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Mentors have message for kids: Go to college

Western Washington University college students are working as mentors, tutors and role models for thousands of K-12 students in and around Bellingham. The goal: convince them that college should be part of their educational trajectory.

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Western Washington University's Carver Gym was buzzing with fifth-grade energy one day in October, as nearly 900 students filed into the gym in the heart of the Bellingham campus.

The gym had all the noise and excitement of a pep rally before a big game, rocking with the sound of the college band as Western's Viking mascot high-fived his way across the room and cheerleaders thrashed pom-poms onstage.

These 10- and 11-year-olds are on the cusp of an important transitional phase in their lives.

In the next few years, the way they perceive themselves — as smart, average, college-bound

or not — may change the trajectory of their educational careers.

Western's goal: convince them that college should be part of their educational trajectory, first by reaching out to them with the fall field trip, and then by sending college students into their classrooms to mentor and tutor them all the way through middle school and high school.

Although much of the national conversation about college-going rates has been focused on high-poverty, inner-city schools, out in semirural and small-town Whatcom County, beyond Bellingham city limits, the number of high-school graduates who go to college also often lags the state average, which is low to begin with.

Fewer than one in four high-school graduates in the Sedro-Woolley and Meridian school districts, for example, go to four-year colleges. Just a little over half of all graduates in surrounding districts go to college at all. And the majority head to community colleges, which have lower completion rates.

Western isn't the first university to use college mentors to help younger students set their sights on higher education. What sets the program apart is its entry point in fifth grade, a critical moment when students start to size up their own skills when compared with their peers.

Every quarter, about 400 Western students flood 29 elementary, middle and high schools in the

Bellingham area in a program called Compass 2 Campus. Since it began five years ago, the program has reached into 350 classrooms, so far touching the lives of an estimated 9,000 school kids.

The program is essentially a three-credit course for Western students, who spend the first three weeks learning instructional basics and how to work with preteens and teens from different cultural backgrounds, and the remaining seven weeks working in their classrooms as mentors, tutors and role models.

The university won't be able to measure the effectiveness of the program until its original group of fifth-graders, now in ninth grade, graduates from high school in three years. And even then, it may be difficult to tease out the effects of the program from other efforts aimed at boosting college-going rates.

But Compass 2 Campus is making strides toward building what experts say is a key component of improving college attendance: creating a coherent, college-going culture that permeates entire schools.

One day last fall in teacher John Sage's social-studies class at Shuksan Middle School in Bellingham, three Western student-mentors stood by while Sage moved through a lesson on the Middle East that involved interpreting a map, taking a pop quiz and practicing an oral report.

The mentors are trained to watch for academic hiccups — moments when a student stumbles on a concept or a project, often signaled by a change in body language, such as slumping in a chair.

The mentors watched, sharp-eyed and ready to step in. They leaned over students working on map interpretations and gave gentle praise. They helped correct wrong answers when the quiz was over. And they served as coach to groups of students practicing oral reports that they would later present to the class.

"They're smart, they're college students, they've done this before," Sage said. "I love having them in my room."

Shuksan Principal Jay Jordan asks his teachers to set aside time every Thursday so the mentors can talk to students about what college is like.

"Hey, 35 college kids in our school, four hours a week — that's a great connection," Jordan said.

As the mentors talk about how they came to be students at Western, they are also imparting a subtle lesson:

I'm a college student. I'm like you, just a few years older. Study hard, and you can go to college, too.

Chance encounter

Eleven years ago, when her husband was chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, Cyndie Shepard had a chance encounter with a fifth-grader who was in trouble for misbehaving.

Shepard asked him what he planned to be when he grew up. Defiant, the boy crossed his arms and said he expected to end up in jail — just like his father.

An educator who had run special-education programs in Oregon, Shepard was stunned that a 10-year-old could have such a bleak view of his future. But researchers know that by middle school, students have strong ideas about their own skills and potential — ideas that can open avenues, or cut them off.

At the same time, countless studies have linked better job prospects, higher salaries, even lower rates of incarceration with at least some level of postsecondary education or credential.

