

New Haven Register

Career Students Get a Taste of College

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By Elizabeth Benton

NEW HAVEN — Najeia Mention knows she's headed to college.

"It's not even a question," she said. "My stepmom always told me 'You're going to college.' It just sunk in."

This summer, Najeia, 15, and 46 of her Career High School classmates spent three weeks studying and rooming together at Yale University, getting an advance look at the type of place they'll be in a few years.

The Science Collaborative for Hands-On Learning and Research program, known as SCHOLAR, now in its 10th year, is a rigorous three weeks of science classes, college admissions guidance and interdisciplinary courses, including a class this year on Africa. Rising seniors also write their college application essays during the program.

All students in the tuition-free program have gone on to attend college, and two students have attended Yale. For half of the students in the program, they will be the first in their family to go to college.

Eleven years ago, Yale opened a partnership with Career, a science/health and business/technology magnet school. At that inception, a team of educators visited Xavier University in New Orleans, a historically black Catholic university with a record of getting 97 percent of its students into medical school. The team looked at Xavier's feeder high schools and noticed a trend, that almost all of their students were attending summer programs.

From that trip, SCHOLAR was born.

"The original intent was to give students a nugget of what students would be doing the following year in science classes," said Claudia Merson,

director of Public School Partnerships in the Yale Office of New Haven and State Affairs.

With Career's science teachers in class with university professors, the program also has developed into a more "organic" form of professional development, Merson said.

This year master's students in Yale's Urban Teaching Program also taught classes, in addition to SCHOLAR's core science curriculum.

Erin Ahearn-Leger, 16, of West Haven, has her heart set on attending UCLA. So much so that at one point, she thought she wouldn't apply anywhere else. "I want to go away," she said.

She's still got to sell her parents on the distance. "They're thinking no," she said, but dorm life this summer only has her more convinced.

"I got over the shared bathrooms," said Ahearn-Leger. "Living on campus is so great. It's like having sisters. We sit and we talk and watch movies, gossiping. ... One night we stayed up and cleaned the bathroom together. It was the greatest bonding experience."

From 6 to 9 p.m., after a full day of classes, the SCHOLAR students study together. "We can help each other along," said Ahearn-Leger. "I learned a lot more than I thought I would."

Beyond dorm bonding, the program's goal is to prepare students for their high school courses in the fall. "Across the board, they go back to their classrooms and become leaders, and it's only because they've been exposed," said Mount Holyoke College chemistry professor Connie Allen.

Allen is familiar with challenges some minority and first-generation college students face when they arrive on campus through her role as an academic dean at Mount Holyoke.

This year, she will transfer those skills to the high school level at the Academic Success Program in Dallas, where she will work to prepare minority and first-generation college applicants for attendance at top-tier schools.

“It’s these students we have to tap early on, to get them excited, and also to let them know they can succeed,” she said.

The SCHOLAR program is one of two residential programs at Yale specifically for New Haven students. There also are 12 Schafer Scholars taking Yale summer courses and boarding in the dorms.

SCHOLAR is limited to Career students, but Merson said there are preliminary plans to open a similar program for Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School students, with an arts focus.

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