



Pathway Newsletter



Avenue Scholars Celebrates Its 15th Anniversary

"Avenue Scholars, the leader in bridging the gap between education and business, guarantees careers for our youth of hope and need through supportive relationships, individualized coaching, education, and training."

This mission statement reflects the focus and the adaptations Avenue Scholars has made over its 15-year history of serving students of hope and need in the greater Omaha community.

Some of those adaptations can be seen in the changes from the 2010 mission statement, which read: "Our mission is to provide an avenue of success for Omaha area students of talent and need by offering comprehensive support from high school through community college or university graduation, leading to enhanced lives and careers."

Lindsay Decker, Director of Communications & Development, says the organization wants Omaha and other communities to see that

Avenue Scholars is a proven model for connecting young people to careers.

"In 2021, Avenue Scholars went through a strategic planning process where we collaborated with alumni, education partners, as well as business and community partners on several initiatives. One of the outcomes from that process was updating our mission statement to best reflect the way our work is seen within the community," Decker said. "Our new mission statement was intentionally designed to be lofty. We wanted to challenge our organization towards high quality service to students and high quality relationship building when it comes to our partners. Now that we're 15 years old, we know that those two ingredients are essential to connecting our students to the opportunities that help them achieve a fulfilling career."

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Avenue Scholars

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Avenue Scholars 15th Anniversary cont.

Avenue Scholars was first conceived during the 2007-2008 school year when the late philanthropist Walter Scott Jr. contacted Dr. Ken Bird, who was in the midst of retiring from his career as superintendent of Westside Community Schools.

“Walter and I were the founding board members,” says Dr. Bird, Avenue Scholars President/CEO. “Walter had contacted me about starting a project to initiate a scholarship program like the The Kalamazoo Promise program in Michigan, where kids got scholarships from the private sector to attend a two or four-year college.”

Dr. Bird, after being given time to gather his own “thoughts and ideas,” came back to Scott with a plan to identify “underserved kids,” high school graduates who were most at risk and get them into a four-year college at the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO). It began as sort of a “street school project.” That initial startup did not last long, as Scott and Bird realized they “were starting too late” in young people’s lives. For the first year, they recruited students while they were still in high school at Omaha Benson and Ralston. The pilot program lasted about one-year, with the goal of sending students to UNO with scholarships. Then they realized that a number of other organizations were already involved in providing scholarships for students to attend UNO, but “there was not a lot going on at Metropolitan Community College (MCC).” Thus, Avenue Scholars switched from a four-year college focus to a two-year college focus for the next four years.

A few years later, another proverbial “light bulb” signaled another adaptation.

“We were looking at the data that showed we had about 200 kids at MCC enrolled in General Studies and thought ‘What are they going to do with that? That’s not a career path,’” Dr. Bird said. “That’s where we switched to a career-centric focus on the five highest needed careers in the community: health services, information technology, auto and diesel, trades and construction, and business. This program focus has been fairly stable.”

This ability to adapt to the changes in the community’s workforce needs has allowed Avenue Scholars to grow and expand its services. From five schools and 25 students, the organization now serves 11 high schools and 700 students on average.

“Our focus changed from students getting four-year degrees to associate degrees,” Dr. Bird said. “Now we’re defining success as finding a career path, a job with upward mobility that can be obtained with a certificate or associate degree.”

Avenue Scholars has evolved in step with an evolving workforce.

"The evolution has been interesting to watch over the 15 years," Dr. Bird said. "The data shows young people are more focused on entering the workforce earlier, without the debt incurred getting a four-year college degree. One can get a CNA certificate coming out of high school, or an associate degree out of community college and be debt-free."

"There's been a whole shift on needs in the community, and Avenue Scholars is riding that wave. It's been really good timing for us. We've been nimble, able to adjust to community needs and workforce demands."

Despite the slow start, the program now reflects the vision community leaders envisioned 15 years ago.

