



Fast Track

Graduates of Ohio's Early College High Schools set a pace for early success



Early College High Schools in Ohio

Across Ohio, early college high schools are changing what it means to be a college student. These schools take the young teenagers who are least likely to attend college and most likely to be performing below grade level, then put them in an atmosphere with high levels of support and high expectations. They allow students to start taking college courses in grade 9 or 10 and earn up to 60 hours of college credit by the time they graduate from high school.

The nine Ohio Early College High Schools in the KnowledgeWorks network are showing remarkable results. They report an average graduation rate of 91 percent and more than one in three ECHS students graduate with a high school diploma and two years of college credit or an associate's degree. Others earn substantial college credits that speed their journey toward a degree.

More than 90 percent of ECHS 10th graders scored proficient or higher on the Ohio Graduation Test in reading, writing, mathematics and social studies, outperforming the state average. Greater percentages of

students from ECHS schools scored accelerated or advanced on Ohio state achievement tests than students at comparable high schools, suggesting that they are more college ready.

What happens when these young adults – almost all of them the first in their families to attend college or students who likely would not continue their education without the boost of ECHS – move beyond the carefully structured and nurturing environments of their high schools? Research shows that they are more likely to enroll in and complete college.

But research data is only part of the answer. Each of the remarkable young adults who has graduated from an Early College High School has a unique story of accomplishment and challenge. Each has a dream as individual as his or her journey.

We invite you to meet a few graduates of Ohio's Early College High Schools and learn more about how they are progressing on the fast track to realizing their dreams.

To learn more about early college high schools or these ECHS alumni, please go to

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Adairia Kelly

Graduate of Dayton Early College Academy.
Attending Miami University, studying social work.

Overcoming personal tragedy to help others

Adairia Kelly says that when people look at her, they don't realize everything she's been through.

It's no wonder. With her self-assured manner and high-wattage smile, Kelly seems like someone who is sailing through life. Hearing this Miami University student speak about her first appearance on the Dean's List or her plans to attend graduate school and enter social work only confirms the impression that Kelly has always been a student destined for success.

But Kelly's confidence and accomplishments hide a much more complicated truth. She has overcome enormous obstacles to reach this point.

The first pivotal moment came when Kelly enrolled in a new and demanding high school and had to learn to develop academic independence and concrete study habits for the first time in her educational life.

The second was when back-to-back losses — the death of her maternal grandmother, followed by the murder of the little brother she helped raise — threatened to derail the college career she'd worked so hard to earn.

In both cases, caring educators and an innovative program that harnessed Kelly's intelligence and drive helped her become an accomplished college student and stay resilient in the face of devastating personal loss.

Born when her mother was 14 and her father 16, Kel-

ly spent a lot of time as a young girl taking care of three younger siblings. By the time she moved from her mother's to her paternal grandmother's care when she was 12, she'd missed out on a great deal of her childhood.

So a new school where students could attend college classes while in high school seemed like it could be the chance Kelly needed. The Dayton Early College Academy (DECA) promised a personalized education, rigorous standards and a financial and academic jumpstart that, with hard work, could help students earn an associate's degree at the same time as a high school diploma.

Kelly found herself on the University of Dayton campus at age 14. Compared to her experiences in urban Dayton elementary and middle schools, almost nothing about DECA felt familiar. "It was so new, I just had to adjust."

But between DECA's teachers and advisers, she got the help she needed to make that adjustment.

To DECA's staff, Kelly appeared articulate and magnetic — qualities that could help her soar through the early college experience, but that also threatened to trip her up in the up-and-down social culture of high school.

Kelly's adviser and science teacher Melissa Reiger saw a range of possibilities for the young student.

"From the beginning I could see potential in Adairia but I also saw that she was holding herself back," she said. "She could be stubborn or let her attitude get in the way. At the same time, I could see that she could question and think critically along with having great leadership skills. Most of all, when she found a passion in something, she would excel."

The commitment of DECA teachers helped Kelly build her own commitment to her education. “As I got into the groove of things, I understood how hard I had to work and that I was in control of my learning...” Kelly said. “My teachers were there to advise, not to hand things to me.”

Kelly left DECA with her high school diploma (the first person to achieve that on her mother’s side of the family), along with 56 college credits and a full scholarship to Miami University.

But the road wasn’t easy after DECA. In each of her first two years at Miami, Kelly experienced a profound personal loss. Her maternal grandmother died her freshman year. Then, when she was a sophomore, her younger brother was killed while waiting at a bus stop. Stunned, and often torn between her new life and traumas at home, Kelly struggled to keep her college life on track.

