

Transcript of Ciresi Walburn Scholars discussion on KMOJ

On Sept. 28, 2018, the VOICES program on KMOJ, 89.9 FM, hosted a one-hour conversation about the Ciresi Walburn Scholars. Participants included:

- Co-host Rashida Fisher
- Co-host Samuel Simmons
- Guest: Abdul Omari, program coordinator
- Guest: Andre Griffin, student at Augsburg University
- Guest: Amin Mahamoud, student at University of St. Thomas

A press release summing up the leadership program opportunity that was shared with the media is available here: www.mnprivatecolleges.org/media/press-releases.

Speaker 1: (singing)

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Welcome to Voices, with host Sam Simmons and Rashida Fisher.

The views and opinions of this program for not necessarily those of the staff, management, or board of directors of 89.9 KMOJ.

Samuel Simmons: Thanks for tuning into Voices. I'm your host, Sam Simmons, and I'm joined by ...

Rashida Fisher: Rashida Fisher. Hello, hello, fam. How are you? Welcome to Voices.

Samuel Simmons: How are you doing this evening?

Rashida Fisher: I'm doing well.

Samuel Simmons: How's your week been?

Rashida Fisher: Pretty good. I can't complain. It's been a long week, but it's so wonderful to make it to Friday.

Samuel Simmons: Yeah, me too.

Rashida Fisher: Yeah.

Samuel Simmons: Why don't you introduce our guests?

Rashida Fisher: Yes, hello, Twin Cities. Happy Friday. Hey love. Hey you. Twin Cities, this Friday we have a wonderful show planned for you all that is geared towards education. We have several individuals in the studio that are here to discuss a milestone for a foundation that is geared towards promoting equitable education and social justice, especially for Minnesota children and youth. We have scholars from the Ciresi Walburn Foundation for Children as they celebrate 20 years of activism and work in our community.

Here in the studio, we have Andre Griffin. Andre is a student at Augsburg University. He is double majoring in secondary education and history and is from Patrick Henry High School here in Minneapolis. Welcome.

Andre Griffin: Hi. Welcome.

Rashida Fisher: Well, tell me a little bit about yourself and your experience as a scholar.

Andre Griffin: A little bit about myself. I'm a north Minneapolis native, so I was born and raised here in north Minneapolis on 40th and Bryant. This station is very near and dear to my heart. Yeah, like you said, double majoring in education and history.

Rashida Fisher: What are your plans for that?

Andre Griffin: My plans are to hopefully go back and eventually teach at Patrick Henry High School in north Minneapolis.

Rashida Fisher: Okay. Bring it home. Excellent. We also have Amin Mahamoud. He is at the University of St. Thomas and is majoring in economics. He hails from Mounds Park Academy in St. Paul.

Amin Mahamoud: Thank you.

Rashida Fisher: Welcome.

Amin Mahamoud: Thank you. Thank you. Glad to be here.

Rashida Fisher: Again, the question to you, tell us what it means to be a scholar?

Amin Mahamoud: Well, it means a great deal to me to be a scholar, just to be matched up with the other scholars like Andre and the other cohorts and being taught by professors and the wonderful people of the Ciresi Walburn Foundation.

Rashida Fisher: And what are your plans for your degree?

Amin Mahamoud: It varies between day to day. Some days it's marketing. Some days it's doing government research. But nothing finalized just yet.

Rashida Fisher: Okay. Well, that's a degree that there's so much that you can offer and that you can specialize in. Best of luck figuring that out.

Amin Mahamoud: Yeah, thank you.

Rashida Fisher: It can always be different. You can start in one area and decide to do something else later.

Amin Mahamoud: Exactly. Yeah. Thank you.

Rashida Fisher: We're going to do things a little different here. We have our scholars here to introduce their leader, Dr. Omari.

Andre Griffin: Yeah, Dr. Omari was our professor this summer for the class that we took for the scholarship. He's an amazing professor. He's also a regent on the board of regents for the University of Minnesota.

