

MCC offers path to college for former dropouts

The \$4.3 million Gateway to College program helps 16- to 20-year-olds receive a diploma

By NATE DOUGHERTY

Denise Prohaska can measure the success of the Gateway to College program she heads at Monroe Community College in the plans once-aimless students are making for themselves. One plans to work as an EMT while he pursues courses in martial arts. Another is working toward becoming an accountant.

Just a little more than a year ago, all were high school dropouts.

Gateway to College was developed by Portland Community College in Oregon to

help 16- to 20-year-olds who have dropped out of school receive a high school diploma while earning college credits. That school's graduates earned an average of 73 college credits, putting them more than two-thirds of the way to a college degree.

In 2006, MCC received a \$350,000 grant from Portland Community College to help fund the first three years of the \$4.3 million program at the Damon City Campus. College tuition and books are paid for with K-12 funds by the Rochester City School District.

The Gateway to College National Net-

work is a national intermediary in the Early College High School Initiative, which is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in partnership with the Carnegie Corp. of New York, the Ford Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

MCC operates one of 18 Gateway to College programs in the nation and the only one in New York.

At MCC, Gateway to College has enrolled 115 students who dropped out of high schools in the Rochester City School District. The duration of the program differs based on the student's needs, with the first student graduating this summer and another 14 expected to complete the program within the next 12 months.

Since its inception, more than 600 students have expressed interest in joining, and administrators use tests and interviews to select those who will be admitted. Students are first given an assessment test to determine their reading level, followed by a test of writing and math skills. They then write three essays and meet with program officials.

"We have learned so much since this program started," Prohaska said. "I think we're doing a better job at picking the right kind of students. We're basically asking them to jump from not taking high school courses at all to taking college-level courses, so it's not for the faint of heart."

Because students come from different circumstances, administrators look at each one on an individual basis rather than judge them against a matrix to gauge success, officials said. A student who was forced to leave the program to care for siblings after the death of a relative is not considered a failure, and neither is a student who chose to leave the program but pursued a GED instead.

In the first semester of the program, called the foundation semester, students take reading, writing and math classes along with a course on how to survive college. They attend classes Monday through Friday and are required to spend four hours each week in a learning lab, which Prohaska calls "study hall on steroids."

"That foundation semester is a way for us to reprogram their brains about education and change their behaviors," Prohaska said. "It's important during this time that everybody, especially instructors, is on the same page philosophically."

In the second semester, students are integrated into the college community as they take more specialized courses. They still must meet with Gateway advisers for roughly an hour each week, but Prohaska said many students come back more frequently to talk about their successes and struggles.

Gateway instructors play a dual role as in-class counselors of sorts. Kurt Krahenbuhl, a math instructor, said teachers need the same commitment to the program the students show for it to be successful.

"As faculty, we're like family to them," Krahenbuhl said. "These kids have some terrible stories that could make it uneasy to come in and teach, knowing what they're going through. We monitor whether or not they're coming in, if they're there on time, and call to make sure they're OK if we think there's a problem."

A large part of the program's success is credited to the tight-knit atmosphere administrators try to foster. The Gateway to College center is tucked in a quiet corner on the fourth floor of the Damon City Campus where students can eat, study and meet with advisers. In a waiting area there is a refrigerator filled with cartons of milk, individual cereal boxes and sandwiches pro-



File photo by Kimberly McKinzie
Gateway to College has enrolled 115 students who dropped out of high schools in the Rochester City School District.

vided at no cost to them by the RCSd.

Even veteran students help pitch in to look out for newer ones. Jessica Kennedy, who is in her second year, talks to incoming students about how the first semester can often feel difficult and intimidating and what it took for her to complete it.

"It makes it a lot easier to be able to see someone who has gone through it," Kennedy said. "I tell them how hard they're going to have to work and how they have to make an internal choice to commit to the program."

Even with the extended support system, the program has not been without its bumps. Nearly one in seven students was homeless at some point during the first semester, and Prohaska said students facing personal issues would sometimes slip away without notice.

With just a few weeks remaining in the semester, one B student stopped attending classes. When the staff was able to reach her, the student revealed that she had gotten into some trouble and was too ashamed to come back.

One of the biggest problems for students is adhering to the strict parameters of the program after being used to less stringent rules in high school. Students are expected to attend every class and must receive at least a C to pass.

When a faculty or staff member notices a student becoming less involved in the program, they draw up a "success contract" that identifies their rough spots and recommitments them to the program. If that fails, the student meets with advisers for a more formal talk that usually leads to the mutual decision that the student should leave the program.

The program's success is gaining notice from other local school districts, which have expressed interest in joining. Prohaska said as more students complete the program its effects will begin to ripple through the economy.

"The stats about students leaving high school are staggering," Prohaska said. "When we talk about preparing for the future, we can't have economic growth if we don't have a work force ready to go, and that's what these students are becoming."

nate.dougherty@rbj.net / 585-546-6303

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CORRECTIONS AND AMPLIFICATIONS

The list of hotels and motels published June 20 should have included the Rochester Plaza Hotel and Conference Center. With an average single-room rate of \$169, it would have ranked 13th.