Shepard thought that highlighting the path to college was especially needed in Green Bay, a gritty industrial town where only about 21 percent of adults have a bachelor's degree or higher, and the rate of college-going among high-school graduates is low.

So she and others developed a program to plant the seed that college options "are real and available, and especially for underserved, nontraditional students," said Tim Kaufman, chair of the professional program in education at UW-Green Bay.

The program started with a campuswide field trip for fifth-graders from nearby Green Bay elementary schools. Later, the UW-Green Bay added a student mentorship program.

Last year, more than 170 from the Green Bay campus participated in the program, called Phuture Phoenix, which reaches 27 schools. The program has also expanded to two other Wisconsin schools, UW-Eau Claire and the private Silver Lake College.

Phuture Phoenix high-school graduates have been going to college at modestly higher rates in the last two years, with a 4.4 percent increase in the number going to four-year colleges, and a 1.2 percent increase in the number of students going to two-year schools. That's happening at a time when national college enrollment has started to level off and drop in many states, including Wisconsin.

When Bruce Shepard was made president of Western in 2008, state higher-education policymakers urged Cyndie Shepard to bring Phuture Phoenix to Washington, concerned about the low rate of high-school students in the state who go on to college.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Washington is 46th among the 50 states for the percentage of students who enroll full time in college right after high-school graduation.

Some researchers think the NCES numbers don't reflect a true picture of Washington's college-going rate, making it look artificially low. But even if the national count missed some students, the college enrollment rate is still significantly below the national average, leading policymakers to try a variety of measures in recent years to get more kids to go to college.

At first, Cyndie Shepard didn't think her program would be a good fit. In Bellingham, for example, a high percentage of high-school graduates do go on to college — nothing like Green Bay.

But outside Bellingham, college-going numbers at some schools are much lower.

The Legislature endorsed Shepard's work by passing a bill authorizing a pilot project at Western, designed so it could be replicated elsewhere in the state.

Now long past the pilot phase, Compass 2 Campus is funded by \$310,000 a year in private money and foundation grants, most of which comes from the Bellingham community and from alumni; it receives no state money.

Its model has caught the eye of other universities.

At Central Washington University, administrators have set aside \$15,000 to start the program in the Ellensburg area, with mentors to begin working in rural classrooms in the fall.

"I struggled too"

Funky, laid-back Bellingham, 20 miles south of the Canadian border, serves as the kind of intellectual center of northwestern Washington.

Nearly 40 percent of this college town's residents have a bachelor's or graduate degree, and more than 70 percent of its public high-school graduates go to college.

But outside of Bellingham, it's a different story. The towns are small. The economic base is blue-collar — agriculture, timber, manufacturing, fishing. And for more than a third of all high-school graduates, going to college is not in the cards.

At the heart of Compass 2 Campus lies two ideas: that in middle school, students form strong ideas about their own skills and their potential; and that starting in fifth grade, schools can encourage more students to go to college by bringing college mentors into the classroom to help out over time.

When one of her eighth-grade students was flunking math because she couldn't grasp how to divide fractions, Western student Marguerite Balch shared her own frustrations.

"Math was not my strong subject — I struggled too, and now I'm in college," she told the girl, an eighth-grader with an *I don't care about school* attitude.

Balch kept working with her, and at some point, the tutoring clicked. After winter break that year, the girl sought Balch out and proudly announced that she'd passed her math class.

When kids make the transition from elementary to middle school, "that's the place where we see the strongest negative changes in achievement and motivation, consistently," said Eric Anderman, chair of the Department of Educational Studies at Ohio State University, who has done extensive research on this issue.

"Right around the fifth grade, it's a really, really important time to plant those seeds and get kids thinking about their futures," he said.

Sophisticated training

Once kids enter high school, the issues grow still more complex.

Dropouts, safety issues, drugs, teen pregnancy — counselors have their hands full. Often, only the best and brightest are encouraged to go to college.

Students who haven't expressed an interest, or who aren't at the top of their class, are often overlooked, said Stanford University associate professor Anthony Antonio.

By comparison, "in a strong college-going culture, everyone understands this is a shared value or goal, and understands what their role in that might be," said Antonio, who teaches and does research in Stanford's Graduate School of Education.