Amin Mahamoud: Dr. Omari has his bachelor's, master's, and PhD from the University of Minnesota, very invested in Minnesota itself. Like Andre said, he's on the board of regents and is heading the Presidential Search Committee. He's kind of a busy guy, but very laid back, very informative, and really a great leader for our cohort and class.

Andre Griffin: Great guy.

Rashida Fisher: Excellent. Welcome Dr. Omari.

Abdul Omari: Appreciate you. Good evening, folks.

Rashida Fisher: Is there anything else you'd like to add to that wonderful introduction?

Abdul Omari: The only thing that I'll add is I have the privilege and honor and joy of working with these men as we design the scholarship program specifically for black men in the private colleges. We knew that we'd be able to put something together that would be powerful where these young men could come together and build a cohort and lifelong partnerships and friendships that would take them through the academic and scholarly journey.

Rashida Fisher: Excellent. Tell us a little bit about the foundation and what kind of work and what type of opportunities it's providing for young people.

Abdul Omari: The Cirese Walburn Family Foundation is focused particularly on helping young people that come from traditionally either marginalized or under-prepared populations, essentially to help them thrive in the world. When they came to us,

we had previously launched and successfully piloted two cohorts of a very similar scholarship program with a different funder. So when they approached the Minnesota Private College Fund, particularly the president of the Minnesota Private College Fund as well as my partner in crime, Carolyn Jones, who helps to coordinate the program, we were able to adjust the program where we designed it with two schools, Augsburg University and the University of St. Thomas.

We have 12 scholars in this cohort, where we take rising juniors and work with them and build with them in their last two years of their college journey.

Rashida Fisher: Excellent. For the two scholars, tell us how you stumbled upon this opportunity.

Andre Griffin: Well, it wasn't one of the scholarships that you kind of apply for and you cross your fingers, "Did I get it?" Those scholarships are great, but I think this one is really unique in a way that we didn't really apply for it. We got referred to it. The leader of the Pan African Center in my school. His name is Muhammad. He said, "Hey, there's a scholarship here. You fit all the qualifications and I think it'd just be a great fit for you. These are the requirements and these are the things that you have to complete." He really spoke highly of it. So after I took the time to read up on it, I was like, this is a great choice.

Amin Mahamoud: Yeah, similar experience to like Andre said. It wasn't something I applied for, more so recruited. I met our campus coordinator for St. Thomas, Brad Pulles, a wonderful man who sat down with me and just presented this unique opportunity and just told me to apply and thought I would be a great fit for the program. I've been very lucky to be accepted and thankful to have it.

Rashida Fisher: Great. This is something that you need to be nominated for?

Abdul Omari: Yeah. By design, what we've done is we've very intentionally taken students who vary across the academic spectrum, but who can be significantly impacted by a program like this. This is the folks who, if they have a little extra support or partnerships in relationships could really thrive. So what we do is we have relationships with staff on campus who already know the students. So it's not just a blank application, but we have folks on campus that know the program and then that know the student, so that we can match up well in making sure that we have a broad range of folks with different academic promise as well as social promise, engagement, so on and so forth, because we know that when we have folks across the spectrum in one room, everyone will rise together.

Rashida Fisher: Absolutely. That's wonderful. I like the idea of being intentional with who you're targeting and the idea that these are young people that have been identified by faculty, by staff, as having that promise instead of those that have resources and that have really people to help them navigate higher education in a different way that typically get scholarships that you just generally apply for. This is

someone saying, I see something in you and you deserve an extra hand in getting you through to the finish line.

Samuel Simmons: What ways do you feel that this scholarship is going to be different than other ones? I know you kind of touched on it, in terms of the goals of the outcomes for this scholarship and for these young people.

Rashida Fisher: Andre and Amin, I'll have you guys answer the question first. What do you think is different about this scholarship and the intended goals of this scholarship versus others?

Amin Mahamoud: I think the main difference between this scholarship and others is the engagement from all these members through Dr. Omari and Carolyn Jones and the foundation itself. Most scholarships there's sort of a financial ... the main part is the financial component and they sort of just let you be free, where this is really intentional in seeing your progression in whatever field you may be in. Because I know our cohort varies between majors and aspirations.