"Looking back, it's interesting that the original plan had all these components in it," Dr. Bird said. "Beginning in March of 2008, we had a large planning group of about 40 people that built a business plan that was remarkably on target. The dream laid out of what this program would become — in terms of staff and organization — was remarkably close to where we are now."

Decker says Avenue Scholars has built strong bridges connecting students to business partners in the community.

"We consider ourselves a 'bridge' in a lot of instances," she said. "Bridges symbolize strength, transition, and change. Beyond that, bridges are stable enough to help provide someone a safe place to cross — that's been our impact. Over the last 15 years we've refined various programs and made small changes here and there, but overall, our impact remains consistent. We take our jobs seriously and work hard in providing access for young people to feel confident in a job that lays a foundation for a career."

The "we" in Avenue Scholars involves several components: an administrative team of 12 individuals, 11 High School Career Coaches, six Postsecondary Career Coaches, a three-person Business Outreach Team, and a Student Support Coordinator. All staff members work closely to achieve the organization's mission.

"I think what helps each team reach the ultimate goals of the organization is that every team is clear on their purpose and their strengths. High School Career Coaches are strong at helping a student explore a career and develop key soft skills to help them gain entry to a particular field," Decker said. "Postsecondary Career Coaches are talented in making sure students feel supported post-high school while they navigate what it means to become a young professional. The Business Outreach Team is skilled in developing business partnerships for students to utilize in their personal networks, while providing them meaningful workplace experiences. Our Student Support staff helps identify and eliminate any social or emotional barriers that a student might be experiencing along the way that can affect their journey

in the program. Finally, I think our job from an Administration team standpoint is to make sure, operationally, everyone has what they need to carry out their responsibilities when it comes to serving students."

Another important component of the organization from the start is the Board of Directors, beginning with Walter Scott Jr. The current chair is Susie Buffett. Other board members are Jeff Schmid, Calvin Sisson, and Dr. Katie Weitz.

"The board is our conscience and our advocates in the community," Dr. Bird said. "Susie's leadership is a great benefit to us, and Walter provided a great foundation to work from. It [the board] has always been rock solid and critical to our success."

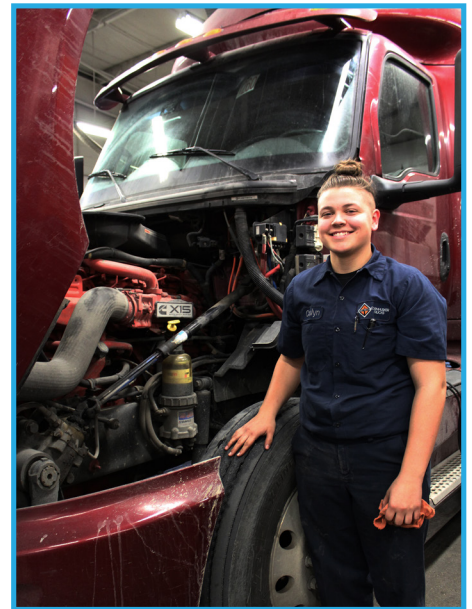
Decker and Dr. Bird are proud of Avenue Scholars' expansion to programs in Southwest Iowa and Des Moines, as well as its Intern Omaha program. The ultimate success for everyone involved with Avenue Scholars is seen in the students who discover their career paths through the program.

"The reality is every time I hear another success story of a student buying their own house, starting their own company, or getting an advancement in their career — that's what we're all about," Dr. Bird said. "The success we've had with the students we serve brings me great pride. And our staff has really had a positive impact on employment in meeting the workforce needs of the community. I think we're really making a difference."

The future of Avenue Scholars is built on solid ground.

"It's a proven model now," Dr. Bird said. "We've stood the test of time. A good organization has to be willing to make adjustments. We've show we can do that. The next 15 years will be about capacity building. The future is in the hands of the consumers — businesses, educators, governments will need to step up to invest more and come up with the funding."





