



Pathway Newsletter



Avenue Scholars Logo Evolution Symbolizes Journey to Success

Boot Camps Offer Students Immersive, Intensive Glimpses at Different Industries

Since starting the Boot Camp program in 2021 in collaboration with community business partners and Metro Community College (MCC), Avenue Scholars (AS) has supported hundreds of students in intensive, immersive career exploration experiences.

Held over four weeks in June, Boot Camps offer an intimate look at what's involved in various careers. The latest round saw student cohorts explore IT, business, construction/trades, auto/diesel/transportation and mental health/human services, respectfully. Of the 74 registered students, all but one completed the program. Each camp featured industry experts, and site visits. Scholars also practiced their soft and hard skills.

AS Senior Director of Programs, Dr. Lisa Sterba, says it's all about exposing students to the ins and outs of careers.

"It's an opportunity to see what piques their interest. It's an opportunity to make connections. The Boot Camps not only give students information to make informed decisions but provide contacts they can leverage as they navigate their future. Students get to hear professionals in these fields share stories of their own career paths."

Story continues on page 6.

Avenue Scholars has continually adapted to student, community, and employer needs, and career-focused educational best practices. Recently, the symbol that illustrates the organization's name has undergone refinement, too.

From the start, President/CEO Dr. Ken Bird says, "the intent for the Avenue Scholars logo is to use a road sign as a metaphor and suggest students can take different routes and explore new directions along a road or avenue as they look for the career that best fits their interests." Subtle new changes have brought the logo into sharper focus to better convey the idea of a career journey with many avenues leading to a successful professional destination.

Story continues on page 8.

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Scholar Graduate Ajana Jones Following Granddad's Legacy as Chef

Ajana Jones has always dreamed of becoming a professional chef. She's now realizing that dream as a Metropolitan Community College Institute for the Culinary Arts graduate. She works as a pastry chef at the Omaha Marriott Downtown at the Capitol District, and in hospitality for Omaha Performing Arts at the newly opened Steelhouse Omaha music venue, opportunities that came through her participation in Avenue Scholars.

Part of the inspiration for her long-held goal came from watching family elders prepare favorite meals in the kitchen. Part of it was practical. When her mom was in the hospital after delivering her twin brothers, her distracted father burned dinner at home. As a seven-year-old, she took it upon herself to learn cooking basics. Then she announced her intention of one day becoming a chef and found an unexpected champion in her late maternal grandfather, Eugene "Gene'O" Persons.

"I told him, and he was all for it. His face lit up," Ajana says, who discovered he was once a chef and restaurateur. "Any chance he got for me to be in the kitchen with him, he would have me there to help. He was showing me how to cook a bunch of stuff. It really started with cakes, and it just went from there. He taught me how to make dinner. Even though I didn't fully understand everything, those were great times."

While a student at Omaha North High School, AS came into Ajana's life and she was paired with Postsecondary Career Coach, Anthony Tate. She also found a mentor in MCC College Success Navigator Racquel Henderson.

"It feels good having support from people who are there to help you be ready for success," Ajana says. "They have constantly helped me find job opportunities. My first coach and Mr. Tate helped me get a job at the Hilton, which is what started all of this."

AS is there for students as life happens, and when Ajana experienced struggles, she came to appreciate the intrusive tough love Henderson and Tate showed.

"When I first started Metro, I wasn't doing great because I wasn't necessarily taking it seriously. Racquel and Mr. Tate sat me down and were like, 'Okay, we know you can cook, but you need to act like you want to be here.'" Ajana appreciates that her Navigator and Coach cared enough to set her straight, because the pandemic tested Ajana's resolve and her ability to focus was one of the tools she leaned on.

"That was honestly the roughest time," she says. "My culinary classes at Metro were all in person. You had to be in the room. They were only letting like six people in. You had to be sure to be on your 'A' game because you were one of only six people who got to do the course for the whole quarter."

Tate has no doubt she's prepared herself for success. "I think the confidence in being a chef, her skills, and her passion will continue to drive her to do well."

