

Navigating the road to college

Two families, two very different journeys

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Holland, MI — Editor's note: Intellectual capital is the most valuable commodity of 21st century business, and growing a well-educated workforce is one of the single most important tasks of economic development in our region. On this note, we're taking a look at how the next generation workforce, today's students, are getting there.

Erin Doolittle came to the Holland Area College Fair Thursday evening at Hope College to scout the 66 colleges prospecting for students. Doolittle came armed with a checklist of everything she wanted from the school she'll be calling home in just two years. For her, a school with religious affiliation, no more than 5,000 students and a good sports and occupational therapy program will make the short list.

A junior at Black River High School, a charter school focused on college prep, Doolittle is required to apply and be accepted to a four-year college or university in order to receive her diploma. She also participates in the school's College Advisory Program which requires college-bound students to write and prepare college essays and gather college recommendation letters from former teachers.

Attending the fair was just another step in the long, and well-mapped, road to choosing a college. The child of two college graduates, she is well versed and rehearsed in what to look for in a college and what colleges are looking for in prospective students. While she's not yet out of high school, she's considering undergraduate options with an eye toward graduate school.

As Doolittle navigated her way around recruiters' tables Thursday night, her mom Stephanie tagged along recommending options and asking her own questions of the college representatives.

Doolittle's first stop was the Ohio Northern University table, a school with 3,666 students and affiliation with the United Methodist Church. Its small size and religious backing were checks on Doolittle's list. The school also boasts a \$3,000 bonus for out-of-state students.

After a couple minutes, mom and daughter were on to the next table — Spring Arbor University. Admissions representative Eileen Santee welcomed Doolittle with a smile, emphasizing Spring Arbor's focus on graduate school preparation, a necessity if Doolittle wants to pursue occupational therapy.

"It's great because right away, the professors encourage you to look at what grad school you're going to go to," Santee said.

As Doolittle moved on to Hillsdale College, her father's alma mater, she wasn't completely sold. "I'd think about it. They have really great educational programs, but I'm not sure about the sports," she said.

Susan Chadwick from Beloit College said students like Doolittle who are being proactive in the college search will find the right college fit and in turn, a job after graduation.

"We're mostly admissions counselors that are here at these things. So kids that are here are doing the right thing," Chadwick said. "A bachelor's degree

equals what a high school diploma used to.”

Breaking the cycle

While college shopping is easily navigated by families of college graduates, the already lengthy application process can be an arduous journey through unfamiliar terrain for families who have never had a campus experience. Everything from college shopping to the application process is foreign — and if just one piece is left out, the student may never make it onto a college campus.

In a press conference, Tony Castillo, owner of local McDonald’s franchises, rolled out Steps for Success on Friday, a workshop designed to help first generation college-bound students and their families put the resources together to get into college.

“I know that you have to break cycles,” said Castillo, also a first generation college graduate. “My kids will now go to college, so a cycle has been broken ... so that for future generations, it’s not a question of, if I go to college, but of where and when I go to college.”

At 9 a.m. Saturday, a college application workshop, designed for these students, will be held at Holland High School. Holland is one of only 10 locations chosen, primarily for its high percentage of Hispanic students. Roughly half of Holland High students are potential first-generation students, said Holland High School Principal Rhonda Klomparens. Other workshops will be held in Houston, Los Angeles, Chicago, Tampa, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Denver, Dallas/Fort Worth and Hartford.

As she considers her future, Melina Cruz, a senior at Holland High School, waivers between careers as a music teacher or in the medical care profession. And, she stands to be the first in her family to graduate from college with a bachelor’s degree.

“My mom always tells me, you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do. ... go to college and pursue your dream.”

At the one-day workshop, information about preparing and applying for college will be presented by national experts, local counselors and college recruiters in Spanish and English.

“We have about 38 percent of our students who are Hispanic. In southwest Michigan, only about 26 percent of the adults have a bachelor’s degree — less than the national average. Even if you have a good understanding about the language, it can be very difficult to get through,” Klomparens said. Her own daughter went through the application process a year ago.

Organizers said 300 students in grades 7-12 and parents from Holland and other area school districts, including Zeeland, Fennville and South Haven, were signed up for the event.

Families can register by visiting HSF.net.

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