

Middletown program gives students college experience



Middletown High counselor aQuena Williams, center, helped create a program for her students to take dual enrollment courses at Delaware State University. The DSU Early Bird program for male students of color aims to give the students both the chance to earn college credits in high school and a taste of what college will be like.

When aQuena Williams, career counselor for Middletown High School in the Appoquinimink School District, helped to create the school's Delaware State University Early Bird program to increase early college access for male students of color, she did so with the understanding that the work would have to center on more than just the importance of academic achievement.

"The program was purposely designed to go beyond reading, writing and arithmetic," Williams said. "We needed to focus on transformative skills as well. These are the tools that, more than anything else in my opinion, help to ensure our students successfully transition from adolescence to adulthood and are on a path of continued success."

This past year, Williams guided 14 students as they participated in DSU Early Bird, a year-long, dual enrollment experience for minority male students. During their junior year of high school, participants attend two college-level courses (with at least one in math) on the campus of the Dover university. Upon successful completion of the courses, the students receive both high school and college credits.

DSU Early Bird also provides students with practical skills such as learning to collaborate with others, analyze their world, set goals, and self-advocate, Williams said. The program coordinates with DSU's Men of Color Alliance (MOCA) to provide students with ongoing near-peer mentoring support as well as tutoring, studying and advisement assistance.

“In addition to the overall partnership with Delaware State University, members of MOCA help the DSU Early Bird students meet benchmarks throughout the year so they remain on track,” Williams said. “The MOCA students also model the skills these juniors need to ensure they are well-prepared for their college transition.”

DSU Early Bird aligns with Delaware’s priority to close the college readiness gap and ensure a smooth transition to college for all students, especially those considered at-risk. According to the U.S. Department of Education, dual enrollment is a proven method for increasing college access, particularly for students from traditionally underrepresented groups. Increased opportunities for students to succeed in higher-level coursework such as dual enrollment classes also help reduce college remediation rates.

Of Delaware public high school graduates entering an in-state college or university, 41 percent will begin their post-secondary education behind their peers and require some sort of college remediation course in English or math, according to the state’s 2017 College Success Report.

In Delaware – as is the case across the country – many students are graduating high school unprepared for the level of rigor necessary in college. Students who do not score well on college placement tests may be forced to take and pass non-credit, remedial courses before entering the college-level courses required for their degrees. These courses often cost the same as credit-bearing classes but don’t count toward a student’s degree. For many students, the need for remediation courses can delay and even hinder college graduation.

Nationally, less than 50 percent of students enrolled in remedial courses actually finish them. Furthermore, 3 in every 10 students who require remediation in college never graduate with a bachelor’s degree.

Remediation numbers are also significantly higher for students of color, students with special needs, English learners, and students from low-income families.

“It’s a surprise for many to learn that acceptance to college does not guarantee readiness for college,” said Shana Payne, director of the Delaware Department of Education’s Higher Education Office. “We need all students to be prepared to succeed in college when they leave high school. This means more access to rigorous coursework that students aren’t always getting in all classes, even those labeled college prep.”

Delaware’s College Success Report suggests students should always seek to academically challenge themselves. The report also asks districts and charter schools to consider new ways to identify students who are ready for higher-level coursework and to also make certain they provide ongoing, targeted supports to ensure student success in these programs.

Several states across the country are starting to examine the remediation issue as more students are dropping out of college, taking longer to complete their degrees or graduating with significant debt.

For Middletown High School, the DSU Early Bird program has been a success and another way to ensure students are on track to enroll in and graduate from college. Earlier this year, the school commemorated its first cohort of DSU Early Bird graduates. For Williams, the day was a celebration of the prior year but also a new beginning.

“We do not just honor the completion of the DSU Early Bird program at our graduation,” Williams said. “Instead, we celebrate the beginning of the work and responsibility each of these students is going to experience as a result of this extraordinary opportunity.”

Congratulations to DSU Early Bird graduates:

- Warren Bennett
- Jaden Clifton
- London Hall
- Louis Hall
- Kobe Hughes
- Corey Loper
- Marion McWilliams
- Bernard Pepukayi
- Adrian Ricks
- Jalen Rushton
- Saahir Salis
- Kahveke Taylor
- Ernest Washington
- Kendrick Whitehead