“I never thought I would experience something like that – I never thought anyone would kill my brother. He wasn’t in the whole gang scene,” she said.

Recovering from that loss has been very difficult. “I still find myself taking it really hard. It’s really hard to not let other people see me hurt,” Kelly said. She is especially careful of her two younger sisters, who she brings to Miami in hopes that they will see themselves in college one day too. In a recent school project, one of them chose Kelly as the person who inspired her most.

Kelly’s paternal grandmother, Mary Pounds, and her friends were determined to keep her moving forward.

“I told her this happens in life, things happen in life, people live and die every day – you grieve, you feel pity for yourself but you get up and move on...” said Pounds. “We didn’t come this far to fail now.”

Kelly responded by pushing her academic life forward and finding new ways to be part of the Miami community. Now a member of a sorority for African American women that does community service, Kelly said, “I just try to contribute to the campus a lot more than I did before.”

She plans to finish her undergraduate work in 2011 and get a master’s degree. “I would like to be the director of an agency that makes decisions on taking children out of homes that are not fit for them. I would also like to start my own nonprofit organization for young girls, homeless girls or troubled teenagers. Or I could be a high school counselor.”

In addition to her course load, she works three jobs – in Miami’s Office of Equity and Equal Opportunity, the campus library and as a resident adviser. She also does community service work at a safe home for homeless girls and regularly meets with teenage girls from Cincinnati to talk to them about planning for college.

“I try to let them know that if you work hard, you can do anything you want to do,” Kelly said.

Tracy Zollinger Turner



Lauren Merrell

Graduated from Toledo Early College High School.
Attending University of Toledo, pre-pharmacy.

Using lessons from high school to meet challenges in college

Walking across the University of Toledo campus on a windy spring day, Lauren Merrell flashed smiles that ranged from quiet and sweet to confident and friendly as she ran into classmates and friends.

Anyone watching her move across campus so comfortably might find it hard to believe that Merrell, even

before her 19th birthday, was almost halfway through her junior year in college.

Merrell's age was only part of what made her presence on campus remarkable, though. Just five years earlier Merrell doubted she'd have the chance to attend college. And only a few months before she had been in serious danger of losing her chance for a coveted spot in pharmacy school.

The story of Lauren Merrell's first year at UT is one of how an innovative high school built on one student's personal strengths to change the course of her life – and how it continued to do so even after she graduated.

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I'm very excited about this chance to pay back what was given to me.

Lauren Merrell's family is as close knit as the wood frame houses that line the narrow streets of East Toledo.

Growing up within those close family ties, Merrell was a good student and dutiful daughter. However, behind the mask of her polite manners and shy smile, Merrell wanted more than her background might have predicted for her. She wanted to be the first in her family to attend college and establish herself in a degreed profession — a profession that would allow her to give something substantial back to her neighborhood.

In eighth grade, Merrell recognized the new Toledo Early College High School — which offered the opportunity to take college courses starting in ninth grade — as the chance to fulfill her goals. When she got her acceptance letter, she later wrote, “I practically jumped up and down and I hugged my mom as my eyes began to fill with tears. These tears were not only of joy, but of hope that I would make it... I would do something with my life that was amazing.”

She soon got used to the demanding workload and was one of the first students to take a college class. Since nobody in her family had gone to college, the TECHS teachers became strong role models.

Then Merrell took part in a pharmacy internship program and decided “to own and manage my own pharmacy someday.” What clinched her decision was her realization that East Toledo had a choice of vacant locations including

“an open field down the block from my parents where a preschool was torn down that would be a perfect spot.”

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After deciding on a career and graduating from TECHS as valedictorian, Merrell's future seemed assured as she started her career at UT. But fate intervened when Merrell's grandmother suddenly became ill.

When her grandmother was diagnosed with dementia and her condition declined quickly, Merrell visited her grandmother daily. For Merrell, who had grown very close to her grandmother over the past decade, it took “a strong emotional toll when my grandmother went into hospice.”

For the first time in Merrell's academic career, she was unable to concentrate sufficiently on her school work. Late in the fall semester, Merrell was spending all of her spare time with her grandmother, and sometimes sleeping at hospice. During the last days of her grandmother's life, Merrell didn't leave her bedside.

With little left to devote to her studies, this promising and driven student failed her fall semester classes. That rocky start wasn't just a setback, either. Because maintaining her candidacy for a competitive spot in pharmacy school required a 3.8 grade-point average, her plan for her future was on the line.

