



AVENUE SCHOLARS.
Your Foundation for Success



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Health Care tops list of career interests

Healthcare in the 2020-2021 school year represents the largest segment of career interests for Avenue Scholars — 35% (164 of 466) of high school students and 26% (83 of 323) of postsecondary students.

For the first time in program history, AS graduated students with degrees in the Register Nurse (3) and Respiratory Therapist (1) fields. Mike Alvano, Avenue Scholars COO, notes starting salaries in these fields range from \$43,000 to \$55,000.

“Tremendous success is being realized through our medical assisting career path,” Alvano says. “We graduated 12 medical assistants in 2020, with an average starting salary of \$31,000 and tremendous upside and flexibility in the healthcare field, including tuition reimbursement (for continuing education).”

Alvano notes other successes in Avenue Scholars’ healthcare initiative.

“We have developed a robust CNA-based internship with QLI,” he said. “There are multiple levels of success with this program, and it is being replicated with other employee-partners.”

In addition, “a new scholarship agreement with Clarkson College was recently signed with opportunities to expand scholarships when appropriate,” Alvano said.

With \$1.7 million in grant assistance from the Charles E. Lakin Foundation funding an Avenue Scholars Healthcare Career Pathway initiative, the partnership with Clarkson College, and a new partnership with the Munroe-Meyer Institute, opportunities for Avenue Scholars students in the healthcare fields are continuing to expand.

Interest in growing the opportunities in the healthcare initiative came into sharper focus in 2016 when Catie Dagle, Manager of



Information Services, partnered with Metropolitan Community College to create a rubric that would give students a clear picture of the possible pathways to a career in healthcare. Dagle at the time was a Postsecondary Career Coach assigned to healthcare as her designated “industry-specific” field on which to focus for developing job opportunities.

Dagle and MCC Navigators created a three-tier rubric, with Tier 1 being the ultimate goal, culminating with a Registered Nursing degree or with a Medical Assistant certification. To achieve this level, students must complete two to four years of postsecondary education. Most take three years — one year of pre-requisite classes, followed by two years in the program.

Dagle said a majority of students land in the Tier 2 level, with most having earned their CN (Certified Nursing) certificate in high school or in the first year of college.

Before the rubric, Dagle said students were dropping out when they learned they had to pass

some higher-level math courses to go beyond the CN level.

“Of the caseload I took over in 2016, about 60% of students were healthcare (focused) students, but we had very few successes,” she said. “I said we have to look at how we are placing students. Are we best serving our students that way? Are we being honest and realistic with them?”

The first cohort of Avenue Scholars following the rubric began their healthcare program in 2018. The results in 2020: 12 Medical Assistants, three Registered Nurses, one Respiratory Therapist.

A KEY CONTRIBUTION

Steve Wild, President of The Charles E. Lakin Foundation, is happy the Lakin Foundation can be a key financial resource for the success and the continued expansion of the healthcare initiative at Avenue Scholars.

“I really admire the results of what Avenue Scholars has built in terms of a program that serves the community,” Wild said. “After I became president, we made a determination that we did not

want to look at or solicit applications for grants. We want to be very strategic in seeking out relationships with non-profit organizations that would take us in the direction we want to go.”

Wild also noted, as background context, that when he moved from Omaha to Missouri Valley (IA) several years ago he had difficulty finding locally enough workers in skills areas “that a person needs to hire to get stuff done.”

“I started talking to Ken about three years ago, and I soon realized and what became important to me is that we needed to create a program here in Iowa similar to Avenue Scholars,” he said.

That idea led to the largest grant the Lakin Foundation has provided to any one organization — a combination of \$2.8 million (over three years) to create the Career EdVantage program in Iowa, serving the school districts of Shenandoah, AHSTW (Avoca-Hancock-Shelby-Tennant-Walnut), Tri-Center, Lewis Central

NEW STAFF



JAN BENITEZ Intern Coordinator

Education: Ralston HS, 2010; Bachelor’s Social Work, UNO, 2015; Masters, Public Administration, UNO, 2020
Job Experience: Completely Kids, Teen Employment Program; One World Community Health Center, Social Worker
Comment: “As an Avenue Scholars alum, I am aware of the impact our programs can have on the lives of young people. As an employee, I have been really impressed with the passion and commitment that everyone brings to our work with students and the community.”

DAN CORRAL Postsecondary Career Coach
 (Focus: Business & IT Careers)

Education: Millard South HS; BA in Psychology, UNO
Job Experience: Partnership 4 Kids and Completely Kids, director & coordinator; DMSi Software, Customer Support
Comment: “Working at Avenue Scholars is truly a blessing. They truly care about their employees and the students we serve. Everybody is friendly, professional, and willing to go the extra mile with any task at hand. My experience so far has been fantastic, and I have very much enjoyed working with the student population we serve.”



