

Project shows troubled youth that education is within reach

January 29th, 2015

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In real life, there's no such thing as a "get out of jail free" card, such as you find in Monopoly. However, a group of boys — inmates at the Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility — learned recently that a "get a college education" ticket is well within their reach.

Ohio State's Center for Higher Education Enterprise (CHEE) hosted the boys, accompanied by five staff members from the Ohio Department of Youth Services, for a day on campus in mid-December, mixing business with pleasure (think OSU men's basketball) and serving up a slice of college life.

It was an eye-opening experience for all those involved. The visitors warmed up to their hosts as the day unfolded and, midway through the visit, one of the boys from DYS confided, "I didn't realize college was like this at all ... and three years ago when I was out there on the streets (in a gang), I would have never imagined being here at OSU, like visiting a college, sitting here with you."

Terrell Strayhorn, professor in the Department of Educational Studies and CHEE's director, said the goal is to nurture their college aspirations and improve the odds of these young people succeeding in college.



Ohio State Vice President and Director of Athletics Gene Smith signs autographs for residents of the Circleville Juvenile Corrections facility as they got a taste of campus life in December.

CHEE is a research and policy center that promotes student success. Its work is centered on four major areas: Access, Affordability, Engagement and Excellence. In terms of engagement, CHEE is committed to cultivating mutually beneficial partnerships with other organizations, agencies, community leaders and businesses, all to promote student success.

Over the past year, CHEE has reached out to DYS, which includes Ohio's juvenile corrections system. Strayhorn and CHEE staff members Royel Johnson, policy analyst, and Joey Kitchen, postdoctoral researcher and program coordinator, met with DYS senior staff to brainstorm ways in which they might better support and promote students' educational success, and in the process better prepare them for re-entry into society.

In preparation for the campus visit, Strayhorn and his staff visited the Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility to observe classes and vocational training and get a feel for the environment these kids were coming from — both



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Next, it was time to introduce them to the Ohio State campus. The agenda for the day included a lunch, presentations from the financial aid and admissions offices, a tour of campus, dinner and a brush with an Ohio State athletic legend.

During the opening session, Strayhorn asked if any of the boys knew of any famous athletes from Ohio State. "Archie Griffin" was the near-unison response, referring to the two-time Heisman trophy winner. Minutes later, Griffin, OSU senior vice president for Alumni Relations, walked into the room, greeted the wide-eyed visitors and signed their Buckeyes caps provided by CHEE. The youthful visitors met with Griffin and Gene Smith, vice president and athletic director, who shared personal stories about the powerful role higher education played in their success, and encouraged the boys to aim higher, persevere and settle for nothing less than excellence.

The day concluded with a surprise trip to Nationwide Arena to see the Ohio State men's basketball team take on North Carolina A&T. While it was not the Buckeyes' usual Schottenstein Center venue, the impact was mind-boggling.

"Simply put, the young men were mesmerized by the sheer size of the arena, the lights and cameras, and the fact that it 'looked just like it does on television.' They wanted to run down and meet Brutus, too," Strayhorn recalled.

The daylong, custom-made campus visit was designed to expose the boys to higher education generally and Ohio State specifically, in response to the nation's young men of color crisis in education; to build staff capacity in helping DYS youth to access higher education; and to share accurate information that makes college seem possible and affordable for all.

By all accounts, the visit was transformative and fun.

One DYS youth gave an emotional account of how the visit impacted him. "This is just amazing. Literally, the best day of my life. When I came here to campus, I was free here (pointing to his heart). But now (pointing to his head), I'm free here, too."

Buckeye REACH students provide mentoring, good examples

CHEE's outreach efforts are not the only ones from Ohio State that involve incarcerated youth.

Buckeye REACH (Relationships and Education in Action through Community and Hope) is an award-winning program that gives Ohio State students an opportunity to build relationships with young people incarcerated in Ohio through the Department of Youth — giving the youth inmates positive examples and thereby reducing recidivism.

Through Buckeye REACH, Ohio State students travel to the Department of Youth Services facilities — this year at the Central Ohio Youth Center in Marysville; the Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facilities; the Franklin County Juvenile Detention Center; and the Ohio Reformatory for Women in Marysville — every other week to build relationships with local youth.

The program, which was brought to life by Patricia Cunningham, OSU director of student engagement, incorporates movie nights and book clubs, allowing Ohio State students to build connections and talk about everyday issues with the young people at the facilities. This program allows for the residents in youth corrections to see folks who are similar to them in age but are the culmination of different life choices and opportunities.

Buckeye REACH is a yearlong commitment by the OSU students, who are recruited for their passion about building meaningful relationships with the residents.

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