During her grandmother's illness and into the second semester, Merrell faced her situation maturely. Her time at TECHS, while she was acquiring the skills needed to survive on campus and earning 63 credits toward her degree, had taught her to ask for help when she needed it. So she turned to UT's peer mentorship program, Rocket-2-Rocket, and people rallied to help.

Merrell began making up missed work and rebuilding what had been a 4.0 average. By semester's end, she had brought her three-year average to 3.6 and was positioned to recover from the failed classes.

Perhaps the greatest testimony to Merrell's maturity and resilience came when she was offered the honor of becoming a Rocket-2-Rocket mentor. “I'm very excited about this chance to pay back what was given to me,” she said.

Given Merrell's long-term goal of contributing to the neighborhood where she grew up, her focus on giving back to the mentor program that helped her get back on her feet isn't surprising.

— Larry Levy



Terrance Truitt

Graduate of Canton Early College High School. **Attending** University of Cincinnati, studying criminal justice.

On track to enter law school at age 20

When Terrance Truitt arrived at the University of Cincinnati in fall 2009, he hit the ground running. At age 18, he was already nearly a full junior with most of his core requirements behind him.

He was on course to graduate in winter 2012 at age 20.

But Truitt's path to success in college wasn't an easy one. He was almost derailed after his father, a mill worker, died unexpectedly when he was in the fifth grade.

"My dad was always my support, so when he passed away, I felt like 'why bother anymore?';0--" said Truitt. "I really didn't feel the need to go to college or anything."

It wasn't until an eighth-grade teacher pressed him to attend Canton's new Early College High School that Truitt finally got back on track toward realizing his dream.

From the time he was a little boy, fixated on the flashing lights of neighborhood police cars, Truitt knew that he wanted a career in criminal justice.

Canton Early College offered Truitt the opportunity to study in a small school with lots of personal attention and to attend classes at Stark State College.

But Early College also gave Truitt an academic wake-up call. From the moment he started, he was asked to complete quality work at a quick pace. He got the first Cs and Ds of his life.

Truitt admitted, "It was a big change freshman year. I struggled. Up until my senior year, I battled with quitting. It felt like a lot of stress."

A turning point came when Truitt's English class read a Holocaust memoir, *The Children of Willesden Lane*. The class discussed and worked on projects based on the notion of "legacy."

"Terrance was still grieving his father – and I had lost my husband to cancer – so we connected in talking about that book," said English teacher Debbie Turner. "His project was a book about his father's legacy to him – it was the most outstanding project I got that whole year, and maybe in my whole career. From that point on, I held him to that standard."

As he navigated courses at Stark State, where he took classes alongside people of usual college age, he went to the ECHS staff for help when things got tough. "The teachers did a lot more than they had to," he said.

But even with their help, believing in himself was a bumpy ride. At one point, as a senior, Truitt felt that a college professor didn't like him and was taking it out on his grade. He thought seriously about quitting.

He went to tell principal Valerie Pack.

"She sat me down and we talked about everything. She let me know that in order to be successful, I was going to have to overcome roadblocks. She said, 'Just let this be another speed bump on your way to success.' I really took those words to heart," Truitt said

Canton Early College High School helped bring him

closer to his dream more quickly than he could have imagined. Before settling into life at a university with a top-rated criminal justice program, he already had his associate's degree and plenty of academic and life skills for college-level work.

At UC, Truitt handily manages classes and a work-study position in the admissions office. He is being mentored by a retired appeals court justice as part of the college program, and is considering which law schools he will apply to. While he's decided to minor in political science and has a keen interest in the ethics of the U.S. justice system, he's leaning toward studying corporate law.

When Truitt visits home, he stops at ECHS regularly

to see his teachers and talk to current students. He also stays in touch online, cautioning students not to squander the opportunity they've been given, to do their work and to ask for help when they need it.

"Going to early college is the best choice I think I've made so far in my life. I became a very independent person," said Truitt. "The early college teachers helped me get there. They gave me the tools to learn how to approach people and ask for help – to not be embarrassed to ask for help.

"They taught me how to be a better person and how not to let stuff get to you. When you're faced with obstacles, they teach you how to cope with it."

— Tracy Zollinger Turner



Paul Hovan

Graduate of Canton Early College High School.

Attending Rochester Institute of Technology, studying animation.

