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IPS goes for old college try

Pilot workshop guides Manual students through higher ed options

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Nancy Griffin was shy when the instructor first asked her to read the stream-of-consciousness essay she had just written about herself in the workshop.

But over the course of a morning session, coaches pulled personal information out of her and about 50 Manual High School students to provide fodder for college admissions essays.

"At first I didn't like it," Griffin said. "I don't like to talk about myself."

But by the time the four-day workshop for Manual juniors wrapped up Sunday, they came around. Called College Summit, it is the latest IPS experiment in trying to change the culture of the district and increase the number of its students who go on to college. If it pays off, the program will expand to other schools.

The Manual students spent the weekend living at the University of Indianapolis, filling out college applications, learning about financial aid and working with writing instructors to craft killer college essays.

In her first writing, Griffin wrote about her fiance and how tired she was. With a little bit of digging, though, the writing coach found out Griffin was tired because her mother was ill and she didn't want to lose her.

Stories like that make for the best college entrance essays, but students often don't know how to mine their lives for material on their own, say the organizers of College Summit. College Summit has set up partnerships with school districts in 10 states to work with teens in urban districts where few students attend college, such as Los Angeles, Denver and St. Louis. It boasts that about 80 percent of the students who attend the summer workshops go on to college.

Indianapolis Public Schools is working with College Summit and a local nonprofit, The Mind Trust, to bring the program here. Manual is a pilot site, but Superintendent Eugene White has said he wants to rapidly deploy the program through the rest of the district if it succeeds there.

Participants will continue to receive college counseling through College Summit's curriculum in special classes and sessions throughout their senior year. Coaches put the students in small groups and lead them through brainstorming and then asking their peers to narrow topics to the most interesting aspects of their lives.

"It's better than writing an essay at school," said Harold McRae, one of the Manual students. "I just don't like writing that much. Here we write about whatever we want." Many of the students didn't look forward to the writing, often a least favorite subject in school. College Summit works to break down that barrier so students can put their best foot forward to colleges.

"A lot of our students come to us with a lot of angst about writing," said Katie Hill, the writing coach for the Indianapolis workshop. "We're saying, 'Admissions officers just want to see who you are.' "

Students were selected from among those who will be seniors this year and have middle-of-the-pack grades.

Beyond writing skills, College Summit also connects the students with college counselors who create a plan for them and point out colleges they might not have thought about. A workshop shows students how to secure financial aid, and nightly rap sessions build confidence and rapport. The leaders aim to impress upon students that they can succeed at college if they want to.

"You see this incredible transformation process in the four days you're here," Hill said. The core mission, though, is those essays, so students can begin applying to colleges. Instructors start out having students put their pen to paper and write about themselves, with the caveat that they can't stop writing until the end of the time period.

Those pieces are read aloud, and other students call out things they found memorable or wanted to learn more about.

During the next few hours, students come to find themes in their lives that will interest others.

Caleb Longenberger, an Indianapolis engineer starting work at Deloitte Consulting, worked with a group of four students.

"I didn't have anybody in the room that was holding back," he said. "This (workshop) basically takes their ideas and puts structure to them."