

College students ask questions and offer advice about higher education

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WHITE PLAINS - Which colleges have the best courses? How are the parties? And is it tough to balance studying with work?

These essential questions and many more were both asked and answered by students yesterday at the annual "Speak Out" event, an open forum hosted by the nonprofit corporation College Careers Fund of Westchester.

"They need someone to talk with about their goals, their dreams, their aspirations, how they're going to make it, what they need to make it," said Blanche Walker, executive director of College Careers. "This is our goal, to see that young people complete their education."

College Careers, which is based in White Plains, has been working with underprivileged youth since 1967.

Aiming to make higher education a reality for young adults who might not have gone to college for academic or financial reasons, the corporation provides a combination of financial assistance, personalized counseling and workshops throughout the county. College Careers each year sends an average of 260 students to more than 80 colleges and technical schools throughout the country.

As a member of the original class of College Careers, 57-year-old Gaye Abrams said the group "empowered" her. She likened the founders to her guardian angels.

"College Careers training turned my brain cells into thinking I could be a professional person instead of just a high school graduate who went out, got married and had kids," said Abrams, a behavioral management specialist from Mount Kisco. "It broke the generational curse that African-Americans cannot be successful in college."

The event yesterday attracted nearly 35 local college students and alumni to the White Plains Library auditorium.

A panel of five students took turns talking about their campus experiences, whether they commuted locally to Westchester Community College or dormed at a school out of state.

Moderator Stanley Ferrell moved the discussion from academics to time management to community life, urging the students to say at least one good thing about their college and asking whether it was a place they would recommend to others.

For 18-year-old Tarem Cannonier, hearing others talk about some of the same challenges he's faced was both reassuring and helpful. He's a freshman studying physical therapy at Lincoln University, and he believes everyone should go to college.

"It's a different experience," said Cannonier of Greenburgh. "You get off on your own, and you get to make your own life-changing decisions."

Kaisha Roland agreed college is very different from high school - for the better.

"I love college. I know sometimes I might get a little stressed out or worried, but I try to focus and keep my chin up and make myself proud and make everyone proud of me," said Roland, 19, a sophomore at Purchase College and a White Plains resident. "Nowadays, if you don't have education, it feels like you're not getting anywhere in life."

Saying that the college degree today is equivalent to the high school degree of the past, Mazel Muhammad, program director of the Westchester County Department of Community Mental Health, encouraged students to attend college to help get their foot in the door when it comes to finding employment. The county department provides partial funding for College Careers, along with state aid and individual donations.

"There are a number of jobs you can't even interview for if you show up at the door without that college degree," she said. "I'm very happy to see that kids are enjoying their experiences, and I'm happy that College Careers is here to help them enjoy those experiences and get the most out of their college stay."

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Stanley Ferrell, a project coordinator with College Careers Fund of Westchester, speaks during an event yesterday at the White Plains Library to help college students adjust to their new schools. The students pictured are Ashley Williams, 19; Crystal Harris, 18; and Samantha Barnes, 20.