MICHAEL JOHNSON Postsecondary Career Coach
 (Focus: Auto, Diesel, Welding)

Education: Whetstone HS, Columbus, OH; BA in Religion & Leadership, Grace University, Omaha
Job Experience: City Impact, Lincoln, Program/Youth Director; West Hills Church Omaha, Director of Next Gen; Lincoln Christian School, Drama Coach; Restored, Lincoln, Foster Care Advocate
Comment: “As a Postsecondary Career Coach I have the honor of guiding and mentoring college students interested in work in the fields I oversee. I love the work we are doing at Avenue Scholars and seeing growth in young people.”



CANEI RODRIQUEZ Postsecondary Career Coach
 (Focus: Auto, Diesel, Welding)

Education: Thomas Jefferson HS; Associate’s Degree, Early Childhood Education, MCC; BA, Sociology, UNO
Job Experience: Omaha Public Schools, Social work; Kids Can, Youth Group Leader; Omaha Community, Family Engagement Specialist
Comment: “Being a part of Avenue Scholars has been a true blessing. The organization truly cares about their employees and students we serve. My experience so far has been wonderful, and I truly love working with the students we serve.”



ALEJANDRA SOTO-SUAREZ High School Career Coach

Education: Omaha South HS; BS in Education, Secondary Education & Mathematics, UNO
Job Experience: Omaha Public Schools, Bilingual Liaison; OPS, High School Math Teacher
Comment: “I feel honored and privileged to work for such an organization (Avenue Scholars). Every individual at Avenue Scholars truly cares and is committed to helping our students succeed and our community thrive. In addition to this world-changing environment, everyone here makes the job fun.”



ALLIE THOMPSON Intern Coordinator

Education: Thomas Jefferson HS, Cedar Rapids, IA; BA, Family Services, University of Iowa, 2012; MA, Counselor Education, University of Montana;
Job Experience: School Counseling Intern, Montana; Admissions Rep; Academic & Career Advisor; UNO; Softball Coach, University of Montana & Kirkwood CC
Comment: “Being able to provide students with tangible opportunities to explore their career interests has been rewarding. To see students actively grow in their workforce has inspired my work thus far.”



ABOVE. Julia Romero works to clean up at the end of a home construction job in Louisville, NE. Romero is planning to obtain an Associate’s Degree in Construction Management from MCC.

LEFT. Melvin Sudbeck, owner of Sudbeck Homes, with Jairo Olivo, at a home construction site in Omaha. Olivo is on track to receive his Electrical Associate’s Degree from MCC in May 2021.

Sudbeck Homes builds new job opportunities

In three short years, Sudbeck Homes has built a working relationship with Avenue Scholars that has proven to be a win-win situation for all parties involved — with AS staff striving to match students with jobs in career areas in which they have expressed interest, with students looking for on-the-job experience, and with the building construction industry searching for emerging young talent.

“It’s a great program,” says Melvin Sudbeck, owner of Sudbeck Homes. “We can get a workforce at a younger age. We can train them in our system, which builds consistency — all of us working on the same mindset.”

Sudbeck Homes operates as a general contractor business. “We do everything from start to finish,” he said.

Scholars thus have the opportunity to learn many aspects of the building industry, which suits Jairo Olivo, a 2018 Omaha Bryan graduate who is attending Metropolitan Community

College and plans to receive his Electrical Associate’s Degree in May 2021.

After obtaining his degree, Olivo hopes to continue working with Sudbeck Homes, focusing on commercial building. He dreams of having his Journeyman’s License in 10 years and then some day owning his own business.

“I’m really glad I got into the program,” Olivo said. “If not for Avenue Scholars, I don’t think I would even be going to college. I like working here a lot. He’s (Melvin Sudbeck) a good boss and mentor. He’s a good teacher, and he’s friendly and jokes around a little, so working for him and with him never seems awkward.”

Sudbeck is appreciative of the opportunity to work with Avenue Scholars students.

“Kids are learning and getting hand-on experience,” he said. “It’s another opportunity for them to overcome some of life’s challenges and to better themselves.”



Healthcare

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and Riverside, and \$1.7 (over two years) in Nebraska.

“We wanted to link the two organizations together under the total grant,” Wild said.

Wild notes he is not looking to change or add to any of the Avenue Scholars program initiatives. His desire is that Career EdVantage will be able to build a model very similar to Avenue Scholars. Regarding Avenue Scholars, he is happy the focus of the Lakin Foundation grant is on healthcare.