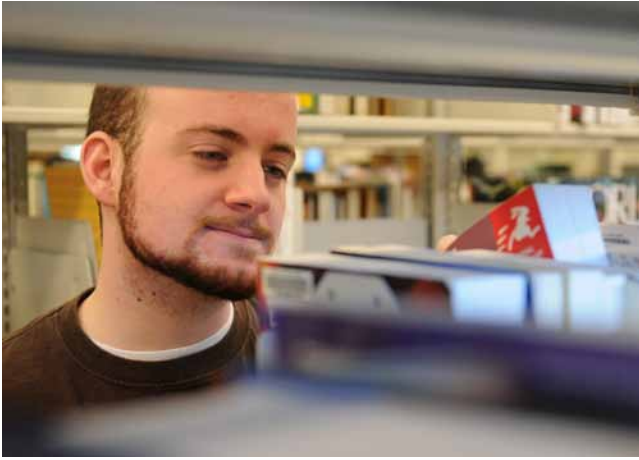
Deafness didn't keep him from being first in family to get degree

Born profoundly deaf, Paul Hovan always struggled to find schools that would treat him like a capable student and provide the resources for him to learn. He and his family didn't hold high hopes when, after years of frustration and even moving across country searching for supportive classrooms, they learned about a new school called Canton Early College High School.

Their doubts proved to be unfounded. What they discovered in Early College High School was a place where teachers didn't consider Hovan's deafness an obstacle to his ability to work on a college level – an environment that launched him into the future they always believed he could have.

Now Hovan is studying 3D animation and digital art at Rochester Institute of Technology, having already become the first member of his family to get a college diploma by earning an associate's degree during high school.

Despite how well Hovan's time at Canton ECHS turned out, the transition from schools where teachers accepted or even overestimated his limits to one where teach-



At Canton Early College High School, teachers didn't consider Paul Hovan's deafness an obstacle to his ability to work on a college level.

ers helped him overcome them got off to a rough start.

"It wasn't easy," said Paul's mother, Shawana Hovan. One of only two deaf students in the ECHS program, Hovan was behind in several subjects, particularly those for which reading and writing were central. Having learned to communicate in American Sign Language, English was effectively a second language.

"It has been and probably will continue to be a challenge for me. American Sign Language is completely different from English," said Hovan.

As a freshman, he was not yet constructing English sentences. But he was now in a school with an interpreter, tutors and committed educators.

From the moment that ECHS English teacher Debbie Turner met Hovan, she never considered his deafness an obstacle.

"I never thought of Paul as not being capable – he was very fluent and articulate – I knew him from the very beginning as someone who was excited about the program and willing to learn," she said.

To Hovan's mother, seeing her son engage and love Shakespeare in Turner's class was a pivotal moment in Hovan's growth. Turner remembers it that way as well.

"Paul was not aware of the meanings of language beyond the literal," said Turner. "One of the discoveries that made *Romeo and Juliet* so pleasurable for him was that I helped him (and my other students) deconstruct the layers of language beyond the literal.

"He had never been asked to do that before. With each step that he took toward understanding literature and the

use of language – metaphor, simile — I could see him blossom. He engaged in the classroom conversations... Mrs. Black [the interpreter] would tell him to slow down because he would sign so quickly. His mind was working so quickly that his hands couldn't keep up."

Even as he struggled through English and social studies, Hovan excelled in art and design. As a junior, he won a citywide young inventors contest by making a chandelier out of recycled materials. His skills in welding and electrical wiring led to a commission for another chandelier through the organization Arts in Stark County.

Hovan's experiences at ECHS were especially welcome given his earlier difficulties.

His parents believed that, given the proper environment and resources, their son possessed the abilities to engage and understand all of the subjects that any hearing child would. But throughout elementary and middle school, those bright spots were the exception, not the norm.

Once he enrolled in ECHS and connected with teachers, Hovan found his way to what he wanted to do. In his senior year, Hovan won a national award for graphic arts for digital photography from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) and was flown to visit its Rochester campus for a weekend, along with his family.

Hovan was offered a scholarship to NTID as he logged his next major accomplishments – he earned a black belt in karate, then got his associate's degree from Stark State College.

At RIT, Hovan lived in an all-deaf dorm away from home for the first time in his life. A relevant milestone for any student, living independently was essential for Hovan.

His mother served as his primary connection to the hearing world most of his life. "Even though we sign, and we're his family and we love him, would you want your mother interpreting for you?" said Shawana. "It's nice to see him building relationships outside of our family."