We have people who are doing premed and we have people, like Andre, doing secondary education. We have people who are doing finance. So it's more so just developing the individual through opportunities and connections and just personal skilled development that holds us accountable, but also the people and the leaders who are developing this program itself.

Rashida Fisher: Andre?

Andre Griffin: I'm a little bit ... That's true. I feel like this scholarship is more of a support system than a scholarship because from the get-go, the people who refer you, they kind of have your back from the get-go, like you said. For me, Muhammad Salaam, the Pan African coordinator at our school, I had to think in my head, I have to do good in this class because he said this is a good person for this scholarship. And then once we have our cohort with our peers from different schools too, you have a connection with people on more than one campus. You check in on each other. You really get to be friends with those people and that's another support system.

If I'm struggling around finals time, someone's going to ask. Someone's going to say, "How are you doing?" And instead of me being out alone and thinking in my head like, I don't know if I can do it, I have a lot of people who are on my team already. So I think that's the most special part about this scholarship. It feels like a support system.

Rashida Fisher: Dr. Omari, as far as the Ciresi Walburn Foundation pairing and partnering up with Minnesota Private College Fund, why this marrying at this time? And for you and the other leaders, what was the intended outcome of this kind of scholarship program versus those that is just about the gifting of funds?

Abdul Omari: Well, so we know that black men in higher education are in a crisis right now, people of color in general, but specifically more than any other demographic, black men in higher education are in ... There's too few of them and oftentimes what we experience is that we can do what I refer to as diversity 101. We can get students on campus, but then we don't provide inclusive opportunities for them to engage and thrive. Part of that thriving is retention, opportunities to engage, and then of course, eventually graduating.

The initial cohort that we started three years ago, the funder for that program, the Phillips Family Foundation recognized the need within higher education and they already had a relationship with the Private College Fund. From there, Cirese Walburn seen the work that was being done and they also approached the Minnesota Private College Fund. So as we look at it, what we decided and what we think about and I reflected on my experience at the University of Minnesota and I had far too many experiences where I saw black men with fully funded scholarships and they were 100% paid for. By the end of the first year, sometimes even the first semester, they were gone.

I used to get mad because I wasn't fully funded. I was close to it, but I wasn't fully funded. But I did graduate with a PhD with no debt.

Rashida Fisher: That's a miracle.

Abdul Omari: Yeah. We were grinding. What we wanted to do was really think about, okay, we know that the financial component is very, very important and it's real. We will not ignore that. What we also know is touching some of what Andre and Amin were talking about, there's a level of accountability that's required when folks are going through higher education. So we designed a program that lasts for two years that focuses the first summer on a leadership course, a 10-week leadership course that I teach where the men really, really get to know each other and have an academics component and a real nice community component.

From there when they're back on their campuses, they have their campus coordinators who provide support to them. They have me. We have a retreat. We get them suits, shirts, ties, shoes. We take them to a black national student government conference. This year it will be in Missouri in February. And then we work with an organization that trains and places them in internships over their next summer that's specific to their career field and their major, and we also pay for that internship. And then they come back to school their senior year and have that same support system that we talked about while starting to prepare for either graduation or graduate school or whatever they deem next.

Rashida Fisher: This is really about the ... what I'm hearing is the retention and successful transition into a career that is not always the case when you get, when black and brown people get to college. It's already a hurdle to get there if you don't have people that have navigated that process before. We know the statistics bear out that money is not enough, that even without finances being a

challenge, navigating higher education is a new culture for a lot of people and it takes some extra support.

Abdul Omari: Correct. Absolutely. One of the number one indicators of retention and graduation rate is engagement. We want to make sure that these students are engaged in what they're doing on campus with either the cohort or other student organizations.

Rashida Fisher: I'm wondering, these young men have proven to a certain extent that they can make it because they've gotten past their freshman and sophomore year. Is there a particular reason why you're choosing juniors versus freshmen for this kind of scholarship and leadership program?

