Making the Case for College and Career Coaches

College and career readiness is an initiative getting a lot of attention of late as nearly every state tries to reduce college remediation rates and increase college completion rates.

Kentucky is no different having passed legislation in 2009 (Senate Bill 1) seeking to do just that.

But, to borrow a sports analogy, every good team must have a good coach and in the game of education, that means many coaches.

Thanks to the help of an AmeriCorps grant, Kentucky is in the second year of utilizing more than 40 “coaches” around the state that are helping countless students prepare themselves for their next step of education once they graduate from high school.

Gayle Hilleke, executive director of Kentucky Campus Compact, the agency that administered the grant, has overseen the use of the Kentucky college and career (KCC) coaches through three partnering agencies in the state. She said the program is modeled after the national Near Peer Mentoring program that brings recent college graduates together with high school students in order to help them make that transition from high school to college.

The Kentucky program, which places 40 KCC coaches around the state, has been made possible by a partnership with the Office of Career and Technical Education (OCTE), Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority (KHEAA), and the Berea GEAR UP program. The program is funded from the federal agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) through the state agency, the Kentucky Commission on Community Volunteerism and Service (KCCVS).

Shelby Co. ATC Career Coach Pam Lang helps students at the school find the college or career path that is best for them.

In the course of getting the project started, Hilleke realized a conversation needed to happen with career and technical education which led her to OCTE's Mary Stratton who serves the system as an area supervisor overseeing operations at 17 of the 53 schools that make up the agency.

Stratton said there are scores of students enrolled in CTE programs that have the ability to move up to the next level of education and that the KCC program has become a necessary component in getting students to that level.

"Many of our students have not been identified as college prep but they are as capable as anyone else," Stratton said. "They are just a different type of learner and are vital in meeting our college and career readiness goals. They just need someone to sit down one-on-one with them and get them to that first or second step."

The program is designed to work with a core group of students considered to be "not college bound." Seth Blakeslee, the KCC coach at Waggener High School in Louisville and former coach at Nelson County ATC, has worked the last two years with those types of students and said without someone to push them, a lot of them will take the easiest option, which does not include post-secondary education.

"I firmly believe that this program is critical for the postsecondary success of Kentucky students, especially at schools like Area Technology Centers. For many students, the Kentucky College Coach is the main resource and the only available one for information and help regarding postsecondary education" he said. "Availability to students is my first priority as a college coach."

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Mary Stratton
OCTE Area Supervisor

Blakeslee added that not only does he have the chance to work with students but their parents, as well.

Partnerships have proven to be a vital component of the KCC program, and OCTE has been unique in its involvement. Hilleke pointed out that this may be the only technical education system in the country to participate in such a program.

More importantly are the results and even though data is still being collected, with what information is known, the program has been a success so far.

“Even after the first year, we know that it is a powerful program. So our hope is that we will have a coach in every ATC and high school in Kentucky,” Hilleke said. “Some of the things we’ve found were that ACT scores were improved and a higher percentage of high school students graduated. The most significant outcome was the number of high school seniors who continued on to college. The core students involved in the KCC program went to college at a rate nine percent greater than the non-core students at the same schools. I think that schools that experience it, and have a really good coach, see what a dramatic difference it can make for their students, and I think as they are economically able they would support it.”

Blakeslee also has seen firsthand how successful the program has been. “Of my 15 current seniors, 14 have applied to college. Last year, at Nelson County ATC, I had over 70 percent of my core seniors attending some form of postsecondary education, including two-year colleges, four-year universities and apprenticeships,” he said.

Hilleke noted that as more data is collected, it will continue to fortify how valuable the program is and how important it is to fund it even in tough economic times.

She said the first year saw the largest grant in $907,000 but the second year fell to $146,000 and it has been the partners’ contributions of match money that has kept the program going.

Next year looks to be a challenge; if additional funds aren’t found, some schools could lose the KCC coach even though it has been critical to the advancement of participating high school students.

Stratton said OCTE has applied for an additional AmeriCorps grant to keep the program alive in that agency. She also emphasized that private funding from corporations would make a huge difference in sustaining the program.

“The funding keeps getting cut on the federal level. But the bang for the buck, when it comes to the results of this program, has shown it is tremendous,” she said.