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Program aims to increase degrees in Stark County

'College connectors' help high school students navigate path to college

By Nancy Molnar
Special to the Beacon Journal



Published: June 13, 2014 - 09:53 PM

CANTON:

If no one in your family ever went to college, it's easy to hear the voices that will tell you not to try.

"My mom says why should I go because she never went."

"We can't afford it."

"I need to get a job now because our family can't afford for me not to be adding onto the family financial picture."

Those were among the answers Stark County high school students gave as part of a focus group formed to learn why so few pursued higher education, said Adele Gelb, program officer of the Stark Education Partnership.

One of the nonprofit partnership's goals is to increase the percentage of Stark County residents with college degrees from a baseline measurement that found only 20 percent had bachelor's degrees.

"We realized that we needed to support students and to change the culture to become a college-going culture in the high school, because 80 percent of the kids probably had no one at home that has had the experience in order to be able to support them or even support their desire," Gelb said.

Since 2007, that effort has included putting new employees — called college guides, or college connectors — in high schools to help students, counselors and principals overcome barriers to post-secondary education.

First-generation college students, often from poor families, might need time to get a job, buy a car or make other arrangements before they can attend even a two-year college.

For Timken senior Kamyia Chandler, a major challenge was getting the bureaucracy behind the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to understand that she was financially independent at age 17.

Chris Deschaine, a college connector, helped Chandler smooth out the wrinkles in the FAFSA.

With the help of Deschaine and counselor Sandra Klein, Chandler has \$15,497.50 in grants and scholarships waiting for her when she starts classes at the University of Akron in the fall. She plans to major in psychology.

"You have to have a Ph.D. in order to even practice in the state of Ohio," said Chandler. "I'll be going to school for a while."

Chandler, now 18, works at a fast-food restaurant near her Sixth Street Northwest apartment. For now, her residence is subsidized by the PAL Mission, which assists the homeless and young adults who leave foster care. She plans to avoid the need to borrow money for on-campus living by commuting to UA by bus from Canton.

"What's driven me to ... be so persistent and to try to go to college is because a lot ... of my family members at this moment haven't even graduated, and if they did graduate, they didn't ... pursue a further education, or they're struggling financially, or they have kids or, you know, something.

"I have six female cousins right now who are pregnant at the same time. [They are] between the ages of 17 to 24, and some of them already have kids."

Chandler said her family's experience includes "a lot of jail," which she plans to avoid.

Driven to succeed

Deschaine, 33, has found other students with the same drive to overcome adverse circumstances.

"The kids here amaze me with their initiative," she said. "I'm very impressed by the number of kids who come in here knowing what they want and [who are] very adamant about finding a way to make it happen for them.

"They are capable. There is no task that we can't help them with. And once we start getting the help, we start developing the momentum," she said.

"And that's what I find: I just help a little bit, and then the momentum picks up and before you know it, they've got the admission letter."

Deschaine said she also helped a senior whose mother has Stage 3 breast cancer. The boy works at Walmart, cares for his mother, consoles his siblings and plans to attend Stark State College.

"These are the kinds of kids we have here," Deschaine said at Timken's downtown campus shortly before classes ended this spring. "They plow right through all that."

The college guide at McKinley, Takisha Morgan, has also worked to encourage students to aim high. One of her success stories is a girl with a 3.5 grade-point average who initially limited her aspirations to attending a local two-year school.

Morgan helped her gain admission to three four-year colleges with scholarship offers.

A similar program has been inaugurated at the Barberton Public Library.

Working together

The Stark County program's funding for this year came from United Way of Greater Stark County, \$35,028; Stark Education Partnership, \$33,396; and AmeriCorps, \$38,991.

College connectors complement work done by counselors like Klein, whose work with Chandler included finding shelter for the teen after she was thrown out of her aunt's home — a refuge taken after her mother was hospitalized with leukemia.

Klein was impressed by how Chandler maintained her equilibrium after the experience. Without a phone of her own, Chandler made college-related calls from the counselor's office before Klein reported for work.

"She would already be in my office on the phone making calls," Klein said. "She'd be up there before I would.

"The ambition she has, there is no doubt in my mind she will be 110 percent successful."

Nancy Molnar can be contacted at nancymolnar2002@yahoo.com.

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