

5-17-2010

First Fruits

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls

Recommended Citation

"First Fruits" (2010). *News Releases*. 1182.

https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/1182

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marketing and Communications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in News Releases by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

University of Dayton, Ohio (url: <http://www.udayton.edu/index.php>)



First Fruits

05.17.2010 | Campus and Community, Students

Jasmyne Ahmad knows what it's like to go first.

She was a member of the first class to attend the Dayton Early College Academy — an innovative high school that prepares students primarily from low-income, urban families to go to college. And she was one of 32 students who formed DECA's first graduating class in 2007.

But nothing compares to the "first" she will experience May 23 when she accepts her diploma from Manchester College in Indiana, becoming the first in her family to ever graduate from college.

She also represents an important "first" for DECA, as she and two former DECA classmates who graduate from Wittenberg University and Miami University this month become the first DECA graduates to become college graduates.

"I am super excited, and so is my family, who have always supported me," said Ahmad, who completed her political science degree in three years after starting college with 46.5 transferrable credits she earned while at DECA. "I realized from watching my mother raise three children without any help that this was the only way for me to make a better life for myself, and maybe those who helped get me here."

For DECA Principal Judy Hennessey, these three graduations are the ultimate fulfillment of the high school's mission.

"At DECA, our primary focus is to prepare students for college," she said. "When they get that first acceptance letter, we're thrilled, but we don't consider it mission accomplished. We want to see them succeed in college. We want to see them earn that degree."

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 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.

All of DECA's graduates have enrolled in college, and 84 percent of them are still in college. In addition to the three DECA graduates earning college degrees this month, another two are expected to finish in December, and dozens are on track to graduate in summer 2011.

These numbers are impressive for any group of students, but considering the national statistics for the type of students DECA serves, they are nothing short of phenomenal, according to Thomas J. Lasley II, the former dean of the University of Dayton School of Education and Allied Professions who helped create and sustain DECA.

Lasley indicated that research by Jobs for the Future shows that just 65 percent of low-income students earn a high school diploma, and only 21 percent of those graduates are adequately prepared for college-level work. By comparison, more than 90 percent of middle- and upper-class students graduate, and 54 percent are prepared for college.

"Too few young people out of high poverty families are getting college degrees," he said. "One of the best ways to positively impact a community and increase its economic viability is to increase the number of college graduates coming out of that community."

Like Ahmad, Paul Harsha knows what it's like to be a trailblazer, to carry on his shoulders the hopes and expectations of his family, his classmates and his entire high school.

After graduating from DECA in three years and bringing 31 transferrable credits to college, Harsha, just 19, graduated from Wittenberg University May 15 with a political science degree. He credits DECA with his success, helping him make a remarkable turnaround from his attitude and academic performance in junior high.

A bright student who was not motivated or challenged in a traditional school, Harsha skipped every Monday of his eighth-grade year.

"I wasn't getting in trouble, I just didn't see the point. Nobody cared," Harsha said. "But when I came to DECA, it felt like a community. My advisor would come to my house to discuss my personalized learning plan, they got my parents more involved, and they gave me independence to let me work at my own pace."

In this environment, Harsha said he no longer felt like no one cared. Instead, he began to feel accountable to others.

"If I didn't succeed, I'd be letting people down, people who had invested in me," he said. "At DECA, it was never a question of *are* you going to college, it's *where* are you going to college. And once I got to college, there was never any doubt that I would finish. I couldn't *not* succeed."

Danya Berry, DECA's college liaison, said Harsha's attitude is common among DECA graduates.

"They still feel like they're accountable to us," she said. "They don't want to let us down."

As DECA's college liaison, Berry helps students and their families navigate the often daunting process of college selection, application and financing. But her job doesn't stop when the students walk out of DECA's doors with a diploma in hand.

"Once they graduate, I give them my personal cell phone number," Berry said. "If they need anything once they arrive at their new school, we help them find the answer." This type of ongoing support is one of the unique features of early colleges that contribute to their success in fostering student completion of a college degree.

Berry's assistance isn't formal, and she keeps in touch with some graduates more than others, but the invitation is simply part of the long-term connection to the DECA community the school instills in its students.

Most of DECA's graduates return to the school during college breaks, Berry said. Some come just to say "hi," others hold question-and-answer sessions with current students about what to expect at college. Others even come to volunteer or work during the summer.

Ahmad sums up the connection by calling DECA her "home away from home."

"The teachers, advisors, staff and students are like family," she said. "Whatever you need, whether it be support, advice, or a ride home, someone will help you. Your advisors become kind of like your second parents or guardians. They give you their personal numbers, invite you to their homes, visit you at your home — whatever it takes to help out. They want to see us succeed. DECA was a second family to me."

Though they don't have definite plans for their long-term futures, both Harsha and Ahmad plan to return to Dayton for the time being. Laurel Chaney, the third DECA graduate to earn a college degree this month, also is returning to Dayton. Chaney graduated May 8 from Miami University as a psychology major and plans to attend graduate school at Wright State University to become an intervention specialist tutoring disabled children. Harsha will work on a political campaign this summer and fall, and Ahmad is taking a year off before applying to law school to study juvenile and family law.

Their return home isn't entirely coincidental.

"I would like to stay in Dayton," Harsha said. "I feel like the community invested a lot in me. I want to return the favor."

For more information, contact Cameron Fullam, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or fullam@udayton.edu.