Abdul Omari: Yeah. Oftentimes what we experience is once students, if they do make it past their first year, that their likelihood of retention throughout their college time goes up. However, when they get to around the time between their sophomore and junior year, they begin to oftentimes take more important roles in their families, they begin to live off-campus, so they're experiencing more of needs and desires, I would say, around living a life that is more independent. When you're not on campus as much, you have a whole lot more distractions and things can take you away from being on campus.

Some of the other things when we come back to engagement again, when you're not on campus, say for example, you're having mental health struggles and we already know, number one in our community is not well-received, folks who are having mental health challenges. So when we look at this community that might not be on campus any more, we recognize that that engagement piece or the need for it can also go up a lot more. And then the last piece is we wanted to make sure that we could watch them transition post-graduation and ensure that they're having the opportunities that they can be placed in a job so that they can either take care of their families, they can put money in their own pockets, and/or they're able to start paying off debt if they have it.

I know I said that was the last thing, but I got one more. The way that the market is working right now, particularly for internships, is there's too many, high supply of interns and a low supply of internships which means what we're seeing is the employers that are offering internships can offer either zero payment or very little. So we know that if we have students who are coming from means that won't be able to work for free for a full summer. Knowing that junior to senior year is one of the most important times to do internships, we wanted to be able to provide funding for intern at that time.

Rashida Fisher: That is so awesome. Even those that are attaining a graduate degree, many of those programs, professional degree seekers require an internship and even those that are working, caring for a family, and trying to enhance their career have a hard time with the internship component because they're often unpaid. So I really like that idea of supplementing that experience for them.

Samuel Simmons: You know what I really like about what I'm hearing is the fact that this is so well thought out. Many times in the past, what we would run into is we would start a program because we know it's needed and we really are motivated to work with our young folks. And then you get them into the program, almost because we didn't think it out they almost get set up to fail. I really am impressed with the way you have thought through this in terms of who is ready, what year they're ready, so that it's one of those deals that they have a lot less obstacles to failing even if you're trying to do the right thing.

Rashida Fisher: Amin and Andre, both of you all are juniors this year?

Andre Griffin: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Amin Mahamoud: Yes.

Rashida Fisher: What's been the most benefit or the biggest benefit thus far for participating in the program?

Andre Griffin: Well, the scholarship is nice. That's a nice component of it. I think the biggest thing for me personally is that I feel like I don't have to do it alone any more. But it's not that I had that mindset the whole time like I had to do it alone, but I feel like a lot of times people of color, when they make it into college, they're so used to doing things alone that they often don't ask for help. In situations where they need help, they won't say, "I need help." They'll think, I can do this alone. But being in a classroom full of just black faces and skin tones that look like mine makes it so much easier to say, "Hey, I need to vent." Or, "Hey, can you relate to this about a predominately white institution, this, that, and a third?" I think that's the biggest thing for me so far this school year.

Rashida Fisher: Okay. Amin?

Amin Mahamoud: I really can't elaborate more than what Andre said. It's really having that support system and having peers to fall back on and having Dr. Omari, someone who's been through this college experience. His insights are really important, especially for me. I think I speak for the majority of the cohort as well. But just having someone to help navigate through that space, like Andre said, a predominately white institution and the ups and downs of being a person of color during your college career, just having that support system and peers to vent and communicate and go through the journey together has really been the best part and most beneficial part of this program.

Rashida Fisher: Excellent. And what would you say to other young people that are hearing this interview and thinking, I need to position myself in such a way that I would be recommended? What advice would you offer them?

Andre Griffin: I would say that it's hard. College is hard. But I think that people like to say that if you manage your time and you do x, y, and z well, that college won't be hard.

But in a lot of ways, college is unavoidably hard. So I would say, keep working. Keep putting in that work. Keep getting involved. Keep putting yourself out there. Keep getting those new experiences and taking those chances so that you can put yourself in a position where once you get an opportunity like this, you can take full advantage of it because I think the timing aspect does have a lot to do with it.

