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U-M students help prepare Hamtramck teens for college

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A pilot program that pairs University of Michigan students with Hamtramck High School students for tutoring, mentoring and college prep is showing enough promise that organizers hope they can raise money to expand it to more metro Detroit schools this year.

The program was created by the A. Scott Foundation, an Ann Arbor-based nonprofit, and receives volunteer help from students who represent several U-M student groups. The program was designed to work with low-performing high schools in metro Detroit that have low graduation rates.

M. Abul Azad, a program director at the foundation, said the idea came after he read stories about the 21% graduation rate in Detroit Public Schools.

So he set out to do something about it, settling on working with a district with a smaller population where his volunteers might make the most difference. They connected with Hamtramck High, where the 52% graduation rate is well below the state average of 75%.

Beginning in September 2009, the U-M students visited Hamtramck High twice a week for ACT exam preparation work and once a week for tutoring. They held workshops on essay writing and conducting college searches. They got the students involved in community service. They helped them apply for college and scholarships.

They got results. Students scored an average of 16.6 out of 36 points on a practice ACT exam in January. They subsequently took the official exam in March, June and September. When officials looked at the best score each student posted on those exams, the group average rose 30% to 21.6. ACT scores improved 15% from March to September.

Azad said the foundation has enough money to continue the program with this year's juniors at Hamtramck High. His vision is to expand the program to six more metro Detroit high schools, but he is now in the process of seeking grants from larger foundations to fund the expansion.

Anna Szuberla, 17, scored a 20 on the practice exam, and a 25 when she took the actual test in September.

"I really got a lot of cool things out of it," Szuberla said of the program.

For one, the foundation is paying college application fees for each student, for up to three colleges. It also paid the ACT fees for students taking the test a third time. Because most students in the district receive free or reduced lunch, the state covers the fee for the first two test takings.

There's also a mentoring relationship between the U-M and Hamtramck students. Szuberla's mentor is helping her with the college application process, including reading and editing her application essays before she sends them.

Among the volunteers is Munmun Khan, 19, a U-M sophomore. When the program started, Khan said, most of the Hamtramck students didn't think attending a four-year university was an option.

"They've just blossomed," Khan said. "They're not limited. They're more confident. They know what they want to do."



Hamtramck High School student Anna Szuberla, 17,
works on her math homework. She credits a program that provided
mentoring from a University of Michigan student with her performance on the
ACT exam. "I really got a lot of cool things out of it," she says.

(KATHLEEN GALLIGAN/Detroit Free Press)

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