



# Pathway Newsletter



## Avenue Scholars Uses Metrics to Show the Impact it Makes By Bridging Education and Employment

Leave it to Avenue Scholars President/CEO Dr. Ken Bird to find just the right description of the program's 15th anniversary year.

"It was a whirlwind," he said, reflecting on 2023. "From programmatic accomplishments, to some organizational restructuring, to staff leadership changes, to a phased office move, it was a dynamic year. I am calling it our 'Avenue Scholars 2.0 Reboot' because we got our feet under us in our 15th year and brought a renewed focus on metrics that's going to make us better at what we do."

Unlike nonprofits that struggle measuring outcomes beyond head counts, the program was launched in 2008 and can tangibly demonstrate its impact on the young people it serves and the workforce it feeds.

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## Student Support Team Meets Scholars Where They're At, Helping Them Move Forward Along the Way

Avenue Scholars provides consistent, compassionate, tough-love and layered support to the students it serves. The work of the Student Support Staff in that continuum of care is about "clearing out barriers that threaten getting in the way of students making their path forward to success," said Student Support Manager Ashley Knott.

"It could be personal life issues, financial, housing, food insecurity, mental health," added Knott. "Anything that might take their mind off of work or school. We provide resources to get students connected to entities in the community that can help."

Most referrals come from Avenue Scholars Career Coaches. "Students see [their Avenue Scholars Career Coach] as their point person, so that tends to be where the strongest relationship is," said Knott, a former Avenue Scholars Career Coach herself. "We ask students to communicate what's going on because the last thing we want is for them to be truant from school or not show up to work and lose their job."

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Avenue Scholars

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Internship Program Produces Another Shining Light in Andrea Cook

Avenue Scholars Interns Gives Students Real-Life Work Experiences

Omaha Northwest senior Andrea Cook is among 49 Avenue Scholars students in the AS Internship Program cohort. A home culinarian who aspires to be a professional chef, she gets a farm-to-table education as City Sprouts’ Education Intern.

Avenue Scholars students are strongly encouraged to pursue an internship, said Intern & Employment Coordinator Shaney Schaefer. “It helps students gain education and experience on the way to hopefully forming a successful lifetime career. It can enhance a student’s resume when they apply for full-time jobs.”

Andrea, 17, began her year-long paid internship in June. She appreciates “learning how to be sustainable,” she said, “because I want to grow and make things myself.” City Sprouts’ Education Manager Kaylee Reynolds is able to plug Andrea into relevant activities.

“Andrea helps me implement after-school programs we do at middle schools. We take care of the garden beds and teach classes. Those classes are all about nutrition, cooking, gardening, really the whole cycle of our food, and since Andrea has expressed interest in those things, we definitely

include her in the process. She’s always coming up with recipes and ideas. I may have her teach some classes herself.”

Reynolds is impressed with Andrea’s sustainable focus. “She wants this to be something she takes home with her and carries forward into her future.”

Andrea came to City Sprouts through the Avenue Scholars phased recruitment process. Students apply for internships during their junior year. If selected, they begin interning the following summer and continue through senior year.

“In October, juniors are briefed about the difference between a job and an internship,” said Schaefer. “They learn about the benefits of an internship and what they could be doing to prepare for one.”

Phase two in November to December finds Schaefer visiting classrooms to cover transferable skills, hard versus soft skills, and the importance of community volunteer and school activities on resumes. The third phase, in January, covers what students should do to be successful at the Avenue Scholars Intern Expo at the end of that month.

“We try to make sure students understand what dressing professionally looks like. In our internship portal, students familiarize themselves with the participating businesses and organizations and the internship opportunities offered.”

Business partners range across the six industry categories Avenue Scholars supports. On average, 25 to 30 businesses offer Avenue Scholars internships. Schaefer hopes for 40 participants in the next cohort.

“We help each student craft an elevator pitch about who they are, what they’ve done, and where they would like to go [so that we can help them] highlight their qualities, experiences and interests. We share interview tips and do mock interviews.”

The final phase is applying for internships after the Expo.

Given Andrea’s foodie disposition – she makes savory meals, she bakes, she garnishes, and avows “love of nature and gardening.” City Sprouts was the right fit. Her Avenue Scholars Career Coach Vanessa Collins said the internship helps Andrea combine her passions of “working with children and working in the kitchen.”