We talked about juniors being at a place where they could really use this and I know that if you would have given me this opportunity as a first year, I may have squandered it because I don't know if I was ready to put in the work and do all these different things and the steps that go along with this. But the program is more than willing to support me. So it's just about working hard, staying up on your work, and not giving up on yourself even if other people expect you to give up on yourself and they give up on you already.

Rashida Fisher: Very powerful. Amin?

Amin Mahamoud: Just to build on Andre's point, I think for me, I agree with everything Andre said. But the most important part was just building authentic relationships with people on campus. It's a big thing, the concept of networking and social capital and being able to reach out to people and that's a big component that's lost for people of color when entering college that's there for white students. Just being able to connect with people authentically and not really expect something, but more so just building those relationships and later on being able to reach out to those people was the most beneficial thing for me.

Like Andre said, those tips are immensely helpful, but I think adding that component and just building yourself to new experiences and those relationships, I think, is the best way to help set yourself up for success.

Rashida Fisher: I want to come back to that because there's some pieces there that I want to weed out and tease out, especially for young people of color entering a predominately white college. But it's time for us to take a break.

You've been listening to Voices on 89.9 KMOJ, the people's station. Hold tight. We'll be right back.

BREAK

Samuel Simmons: Welcome back to Voices. I am Sam Simmons and I'm joined by Rashida Fisher. We are going to continue our conversation about leadership and scholarship and we're going to turn the show over to Rashida.

Rashida Fisher: ... Walburn scholar along with Amin Mahamoud, who is also a scholar and their leader, Dr. Abdul Omari, who is here discussing the Ciresi Walburn Scholarship Fund, this wonderful leadership program that's been a collaboration between the Ciresi Walburn Foundation and the Minnesota Private College Fund. This is

not only scholarship, but leadership program that is designed to promote equity in education targeting men of color. Welcome back.

Andre Griffin: Thank you.

Amin Mahamoud: Thank you.

Abdul Omari: Thank you.

Rashida Fisher: Right before we went to break, Andre and Amin, you all talked about how to position yourself to even be considered for such a wonderful program and an opportunity. My question for you all is to really break down what it means to build authentic relationships with people that don't have the same lived experience as you as you're entering a new culture with different rules for socializing and interacting. How were you able to manage that while navigating college and a new experience?

Amin Mahamoud: That's a great question. I would love to say that I knew how to do that initially, but it took some time and a lot of advice from upperclassmen when I was a freshman. Just coming in, I just knew that I wanted to make my college experience ... I just wanted to take the full advantage of it. Speaking with some upperclassmen and seeing how they navigated through it and taking some information and some tips here and there, just approaching it with sincerity, I think, is one of the most important things. Just to elaborate on that, just assuming positive intention with people, it's easy to become pessimistic about outcomes when you see the statistics and you don't see people of color or your kind of ethnicity and religion on campus.

But just assuming that people are really doing it for the best, especially teachers in the higher ed and campus coordinators and such and speaking to that was really important to me. There is a certain amount of luck to it. I'd love to say that there isn't, but there is. I don't know how much you could credit it to you building your own resumé and your own profile and then the chance of luck. But there are some components to that. But I think just really being sincere and opening to people who haven't shared those lived experiences and just assuming that positive intention in their understanding and their reaction goes a long way from the pessimistic out view that can come when you're in a predominately white institution.

Rashida Fisher: Good. Thank you. Andre?

Andre Griffin: For me, I think the first step is always analyzing your environment and your surroundings because for me at least growing up here in north Minneapolis, there was a lot of situations in which I felt like I had to look around and protect myself. Even in school, I felt like I had to protect myself, I had to sit in class and I felt like what I was learning in class wasn't for me. It's wasn't my history. What I was learning wasn't for me. All the education system is very Eurocentric. So

when you come to college, that is a mindset that you have to keep in mind, but you also have to realize that is an institution of higher learning.

You go there to learn about what you want to learn about and you go there for your personal betterment. So when you get there, kind of bouncing off what Amin said, my ethics teacher my first year gave me some great advice. He said, "You make family wherever you can." You go into the campus with the mindset of everybody here is a networking tool and I'm going to make family where I can. Me, I never played volleyball a day in my life when I came to college, but I joined an intermural volleyball team and I made so many Hmong friends. Those are people that they're still friends to this day. I was comfortable with Hmong people growing up here in north Minneapolis.