For her part, Ajana's grateful for the "it-takes-a-village" approach AS uses with students. "Even Coaches that weren't mine would come support me when I worked in the (Sage Student) Bistro at Metro. They would come eat when they knew I was in class. They were like, 'I just wanted to come see what you're doing and how you're doing.' Sometimes you just want someone to tell you, 'Good job.' You just want some type of acknowledgment. You might feel it's small in the scheme of things, but just having that feels good."

Every time Ajana makes a new dish or learns a new technique, she thinks of her granddad. "I wonder what he would say about me now. I hope I'm doing him justice. My mom tells me I am all the time."

Her coaches and mentors expect to be there when Ajana opens her catering company.





Scholar Graduate Jimmy Nguyen Blazing Trail at Clarkson College

In three years, Jimmy Nguyen has gone from thinking higher education was not possible to earning a certified nursing assistant (CNA) at QLI, an Omaha area rehabilitation center that specializes in neurological injury diagnoses, to making the dean's list and completing a Physical Therapy Assistant associate's degree at Clarkson College. He's now enrolled in a bachelor's PTA program with an eye on pre-med studies.

In his transformational journey from aimless to aspirational he became the first Avenue Scholar to attend and graduate from training partner Clarkson College. A second Scholar, Cole Michael Nebel, is also enrolled in the Clarkson program and is also excelling.

Clarkson PTA Program Director Jessica Niemann admires how Jimmy is thriving.

"He really did have to be a trailblazer with being the first Avenue Scholar at Clarkson College in our program. He really did pave his own way," says Niemann.

Jimmy was a Papillion-LaVista High School senior when a counselor introduced him to AS. He wasn't sure he belonged. Student Support Manager Ashley Knott, (then the High School Career Coach at Papio), helped change his mind. He went from an unmotivated, underachieving student to posting a 3.85 GPA.

"She was the first person that told me she believed in me – that I was smart enough to go to college. They offered me a scholarship to go to Metro. That's really what got me going. I thought to myself, maybe I'll give this a try because they want to help me out and maybe I can become something great. It was an opportunity. That's all I needed was an opportunity."

During a meeting to discuss career goals, Jimmy suddenly found himself articulating what he wanted to do: physical therapy.

"My Postsecondary Career Coach, Tonya Fairgood, had never heard me say that before. It came as a very big surprise. That's when they put me in the CNA program at QLI. I started working there and I still work there. I did very well in the

CNA program. Then Tonya offered me a scholarship and an opportunity at Clarkson, where I could train in physical therapy.”

He found it “inspiring” how QLI staff assist patients, “progressing in their journey to regain mobility and independence,” adding he knew right then he’d made the right choice.

“The main reason why I want to become a physical therapist and work in healthcare is helping other people. It’s very satisfying. I love making that patient-provider connection. It’s very important in my practice.”

He’s far from done.

“I want to continue my higher education and training to be able to treat those more complex cases of patients. Going to school really ingrained in my mind scientific, evidence-based practice. What better way to carry it out than by pursuing higher education? In physical therapy I help people with replaced knees and hips or recovering from spinal surgeries, fusions.

I love learning about best rehab practices and helping patients do rehab and return to their normal functions. My next goal is being able to do that surgery by becoming an orthopedic surgeon.”

Fairgood has enjoyed seeing him grow in confidence and ambition. “It’s amazing. He wants to keep climbing. I respect that. I encourage that.”

Clarkson’s Jessica Niemann says, “I think the sky’s the limit. Whatever he sets his mind to, he can absolutely do it. He’s an independent learner now. He loves learning. He is dedicated, committed.”

Jimmy appreciates the support AS has provided. “Tonya’s always been there to help me through school because I’m essentially a first-gen student. My older sister tried going to college and it was very hard because of the money aspect. I had no idea how college worked. Tonya’s always been that back up to help me through the process – applications, resume reviews, personal statements. She advised me through all my work. She got me into Clarkson and into QLI. She’s a very big player in this experience.”

Avenue Scholars is on the move!

Just like our Avenue Scholars students, we are on the move!

The building Avenue Scholars has operated in since 2009 is being demolished. Avenue Scholars used this opportunity to find office space with new benefits, and now, we will have our Avenue Scholars staff together in a single, renovated space.

Please update your records with our new office address:

2121 N. 117th Avenue
Suite 220
Omaha, NE 68164

Our phone number, 402-916-9777, and website address, avescholars.org, remain the same.

