

Early Middle College launching locally

Students hope to get a head start on college, career paths

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BENTON HARBOR — Getting a head start on a college education and a career path without worrying about the cost are the major draws of a program starting its first year

with 55 area students.

About three dozen students attended a cupcake reception Friday at Lake Michigan College for the Berrien County 5th Year Early Middle College Program.

“This program puts me ahead of everyone else in my class,” said David Fernandez, 16, a Berrien Springs High School junior. “They’ll be graduating with an associate’s

degree, if they get one, in 2020. I will be graduating with one in 2019. So I get that whole year advantage to get my life even further planned out.”

The reception, held at LMC campuses on Napier Avenue and Bertrand Crossing in Niles, closed a week-long “boot camp” designed to give an in-depth look at college life.

Getting students committed to college while

putting them on a path to success is the goal, according to Melissa Springsteen, 5th Year Early Middle College consultant for the Berrien Regional Education Service Agency.

“The essence is to allow the students to receive an associate’s degree as well as a high school diploma within the three-year program at no cost to them,” she said.

Three-Year Commitment

The program is a three-year commitment. Classes start Sept. 6.

Students apply as sophomores, and also must pass an interview to get accepted, Springsteen said.

Students then take three college classes in their junior and senior years of high school. By their third year, they’re attending college full-time.

“They delay their high

school graduation, but they get to walk at their high school commencement,” Springsteen said. “When they meet all of the (program) requirements, they get their associate’s degree from LMC, plus their high school diploma.”

This week’s boot camp focused on the nuts and bolts of college success, including academ

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requirements, campus resources, time management skills and “how to conduct themselves,” Springsteen said.

“For five days, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., it’s designed for them to self-reflect, think what their goals are, and what they’re getting into so there’s not a lot of surprises,” she said.

Bridgman, Buchanan, Coloma, Eau Claire, Lakeshore, Niles, River Valley, St. Joseph, and Watervliet are this year’s participating districts.

Ready to work

David, for one, can’t wait to get started.

“It (the week) really gave me a feel for what it’s going to be like in a college classroom,” he said.

He plans to become a certified public accountant, or work for the Internal Revenue Service.

Asked to name his favorite activity, David cited the “Be Real” game, which required him to plug in rough numbers for expenses, such

as a first house and car, and do a budget.

“It put me in perspective,” he said. “I figured I can manage money fairly well.”

St. Joseph High School sophomores Hunter Lange, 16, and his counterpart from Eau Claire, Liz Jorgensen, 16, also enjoyed the exercise.

Hunter is studying computer information systems, while Liz is leaning towards journalism. They plan on finishing their education at Grand Valley and Anderson State universities, respectively.

“Basically, the point of the game is to have a positive money balance,” Hunter said. “It was fun.”

“You had to manage your time, and the budget, so you had everything perfectly balanced out,” Liz said.

Both students also felt different after finishing the week.

“You walk into the lecture hall on Monday morning, you see 50 people you’ve never seen, and you’re desperately trying to find your friends,” he said.

Liz solved that problem by seeking people outside her

normal social circle, which is how she met Hunter.

“The kids from my school are awesome, but this program has helped intertwine the schools a little bit more,” she said.

No student expenses

Early Middle College is a partnership of LMC, Berrien RESA, and participating local school districts which cover tuition and fees, plus books and supplies, said Larissa Hunt, LMC’s director of early and middle college partnerships.

“There’s no out of pocket expense to the student,” she said.

Not worrying about those things makes a big difference, Hunter and Liz agree.

“This is definitely a better way of doing things, instead of hoping you get a scholarship or having to take out student loans,” Hunter said.

“I don’t have to pay a dime, and that’s awesome,” Liz said.

Early Middle College is a different initiative from LMC’s Early College program, which has served 8,834 students since it began in 2009, and now is available at 50 high

schools in Allegan, Berrien, Cass, Ottawa and Van Buren counties.

Early College offers dual enrollment and direct credit options in which high school students can take college classes for credit or get credentials as an adjunct, respectively, Hunt said. It is credited with saving \$12 million in tuition costs for local families, an LMC handout states.

“Early Middle College utilizes both direct enrollment and direct credit classes but allows a student to finish a full associate’s degree,” or transfer to a four-year school, if they wish, she added.

Early Middle College has existed for roughly four years but never had been offered in Berrien County until now. Hunt said it’s not difficult to see the benefit.

“From the beginning of the week, they tend to be very quiet,” she said. “By the end of the week, they’ve made new connections, have new friends and learned to access resources on campus. They are leaving prepared to start college in the fall, which is really exciting.”