All of the professors Hovan works with at RIT sign, and there are more than 1,500 other students from all over the country with varying degrees of hearing loss. He and his roommate have discussed moving into an apartment together.

Hovan is grateful that he got to be one of the first 100 students to enter ECHS. "All the extra effort that the teachers, tutors and my parents put into helping me on that journey through ECHS and English has made it possible for me attend the college I wanted to."

—Tracy Zollinger Turner

Graduate of Lorain County Early College High School.

Attending Lorain County Community College/Kent State, studying business administration.



Rachel Sanchez

Getting more than college credit from early college

Rachel Sanchez enrolled in Lorain County Early College High School for the academic advantage, but found a benefit she never expected: a strong work ethic, due in no small part to the influence of ECHS's iconic principal, Roslyn Valentine.

"Mrs. V never let us slack," Sanchez said.

Even when she left Valentine's watchful eye after graduation, Sanchez took that work ethic with her. She studies business administration at Lorain County Community College through the University Partnership program, which will give her a degree from Kent State University.

Despite carrying more than a full-time class load, Sanchez worked three days a week at an insurance agency as office manager, sometimes handling customer accounts.

Sanchez took a pragmatic approach to both her studies and her job. Of her major, she said, "I can use that degree in any field."

And the part-time job? It was a good place for her to learn real-life business practices, she said, "and it's so much better than handing out fries at a fast-food place."

With so much on her plate, Sanchez managed her time by taking two of her four classes online so she could

work at them when she had time — and by calling on the work ethic she's been developing all her life.

"Rachel is polite and motivated — reserved but not shy," said Rosey Wagner, ECHS's academic adviser. "That's the reason for her success. She never was a typical teen."

Sitting in the college library not too long ago, Sanchez did appear different from the other students. She sat erect in her chair, her posture friendly but businesslike, and kept eye contact while she talked. Somehow, her poise made her casual jacket and long denim skirt seem dressier.

That seriousness contributed to her 4.0 grade-point average in high school. It also may well allow her to surpass family members' academic achievements. While both her parents and brothers have some college experience, she will be the first to graduate from college.

Sanchez recalled that she didn't like ECHS at first. "I went from a huge class to 60 people in Early College," she said. "The *same* 60 people, every day." Once they got to know each other, though, she saw the advantages of a small class. "We figured it out quickly, who could help whom. Us, the teachers, the staff — it was a great support system, one of the best things about Early College."

She was so impressed by the support system at ECHS, in fact, that she decided to become a part of it, mentoring new freshmen during her four years there.

Perhaps sharing that kind of collaboration and support is another thing she never expected to learn while attending early college high school.

— Mary Mihaly

Graduate of Lorain County

Early College High School.

Attending University of Akron,
studying fashion merchandising.



Marquis Pugh

From a rough start, a new beginning

The crowd moved in every direction in the Student Union at the University of Akron, wearing the uniform of college campuses everywhere: sloppy t-shirts, jeans and earphones.

Sitting in the campus coffee shop, sipping a latte, Marquis Pugh didn't look like the rest of the crowd. His shirt was neatly pressed, and the collar of his short denim jacket was turned up just enough. Pugh was cool and calm, ready to hold court. "Fashion with a passion!" he said, grinning.

Pugh's smooth demeanor demonstrated his transformation from his freshman year at Lorain County Early College High School (ECHS), when he made a different kind of impression on people.

"Marquis had to be redirected several times," said academic adviser RoseMarie Wagner, "but that's what I like most about him. He had to work to graduate, but he wanted it, and he finished what he started."

Pugh doesn't deny that assessment. "I used to be a problem child," he said. "I goofed off, wouldn't go to class."

He discovered he had to make up work he didn't do properly. "When I first started Early College, I did mess up," he recalled. "And for that I had to keep going to summer school, keep retaking classes."

Those lessons stayed with him. "Because of Early College, I've learned how to study a lot better. I learned a lot from my mistakes," he said. "I don't think I'd be in college right now if it wasn't for the early college program."

Pugh's lack of focus may have been complicated by a

problem even his parents didn't know about until he was grown: a serious form of scoliosis. He underwent back surgery when he was 16.

During his final two years in Early College, Pugh learned to temper his sometimes-misguided playfulness — a lesson Pugh said he owes to Roslyn Valentine, ECHS's principal. "I was always afraid of Mrs. V," he said. "But ... she saw potential in me that I didn't see in myself."

