

STUDENTS

'Let's Talk About Your Grades'

By Katherine Mangan DECEMBER 15, 2015

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Ty Wright for The Chronicle

Anthony Walker (center), a high-school student in Columbus, Ohio, stands with Commodore Williams (left), a student at Ohio State U., and Joseph DePalma, an Ohio State alumnus, in the university's Thompson Library.

Commodore Williams sees a lot of himself in Anthony Walker, a wiry 15-year-old who loves singing and sports, but who tends to let his schoolwork slide. They met last year as freshmen, and they expect to graduate together three years from now — Commodore, from Ohio State University, and Anthony, from Whetstone High School here.

They're two-thirds of a three-person mentoring partnership, part of [an effort](#) that encourages Ohio State students to commit to civic engagement that goes beyond the quick-hit volunteer activities some call "poverty tourism."

Rounding out the threesome is Joseph DePalma, a 28-year-old high-school science teacher who graduated from Ohio State. He plans to be available for the four years to advise both Commodore and Anthony.

The mentoring program is one of more than 50 community-service projects in eight neighborhoods — mostly poor and predominantly black — and four corrections facilities that make up the Buckeye Civic Engagement Connection. Patricia Cunningham II, the university's director of social change, oversees the umbrella group, relying on "a small army" of paid undergraduate and graduate students, like Commodore, to run them.

At a time when campus demonstrations nationwide have brought greater awareness to the struggles of disenfranchised groups, programs like these are encouraging students to take meaningful steps outside their comfort zones.

Ms. Cunningham likes to call it the "Alice in Wonderland effect, where students go in thinking they're just going to help an emotionally disturbed kid," but come out a different person — or at least with a deeper perspective on poverty and privilege.

More than 800 Ohio State students participated in the civic-engagement programs last year, and the 10 college mentors in the pioneering group were culled from more than 200 applicants. The second class of mentors and mentees will be selected during the spring semester.

Mentors had to be willing to make a four-year commitment that involved at least two get-togethers or calls per month.

"The fact that they'll graduate together gives it a motivational push," says DaVonti' D. Haynes, an Ohio State senior who founded the mentoring program with Commodore.

DaVonti' credits a mentor he's had since eighth grade with pushing him to attend college and helping him apply. He's the youngest of four and the first to attend college; his oldest brother is in jail, he says, and another was killed while in high school.

"The point of the program is not to persuade everyone to attend Ohio State," DaVonti' says, "but just to go to college in general."



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Commodore Williams (right) shows Anthony Walker around the Thompson Library at Ohio State U., where Commodore has offered to help Anthony study.

The long-term commitment appealed more to Commodore than the less-taxing community-service activities that proliferate around the holidays.

"You can volunteer at a homeless shelter that gives free meals at Christmas and feel good about it," says Commodore, 20, "but those people will be hungry the rest of the year, and you're not doing anything about that."

He wants to play a meaningful role in Anthony's life.

"I'm still just in my second year in college, so I'm not someone with all this worldly wisdom who's telling him what to do," Commodore says. "It's not often that you have someone who's been through those experiences who's close enough to your age that you can relate to them."

Time Management

Over the four years, Commodore says, he and Anthony will commiserate about homework and girls, peer pressure and career goals. He will do his best to keep

Anthony on track for college. Joseph, the science teacher, will help both of them keep their sights on what comes after that.

On a recent, chilly evening, the three slide into a table at Starbucks for a post-bowling snack.

Asked what he likes about having a mentor, Anthony pauses for a moment. "I like being taken out and getting free food." Commodore groans as Anthony smiles sheepishly, pulls out his camera, and posts a picture of his Java Chip Frappuccino on Snapchat. "Never had one of these," he says.

"No, it's like another person I can vent to, who can give me advice," Anthony adds. Joseph sees an opening. "Let's talk about your grades."

Anthony: "Let's not." Long pause. "OK, I want to be a real-estate agent, and I need to go to college for that. I want to help my mom out by getting at least two years of scholarships. But I get lazy, and I don't know how to manage my time. If I do wrestling, my day's gone."

Commodore can identify. He played soccer all through high school. "There were years when I'd go home, eat ramen noodles, play soccer, eat Wendy's, do homework, game over," he says. "It gets harder to manage your time in college because there are so many distractions."

Anthony's biggest one is sitting in front of him: his phone.

"Everyone's wanting to Snapchat me," he says. "I wanna go to Ohio State, but I know you can't with just passing grades."

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Commodore says he can help Anthony get a scholarship, if he gets his grades up. Joseph adds that people will notice.

"If they see your GPA is improving, they'll know you're getting serious," Joseph says. "When I'm writing letters of recommendation, I can't tell you the number of students who say, 'I wish I'd tried harder.'"

Anthony nods, sinks into his chair, and checks his phone for reaction to his Snapchat post. Commodore tells him he's rearranged his spring schedule so they can do homework together.

"I'm pretty sure you'd be psyched to study in Thompson," the university library, he says.

Anthony does his best to look psyched for a study session.

"If you have less fun now, it'll definitely be worth it," Commodore says. "You just have to get into that mind-set. After a while, it gets easier."

'Not One-and-Done'

What isn't easy, both the mentors and mentees agree, is the transition to high school, when students are questioning their identities and struggling with tougher courses.

In addition, "technology has changed the game of social interaction for young people," says Ms. Cunningham, the university's social-change director, whom students call Dr. Patty. "When I got bullied, it ended when I got home, but now, they're hurting each other 24/7."

A mentorship program that spans four years is an ambitious undertaking where the stakes are high, says Ms. Cunningham, who received her bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees at Ohio State.

"These youth are particularly vulnerable. They're used to people quitting on them," says Ms. Cunningham, who also teaches interdisciplinary courses tackling issues such as poverty, race, gender, civic engagement, and leadership.

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"As a mentor, you have to decide, Can you handle sticking in there when your mentee doesn't get back to you because of teen angst or because she gets pregnant or he gets someone pregnant? Are you willing to have a difficult conversation with a parent or teacher? It's not one-and-done stuff. This ain't a puppy."

School-based mentoring programs have to last at least six months to be effective, but about half of such relationships fizzle out early, according to a national expert on youth mentoring.

"At best, such mentorships are not effective. At worst, they're harmful because they leave people feeling bereft," says Jean Rhodes, a professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts at Boston and director of its Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring.

Busy college students don't always appreciate how much work and patience goes into a mentoring relationship and often give up when their mentees don't show up or their families seem indifferent to their efforts, she says.

Those who stick it out gain valuable insight. "One of the hidden benefits of mentoring is that it takes middle-class adults and puts them in the shoes of the underserved," Ms. Rhodes says. "The ravages of poverty become much more tangible when you've experienced them firsthand with someone you care about."

On a recent evening at Ohio State, 27 student site leaders took turns reporting on the progress of their volunteer programs. They're a racially and socioeconomically diverse group; some returning to neighborhoods like the ones they grew up in and others seeing poverty up close for the first time.

One described an arts-and-crafts project at a nursing home where, following up on volunteers' reports, the university had earlier complained that residents weren't being properly cared for. Another was excited to learn that all nine of the inmates in a maximum-security juvenile-detention center he had helped prepare for job interviews had been hired by a local Burger King, even though it meant that someone would have to be there supervising them.

At other scattered sites, Ohio State students were teaching high-school students how to present TED-style talks, helping formerly homeless people find comfort in meditation, and teaching leadership skills to middle-school girls.

A common thread is the sustained commitment the student coordinators make to their programs, says Ms. Cunningham.

"When you're invested in someone long term, and someone invests in you long term," she says, "it can really make a difference."

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