

Donor Spotlight

Gateway to Economic Self-Sufficiency Scholarship Skyrockets at Startup

Nationally rising tuitions and a difficult economy increase the sacrifices that many of today's students must make to obtain a college education. But for some, getting an education at Bucks County Community College is a life line – literally the path to a permanent escape from poverty.

That's where the BCCC Foundation helps. Led by Executive Director, Tobi Bruhn, the foundation secures donors and manages the distribution of all student scholarships. But how do they connect the donated money to the students who have both the greatest financial need, and who are committed to working to earn a degree?

Interestingly, the focus of another entity, Bucks County Opportunity Council (BCOC), is to help low-income families to permanently leave poverty. Through its Economic Self-Sufficiency Program (ESSP), the council helps participants acquire education, skills and employment. They understand first-hand the value of an education from Bucks. In fact, 71% of the ESSP participants are attending or have attended Bucks.

The relationship between Bucks and the BCOC makes perfect sense, according to Bob and Lore Eichfeld, sponsors of the *Gateway to Economic Self-Sufficiency Scholarship*. The BCOC has worked for nearly two decades to address the multi-faceted causes of local poverty. Lore, a registered nurse, joined its board of directors. For Bob, a retired Citigroup executive with a penchant for microeconomics, giving the scholarship a financial kick-start simply made sound economic sense.

Initially, the couple sponsored the tuition for one nursing student, and it was her success buoyed by the notable support of coaches from the ESSP that prompted them to replicate their smaller scale philanthropy to benefit more students. It took the collaboration of the BCCC Foundation and the BCOC, and more than a year of planning to create the scholarship. When the Eichfeld's hosted a special event with an initial goal to raise \$20,000, the multi-year commitments of the attending donors successfully netted over \$48,000, more than doubling their expectations.



Bucks County Opportunity Council's Senior Self-Sufficiency Coach Deb Rosenberg (right) with her client Melissa.

This speaks volumes to the value of not only meeting tuition needs, but having the additional wrap-around support of the BCOC to help keep students on track. One way to envision the significance is to consider that given Bucks' current tuition rates, the amount raised could fully cover two year's tuition for seven needy students. That is potentially seven new workers: nurses, IT specialists, business professionals, or videographers who would have, had it not been for a scholarship, remained on welfare indefinitely. What's more, significantly more students could be impacted if the awarded scholarships work in conjunction with government grants or federal loans which they often do.

What will make the Gateway Scholarship Program successful, Lore believes, is that potential students are first vetted by the BCOC. They are then partnered with coaches who mentor, counsel, coach, and hold each student accountable to their agreed goals. This reinforces a commitment to getting an education. And their coaches help them stay in their chosen educational program at Bucks so that they can and do leave poverty permanently, as opposed to coping in it.

Ultimately, Bob says, "This eliminates welfare and helps the taxpayer too." Considering that the Economic Self-Sufficiency Program is not an entitlement program, it's tough to argue with BCOC's figures. "It actually saves \$4 in cash welfare subsidies for every \$1 invested in a successful graduate," according to BCOC's Executive Director Roger Collins.

For the individual participants, the opportunity is life changing. Students graduating from Bucks and the ESSP become self-sufficient, providing the needed boost for themselves and for their families. Considering that the average income of program participants is \$10,600 and that at graduation it is nearly quadrupled to \$39,633, it is also an investment in the economic stability of the community as they purchase goods and services. Their education also benefits local businesses and hospitals that need trained workers.

The Gateway to Economic Self-Sufficiency Scholarship provides the opportunity to students who are committed to their own education, but who could not otherwise be able to afford the quality education that Bucks has to offer.

To make a tax-deductible donation to the Gateway to Economic Self-Sufficiency Scholarship, contact the BCCC Foundation at 215-968-8224 or foundation@bucks.edu.

Written by Kimberly Kratz, Class of 2011.