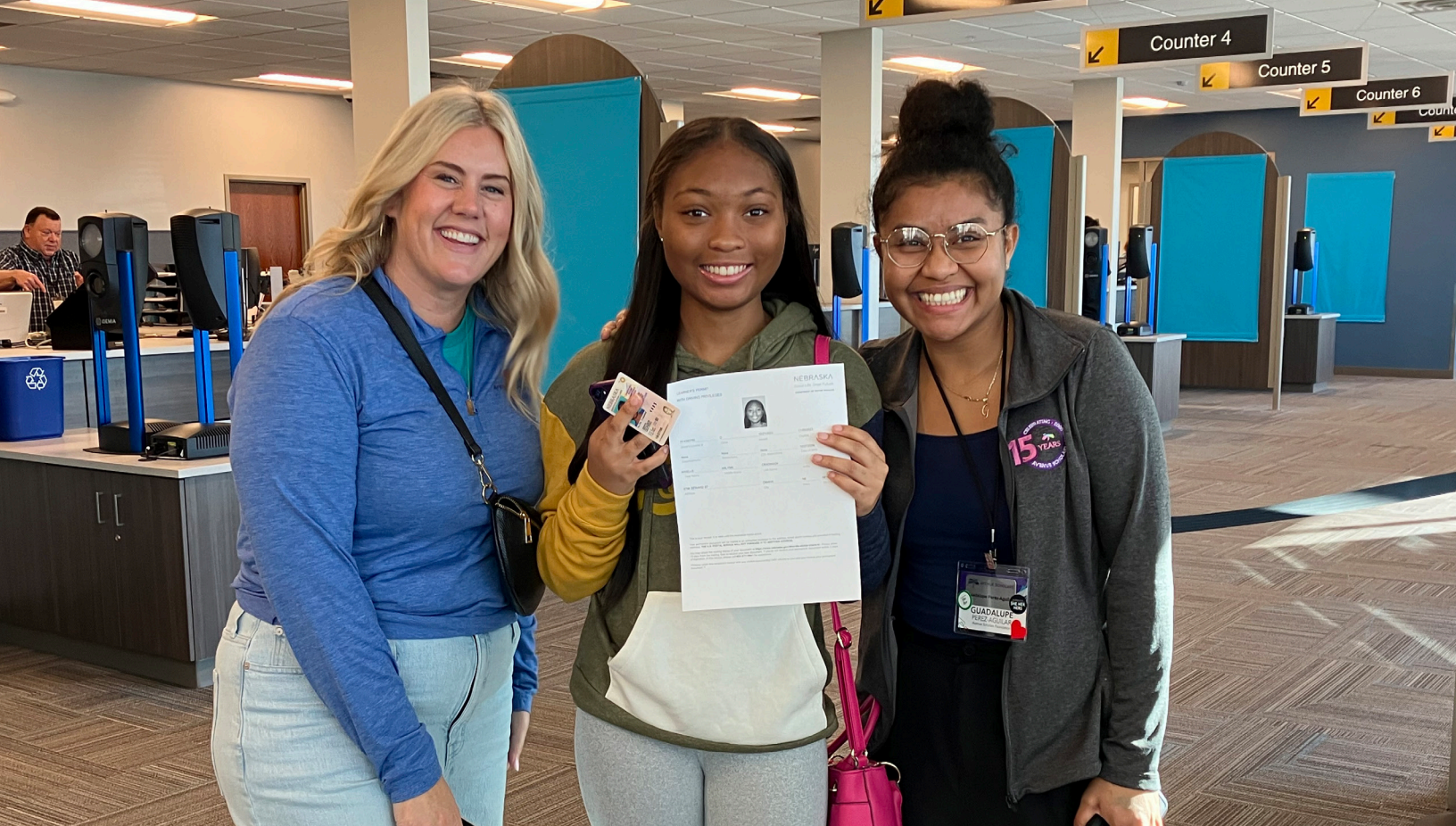
Andrea wants to attend Metropolitan Community College’s (MCC) Institute for Culinary Arts. City Sprouts helps her grow her urban farming skills in the meantime.

City Sprouts Executive Director Marissa Jensen said interning at a nonprofit like hers “shows young people how you can combine a love for what you do with a career and it lets you work across different departments, doing different things.”

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## Student Support Team Meets Scholars Where They're At, Helping Them Move Forward Along the Way, cont.

As unforeseen situations, even crises, arise, Avenue Scholars responds. Recently, Knott responded to a student who divulged being kicked out of their home and spending nights in a car. Knott met with the student to find out what was going on at home, had them fill out an application for Youth Emergency Services, shared gas cards, and secured a safe place to stay. She also connected with the Scholar's family and school.

Sometimes students report an issue their family is facing and ask Avenue Scholars to intervene.

Avenue Scholars proactively has students complete a needs-based assessment upon entering the program.

"It asks about their home situation — is it safe, stable, do you feel supported, is there a need for an interpreter, do you have mental health or financial needs, do you need to get a driver's permit or license?" Knott said.

"From that inventory we identify any red flag situations. Very intentional, strategic support is built into the program. We

have safety nets to catch you if you're struggling."

