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12.17.2007 | Campus and Community, Education, Students  Featured in the recently released book, Minding the Gap: Why Integrating High School with College Makes Sense and How to Do It, the Dayton Early College Academy continues to be nationally recognized as a leader in innovative education by helping urban youth achieve success in high school and go on to college.

Located on the University of Dayton campus through a partnership between the University and the Dayton Public Schools, DECA is a non-traditional charter high school with the singular focus of preparing urban students to succeed in college. Many of the students are from low-income families and will be the first generation to go to college.

"We have a lot of people coming in to see what we've done at DECA because we haven't just created a school that's operational, we've created an environment that's a model of best practices," said Thomas J. Lasley, dean of UD's School of Education and Allied Professions.

Established in 2003, DECA's evolution has been researched and closely scrutinized as an innovative education experiment by the Harvard Graduate School of Education in a June paper, and the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, reported on DECA's progress in two October reports. The New York Times reported twice on DECA's first graduating class earlier this year.

According to KnowledgeWorks the two reports, "Every Student Deserves a Legacy 2007: Real-life stories from the front lines of high school reform," and "To a Higher Degree: Real-life stories of progress in four early college high schools" focus on the true stories of students and explore "why it's so hard to change schools and how, despite the obstacles, change is taking place."

Lasley, one of the principal architects of DECA recently shepherded the school's transition into an independent charter school. And while Lasley said he appreciates the national attention the school continues to receive, he remains focused on the school's long-term success.

Although every member of DECA's first graduating class went on to college, financial challenges prompted the school's conversion from a public to a charter school. As a charter school, DECA is sponsored by the Dayton Public Schools but governed by an independent board of community leaders. UD provides support and academic oversight.

UD is one of only a handful of top-tier universities — and the only Catholic university — to operate a charter high school, according to the October 10 issue of Education Week, in a report on the University of Chicago's charter school.

The stakes are high: according to a Washington Post report this year, the general public believes national high school graduation rates are around 90 percent. However, the truth is much bleaker – only two out of three students actually graduate with their classmates.

This new involvement of private institutions in a traditionally public arena is a natural one for the University, which always been a leader in the Dayton community on issues such as neighborhood revitalization and economic development, Lasley said.

"UD is very much a part of Dayton. What happens to Dayton is going to happen to the University of Dayton. If Dayton has a dysfunctional school system with too few opportunities for academic advancement for the students, then this will ultimately impact UD. We don't want to see this happen to Dayton – to our community," he said.

DECA puts these ordinary urban students in a unique position ? the driver's seat for their future success.

"What people are seeing is that we've vested much more responsibility in the hands of the students," Lasley said.

"Our challenges at DECA are not just academic. We have to help students envision themselves as college students. Being the first in your family to go to college makes this more complex," said Judy Hennessey, DECA's principal. "We have some students who are the primary caretakers at home. For all practical purposes, they don't have parents – they are the parents."

Hennessey said DECA recognizes these special circumstances and builds on them, allowing students who were making crucial decisions at home to make informed decisions about their educations. They learn that college prep classes are
important and they learn that the tools for success are within their reach.

Through DECA's innovative high school curriculum, students are prepared for college work and then take college classes at Sinclair Community College and UD. By the time they graduate from DECA, they understand they can succeed in college because they've already experienced that success, he said.

"I think my best day at DECA was graduation last year," said Lasley. "Every student who graduated from DECA decided to go to college. Knowing that some of these kids, without a shadow of a doubt, would never have gone to college without DECA. It's changed lives."