Over time, Pugh became a regular visitor in the ECHS office. "If somebody was having a bad day, Marquis was ready with a funny story for us," ECHS administrative assistant Jenifer Johnson said. "You were not allowed to be unhappy around him."

Now Pugh studies fashion merchandising at UA and works part-time for a local internet provider. "I've always loved clothes," he said. "They give you freedom of expression in a real way; you express yourself through them."

He has strong family support. His mother visits about twice a week and they talk every day. He said he's "best friends," too, with his grandmother and his 23-year-old sister, Majesha, an Ohio State University graduate.

His mother credits Early College with helping Pugh develop from a half-hearted student to one with drive. "It was a focus thing," she said. "Marquis struggled, but he knew he had to grow up and he set a goal."

That goal is to move to New York and work organizing fashion shows for top designers or as a personal stylist for Manhattan's elite.

"My goal is to have my master's degree when I'm 23," Pugh said. "Look, I'm only 18 and already I have an associate degree — why procrastinate? If I procrastinate any more, it will only hold me back in life."

— Mary Mihaly

Graduate of Youngstown Early College High School.

Attending Youngstown State University, studying environmental science.



David Bresko

Crafting a college career to fit his passions

It's easy to spot David Bresko in a coffee shop. He's the one who slightly resembles the young Paul McCartney and has his nose buried in a Japanese paperback. As in, a book written in Japanese.

A self-described "language geek," Bresko also is fluent in Russian and Italian, and can read and understand Spanish and Irish/Gaelic. But Japanese is his passion: "I eat, sleep and breathe in Japanese," he said with some pride.

Bresko had to be inventive about working in his love for language when he decided to take advantage of a full scholarship to attend Youngstown State University and study environmental science.

He knew he wanted to attend YSU from his experience on campus while attending Youngstown Early College High School, where he earned 62 hours of college credit from YSU.

But the college doesn't offer Japanese classes. So Bresko found a solution – with the help of a YSU professor, he arranged to study Japanese remotely with a teacher at the University of Akron. He also works as a part-time tutor in the language lab.

Bresko's decision was made easier by his early college experience. "Most high school students listen to college professors talk about *their* experiences, and make decisions based on that," he said. "There's a lot of experiment-

ing. But thanks to Early College, I didn't have to experiment — I already had my own experiences to draw on — so I could focus right away."

Bresko sees another important edge he gained from YEC. "It made the going easier," he said. "Because I already was on campus and taking college courses, I knew early which subjects I wanted to study. I was ready."

His mother Judy is quick to credit YEC for giving Bresko "the opportunity to show what he's capable of."

Finding a way to stay involved with languages isn't the first obstacle Bresko had to overcome. For years, Judy and her husband David, a police officer with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, wondered if their toddler would fully recover from severe sleep apnea that made it hard for him to get enough oxygen. He was a quiet child, she said, always "in the corner with a book."

During that time, Bresko was developing the passions that now guide his life. He paid attention to his paternal grandmother, who always spoke Russian, and his father's devotion to nature.

When he got to high school, teachers helped him explore his interests and develop his leadership abilities. They encouraged Bresko when he organized an Anime (Japanese-styled animation) Club, "to get kids interested in something different. Get them motivated."

Bresko knows about motivation. And he knows that a degree in environmental science will be his ticket, in this era of global greening, to graduate school in Japan. He trusts that his two passions – for languages and for nature – will take him anywhere in the world he chooses.

— Mary Mihaly

Graduate of Africentric
Early College.
Attending Miami
University, studying
computer science.



Brandon Carter

The early college experience pushed him to grow

Brandon Carter is one of those driven students with an innate ability to know what it takes to get the job done. From a young age, he knew he wanted to be in a technical field, and he knew that college was critical. By all accounts, he was bound to succeed in nearly any high school setting.

But he encountered more challenge than he expected when his high school, Columbus' Africentric, adopted an early college program. He became one of the first students to qualify to take classes at Columbus State Community College – and the very first to receive his associate's degree along with his high school diploma.

Taking college-level courses as a high school junior pushed Carter academically for the first time.

“Being exposed to early college was kind of like a gift for him,” said Eleanor Vickers, Africentric's college liaison at the time. “Being at a traditional high school would not have challenged him, or allowed him to grow the way he did.”

Carter agreed. “Columbus State was a big challenge for me compared to high school. The teacher doesn't hold your hand so much,” he said.

But he found that he didn't want his hand held either.

Not wanting to be treated differently, Carter and other Africentric students decided to stop telling Columbus State professors that they were in high school after one pointed them out in class.

