

Career Series Articles

Dropouts: follow Pathways to career success

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July 22, 2007

Pathways Academy, Florida Community College's charter high school, is specifically for high-school dropouts and at-risk students in Duval County. It's one alternative for students who have become academically uninvolved.

Anyone involved with Pathways will tell you it's not just a way to catch up; it's a way to get ahead. Pathways provides technical training in high-wage, high-demand career fields such as IT, financial services, advanced manufacturing and robotics, automotive, biotechnology, biomedical equipment technology and construction trades. Students can earn college credit. They advance through the semester at their own pace. It's an innovative approach for students who aren't succeeding in traditional high school. It's provided at no cost to students. But it's not for everyone. There is a catch:

"You have to want it, to get it," says Cassie Barker, a 17-year-old who started at Pathways in January. "Otherwise there's no use [in your being there]; you're just taking up space."

Barker left high school in her freshman year due to family circumstances. She was scheduled to start at Pathways in August 2006. Her mother's death and subsequent family issues delayed her start, but Barker persevered, found a way around the obstacles and started in January. Her career goal is to be a criminal investigator.

Returning students Brittany Barnhart and Tempest Correia have somewhat similar stories. Their high-school careers were interrupted by matters not necessarily of their own doing—matters of the finances, health and family-related situations. Grades were not a problem. Attendance became impossible due to family matters. But unlike Barker, Barnhart and Correia were both in their senior year when they left high school.

Steven Sherbeck got his diploma from Pathways in May. His grades were good until his sophomore year, when he lost interest and quit going to school. He chose Pathways because he didn't want to "be a dropout and work minimum wage jobs forever." At Pathways he took A+ Certification classes—for free. He's employed by a small computer business now and looking into additional certification programs to increase his knowledge and income potential.

Pathways works for Barnhart, Correia and Barker and worked for Sherbeck largely because they want "it," the high school diploma and the chance to turn their lives around.

At Pathways, wanting it involves recognizing the link between educational success and career success. It involves balancing the freedom of working at your own pace with the responsibility to meet your commitments.

"Self-paced learning levels the playing field," is the opinion of Barnhart, whose long-term goal is to be a physician's assistant. She recognizes that not everyone learns at the same pace and relates her frustration in the past with classes where no one could move faster than the slowest to catch on, and it was difficult for anyone to get individual help.

Pathways provides abundant support from faculty, administration and case workers.

"Students will retreat when faced with problems," said Sabrina Willis, one of Pathways' five case managers.

Willis and the four other case managers see the students individually at a frequency determined by their "barriers"—having children, excessive absenteeism, runaways, substance abuse. They help provide the life skills and social skills to help students advance rather than retreat. Willis is also facilitator of the JAG (Jobs for America's Graduates) curriculum, a stay-in-school program that grooms students for the work world, meeting one hour daily.

Barker, Barnhart and Correia recently accompanied Jewel Johnson, community, industry and dual enrollment coordinator, to Orlando for a JAG conference. There they provided testimony to about 500 people on the employability and social skills they gained from JAG and Pathways. They rocked.

"I've learned that with this population of students there's always more than meets the eye," said Johnson. "Our students possess potential for greatness. They simply need the support of a team of adults willing to assist them in their transformation."

Correia works hard at her studies in pursuit of a career in computer engineering and programming. Having to take time off to care for her sick child was possible because of the self-paced schedule, the help of the faculty and the support of her case manager.

"No excuses. The resources are there. You are in charge of yourself," says Correia.

Prospective students (ages 16-20) and parents may attend the Pathways Academy Recruitment Fair at Downtown Campus, July 28 from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. Call Pathways Academy at 904.633.8125 for information.

*Tuition and fees are subject to change by action of the College's District Board of Trustees. Current tuition and fees will be posted at the time of registration.