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'It Feels Like a Dream'

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Every member of the Dayton Early College Academy class of 2010 has been accepted to college, continuing a remarkable record held by the three DECA graduating classes before them.

And 30 of the 34 students who will graduate at 6 p.m. June 1 at Sinclair Community College Building 12 represent another DECA trademark: first-generation college students.

Six of the graduates will attend the University of Dayton in the fall, and 14 of them will attend other Ohio colleges, while one student will become the first DECA graduate to attend an Ivy League school. Together, the 2010 class has earned nearly \$1.6 million in scholarships and grants, bringing the total financial aid of all DECA graduating classes to \$5.1 million.

The graduates are the products of the singular focus of the innovative high school located on the University of Dayton campus: to prepare students primarily from low-income or minority families – as well as those who might not be successful in a traditional classroom – to go to college.

"Our students consistently show that hard work and commitment to a goal can help them beat the odds and make a better future for themselves and their families," said DECA Principal Judy Hennessey. "Every year our graduates set the bar higher, showing the next class what's possible, and every year the next class rises to the challenge."

Consider Jordan Davis. Following in the footsteps of 2009 DECA graduate Charles Wilkes, Davis is the second DECA student to receive the prestigious national Gates Millennium Scholarship award. In addition to fully funding his college education, including books, tuition, room and board, the scholarship provides academic support, mentoring and leadership training. Only 1,000 students nationwide earned the award, which is renewable up to 10 years to also fund graduate study in one of seven fields.

Davis is using the scholarship to attend Cornell University as an electrical and computer engineering major.

"I always knew I would go to college, I just never thought I'd be going to an Ivy League school," he said. "It still kind of feels like a dream. It's the embodiment of what I've been working for the last four years."

That work includes a stint on the school's first mock trial team, which advanced to the Ohio state finals, and a spot on the DECAbotz robotics team that won the top rookie award at the regional competition and earned a trip to nationals. Davis also served internships for two summers at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and earned 78 credits from Sinclair Community College.

"Going into a college classroom the first time was intimidating, but then to see that I can succeed, it's assurance that I can do this," Davis said. "Had I gone to another high school, I probably still would have gone to college, but I would not have challenged myself, and I wouldn't have the opportunity I have now."

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

A recent study by the National Educational Longitudinal Study shows that 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 graduate, and 85 percent enter college.

DECA exists to change this disparity.

The school focuses on preparing students for college work through personalized academic attention; the development of close relationships between 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.

The result is 106 DECA graduates with a perfect college acceptance rate and an average of 84 percent still in college. Three students this month became the first DECA graduates to earn a college degree.

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