“We found it was better to succeed and then tell them,” said Carter.

Completing college coursework not only challenged Carter, but also helped set his college applications apart from the pack.

“The early college experience definitely shows colleges that you can perform at the college level,” he said. “You get to engage in a college environment, and engage in the higher thinking that colleges require.”

With his associate's degree, Carter became the first member of his family to earn a degree. He was offered a full scholarship to Miami University of Ohio.

Carter entered Miami with enough credentials to be a junior, but the core requirements of his computer science major will take four years to complete. Having some of his core course load already finished gave him a little more breathing room, which he needed, as he did eight hours of a work-study scholarship per week, running registers and stocking shelves at the campus convenience store.

In his first year, he found Miami to be a new challenge, much harder than Columbus State, but was taking it in stride. He said, “As long as you put the time in, there's no reason you shouldn't do well.”

— Tracy Zollinger Turner

Graduate of Africentric
Early College.

Attending Ohio
Dominican University,
studying math education.



Kiani Mullins

Following her role models into teaching

Kiani Mullins arrived at Ohio Dominican University with 31 hours of college credit and a clear sense of what she wants to do with her life.

She plans to teach high school math – and she knows what kind of math teacher she wants to be. Attending Africentric Early College School helped her figure that out.

“My method is going to be different,” she said. “There were a couple of teachers I had who didn’t do the arguing, who expected more of you. Then, when you get an A, you feel like you’ve earned it.”

One of those teachers was Tawana Arnold, who taught Mullins math in ninth and 10th grades.

“I loved the way she broke it down if somebody had a question,” said Mullins. “We’d solve a problem and then look closely at how we got there.”

But even with so clear a goal in mind, Mullins’ first year as a full-time college student wasn’t easy. Being the first member of her immediate family to go to college, Mullins was exploring what was for her uncharted territory. She almost lost her way, distracted by the draw of social life and undermined by inadequate study habits.

That’s when she found that her early college experience helped with more than her vision of her future. It also provided many of the tools she needed to problem-solve when the challenges threatened to overwhelm her.

In her first semester, Mullins fell back on old study

habits that, because of her natural skills and ability to do well with little work, had been sufficient in the past but couldn’t keep up with the requirements of the more advanced coursework.

“It got me the first D of my life,” she said.

Leaving campus to socialize with friends and family also contributed to her first semester crisis. Balancing college and her social life was much harder with so many friends and family members a quick car ride away.

“I didn’t have self-control,” she said. “I was always going off-campus. If someone called and wanted me to take them someplace, I’d go do it... then I’d be up all night working on a big project and it wouldn’t come out well.”

Mullins began to lean on a few of the things that she had learned at Africentric, like the importance of getting to know her educators and asking for help.

“I learned that developing a relationship with a professor definitely helps in a class,” said Mullins. One she began talking to in particular at ODU “showed me how to make things here about me and got me to talk with a counselor.”

By the holiday break, Mullins and her academic advisers at ODU came up with a solution that she had to impose on herself. “I can only leave campus two days a week,” she said. “I try to treat this like it’s not Columbus.”

The results were immediate.

“Kiani is taking baby steps, but I’m really proud of her right now,” said her adviser, Cynthia DeVese. “She’s already noticed what she needs to do differently, and I think that’s a very big step.”

Mullins’s struggle with the transition to full-time col-

lege student isn't surprising, according to those who work with students who are breaking new ground by continuing their education.

"Africentric is a school that has a lot of students in poverty – a lot of students who come from families where there is no college experience," said Arnold, the math teacher who helped inspire Mullins.

But ECHS makes a transition that otherwise could sink a student's ambitions manageable, Arnold said. "I think the early college experience makes it more real for students. They learn how adults act."

Mullins' college experience, it seems, is much like her life in high school math class.

"Kiani was always a puzzle-solver, she wanted to figure out a different way. If she couldn't find the answer, she would push herself to try to figure out a way to do it," Arnold said.

The way she figured out for herself at ODU includes focusing on children. She began a work-study job tutoring local middle school students in an after-school program, which not only helped her create more social connections on campus but also reminded her of the goal that led her there in the first place.

"I really love that job," Mullins said. "I actually miss the kids when I'm not there."

— Tracy Zollinger Turner



Graduate of Youngstown Early College High School.
Attending Youngstown State University, studying pre-medicine.

