

MESSAGE from the PRESIDENT/CEO

"This special edition newsletter is being shared to communicate Avenue Scholars' responses to the unprecedented situation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. If you have questions or wish to partner, please contact us." - *Dr. Ken Bird*



Jamar Dorsey, Director of High School Programs, speaks to the new class of Avenue Scholars at the 2019 Celebration Luncheon.



Avenue Scholars maintains support for students, staff

Avenue Scholars, "Your Foundation for Success," is committed to working with Scholars on that pathway to success during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"As you will see by reading the 'team' reports contained in this COVID-19 newsletter, Avenue Scholars remains open for business in the continued service of our 800-plus students in the greater Omaha area," says Mike Alvano, COO/CFO. "While the pandemic has required the organization to be creative in how we do business, it has also created even greater needs in a student population that, by definition, was already at risk."

"We are identifying needs in four particular areas - IT equipment and access, food insecurity, mental health, and employment - that present unique challenges to our students above and beyond what they would normally experience," Alvano said.

Technology is a key.

"Administratively, we are focused on providing technology support, making available our chromebooks and ordering mobile hotspots for students to check out," said Kris Valentin, Director of Human Resources and Partnerships.

As always, staff are focused on the needs of all students.

"We intend to make sure student needs in all of these areas are met in the coming months irrespective of the turmoil caused by COVID-19. We will make every attempt to stay connected to our students and to make sure the students stay connected to family, education, employment, and their Career Coaches at Avenue Scholars," Alvano said. "At the outset of the pandemic, over 500 of our students were employed throughout the community. That number has now fallen to approximately 350 students. Stability is vitally important to our students, and it is our intention to bring as much stability as possible to the lives of our scholars."

Keeping staff safe while remaining productive has been another administrative concern.

"We've provided staff the flexibility to work remotely if they choose, outside of some limited designated office hour periods each week," Valentin said. "Each team and staff member has written work plans, and directors provide a weekly report on their respective team's work. The office has remained open and we expect that will continue to be the case, unless there's a public order or an order in the building that would cause us to close."

Avenue Scholars appreciates all the community support.

"We are thankful for the ongoing support of the Omaha business and philanthropic community. You help bring 'normal' to our collective lives (students and staff) at a time when normal is otherwise hard to find," Alvano said.

"Please think of us as we continue the mission of Avenue Scholars - *To ensure careers for committed students of hope and need through education, training, and supportive relationships.*"

High School Career Coaches stay in contact with Scholars

Avenue Scholars' team of High School Career Coaches (HSCC) has stayed in contact with all Scholars, calling, emailing, or texting each student on their caseload.

TEAM RESPONSE

Starting the week of March 16, Coaches asked students three basic questions: Do you have access to technology? Has your work status changed because of COVID-19? How can we support you to complete classwork at your high school and/or Metropolitan Community College (Senior Academy, etc)?

Coaches discovered 55 students don't have wifi, 57 students don't have any form of technology, and 64 students have only a cell (smart) phone for technology.

"The HSCC team also holds an AM and PM meeting virtually to support each other as we work with students to find solutions and support," said Jamar Dorsey, Director of High School Programs. "The HSCC team is also mailing home letters to inform parents of our continued support."

CHALLENGES

Dorsey recognizes the challenges will continue to evolve as the community situation unfolds over the coming weeks, including the fact that most students will



MIKE ALVANO
COO/CFO



KRIS VALENTIN
DIRECTOR OF HR
& PARTNERSHIPS



Terry Fischer, Director of Career Programs, speaks to Avenue Scholars at the 2019 Celebration Luncheon. The 2020 Celebration Luncheon was cancelled due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Postsecondary Team collaborates with MCC Navigators

For the Postsecondary Team, early assessment of students' needs and securing course schedules at MCC were high priorities in dealing with the COVID-19 impact.

TEAM RESPONSE

"Postsecondary Coaches made contact with every student to assess stability and needs during COVID-19 time," said Terry Fischer, Director of Career Programs. "Ninety-six percent of PS students were responsive to our outreach in the first week."

During student contact, coaches reviewed MCC's pivot to online coursework, the student's comfortability with online coursework, job status and basic needs status (food, housing, transportation and technology) in light of the circumstances. Advising was afforded and follow-up plans were made based on the intake of information.

"Coaches, MCC Navigators, and students made joint decisions on if the student should modify their spring class schedule based on student's capacity," Fischer said. "All MCC schedule changes had to be decided by March, so that was a high priority the first week. All students, instructors and Navigators were highly engaged in this decision making."

CHALLENGES

Moving the classrooms online has been a challenge for many Avenue Scholars students.

"Our students traditionally fare better in traditional

classroom settings than in online coursework," Fischer said. "One challenge is helping students successfully transition to online only coursework. We have to build the student's academic confidence, self-discipline for online coursework, and access to wifi."

Another challenge has been helping each student manage a loss of hours on the job or to be laid-off, or furloughed, due to the virus.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Despite the challenges, there has been success.

Fischer outlined six areas of success in responding to the COVID-19 impact: 96% of all post-secondary students were responsive to our outreach and advising during the first week of our COVID-19 response; collaboration with MCC's Academic Navigators in video conferences, in-person meetings and phone calls to strategize individual plans for each student; engagement with employers when students have transitioned to work-from-home practices, so students successfully make the transition; successfully connected students-in-need to community resources: food pantries, Nebraska Department of Labor unemployment benefits, new employment opportunities, etc; maintaining weekly outreach with students during this time; diligently assessing and documenting student job and school status and services offered; maintaining weekly outreach with students; diligently assessing and documenting student job and school status and services offered.

