

UMSL program shines path to college for 7 Vashon grads
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Their first brush with higher education came unexpectedly. High school students one week, in late January they were transformed into scholastic hybrids who spent half of each day on a genuine college campus.

The decision to enroll seniors at Vashon High School in college-level courses at the University of Missouri at St. Louis is now paying dividends. This summer, UMSL invited 13 of those 45 students - who completed courses in anthropology, sociology and college readiness - to become full-time students in the Class of 2010.

Seven accepted that invitation, and on Monday, they reported to the campus for the start of their freshman year.

To put the numbers in context, six years ago, only nine out of nearly 300 Vashon seniors were accepted by two- or four-year colleges. In 2003 and again in 2004, only 21 were accepted. This year, the UMSL program combined with other efforts are being credited with 81 Vashon graduates receiving acceptance letters.

One of the new UMSL freshmen, Shanteria Mooney, said she was aware of the benefits of higher education but still wasn't sure what college entailed when former St. Louis Public Schools Superintendent Creg Williams gave Vashon students with a "C" or better grade-point average the option of attending UMSL.

"It was my senior year, and I knew I wanted to go to college," said Mooney, as of Monday a criminology major. "But I had no clue what college was like. I wanted to at least get a preview before the movie."

On Jan. 17 - days after Williams announced he was moving a significant portion of the graduating class out of a building troubled by violence and poor test scores - Mooney joined the 64 other seniors who had qualified to spend the morning at UMSL before returning by bus to Vashon in the afternoon. At the end of the semester, 45 remained.

Through its work with College Summit, a program that promotes the benefits of higher education to underachieving and underserved students, UMSL officials understood how to proceed when the Vashon contingent showed up in January.

"We wanted to give the students an opportunity to explore what they can do," said Curt Coonrod, UMSL's vice provost of student affairs. "There are a lot of opportunities out there, and we needed to make sure we provided the students with all the resources that were available to them."

The first lesson, though, occurred outside the confines of the classroom. Accustomed to entire school days spent indoors, the Vashon students reported to UMSL on a late January morning dressed in thin jackets and their school uniforms - short-sleeved polo shirts.

Forced to walk outdoors between classes, said Chinera Meeks, "We found out that this is what college is all about."

Soon, Meeks - who enrolled this week as a business administration major - and the others learned the ways college entailed far more than frigid jaunts between classroom buildings.

"Being on campus itself was a welcoming experience for them," said Carl Williams, an UMSL student development coordinator. "It dispelled a lot of myths in their minds that they weren't able to do it."

Carl Williams worked closely with the Vashon students and will continue to monitor the progress of the graduates returning to campus this fall.

Chinera Meeks said a college preparatory class during her freshman year at another high school had convinced her of the importance of continuing her education beyond the 12th grade. When she is on campus this fall, she will be joined by the role model she credits with keeping her pointed toward that goal after Chinera became a mother at the age of 15 - her own mother, Idrissa Meeks, who is in her second year of classes at the school.

As UMSL celebrates the success of the program, the forced resignation of Creg Williams in July has cast the future of its alliance with Vashon in doubt.

"If you know someone who graduated and went to college from the year before you, then you might be more likely to apply to college yourself," said UMSL Provost Glen Cope. "It's the kind of snowballing we'd like to see."

Said Coonrod: "It has been very heartwarming to see these students clearly understand there are possibilities they may never have thought of. It has given them confidence to explore some opportunities they haven't had in the past."

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