But that's a demographic that I wouldn't hang out with and now that's a connection and a perspective that I now have that I didn't have before. I think a lot of people think that if you go to college that you either just do good off the bat or you do bad off the bat. But it's a lot of hard work. It's a lot of falling down and picking yourself up constantly. And it's a lot of correcting your own mistakes, being conscious of your own mistakes, noticing the imperfection, and trying to eliminate them one at a time.

When you want to just sit in your dorm and not do anything, you have to take that time and say, "You know what? The Black Student Union on campus is having an event, I'm going to go to that because that's an opportunity for me to better myself." It seems hard at 2AM when you're studying for your essay. It seems hard to just keep going on and keep pushing, but what you have to keep doing is keep pushing because even if you may not be used to it, when you're studying that hard you're going to reap the fruits of your labor eventually.

Rashida Fisher: Dr. Omari, what do you notice as far as socializing and navigating higher education? What are some of the things that ... or trends that you're noticing amongst all of the scholars?

Abdul Omari: Well, I'll come back to that engagement piece first. That's extremely important, students who are engaged. But you oftentimes have students that are not engaged at all and that's a challenge, or they're overly engaged. That's also a challenge. Finding a balance between the two is important and remembering that the primary reason that they're there is for their academics. I want to touch on two things very quickly. One is the positive intent that Amin was talking about. I think that that's where we should always start with, is positive intent. I'd also add that we're the land of positive intent with passive aggressiveness in Minnesota nice.

I think it's very good and healthy to assume positive intent, but we have to make sure that our actions line up with the outcome that we want because intent does not equal outcome. Oftentimes, we see folks who use positive intent and then have actions that don't line up with the outcomes and say that everything's okay because we had positive intent. So it's important that we

make sure there's a difference between those two. And thinking on the luck piece, I shook my head when Amin said that part of it is luck. That's true and the key to luck is not just that we have it, it's about how we capitalize on it.

Now that you have had the opportunity that we can give credit to luck, it's about what you do with it now.

Rashida Fisher: Excellent.

Samuel Simmons: During break the question I asked is, how did this scholarship come about? How did this scholarship come about? What's been the process?

Rashida Fisher: How did the scholarship come about? Just the different iterations from the first shell of a program to this what seems like a really robust, intentional program.

Abdul Omari: Got it. When the idea first came up, it all started with that piece about the current climate for black men in higher education. From there, I was actually in the last year of my Ph.D. program and my research focused on the perceptions of mentoring for black men. I was teaching a leadership course at the University of Minnesota and that's when I got a call from Carolyn Jones at the Minnesota Private College Fund and essentially she had put together a shell of a program based on the research that she had done around the country. The way that I describe it is she asked me if we could work together to bring life to it.

We took the shell and I added some components from my areas of research and knowledge and then we started with three students. As we've gone, the intentionality of it that Sam was talking about is so important because we literally adjust and change the program in live time. If we see something that's happening in real time based on the feedback that the students are giving or the conversations that we're having with them, we change and we adjust because we take a student-centered focus on what needs to be done as we go. That's why I would say it's robust now. It's live now. We have the nuts and bolts together. But we're constantly screwing the nuts and bolts into different places because each student has different wants, needs, and desires.

Rashida Fisher: You know, that seems like a common sense thing and yet it is really radical when you think about the structure of foundations gifting money. They have specific outcomes and they have different objectives that you have to meet in order to either continue to receive their funding or et cetera. We've all, especially if we receive grant funding, know how to do that. But to have a program that allows for that much flexibility and adjusting along the way to meet the outcomes is truly student-centered or really wanting real outcomes instead of just documented outcomes.