TaQuaesa Toney

Pre-med, volunteer work and activism

Hunched over her desk in the small lecture hall at Youngstown State University, TaQuaesa Toney wrote fast, a sort of dogged perseverance on her face. The instructor in this anatomy class was a fast-talker who was quickly covering such things as the hypothalamus and dopamine pathways.

It was difficult to keep up with the lecture, and most of the would-be doctors in the room slowed their writing, slumped in their seats and watched the instructor pacing between charts as she spoke. But Toney didn't look up; she was taking down every detail.

After class, Toney sat in a coffee shop in the Butler Institute of American Art and talked about her evolution from someone who never envisioned herself in college to pre-med student.

"I wonder if I would have been as interested in going to college if it weren't for Early College," she said. When she was in middle school, she hadn't thought past the dances and "high school fun" that awaited her. Once she heard about Youngstown Early College High School, though, her ambition kicked in.

"It sounded too good to be true," she said. "I was going to get an associate degree in high school. That was enough for me!"

The formerly shy student shone in Early College, graduating in YEC's first class with honors and an associ-



It sounded too good to be true. I was going to get an associate degree in high school.

ate in arts degree. She was awarded a full scholarship to YSU – without which she would have struggled with the financial obligations of college – and coveted lodging in the honors dorm.

“It brought out the best in her,” her father, David Hite, said. “She’s more outgoing now, not so shy. She’s become a good speaker. And she’s always wanting to volunteer to help others, organizing people at church for a good cause.”

Family, and family values, are important to Toney. She credits her mother, a nurse, with her interest in health and medicine, and an aunt who frequently took her to church with her strong Christian belief.

The oldest of four children and the first in her family to go to college, Toney informally mentors her siblings: her brother James (“My mom says I spoil him, not mentor,” she said, laughing), and sisters Aaliyah and Tre’dayza — who attends Youngstown Early College with hopes of becoming a pastry chef.

Toney channels much of her energy these days through the YSU chapter of Interservice Christian Fellowship (ICF). “She’s been involved for several years and shown a lot of integrity,” Katie Schneider, one of the group’s leaders, said of Toney, who organizes social events for the group. “She’s been instrumental in reaching out to international students — really gone out of her way to welcome them, involve them in Bible studies, and been hospitable.”

Getting to know international students has been one of Toney’s great pleasures of college life. Her honors dorm is reserved for “emerging leaders,” and she’s become close to students from Taiwan, China and the Bahamas. She so enjoys their company, in fact, that she organized an International Coffee Hour; for two hours each week the students meet and trade stories about their experiences.

Yet another example of her activism at YSU: A new friend from Haiti, along with her strong faith, inspired Toney to organize a program called Devoted, a fundraiser for victims of the earthquake in Haiti. “She tends to be the initiator of gatherings and events, but then sits back and enjoys the people,” Schneider said. “TaQuaesha doesn’t

need to be the center of attention. I enjoy her tenacity.”

As Toney relaxed in the coffee shop, she downed her water and began explaining her latest passion — fighting human trafficking.

“The laws in some states still allow it,” she said. “Isn’t that amazing? I want to raise awareness about the slave trade, so I’ll probably do some fundraising.”

“If she says she’ll do it, then she’ll get it done,” Schneider said. “When we first heard about the trafficking, she kept on our case about it... and in her sweet, soft-spoken manner, wouldn’t let it go.”

Toney, she said, is “administratively gifted.” She also sits on the board of the YSU Gospel Choir and serves as the group’s chaplain and computer programmer. And, of course, she sings with them — a significant time commitment in itself, since the choir rehearses every week and performs frequently across Ohio and Pennsylvania.

She’s beginning to be recognized for her achievements: in January 2009, Toney was one of three students to receive a YSU Diversity Award for Undergraduate Achievement.

Yet Toney modestly recognizes her shortcomings. “I’m a big procrastinator,” she said. “I’m trying to work on that this semester — but I do good work under pressure, so I might keep doing it a little. I like to think on the spot.”

Toney won a spot on ICF’s two-month mission to Ghana for summer 2010, and by spring was busy making preparations — learning some language basics, collecting friends’ e-mail addresses and trying to raise funds. She was planning to live with Ghanaian families, doing evangelistic work and helping with whatever tasks were needed to make life easier.

“I knew I would be volunteering this summer,” she said, “but I thought it would be in Youngstown — not in Africa!”

When Toney returned from that summer mission, she faced a task that promised to put that tendency to procrastinate to the final test. She hoped to finish her pre-med studies in about 18 months.

— *Mary Mihaly*

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