OSU-Cascades program helps high schoolers connect dots before college

By Sheila G. Miller / The Bulletin

Published: December 16, 2009 4:00AM PST

LA PINE - La Pine High senior Laura Jackson knew she wanted to go to college, but she wasn’t sure what she wanted to study or how to go about applying.

That’s where a new program called Connections to College came in. Now, thanks to the Oregon State University-Cascades Campus program, combined with the statewide ASPIRE program, Laura is preparing for college by filling out applications and learning more about scholarships.

“I felt lost,” the 17-year-old said. “If I didn’t have ASPIRE, I wouldn’t get it figured out.” Laura’s still not sure what to study, but she’s thinking about a future as an athletic trainer. The fact that Laura’s thinking about a future that involves postsecondary education is exactly what Connections to College Director Jacquie Coe likes to hear.

The program started with a $25,000 gift from Bend Research, with the goal of helping students prepare for a successful college experience. It’s up and running at La Pine and Crook County high schools, and about 22 students are participating in the program at the two schools.

“I’m a hometown Bend person, and there’s just so many kids I knew when I was in school or who I now know from my daughter’s era that just don’t make it to school,” said Bend Research President and CEO Rod Ray. “It’s just kind of an attempt to help them identify some higher-risk kids and get them in (college).”

School counselors invited students who they thought would benefit, and who had at least a 2.75 grade point average, to apply for the program. The majority of those involved would be the first in their families to attend college and were identified as students with potential but without much access to information about college.

Meeting once each month during the school day, the class centers on different topics, some of which have included paying for college, campus life, academic life and the college application.

The program started in March.

“We sort of picked based on schools that were interested but also that have the right population,” Coe said. “The students were chosen because they were students who have the grades and the potential, but maybe don’t have the background, the family situation or the money to make college happen.”

On Tuesday, eight students listened as Oregon Student Assistance Commission and ASPIRE regional program coordinator Becky Wilson discussed tips for finding scholarships and loans.

Wilson walked the students through the process of finding and applying for scholarships, then discussed what scholarship readers are looking for.

There were plenty of questions for Wilson throughout the presentation.
Some students wondered how detailed they should be in listing their activities, while others wondered whether it was OK to brag about their accomplishments.

“Be specific,” Wilson told them. “It tells a scholarship reader to really believe that you have a plan.”

“How many of you have finished your applications?” Coe asked at the end of Wilson’s talk. The students responded with laughter.

“Your homework for next month is to at least make a final decision about where you’re applying to,” Coe told them. “Start filling them out and start searching for scholarships.”

In January, the Connections to College team will help the students fill out their federal financial aid forms. They’ll also learn about student support services and the life of a college student.

“The ultimate goal would be for them to be successful at college,” Coe said. “Research shows kids like this can get into college, but we want them to stay and be successful.”

In that vein, Coe and the speakers try to demystify the situation. They explain everything from what a syllabus is to what a professor will expect from them.

The instructors also show them that there are resources for students once they’re on campus. During the past year, Connections to College took students on trips to Oregon State and Western Oregon universities, as well as OSU-Cascades and Central Oregon Community College. So far, the students agree that the best part of being involved with Connections to College was a trip to Corvallis to see OSU.

“We learned quite a bit,” said Kaylei Pratt, 17 and a senior.

Kaylei said she needed help because no one in her family has ever gone to college.

“They weren’t able to tell me what to do,” she said. Caleb Farmer, 17, said he had family members who had attended college but never finished. “I thought it would be really cool to learn more about colleges and scholarships,” said Caleb.

Some of the questions students ask, Coe said, prove how important the program is. “They’ve asked if, at college, you go to school all day,” she said. “There’s just things they don’t know.” Coe said she knows the program is working because of conversations she overhears among the students.

“After our trip to the Valley, on the bus ride home they were discussing the pros and cons of a small liberal arts school and a large public university,” she said. “When you hear them talking amongst themselves, to see them progress to that point, that’s great.”

Sheila G. Miller can be reached at 541-617-7831 or at smiller@bendbulletin.com.