulous, especially for students attending universities with more than 500 student groups.

Students often find organizations via bathroom bulletins or announcements scrawled on campus pathways. Even if they try a few, many end up using their affiliation with an organization

as a résumé bullet point. They go to mandatory meetings, but lose interest in additional engagement because they don't feel connected to the group.

"I think the college experience is much more about student development," says Steve Loflin, founder of The National Society of Collegiate Scholars (NSCS). "Orientation is where it all begins. If you can find a way to connect students to something they never imagined before and get them outside of their comfort zone, it gets them meeting people they would never have been able to interact with otherwise."

What's different about NSCS is that it targets freshmen and sophomores rather than students nearing the end of their college

careers. It's also much more dynamic than most honor societies, getting students involved in activities aimed at helping other students, including those who are younger and possibly at risk. Academics also are important—young people are invited to join only if they rank in the top 20 percent of their class.

Among other activities, NSCS members mentor middle-school students, work with after-school programs, work with fellow students to help them obtain graduate scholarships, and connect young people to academic leaders and business professionals. The NSCS also offers more than \$250,000 in scholarships to its members every year. For younger college students, involvement with NSCS activities provides a sense of place on large campuses and sets the tone for the rest of their academic careers.

Loflin was just a freshman himself at the University of South Carolina when he developed the idea for the organization. He had taken a class that introduced students to the university experience, and he became interested in how kids transition from high school to college.

"I wanted to start an honor society to recognize students who had done well in their first two years of college," he says. "In my experience, honor societies typically happen at the end of college. The students graduate, and it's pretty clear it can't be a meaningful part of their college experience."

Loflin had always been involved with school activities. Engagement wasn't an issue for him. However, he saw the value it brought to his life academically and personally and wanted to share that experience with others.

Loflin wanted to create a solid academic, leadership and organizational connection point for students on campuses throughout the country. In 1994, he and two friends founded the NSCS. It was tough convincing the first few campuses to get on board, but eventually they saw the value in Loflin's vision. Though Loflin and his friends developed nine chapters in four years, he didn't start working full time on the nonprofit until 1998.

Today, the NSCS has 280 chapters on campuses in every U.S. state and Puerto Rico. The organization continues expanding, and several of its programs aim to combat declining high school graduation rates. The NSCS Planning to Achieve College Excellence (PACE) program has exposed more than 12,000 middle and high school students to colleges and universities through mentorship, college tours and tutoring.

Every year, chapters from around the country participate in the PACE March to College Day, bringing underserved students to nearby colleges and introducing them to the campus, college life and academic opportunities.

"We show them what they can do at college, that the sky is the



Steve Loflin



Catherine Provost

limit, that no matter what age you are, it's possible," says Catherine Provost, NSCS manager of chapter development and founder of the University at Albany chapter. "On one campus, we split about 500 students into different groups for different tours. If they were interested in science, we brought them to a lab. If they were interested in the arts, we would bring them to a stage."

NSCS is well organized, but each chapter is given some autonomy, which allows the chapter leaders to create community-specific programs. One chapter may provide after-school tutoring for students while another may start a financial aid course or host a résumé-building lecture.

At the University at Albany, NSCS students tutor high school students preparing to take the SATs. Provost says some of the students she tutored were barely prepared to graduate high school. However, the academic and moral support provided by NSCS members helped some kids graduate and continue to college.

"I had a student who shared with us that his high school guidance counselor said he didn't need to worry about college, that it wasn't an option for him and that, if he didn't just drop out, he should just focus on a job that would pay after school," Provost says. "That lit a fire and broke my heart. Not only did he pass high school, he went to community college and attended Long Island University."

This is exactly what NSCS is designed to do—inspire students to achieve by giving them access to academic, social and community resources.

Provost followed the NSCS path to success, first completing graduate school and then accepting a job in corporate America. Even though she was out of school, Provost kept in touch with NSCS members. The connections were personally valuable, but she had a feeling that, somehow, she would return to the organization. "I was increasingly dissatisfied with the corporate culture," Provost says. "I stayed in contact with NSCS and ended up doing the opposite of what I was doing 10 years ago."

When she was in school, Provost was a student helping students. Today, she works with chapters to make sure they're getting what they need.

"I admire Steve greatly," Provost says. "He is a visionary. He makes sure everyone who goes through our programs and our organization does what will most benefit them no matter what that is. He wants to make sure we're relevant in every way possible."

NSCS expects to have 1 million lifetime members by the end of 2012. The organization is also reaching out to community colleges, discussing international expansion and planning to dole out at least \$750,000 in member scholarships in 2012.

Loflin's experience in founding NSCS provides a lesson he repeats to members: "My advice when I'm talking to college students, particularly entrepreneurial college students, is that every idea has the potential to become something. You just have to take the idea and be persistent with it." **S**