HSCC team creates plan for students

not return to classrooms this spring.

"It's difficult with families not knowing exactly what resources they need or what to do if their personal situation changes," he said. "Access to wifi and technology seems to be a challenge, but we will know more once students start fully engaging on submitting assignments online working through systems such as blackboard to complete work virtually."

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Dorsey outlines four areas of accomplishment in the first two weeks of responding to the COVID-19 impact on Avenue Scholars: "creating a plan for students to continue in the Senior Academy Program; creating a list of students who need technology now; leaning on each other for support during this unique time; and having a two check-point day has been huge."

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Kelly Bernadt, Director of Student Support, poses for a photo with Jan Benitez in 2017. Benitez, a 2010 Ralston graduate and Avenue Scholar, was the Teen Specialist for Completely Kids. In February Benitez was hired as an Intern Coordinator for the Business Outreach Team.



Student Support team ‘source of calm’

In such confusing times, providing social and emotional support for students has never been more critical. That’s where the Avenue Scholars Student Support Team steps in.

TEAM RESPONSE

After schools closed their doors, the Student Support Team initially responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by reaching out to high and moderate need students to ensure that their basic needs as well as their social and emotional needs are being met. SST is working on reviewing their caseload to identify the need level of all active students.

“All high and moderate ranked students will have plans documented to address how we will support them moving forward,” said Kelly Bernadt, Director of Student Support. “The Student Support team has also set a goal to contact each Career Coach to ‘staff’ shared students and discuss student needs, risk, resources, etc.”

Connecting with resources has been another priority for the Student Support Team.

“We have been reaching out to community agencies to learn more about resources being offered in the community,” Bernadt said. “SST has shared these resources so all staff have access to them. SS Coordinators have been communicating with Career Coaches and Navigators to help troubleshoot and connect students to resources.”

CHALLENGES

COVID-19 has presented several unique challenges.

“One major challenge has been trying to support students with mental health needs over the phone,” Bernadt said. “We are working on finding more mental health resources in the community that are offering counseling via telehealth services so that we can offer this to students as a resource, if needed.”

“Another challenge has been the financial stress students are facing due to losing their employment,” she said. “Many are looking for new jobs, applying for unemployment, and applying for internships, but it takes time. We have been able to find students resources in the community to help with housing and food needs, to date.”

Bernadt is also concerned about the Avenue Scholars staff.

“It has been a challenge balancing work, family obligations, and self-care,” she said. “This will be ongoing for my team and staff in general, and we are trying to support each other as best we can.”

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Bernadt continues to be positive about the situation.

“SST has continued to be a source of calm for our students and staff,” she said. “With all the stress and anxiety surrounding this crisis, I think that is an awesome accomplishment. SST continues to respond to referrals from Career Coaches and Navigators quickly, and the turnaround to offer support and resources has been fast and helpful.”

AVENUE SCHOLARS

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“Our mission is to ensure careers for committed students of hope and need through education/training and supportive relationships.”

Ana Lopez Shalla, Director of Business Outreach, works with Mekhi Banks, an Omaha North High School graduate, on his preparation for performing emcee duties at the 2019 Celebration Luncheon.



Business Outreach Team stays positive

The Business Outreach Team has been busy the past two weeks assessing the COVID-19 impact on Career Exploration, Intern Omaha, and Postsecondary Internships.

TEAM RESPONSE

Ana Lopez Shalla, Director of Business Outreach, says Avenue Scholars, “conducted early outreach to all Career Exploration partners, inquiring about the status of their events and letting them know we look forward to partnering in the future.”

All Career Exploration Events were cancelled for this school year.

Other team members contacted all students, employers, and educators involved in Intern Omaha’s pilot cohort to ask about their status.

“Dr. (Ken) Bird reached out to superintendents to let them know we were surveying employers and would reconvene once we had a clearer picture,” Lopez Shalla said.

In addition, the Team has conducted early outreach to students and supervisors to assess the the status of active internships, and HR partners to assess the status of upcoming internships.

CHALLENGES

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and state mandates to close businesses to control spread of the virus, the Business Outreach Team is “facing great uncertainty regarding business participation,” Lopez Shalla said. As of March 24, only 64 of 219 internship openings had been filled.

The Team is also working to “establish an AS standard regarding completion standards for students in

Cohort 1 so we can offer guidance for the next couple weeks,” Lopez Shalla said.

In terms of Postsecondary internships, they lost 12 of 83 spots that were originally recruited, and “we have major concerns regarding the filling of the remaining 72 spots,” she said.

The Business Outreach Team has offered to partner with Career Coaches to “creatively problem solve” in regards to finding more students who would be willing to fill out internship applications.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In the area of Career Exploration, the Team is working to institute creative ways to revive the opportunities, including “investments in a potential virtual Career Exploration platform.”

Regarding Intern Omaha, “Until this point, the vast majority of those who started the program have been able to stick with it and gained great value from it,” Lopez Shalla said. “This isn’t the finish line we expected, but it is exciting to see that so many will cross it.”

She notes also that “many employers are maintaining their commitments and still see the program as a priority.

Due to the circumstances, the Team has adjusted its plans for its first-annual orientation session, going from an in-person framework to a digital format.

The Team continues to work “tirelessly” on maintaining relationships with currently available Postsecondary internships and ensuring that “these partnerships are taken advantage of so they grow and persist for years to come.”