

The Perfect Investment

Sarah (Green) Greco, '14, is gifted, hardworking, and determined. Thanks to scholarship support, she and other deserving students are making the most of their time at Southern.

By Natalie Missakian



AS

a student representative on the State Board of Regents for Higher Education — the governing board of the Connecticut State Colleges and

Universities system — Sarah (Green) Greco, '14, plays a role in shaping the future of public institutions of higher learning — including Southern.

It's a dream appointment for the 2010 valedictorian of West Haven High School, who envisions a future for herself in higher education, perhaps leading a department like Student Affairs on a college campus.

But she doubts the opportunity would have been available to her without the aid of scholarship support. Freed from the need to work long hours to cover tuition, Greco says she had more time to participate in activities like the Student Government Association, where she built relationships that led to her Board of Regents post as well as a part-time job in Southern's Office of Residence Life.

"It wouldn't have happened if I was stressed out every semester worrying about paying my school bill," says Greco, who is now pursuing a master's degree in English education at Southern.

As an undergraduate in the Honors College majoring in English education, Greco received the prestigious, merit-based Presidential Scholarship, which covers full in-state tuition and fees for the university's highest-achieving students. Thanks to a variety of other scholarships offered through the SCSU Foundation and other sources, she also was able to cover the cost of books and educational expenses. Among these was a winter study abroad program in Jamaica in Greco's sophomore year, during which she visited schools in the Montego Bay area to compare the U.S. and Jamaican education systems.

"I can't say that I would not have gone to school at all [if it weren't for the scholarships]. We would have figured it out. But I wouldn't have had an opportunity like the one I had at Southern," she recalls.

Currently 71 percent of Southern's students receive some form of financial aid, according to Gloria Lee, director of the Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships. But federal grant money, which unlike a loan does not have to be paid back, is limited, she explains, and there's never enough to meet every student's need.

"I don't have enough money to cover everybody. I wish I did," Lee says. "That's why when I go out to workshops I encourage students to apply for scholarships."

Although it takes a little more legwork — most scholarships have their own application processes above and beyond that for financial aid — Lee says the effort can pay off substantially by reducing the amount students need to borrow for tuition.

Levels of debt have continued to rise nationwide. The Pew Research Center estimates that 69 percent of new college graduates in the Class of 2012 took out student loans to finance their education, borrowing an average of \$26,885 — more than twice the \$12,434 (adjusted for inflation) borrowed by the Class of 1993.

"Because I was valedictorian in my class they just assumed I was going to go to an Ivy League."

— Sarah (Green) Greco, '14,
on why Southern was her first college choice

Greco says her goal was to graduate with as little debt as possible, a priority she appreciates even more now that she is married with a 10-month-old son. "I came from a hardworking family that struggled with being in and out of debt because they were trying to make ends meet," Greco explains. "I didn't want to graduate from college with that burden."

Although she decided to attend Southern before she learned of her aid package — the university moved to the top of her list after her first campus visit — the generous amount of scholarship support she received reinforced her decision.

Once on campus, Greco continued to shine academically, graduating summa cum laude with a 3.95 grade point average. She was one of only four Southern seniors to earn the 2014 Henry Barnard Foundation Distinguished Student Award, one of the state university system's top academic honors.

An extremely active undergrad, Greco was vice president of the Student Government Association, president of the university's chapter of the Sigma Tau Delta English honor society, vice president of its chapter of Sigma Alpha Pi National Society of Leadership and Success, and a member of the honorary service organization Zeta Delta Epsilon. She also worked every summer helping to plan and execute Southern's New Student Orientation.

Now living in New Haven, Greco remains a firm believer in the state's public universities — and encourages high-achieving high school students to consider Southern and other public institutions of higher learning for their quality and value.

"Education is what you make of it. There are people at Southern who will give you the highest-quality education and beyond if you are looking for it," says Greco. "I don't think I'd be sitting on the Board of Regents and working at a university right now if I had made a different decision."

For her part, Greco felt she could make more of a difference at Southern than at a bigger school where she might have been "just a cog in a wheel." But she remembers some people being surprised by her choice. "Because I was valedictorian in my class they just assumed I was going to go to an Ivy League," she remembers.

Initially, that's what Greco thought too, noting that her father was a Yale University alumnus. Southern was barely on her radar. But when she visited campus, she says she immediately could picture herself as a student: "It's a feeling I hadn't gotten anywhere else."