Scholar Finds Her Niche in Diesel Mechanics

Caslyn Peters, a Papillion La Vista senior, has never taken her experience in the Avenue Scholars program for granted. With that mindset and the motivation instilled in Peters through the Avenue Scholars program and work opportunities through Intern Omaha, she has found her niche — for now — as a diesel mechanic at Cornhusker International.

"Don't take the program for granted," Peters says. "Too many do. You can get a lot of knowledge and resources from it."

Scholars who fulfill all the obligations of the Avenue Scholars program are rewarded with a grant of up to \$8,000 to attend Metropolitan Community College (MCC). One expectation of the program is that students apply for an internship through Avenue Scholars' Intern Omaha program. Originally, Peters was looking to find work in the auto industry.

"I got talked into trying this diesel stuff," Peters said. "When I toured [Cornhusker International], I liked what I saw. It was the only [internship] I applied to."

Peters started working at Cornhusker International last June. When Peters' summer internship ended, the company elected to continue her employment.

"We're under no obligation to extend their employment, but if the student is working out, we want to keep them on board," says Service Manager Brad Dickey.

Peters aims to become a full-time service technician. She likes engine work the most. However, interns are required to learn all facets of the work in the diesel service department.

"Technician is a broad, general term here," Dickey said. "There are a lot of moving components. It takes all types [of technicians] to make the shop go around. We have 22 laptops, using 10 different programs out there. A technician has to be computer savvy. It takes a while to figure out specifically what you want to do. Caslyn likes to do the engine work and get her hands dirty, but everyone needs to start at the bottom and build on the foundation."

This summer, while still working at Cornhusker International, Peters will start her postsecondary education at MCC, where she plans to obtain an associate degree in Heavy Equipment and Diesel Technology. In two years, with diploma in hand, Peters plans to continue employment at Cornhusker International.

"I hope to stay here and do more training, then see where that takes me," she said. "I'm down to trying about anything. I like the people here a lot, and I've learned a lot about trucks. I have worked a lot of other places, and it's usually the people I stay for."

Peters is excited about her future. Dickey says there is a good reason for that optimism.

"It's a good way to make a living," he said. "It's not easy and it's not for everybody, but it's a good career path with lots of opportunities. What Caslyn brings to the table is that she's a little more driven than some other interns. We reward her for that drive."

Daejon Carson's Drive to Help His Community

Daejon Carson's drive, imagination, and resiliency were all displayed in an unusual way as he prepared for an interview that would lead to his present job at E&A Consulting.

As Jessi Hedlund, Avenue Scholars Career Program Manager, recalls, Carson realized as he was heading out for the interview that he did not know how to tie his necktie, and it was too late to stop at Avenue Scholars to get assistance.

As Carson was driving to E&A Consulting, he spotted a car dealership next door to his destination.

"He just walked right into the dealership and asked the salesmen if they could help him with his tie," Hedlund said. "They did, and he got the job. It's really a good story that demonstrates Daejon's confidence and resiliency."

Carson, who graduated in December from Omaha Northwest High School, started his part-time job at E&A Consulting on March 13. According to its website, "E&A is an engineering, planning, environmental and field services firm with offices in Omaha and Lincoln." Although Avenue Scholars provided an initial opportunity to explore the field, Carson took the initiative to land the job on his own.

"Avenue Scholars put me through a construction site layout class, and through my instructor I learned about different companies to work for, and I just started applying," Carson said. "They [E&A] are the ones who reached out to me and came to my class. I ended up working there."

Carson is enrolled at Metropolitan Community College (MCC), where he plans to obtain an associate's degree in Civil Engineering. Why Civil Engineering?

"I was attracted to the different technology — the mental challenge to it," Carson says. "I like to figure stuff out."

He is currently working 15 hours per week at E&A and 15 hours per week at Kentucky Fried Chicken. This summer he hopes to be working full-time at E&A Consulting.

Carson is confident when it comes to envisioning his future, and Civil Engineering may be a temporary side trip on his journey.

