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KENAN-FLAGLER



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Alumni Profile: Thomas Roberts and the Business of Mentoring

A talk he gave to the nonprofit college prep program Hoop Dreams Scholarship Fund in Washington, D.C., ignited a dream in Thomas Roberts (MBA '01). Then a vice president with Citigroup Private Bank's High Net Worth division, Roberts gave the speech in 2006 to motivate underprivileged kids to continue their education. When a student asked him how he had succeeded in school, he had a quick answer: hard work and a great attitude.

Soon afterward, on a flight to Los Angeles, Roberts realized he could have answered the student's question more completely. He thought about how to illuminate the path to success and started devising tools to help. Within a couple of months, his notes on the plane formed the basis for [Roberts Education Corp.](#), which offers academic training and support through motivational talks, books and a network that recognizes achievements of students, parents and educators.

Roberts aims to increase the number of college graduates. "There's an educational crisis that's happening now," he says, "in the sense that socioeconomic resources highly affect who's graduating from high school, who's graduating from college."

As the first male in his family to finish college, Roberts, who played basketball on a scholarship at The College of William & Mary, doesn't take the achievement lightly. "I don't come from this legacy of education, this legacy of wealth. But through education, I was able to give myself a really competitive chance and make some opportunities avail themselves to me," he says.

Now he encourages others to create opportunities through education. "I'm trying to empower individuals to own their success, to own their education," he says.

Roberts gives talks and training sessions at schools, churches and other nonprofits about academic readiness, study skills, learning styles and parental involvement. His books – "How to be a Great Student", "How to Raise a Great Student" and "How to Have a Great College Experience" – are the focus of the training.

Roberts Education, based in Fairfax, Va., has six employees. Roberts, 37, also runs two other companies: Empower YOUiversity, which publishes educational tools and training materials, and The Great Student Network, highlighting educational achievements to motivate others. The network "tries to be that spark that showcases the power of education that inspires families, students and educators" Roberts says.

He focuses on helping students realize how they best learn and how to be organized and prepared. "I'm trying to turn rocks into sponges," he says.

It's not Roberts' first mentoring role. At Citigroup and JPMorgan Private Bank, he was a recruiting manager and involved with student training. He also was a high school basketball coach. After college, he played basketball professionally overseas, then worked at Wachovia as a small-business banker. Later, he enrolled at Kenan-Flagler because he'd always wanted to be an entrepreneur. "I thought an



MBA would equip me in the fundamentals of what it takes to be a successful businessperson," Roberts says.

In building his corporation, Roberts drew on the talents of Kenan-Flagler colleagues in publishing, computer technology and other facets. "That network has been absolutely incredible," he says. "I'm using every aspect of my skill set, the relationships and network I built at business school, the training I received at Kenan-Flagler. I utilize that credibility."

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