Knott and Student Support Assistant Guadalupe (Lupe) Perez-Aguilar divide the 11 schools Avenue Scholars serves. They make presentations at the beginning of the school year to inform incoming juniors about support services, make monthly school visits to teach life skills classes, and meet individually with students.

"When I do that presentation junior year I always tell them, 'Save my number because you will need me at some point,'" said Perez-Aguilar. "Student Support is the only element of the program that follows students from 11th grade through postsecondary graduation. That could be three to six years. It's neat to see the changes in the students."

During senior year, the support team conducts classes on perennial subjects, Knott said. "A big one is students considering moving out on their own after high school and what they need to be thinking about or doing to prepare for that. We cover how you build credit, how much income you

need to make to qualify for an apartment, and the need for a co-signer."

Students are told of the partnership Avenue Scholars has with the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) that enables some Scholars to live in UNO dorms while attending MCC.

"We discuss car insurance and ownership and the difference between comprehensive and liability insurance. We try to equip students with basic life information before they enter the real world. It's not to say all of them don't know it, but many have parents or guardians working a significant number of hours or maybe still navigating the system themselves," said Knott.

The Student Support staff addresses any issues or questions Career Coaches report their Scholars are struggling with — everything from procrastination and time management to coping skills.

Avenue Scholars defers and refers where appropriate.

"We are really trying to lean heavily on the systems in which we're serving students and to develop even more interwoven relationships with the schools in order to leverage what's out there," said Knott. "The goal is to work in tandem as much as possible rather than working in silos."

"We try to help students recognize how many community agencies and supportive networks there are available. At some point they'll transition out of Avenue Scholars, but if we help expose them to a variety of community resources they will forever have access to, then we've done our job connecting them to services they may need down the road."

Perez-Aguilar coordinates driver's education training with the National Safety Council and Cornhusker Driving School, and a "DMV Day" with the Douglas County Department of Motor Vehicles.

Avenue Scholars works with automotive partners students can go to for car repairs at a discounted rate. The same for immigration legal services.

"Lupe is an incredible relationship connector and maker," said Knott.

The Avenue Scholars Savings Program helps students in the market for a vehicle or independent housing.

"We provide education and incentivize saving to give them more of a barrier-free pathway," Knott said. "On the auto side, if students save up to \$3,000, Avenue Scholars will match that

towards the purchase of a car. On the housing side, if they save \$750, we'll match that towards the first month's rent and deposit."

To qualify for the savings match, students must consistently hold employment, have a driver's license, insurance, registration, have the ability to save, and be in good standing with the Avenue Scholars program. Qualifying students are taught financial literacy and given coaching, and must report their monthly savings and bank statements and discuss how their budgeting went.

Perez-Aguilar said she and Knott's work is not just about supporting students, it's supporting the High School and Postsecondary Career Coaches and College Success Navigators assigned to them.

"It's really important that schools know who we are and we know who they are," Perez-Aguilar said.

Student Support impresses upon students that students don't have to experience life-school-work challenges alone because support resources walk alongside them through it all.

According to Perez-Aguilar, "It's crucial they feel trust and care. By forming genuine relationships with them, they're able to ask for help without feeling a certain way. We want to make sure they feel comfortable contacting us when they need something or have questions. It's part of letting them know they can count on us."

In a program all about meeting students where they're at, Knott and Perez-Aguilar convene with students at schools twice a month, or more if needed. The Avenue Scholars intrusive care model is non-negotiable.

"Something I tell students is, 'We're going to be in your business. Our job is to hold you accountable and provide you the support you need to get where you want to be,'" said Knott.

The idea is to help students become independent. "I see our team as a vehicle of support for Scholar resilience," said Knott. "My belief is that by helping these young people see they are more resourceful, equipped and resilient than they know, they will carry that forward to their future endeavors."

"My goal is to continue growing our list of resources and contacts to best support the young people we serve and to build a positive, engaged, cohesive, well-trained team that is consistently collaborative and honors the voices and viewpoints of all team members."



## Internship Program Produces Another Shining Light in Andreyana Cook, cont.

Besides being a “very eye-opening” experience, Andrea said she likes that “nonprofits care for the people they serve and have connections with them.”

“It’s a way to give back to the community.”

Andreyana stood out from applicants with her passion and eagerness to try new things. She hasn’t disappointed.

“She’s completely blown me away,” Reynolds said. “She’s a very autonomous worker. She comes in, I check in with her, tell her an idea of what I might want done, and she goes above and beyond to do things I don’t even think of or ask for. She’s very organized. She’s also such a bright spirit to have in the office.”

“I feel like initiative is one of the hardest things to teach and to mold,” Jensen said, “but she has it and that is going to serve her very well in the future. She’s very well-respected among the staff. She fits here wonderfully. She’s passionate about all the things we do. But it’s the work ethic, compassion, eagerness and intelligence she brings that sets her apart.”