"I have always wanted to be a fireman," he said. "I changed my course or focus, but I still want to be a fireman some day. For now, I wanted something I could get into right away."



In addition to his part-time jobs and school, Carson is working on getting his Emergency Medical Technician's license, a requirement of becoming a firefighter. Whether employed as a civil engineer or as a fireman, Carson wants to contribute to his community.

"I want to stay in the community," he said. "I have a passion for helping people. That makes sense to me."

Carson appreciates that Avenue Scholars "opened up opportunities" and "kept me on track."



Mock Interviews Prepare High School Students for Success

Finding a path to a meaningful career is the ultimate goal of Avenue Scholars students. Before stepping foot on that path, every Scholar must be prepared. That preparedness is a crucial goal for Avenue Scholars Coaches and the Business Outreach Team.

In February the Business Outreach Team conducted mock interview sessions at all 11 Avenue Scholars-affiliated high schools.

"The mock interviews came out of a phase recruitment process the Business Outreach Team developed to prepare our Avenue Scholars to apply for and ultimately have success within the Intern Omaha program," said Jessi Hedlund, Career Program Manager. "Historically, we have given them all the information in one big chunk, which is a lot to process. We decided to break it out into little phases."

In Phase 1 Scholars receive an overview of Avenue Scholars' Intern Omaha program and the benefits of an internship over just a regular job, which doesn't provide academic credit. In Phase 2 students learn how to prepare resumes and other professional documents. In Phase 3 students learn about networking and how to get prepared for the Intern Omaha Expo, where Scholars have the opportunity to meet a variety of business partners. In addition, students are taught how to analyze job descriptions and to consider how their skills match up with the descriptions for jobs they are interested in pursuing.

Interviewing is not usually a skill that teenagers already have in their toolbox.

"We want them to feel confident and comfortable going into the [Intern Omaha] application portal and interviewing with various businesses," Hedlund said.

To conduct the sessions, the Business Outreach Team had to set up 75 volunteer interviewer slots, which were filled by Avenue Scholars staff, board members, community members, and business partners.

"We thought it was very beneficial to pull them [businesses] into the schools to see students in their space," Hedlund said.

During the mock interview sessions, each student met with a volunteer interviewer for 20 minutes — 15 minutes of interviewing plus five minutes for feedback. Each interviewer was given a list of questions and a scoring rubric.

Hedlund believes the sessions were very successful.

"The coaches did a great job preparing the students," she said. "They made sure students knew they had to be 'dressed for success' and that they had their resumes ready. Coaches made sure students practiced with each other, using the same list of questions and rubrics the volunteers had."

Hedlund is confident the students enjoyed the sessions.

"Audrey Gustin, (Business Relations Manager and Department Head) was in the room with the business partners, and I was in the waiting room with students who appeared to be dreading the experience," she said. "I don't think I saw one kid come back without a smile on their face. The most common quote I heard was 'that wasn't bad at all.'"

High School Career Coaches believe the experience was beneficial.

"The mock interview events we hosted in the high schools provided students a more realistic 'high stakes' environment for them to practice the skills we had worked on in our classrooms. By providing an audience of professionals from the community, it allowed students the opportunity to truly rise to the occasion by preparing polished resumes, arriving in professional attire, and bringing their best, most prepared

selves," said Ashley Knott, High School Career Coach and Department Head. "They were able to receive authentic, real-time feedback on areas in which they were strong and those they could improve upon, and most all students exited the room beaming with confidence about the skills they had just demonstrated. While many received constructive criticism, the most significant impact was the way in which many students suddenly felt prepared for something that had previously seemed overwhelming. The combination of the Intern Omaha Expo, the classroom preparation, and the mock interviews undoubtedly helped my students to feel more comfortable about their Intern Omaha interview and other interviews."

The Intern Omaha application portal opened in February, with 69 individual internship positions available. According to Hedlund, 112 students submitted 220 applications.



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