Abdul Omari: Yeah, absolutely. And don't get me wrong. I mean we need y'all to graduate, and in four years actually. But we'll adjust if we need to. There's other things along the process that are oftentimes taken for granted. We have a writing

course. We contract with a writing professor, Dr. Todd Lawrence from University of St. Thomas, because we know the importance of written communication as well. Heck, I almost dropped out of my PhD program because I couldn't write well enough. So we have those components along the way that are almost hidden in the background, but are also important. That was a component that we did not have with the first cohort. But we recognized the need for it.

Rashida Fisher: So you were able to identify new resources and allocate funds to it instead of, well, we don't have money for that because we didn't put that in the budget this time?

Abdul Omari: What we've done as we've gone along, that first cohort did not have the writing course and then we factored it into the second two cohorts ensuring that we'd be able to provide that resource to them. I kind of tear them up in class on their technical writing and Dr. Lawrence tears them up about making sure that they see themselves as writing and knowing that writing is a way to communicate and they're comfortable with it, can write the narratives that they want to write.

Rashida Fisher: Yeah, that's the code switching that you have to learn how to do once you go into higher education. As great as a writer you think you are, even the best writers have editors.

Abdul Omari: Indeed.

Rashida Fisher: And that's what I have to remember myself as I'm finishing up stuff. It's hard and it's not the natural way that we communicate with one another, academic and professional writing.

For Andre and Amin, tell me what it's like to ... and the listening audience, what it's like to manage the demands of this program even with all the benefits. I'm sure there are times where you're like, "Man, another meeting, another tutoring session. I'd rather be asleep. I'd rather be hanging out." And the demands of being in higher education.

Andre Griffin: Well, for me, I see it as every night when I hit my pillow, I want to hit it like a rock and sleep the full night hard because I feel like that's the only way that I'll really make myself as good as I can possibly be at the end of the day. Sometimes it is very annoying to get out of class and have to go to a meeting when you're really tired from class because you didn't get much sleep because you were studying. But recognizing that it's important and that once you leave the meeting, you're going to be that much a little bit better and those little things add up in the end.

Amin Mahamoud: And like Andre said, you just have to think long-term, like he's saying, it builds up for the long-term. But also that the program is very accommodating to

students and our schedules. There isn't necessarily a burden. They're very flexible in understanding that the point is for us to achieve academic success first and foremost and within four years. Just having the program being flexible in that really helps, but also just thinking long-term when approaching some of the mundane things about the program.

Andre Griffin: And to add on to the ... all the meetings and everything is for you. It's all for you. When you go there, you talk about you. You talk about things that they can do and things that you can do to have you perform better. Once you enter the meeting, even if you're in a bad mood or if you have a bad attitude, it's like everything there is for you. You have no excuse to really be grouchy or mad in the meeting because you can tell, people really care about you.

Rashida Fisher: I'm sure that's really important, having the staff and the program really be interested in you as a person and not you to meet their outcomes. Okay. What else would you want students to know about this program?

Amin Mahamoud: Personally, I would like to tell students that this is a wonderful program, especially in conjunction with the Minnesota Private College Fund and Ciresi Walburn, for students attending these private colleges that this is a program built for our success. Like Andre said, this is an investment in ourselves with people who really do care about us. There isn't just necessarily a look for an outcome, just like okay, this statistic. This student graduated, but more so the progression as a person, as a student and whatever you aspire to be. Yeah, just really reiterating the benefits and how great and beneficial this program has been to me and the other cohorts.

Andre Griffin: I think the program and the class in particular is really beneficial and influential because I've never been in a classroom with all black faces and all people who look like me. It's just such a great feeling to be able to take that exhale and that deep breath and to really be your authentic self in a room because you don't have to worry about what you say or worry about the looks that you're going to get, worry about being the representative for your community about slavery. When slavery pops up, everybody stares at you. Because that would be weird if we all stared at each other.

That's a unique experience though. It's very unique. It's something that I feel like everybody should get the opportunity to experience, just being in a classroom that is kind of centered around your culture and people who look like you because that's something that people of color don't get. But that's something that Caucasian students get often. I didn't get my first black teacher until my first year of college. All that time I was never looking at a face that looked like mine. So it feels so nice to look all around and see a face like mine, not just the teacher and not just the students.