Interns like Andreyana, said Schaefer, “get to learn from experts, get to practice skills and get immediate feedback,” adding, “There’s someone there guiding and helping them learn from their mistakes.”

City Sprouts is a nurturing experience for Andreyana. “I love the environment. They encourage me. They make sure I’m getting the most out of this internship. They’re always very helpful. It’s a safe space for me.”

Once selected for an internship, students attend mandatory orientations.

“We go through expectations, share a timeline and to-do list, and have them sign a student commitment form,” said Schaefer. “During the course of the internship, we do check-ins with the student, their Career Coach, and their immediate work supervisor, as well as quarterly performance evaluations. It’s important for students to get feedback on what they’re doing well, what they could improve on. We want them to show responsibility and accountability and put some effort into investing in themselves.”



Schaefer said 85 to 90 percent of Avenue Scholars interns successfully complete their internship.

City Sprouts has seen Andreyana grow from timid to assertive. “She started her employment a bit soft-spoken, and quickly found her voice here,” said Communications & Development Manager Emily Ramelb. “She is determined and empathetic in ways that will bring her far in her career and life.”

“Andreyana is our intern, but really she’s just another member of our team,” Reynolds said. “She’s at every staff meeting. We’re all bouncing ideas off of her. She jumps in and helps with everything.”

Andreyana agrees that she’s driven. “If I want something done or if I strive to get some place, I’ll get there no matter what because I won’t give up. I feel like giving up is just giving up on yourself basically. If you don’t have faith in yourself, then who will?”

Schaefer said internships provide multiple benefits, including learning work-life balance.

“They provide an advantage in identifying and preparing for a career, along with learning and networking opportunities. It gets your foot in the door and gives real-world exposure to an industry you’re interested in.”

Andreyana has found her calling doing community-based work around growing, prepping, and teaching about healthy foods.

“I love seeing people from the community come to events we have here. It’s heartwarming. I like the connections I make with people. I like working outside and doing hands-on things – also the aspect of making sure everybody in the community is good. It lets me see the kind of environment I want to be in.”

## Avenue Scholars Uses Metrics to Show the Impact it Makes By Bridging Education and Employment, cont.

“A lot of programs take credit for graduation rates and maybe that’s a valuable measure but for us that’s just one measure. The next measure is what young people do after graduation, the training they get, and [their] careers in the community.”

“As we look at Avenue Scholars from an accountability standpoint, we’re uniquely positioned to be able to document our outcomes – the performance of our organization. We have hard data around young people and their achievements in the community. We need to recognize and celebrate that, and hold ourselves accountable and ask the community to hold us accountable. At the same time, we need to ask the community to support us because of what we do.”

Being an intrusive support in the lives of young people of hope and need is not always a straight line proposition. As life happens, there can be detours, setbacks and resets. But Avenue Scholars is always there.

“Explaining what we do over time is hard,” Bird said. “Yes, we would like more kids who enter our program in high school to finish it five, six years later. But these are complex, young people facing challenging circumstances. We’re proud of the difference we’ve made but are always seeking to get better.”

Even with the challenges and shortfalls, he said, “2023 marked Avenue Scholars legitimately claiming a leadership role in helping develop the future workforce for our community. Data shows, for example, we’ve had 459 students work in the healthcare sector. We moved 134 of them into active healthcare jobs in the community and their average wage is in excess of \$18 an hour. Additionally, they earned 503 associate degrees and certifications from our training and support program partners.”

Quantifying real-life, real-world impact sets Avenue Scholars apart.

“To be able to demonstrate those outputs and contributions to our community is really significant. I think that’s a hallmark of this year. Our intention is to be transparent and to help the community realize the great work Avenue Scholars is doing to build the future workforce for the greater Omaha area.”

What allows Avenue Scholars to track that impact is the through line that it maintains with young people even after they graduate high school and complete postsecondary training. Instead of leaving young people, Avenue Scholars stays with them through those transition points by serving as the bridge between education and employment.

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## Avenue Scholars Uses Metrics to Show the Impact it Makes By Bridging Education and Employment, cont.

"We want to retain more and have more successfully achieve alumni status, and we'll do that through transparency and accountability. At the same time, we want the community to know that Avenue Scholars is having a great impact in the segments we're working in. I think there's a quid pro quo. We want to be the nonprofit that employers look to help develop the workforce, and we want and need their support to do that."

The more Avenue Scholars tells its story and demonstrates its effectiveness, he said, more support should follow.

With Avenue Scholars documenting its success, he said, "Interest by the education and the business communities is at an all-time high in this kind of work-based learning model aligned with community needs. The key element is that we're a continuum of service, not episodic or situational. Never forgetting that the population we serve has the highest level of financial and personal needs in our community. We're really trying to impact that group as no one else has."

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