We hope to see you soon!





Boot Camps Offer Students Immersive, Intensive Glimpses at Different Industries, cont.

Eight technicians from business partner, Truck Center Companies, spoke about their career paths. "They shared how that avenue can look different for every single person – no one size fits all," says TCC Recruiting and Marketing Manager Chelsey Brooks, keynote speaker at the boot camp program's graduation. TCC impressed upon students how the auto, diesel, and transportation field is increasingly technology-driven.

In her keynote speech, Brooks shared that her own journey didn't start from privilege. "I come from a similar background as many of the students. I talked to them about what my career pathway looked like. There was a lot of sacrifice. So much of your success doesn't lie in where you come from or your education, it lies in your work ethic, your ability to show up and work with other people, your attitude. That's what dictates your success."

Audrey Gustin, AS Business Relations Manager and Business Outreach Department Head says Boot Camps are designed

"to give that real life perspective" that books, videos, and lectures cannot.

Having grown up around brothers who worked as mechanics, Blair High School junior Emily Loerzel already had interest in and access to a facility for doing motor vehicle diagnostics and repair, and the Auto/Diesel Boot Camp cemented things for her. "It helped me figure out what I want to do after I graduate. At first, I wanted to be a welder, but after I started getting more into diesel engines I changed my mind."

Loerzel also developed her Boot Camp experience into a Werner internship she will start next summer. A resume she wrote in preparation for the camp got the attention of Werner recruiters. "They said we need more girls in the diesel industry and asked if I wanted to do an internship. It's an exciting opportunity." She hopes a career there will follow.

"I don't think there are many programs specifically like the Boot Camp that exist in Omaha," Gustin says. "When I talk with new business partners, they're impressed that we offer these month-long camps and provide transportation, lunch, and a stipend. We eliminate any barriers students may have."

Some business partner team members that meet and greet with Scholars are program graduates.

"It's nice for our current students to see someone who's been where they're at become successful in their career. That gets them thinking, that could be me," says Gustin.

Business partners like Werner Enterprises sign up every year, in part to help keep area talent home.

Werner Enterprises Technical Operations Analyst Johnny Vuroz has participated in all three IT Boot Camps.

"I love it," he says. "Avenue Scholars is just a passion project. The program gets a lot of publicity within the company. Teaching has always been in my family's blood, and I love technology, plus the kids are great. It's been a great experience."

Gustin says partners find the camps a practical way to introduce potential hires to their fields.

"As people in the trades retire, industries look at getting the future talent pipeline up and ready to go. A career awareness day or a Boot Camp is a great way to get in front of young talent and get them interested and educated in opportunities in that trade and in your company."



Avenue Scholars Logo Evolution Symbolizes Journey to Success, cont.

Students who are ready to explore career options that lead to employment in the workforce are at a critical juncture in their lives. Avenue Scholars provides avenues of opportunity for students at these major crossroads, offering guidance, direction, and support through areas of study and future career ideas.

"The modification," adds Bird, "brings more clarity to our Avenue Scholars message to explore directional opportunity through education and connections with the community. We're excited with the evolution to a crisper, cleaner, clearer look. The timing is good, too, in terms of launching the new logo to coincide with our 15th anniversary." Jason Fischer of Surreal Media Lab created the refreshed logo.

The name 'Avenue Scholars' hits all the right notes and is important to the organization. "The name was determined by focus groups of youth and stakeholders many years ago," Bird says. "Students told us that they didn't consider themselves scholars because no one ever called them by that name. That

was an incredibly powerful finding. When you think of the word 'scholars' it has value, and our program ensures that our students are known for their academic pursuits as scholars and their extraordinary potential as professionals. Our name 'Avenue Scholars' conveys that our students are on a pathway that's going to lead them to success."

Says Lindsay Decker, AS Director of Communications & Development, "In our mission statement we refer to our work as 'bridging the gap.' If you think of a bridge, it is directional, just like an avenue. A bridge is a stable force that gives you a safe place to cross. We think of ourselves as a force of stability for students and the community and a resource for providing direction and career clarity."

With an established name and a freshly minted logo that underscore the meaning of its work, Bird feels the organization is well-vested and positioned to carry its mission and message into the future.

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