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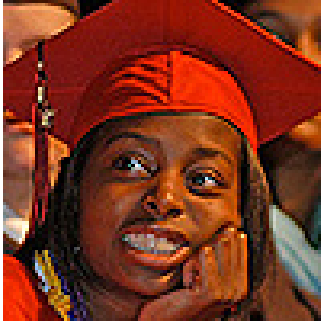
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Grads Have Head Start on College

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High school graduation is a proud moment for any student and parent, but for Dayton Early College Academy students who will receive their diplomas at 7 p.m. Friday, May 30, at Trent Arena, 3301 Shroyer Road, the moment will be especially remarkable.

"I know people who have robbed, been arrested, been killed," said graduating senior Treymane Hogue, who describes his childhood growing up in "the hood." "Someone I graduated eighth grade with is facing a life sentence for murder."

Hogue can boast that he beat the odds and was never trapped in that lifestyle. He will start classes at the University of Dayton this fall as an engineering major and become the first in his family to pursue a four-year degree.

Hogue's story is common among the 215 students at DECA. Most of the students are from minority families and homes where they will be the first to go to college. Several students are raised by single parents, share household duties or have witnessed drug and alcohol abuse at home, said DECA Principal Judy Hennessey.

"We see complex lives and adult responsibilities on their young shoulders. The greatest stories are in their tenacity," she said.

Forty-three students will walk the aisle May 30, and five more are on track to earn a diploma in June. These 48 graduates mark an increase of 50 percent over last year's first graduating class. Three will graduate with an associate's degree and all have been accepted as full-time college students this fall, with 19 planning to attend the University of Dayton.

DECA is leading the way in addressing a major educational concern in the United States. According to a recent study by Jobs for the Future, 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.

"We are really learning how to create a college mindset in students for whom it hasn't been part of their family or neighborhood upbringing," said Thomas J. Lasley II, dean of UD's School of Education and Allied Professions. "In this second graduating class, not only did the number of graduates increase by 50 percent, but more students were accepted at more selective schools, showing that we're doing a better job with college preparedness."

The University of Dayton founded DECA in 2003 in partnership with Dayton Public Schools to prepare students from low-income, urban families to go to college. 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 UD and Sinclair Community College while still in high school.

"Many of these graduates when they become successful will have a sense of giving back," Hennessey said. "We're helping to turn the ship a bit."

DECA's commitment to the success of its students does not end with graduation.

"Our goal is to get the kids to go to college, but ultimately we want them to be admissible to a wide range of schools, and we want them to succeed," Lasley said. "DECA's approach seems to be working."

All of last year's 32 DECA graduates attended college this year, and 75 percent are expected to return for their sophomore year. Some of them experienced significant success during their first year of college — Alexis Ponder was named Outstanding African-American Freshman at Xavier University.

Those few students who were not successful still had the opportunity to attend college and still have the opportunity to build on

the knowledge they have acquired, Lasley said.

"Research clearly suggests that students who attend some college are economically advantaged over those who have never had the experience," he said.

To improve the success rate of its graduates in college, DECA will expand in the 2008-09 school year to include a seventh-grade cohort.

"Studies show the early college schools where the students have a seventh- and eighth-grade experience, they are more likely to go to college and stay in college," Lasley said. "It's unrealistic for many of these students to take them in as ninth-graders and get them ready for college in three and a half years, especially for where they're starting from."

DECA will be the first early college school in Ohio to enroll seventh-graders.

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