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Dayton Early College Academy Celebrates First Graduation May 30

05.23.2007 | Campus and Community, Students Graduation is scheduled for 7 p.m., Wednesday, May 30 in the Boll Theater at Kennedy Union on the University of Dayton campus. Tickets are required and limited to student family and friends.

Dual graduate Alexis Ponder, who is headed to Xavier University to study neo-natal nursing, said being part of DECA's first class has been difficult. As a start-up school, students were challenged by constant transition and change. But she stuck it out.

"I didn't really have a choice," she said. "I learned from my parents' mistakes." Ponder was quick to point out that her family is wonderful and very supportive, but with limited education, opportunities have also been limited.

She said she did well taking college classes while in high school, because she can handle an independent environment. "I think DECA is a great place for some people, people who are determined, willing to work hard and open to help. If you aren't willing to take that support, you won't do well here."

The rest of the first graduating class of the innovative public high school is also sprinting toward higher education: overall the senior class has taken 70 college classes and will earn 1,252 college credits. Each of the 32 graduates is planning to attend college or continue post-secondary education; 10 students will attend UD.

"That's very impressive for a start-up urban school of this type," according to Thomas J. Lasley II, dean of UD's School of Education and Allied Professions and one of the founders of the experimental high school. "We won't really know how successful we are for a few years, but we are very pleased with the achievements and the transformations of our first graduating class."

Early college high schools are based on the ideas that many students are ready for rigorous academic work at a younger age and research that shows students who earn college credit while still in high school graduate from college at a higher percentage, earn higher grade point averages and complete their degrees sooner, according to DECA Principal Judy Hennessey.

Founded four years ago with start-up funds from the KnowledgeWorks Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, DECA focuses on preparing urban students for college – academically, socially and personally. It is the first high school of its kind in Ohio and in the vanguard of similar schools nationally to graduate its first class.

DECA focuses on first-generation college students, predominately from low-income or minority families, as well as those who might not be successful in a traditional classroom, according to Hennessey.

"We're creating a different way of going to high school with a singular focus on preparing students for the rigor of college," Hennessey said. That focus surrounds students with intensive instruction to correct academic deficiencies, programs and assignments to cultivate self-awareness and maturity, and extensive community service requirements to expose students to career possibilities.

Students must pass six "gateways" of requirements and make a final presentation to faculty on their achievements of specific criteria achievements to graduate.

The Dayton Daily News chronicled the days leading up to DECA's first graduation with a video presentation, available on its Web site.

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