“There are severe shortages of healthcare workers, and COVID only exacerbated the issue,” he said.

SERVING THE UNDERSERVED

For Karoly Mirnics, Director of the Munroe-Meyer Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, his desire to expand the Institute’s services beyond the present campus started when he took a hard look at his metaphorical community service mirror a couple years ago.

“I looked into that mirror and asked ‘Are we really serving our underserved communities in Nebraska?’ Mirnics says. “I answered ‘No, not to the degree we should be.’”

That idea of expanding services led to the decision to expand the Munroe-Meyer Institute’s autism care for toddlers clinic at 90th & Q from 800 square feet to 8,000 square feet.

Mirnics believes this clinic’s expansion is a model that could be translated to more communities in the state that could locally provide these services in areas where this type of care is needed — from Norfolk to Scottsbluff to Lincoln.

“There are many kids who have to spend multiple hours a day in this clinic,” Mirnics said. “It’s not feasible to have to travel a long distance for this service. Coupling this problem with the difficulty serving the underprivileged, I started to look for some philanthropy that might help.”

An anonymous “angel donor” came forward,

giving a significant donation to establish a clinic in an underserved area. Mirnics began a search for the most appropriate location for a new clinic.

“We selected North Omaha; services are not adequate there,” he said.

The next step in the process was to hold a town hall information meeting in North Omaha.

“There was much excitement and endorsement,” Mirnics said. “We found a location (near 50th & Ames) and an architect. We’re building the clinic now and hope to take occupancy by the end of the year.”

Next, “I wanted to make sure the makeup of providers reflected the makeup of the community,” he said. “I want to ensure that we have a diverse group of providers working with the number of diverse children we have in North Omaha. That made me think of how we can build a pipeline of diverse providers.”

That mindset brought Mirnics to Avenue Scholars.

Providers, or workers, at an autism clinic have to be Registered Behavioral Therapists, which requires one to have a high school diploma, 40 hours of training, and pass a test.

Mirnics says becoming a RBT is “potentially a career path to go on further in behavioral sciences, maybe even to becoming a psychologist or PHD.

“We felt with the diverse population Avenue Scholars serves, it could be an ideal partnership,” he said. “We can train the students. We already employ a number of high school and Metro students. Employees can work part-time or full-time. We approached Ken and Mike, and they were receptive to the idea.”

After a meeting with AS and Munroe-Meyer staff, the program received everyone’s stamp of approval.

“This is a great opportunity to be on the ground floor in the development of the North Omaha Munroe-Meyer clinic, which will further expand healthcare opportunities as well as put us in a position to embed our students in the community where they reside,” Alvano said.

AVENUE SCHOLARS

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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.”

Scholar overcomes obstacles to become Medical Assistant

Today Jaslyn Melgar, a 2018 Millard South graduate, is overjoyed that Avenue Scholars accepted her application to enroll in the program and was able to dispel some misconceptions she had about community colleges.

“I did not know what Avenue Scholars was until I got accepted,” Melgar says. “I wasn’t sure I wanted to join because I did not want to go to a community college. I had bad stereotypes in my mind about community colleges. I had never visited a college, but once I got to know more about Avenue Scholars and toured a Metro campus, I fell in love with it.”

From there, perceived obstacles began to fall away, one by one, on her way to becoming a medical assistant.

“Being a first generation college student, I had lots of questions, lots of fear. ‘How would I pay for it?’ ‘What do I do to get there?’ Avenue Scholars took a big weight off me. They took off so many barriers off that I thought I would never get through,” Melgar said.



Early in her youth Melgar dreamed of being a doctor. However, she came to realize the road would be longer and more difficult to achieve that dream.

“Ever since I was little, I knew I wanted to be in the health care field. Then I wanted to be a OBGYN to help pregnant women,” she said.

When she realized that dream was not practical at this stage in her life, Melgar got her CNA certificate and discovered more opportunities while working in a hospital. Her first thought was nursing, but she knew “I was bad in math.”

“I knew I could turn to Avenue Scholars for encouragement, and they showed me the way to an opportunity to become a medical assistant,” Melgar said.

Melgar graduated with Medical Assistant Associate’s Degree from MCC this spring and started working as Medical Assistant at the CHI Women’s Clinic in September.

“I love it,” she said. “I have always wanted to work with women, the pregnant mommas.”

Community Engagement

'Power Hour' invites Omaha leaders to forum



Hello all and welcome to the first installment of the Community Engagement Corner. My name is Jamar Dorsey and I have been named to the position of Director of Community Engagement and High School Partnerships. Community is a big part of what career coaches instill in the Scholars, and Avenue Scholars is committed to engaging in the greater Omaha community.