Rashida Fisher: So it's very affirming in addition to all of the extra support that you get,

Andre Griffin: And uplifting, yeah.

Samuel Simmons: Being part of this program, has it changed how you look at your future?

Amin Mahamoud: Personally, yes. Just seeing how many opportunities there are and the structure this program gives to help you succeed. Because for me personally, just finishing up my sophomore year and being approached with this opportunity, I really did not have a clear sense on how to approach graduation and whether it's graduate school or it's just employment and the future beyond that. But having people like Dr. Omari and my other scholars and peers and going through this process helps me really understand all of these little details that help build a clear vision for myself.

There was an exercise in the class, in the leadership course this past summer, where we had to write a big statement, sort of a vision statement for us and how we're going to work to do that every single day to achieve that goal. I still look at that statement from time to time and just use that as a north star in terms of approaching how I approach academics and extracurriculars.

Rashida Fisher: Excellent.

Andre Griffin: And for me, the course made me take, it was a leadership course. It made me take a look at myself as myself and my leader and ask, "What does a leader take?" So by the end of the course, I came to the conclusion that anybody can be a leader and a leader can be born inside of anybody and not everybody needs to be Martin Luther King and needs to be on TV and needs to be in front of people. Coming up, I kind of felt like role models had to be people who were older than you and role models had to be people who have already done it for you to help somebody else get to a successful point.

But being in the class, it made me feel like we can all do this together. I don't have to get the recognition just to be a leader. I can be a leader by saying, "Hey Amin. Let's do our homework." And I can be a leader by just helping row the boat.

Rashida Fisher: Right. Excellent. Dr. Omari, talk about why the leadership component was so critical to this program. We see other programs that focus on academic success and programs that definitely help with the pure finances. But why add the leadership component?

Abdul Omari: Well, as I had been teaching a leadership course and the primary focus of my consulting practice is leadership development. So as I'd been teaching at the university, when you can combine something like content around leadership where people have to dig deeply and understand the connection to themselves before they can connect to other people, which is heavily a big focus of the course, combined with academics, folks really start to see themselves in the

conversation and start to place themselves in the academic work that they're doing rather than it being real abstract.

When you can combine stuff like that in a course and what I say is we use the leadership framework to talk about this, but at the core of it all, we're simply talking about relationships. We're talking about how we build relationships, connecting with ourselves first, and then connecting with other people. And then when we use that leadership framework throughout the two years, not only does it allow folks to see themselves as providing social change for whatever issues or communities that they want to do it for, but they also connect it to how their academics can add that runway, if you will, to use the metaphor, to move through those spaces.

Rashida Fisher: We are just running out of time and need to wrap things up. Dr. Omari, I'll give you the last word and have you talk about how people can continue to support this project and what people need to know about making sure that there's a 21st year.

Abdul Omari: Yeah, absolutely. The website for the Minnesota Private College Fund is minnesotaprivatecolleges.org and you can find out information on that website. Email is to Carolyn Jones and it's cjones@minnesotaprivatecolleges.org. That's contact information that you can find out more about the programming. I'd also just like to say a big thanks obviously to the Ciresi Walburn Family Foundation as well as the Tom James Suit Company and UpTurnships that helps prepare and provide the internships for the students next summer.

Rashida Fisher: Excellent. Well, thank you gentlemen for your time and your talent. And thank you for spending a Friday evening with us.

Andre Griffin: Thank you for having us.

Amin Mahamoud: Thank you.

Abdul Omari: Thank you.

Rashida Fisher: Listening audience . . . Don't forget you can always listen live online, kmojfm.com. Like us on Facebook. Follow us on Twitter @voices_radio. And remember . . . fools multiply when wise men are silent. That is Nelson Mandela.

Samuel Simmons: Remember, a role model is one who knows the babies are watching and acts accordingly. We'll be back next week. We're going to leave you with a little bit of Earth Wind & Fire, Shining Stars, because we definitely have some in the studio today. Again, be safe and we'll be back next week.