When its original group of fifth-graders entered ninth grade this past fall, Compass 2 Campus moved with them into eight Whatcom and Skagit high schools.

As the ninth-graders move up, the program is designed to grow with them — helping them prep for the SAT and ACT, fill out college applications, apply for financial aid.

Anderman, at Ohio State, said mentoring has to go beyond self-esteem building to be helpful. Schools need something more robust than an army of young cheerleaders; they need instructional methods and strategies to help students master concepts.

Shepard, who runs Compass 2 Campus, said the mentor training includes that kind of work. Mentors encourage the younger students to come up with answers on their own, find ways to engage them in the classwork, and use thoughtful and responsive listening.

While it's too soon to know whether students who are mentored through the program will attend college in greater numbers — and if they do, whether it's directly because of the program — the mentors are in high demand among schools in Northwest Washington.

Shepard says she has had to turn some school districts down simply because they are too far away from Western and its student mentors to be practical.

The Dream Project

Compass 2 Campus is one of a growing number of programs that employ college-age mentors to work in the K-12 classroom.

A similar one with a longer track record is the University of Washington's Dream Project, which has helped boost college-going among graduating high-school seniors by 15 to 20 percent since it began nine years ago.

The Dream Project starts in a student's junior year. UW students tutor high-school students in classes where they need extra help, assist in studying for the SAT or ACT and help fill out college applications. The program, funded by the Gates Foundation, reaches 16 low-income schools in the Seattle area.

Last year, the Dream Project won a \$2 million federal grant to also work with middle-school students. So as Compass 2 Campus moves into high schools, the Dream Project is reaching down into middle schools.

The two programs are aware of each other, and have compared notes.

The Dream Project spends, on average, about \$280 over two years for each student helped by the program. Like Compass 2 Campus, it relies on a skeleton staff, and the students are volunteers — indeed, they're paying the university to take a course.

Compass 2 Campus is similarly inexpensive — it spends only about \$34 a year for each student touched by the program, Shepard said.

Compass 2 Campus recently began expanding to Skagit Valley College and Whatcom Community College. Students there who serve as mentors can earn credit for their work if they transfer to Western.

Mentors benefit, too

Compass 2 Campus mentors who repeat the program can choose to stay with some of their mentored students, forming a closer bond with them, but it's not a feature of the program.

That continuity is possible, though, because Western students can repeat the course up to five times for credit.

WWU senior Alexa Tucker, a Compass 2 Campus mentor for all four years of her college career, decided to follow two Shuksan Middle School students whom she met when the boys were in sixth grade. She promised them she would follow their careers through school.

One day last month, Tucker sat in a common study area at Squaticum High School, helping one of the boys, Julian Gonzalez, and another student prep for a biology test.

It was clear that Gonzalez and Tucker were comfortable with each other. She kept him focused as they went over key biology terms, cajoling answers out of him, helping strategize ways to remember certain facts and make associations between concepts.

Gonzalez, shy and sheepish, wore a good-natured grin throughout the study session. While Tucker drilled him with questions about the biological terms and processes, she also offered gentle encouragement.

Shepard said an important component of the program is helping budding teachers develop teaching styles of their own. That points to another potential benefit of the program: its effect on the mentors themselves.

The University of Wisconsin-Green Bay has started requiring applicants to its School of Education

to first become a mentor with Phuture Phoenix, because the program allows students to experience teaching before they commit themselves to the major.

“A mentorship may lead a teacher-in-training to a deeper understanding of the challenges of the job” earlier in their careers, said Kaufman, of Green Bay.

Before Compass 2 Campus, Tucker wanted to be an elementary teacher. Now she wants to teach middle-school students.

Larry Wright, the former CEO of MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership, is a big fan of college mentoring programs, often known as peer-to-peer mentors. Wright was executive director of Washington State Mentors before he took the national job, and has watched Compass 2 Campus grow up.

“I could say something to a 14-year-old, and a 21-year-old could say the exact same thing,” Wright said, and “for a lot of reasons, it’s going to resonate more” coming from a younger person.

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