Avenue Scholars are engaging in the community in many ways. Our Scholars and staff have participated in numerous community events over the last few months — events such as Black Lives Matter at Benson Park, Neighborhood Clean-ups, Northstar Volunteer Day, and the People Are Rising.

Avenue Scholars administration also offers for staff on Wednesdays a segment called "Power Hour." Power Hour is a resource for Avenue Scholars staff members that informs and empowers them as career coaches. Our virtual sessions have hosted Mr. Brandon Logan, Urban Capital Partners Founder & CEO, who provided the staff with tips on how to have critical conversations about race. Lt. Sherie Thomas and Sgt. Antwone Finch of the Omaha Police Department provided Avenue Scholars staff with tips to provide students on how to engage with law enforcement. Mr. Preston Love, who represents Black Votes Matter Institute of Community Engagement, encouraged our staff to help all students register to vote when they turn 18.

Our Sept. 30 "Power Hour" guest was Cammy Watkins, from Inclusive Communities, and she provided insight on Women Voting Rights.

Lastly, Avenue Scholars students took part in a proclamation being passed at the Omaha City Council meeting. The proclamation helps Omahans support issues of racism, injustice and community engagement with police. We are proud that our students participated in this event and we are looking forward to being an advocate for all people in the Omaha community.

Until next time — don't conform to the environment, make the environment conform to you!



Karoly Mirnics, Director of the Munroe-Meyer Institute, hands over the keys to a 2006 Mazda 3 Hatchback to Avenue Scholar student Kendaisia Heath. The car was a Mirnics family car, primarily driven by his children during their high school years.

AS 'friend' gifts family car to Avenue Scholar

A 2006 Mazda 3 Hatchback with about 70,000 miles and a couple minor dings in its history may not look like the dream car to today's average teenager, but for 19-year-old Avenue Scholar Kendaisia Heath, "It was a blessing that came at just the right time."

Before getting to the "rest of the story," you need to understand a little more about Heath's journey.

Heath, a 2018 Omaha Benson graduate, has been navigating a difficult journey since her mother passed away in March. Before her mother's unexpected death, Heath had been considering a medical field path that might result in a job related to helping young people with autism.

"But then it [the circumstances] scared me away from trying that path," she said.

The new route Heath has chosen, assisted by guidance from Avenue Scholars staff, is to earn a Business Associate's Degree from Metropolitan Community College. From there, she plans to enroll in a College of Education program, probably at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, to become a special education/pre-kindergarten teacher.

"During high school, with Avenue Scholars, on a Career Exploration Day, I had the chance to visit one of the special education departments," she said. "It was an awesome experience seeing what those teachers did for their students. I decided then that is what I wanted to do for sure."

Now attending MCC on an Avenue Scholars scholarship, Heath is required to have a part-time job while attending school.

"I lost one job due to my car not working, and I had just gotten a new job, so I needed a reliable car," she said.

In steps Karoly Mirnics, Director of Munroe-Meyer Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Mirnics has had a close relationship with Avenue Scholars

CEO/President Ken Bird for many years. He had a dilemma — what to do with a nice car that the "dealer offered a ridiculous price" for a trade-in on a new car.

"It's been a good family car" that his two children drove to high school, and "I had it maintained for the safety of my kids. It's been perfectly maintained and has low mileage. I reached out to my friends at Avenue Scholars to tell them all about my car and my wish to give it to someone who would most benefit."

Aware of Heath's plight, Kelly Bernadt, Director of Student Services, and Catie Dagle, at the time a Postsecondary Coach, said "we have to get her this vehicle. Catie knew it was a struggle for Kendaisia to get to work."

"We are so glad Kendaisia was able to take advantage of this offer," Bernadt said. "It couldn't have happened at a better time."

Avenue Scholars has developed a couple methods of "getting kids into reliable transportation." One is an Avenue Scholars Savings Program where students learn some financial literacy, with a goal of saving \$3,000 over the course of the one-year program. Then AS will match \$3,000 to enable the student to "buy a really nice car," Bernadt said. Another is non-profit program called Chariots4Hope.

Dr. Mirnics' gift was the first from a private individual.

"I'm so happy this wonderful, driven, smart young lady could get this car and pursue her dreams," Mirnics said. "For her to not crumble in the face of adversity and rise to the occasion is a beautiful thing to see."

Heath is grateful.

"It means the world to me," she said. "I was at the point I didn't know if I could do it. It is a blessing that came at the right time and helped me overcome a lot of negative obstacles."