

5-27-2011

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Recommended Citation

"Perfect Acceptance" (2011). *News Releases*. 900.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/900

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Perfect Acceptance

05.27.2011 | Campus and Community, Students Recent University of Dayton graduate Luke Pace has some advice for the graduating seniors of his former high school: Aim high and never settle for "good enough."

Earlier this month, Pace became one of the first graduates of the Dayton Early College Academy to earn a diploma from the University of Dayton, with a degree in criminal justice, a commission in the United States Army Reserves and a job with Amazon.com.

"Don't ever accept the standard, that C's are OK, that you did enough to get by," Pace said. "As long as you aim high, you'll always have something to work towards, you'll never allow yourself to accept defeat."

Forty DECA students will graduate at 6 p.m. Tuesday, May 31, at Sinclair Community College Building 12. As DECA's fifth graduating class, all 40 continue the early college's tradition of every graduate attending college, most as the first in their families to pursue a degree. To date, all 146 DECA graduates have attended college, with more than 85 percent graduated or still enrolled.

This year's class is the most academically prepared, most ambitious and most adventurous class of graduates DECA has seen, said Danya Berry, DECA's college liaison. Collectively, they earned more than \$2 million in scholarships.

"They've seen the classes before them take risks and succeed, and that has given them the confidence to take even bigger risks," she said.

The University of Dayton founded DECA in 2003 in partnership with Dayton Public Schools. It is the first early college high school in Ohio and the only charter school in the nation operated by a Catholic university.

DECA focuses on preparing students for college through personalized academic attention; the development of close relationships among teachers, families and students; rigorous academic work; and introducing students to college classes at the University of Dayton and Sinclair Community College while still in high school.

Pace, raised in a home caught up in drug abuse, was adopted by a cousin at 13. He always planned on going to college, but he thought the path would be through athletics, not academics.

"I had planned to just play football through high school and hope for a scholarship, but I doubt I would have gotten far with it," he said. "Focusing on academics, that's what is valuable, that's what has gotten me to where I am. DECA definitely changed the course of my life."

The early college also prepared him well for the rigors of higher education. Pace said he didn't feel nervous at all walking in to his first class as a Flyer; he knew he was prepared. But he warns DECA graduates not to take that help for granted, as college requires higher levels of maturity and personal responsibility.

"At DECA, you had so many people pulling for you and keeping up on you that you came to expect help without even asking for it," he said. "But at college, you have to take responsibility and admit you need help, that you can't rely on others to always be watching."

A recent study by the National Educational Longitudinal Study shows just 65 percent of low-income students earn a high school diploma, 45 percent enroll in college and 11 percent obtain a college degree. By comparison, more than 90 percent of middle- and upper-class students are high school graduates, and 85 percent enter college.

DECA exists to change this disparity.

"Some students need the discipline and focus and inspiration from others to achieve their goal of getting into college — or even believing they can," Berry said.

DECA continues to grow. After expanding in 2008 to enroll seventh-graders, the school will begin to graduate classes of up to

70 students by 2013, Berry said. And the board is planning to expand DECA to include an elementary school.

Since its inception, DECA has attracted significant national attention. The Harvard University Graduate School of Education, Jobs for the Future and The Chronicle of Higher Education have studied the school's innovative approach to education.

The Center for Secondary School Redesign has called DECA "a concrete response to convince and prepare urban learners to go to college," and U.S. News & World Report has included it among its list of Best High Schools.

But the best measure of success is the graduates, who break barriers to attend college and beat the odds to succeed.

That's Pace's story. He said his younger brothers haven't stopped talking about his University of Dayton graduation and seeing him in his military uniform.

"My dad says, 'They want to do what Luke did,'" he said. "That's what inspires me, what makes me want to continue to work hard, to continue to succeed."

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