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UK effort aids first-generation college students

By Nancy C. Rodriguez • nrodriguez@courier-journal.com • July 22, 2010

The University of Kentucky has launched a program to help first-generation college students earn a bachelor's degree.

The First Scholars Program is being funded with a \$1.1million grant from the Suder Foundation, a Texas-based organization that helps such students go to college and succeed there. Part of the grant is being used to establish a scholarship program that targets first-generation students, known as the Suder Scholars program.

Citing UK's goal of providing Kentucky students with a "world-class education," university President Lee Todd said the Suder Scholars program "will help us do just that by swinging open the doors of opportunity to young people from across the commonwealth."

The first group of 20 Suder Scholars will start at UK this fall. The grant will pay for another group of 20 scholars in fall 2011.

Upperclassmen will help

Each Suder Scholar receives a partial scholarship. They also will be paired with upperclassmen who are first-generation students themselves to help them navigate their first year of college. The scholars also will attend a retreat, receive academic and study support, and take part in community service and campus activities. In exchange,


average and commit to live on campus their freshmen year.

For Brandy Denton, who recently graduated from Butler High School in Louisville, being selected as one of the first Suder Scholars is helping relieve anxiety about finding her way around UK's 670-acre campus.

"They're going to help us make sure we know what we're doing and where we're going," said Denton, who plans to major in special education. "It's not just the scholarship. It's also the team-building, and we're going on a retreat. It's really going to be a good opportunity to meet people."

Students selected as Suder Scholars must come from families where the parents have no education beyond high school. They must have attended high school in Kentucky, have ACT college-entrance exam scores of 22 or higher, have a high school grade-point average of 3.3 or higher and have applied for federal financial aid.

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UK officials said 292 students applied for the program this year.

Less ready for college

Research indicates that first-generation students are less academically and financially prepared for college, and have more difficulty acclimating themselves once they enroll. They also are less likely to complete a degree program because of delayed enrollment, part time enrollment and full-time work while enrolled.

Just 24 percent of first-generation students earn bachelor's degrees, compared with 68 percent of those whose parents attended college, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Matthew Deffendall, director of the First Scholars Program at UK, said first-generation students often are at a disadvantage on campus because their support system of family and friends does not have the background to provide guidance.

Donisha Peyton of Lexington, who will serve as one of the First Scholars mentors, said: "You really don't have a parent to tell you the experience of college and how the academic work will be different. You really don't have anyone who can prepare you for that."

"One of my biggest struggles was learning that I was more responsible for my success than the professors were," said Peyton, a junior family studies major at UK. "I had to

learn that really quickly. I had to take more responsibility and really, really study."

In Kentucky, where just 19.7 percent of adults age 25 and older hold bachelor's degrees, about 22 percent of students at public, four-year universities report they are first-generation students, based on data from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

At UK, which started collecting data on first-generation students in 2006, 17 percent of incoming freshmen in 2009 did not have a parent who has gone to college.

Dropout rate rises

University data show that first-generation students tend to persist in their first few years in college. But by the beginning of their third year, they drop out at higher rates than their overall class.

"They get lost in the cracks," said Eric Suder, founder and president of the Suder

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Foundation. "It's through no fault of these young people. In fact, they have accomplished a lot by having the dream to go to college and being accepted, but they have all this stuff working against them and they flunk out. ... It's just a total loss to everybody."

The foundation, which was formed in 2008, sought out public, land-grant institutions like UK to launch its First Scholars Program. Suder said UK's enthusiasm stood out, as did its efforts to increase student access and success, including its works to reduce dropouts and its Robinson Scholars program, which is focused first-generation students from Eastern Kentucky.

The Suder Foundation also is paying for a pilot program to be established at the University of Utah.

Effort began in 2009

The foundation initially awarded UK a \$55,000 planning grant in 2009 to hire a director for the First Scholars Program and get it up and running. Last month, UK and the foundation signed an agreement that included the \$1.1million from Suder that will cover operating costs for the program and the first two groups of Suder Scholars. Eventually, it is expected that UK will take over funding of the program and scholarships.

Deffendall said that while UK has programs to support first-generation students, many of those efforts "have been isolated and focused on a few students."

The First Scholars Program aims to have a broader reach, offering support and programs for first-generation students across campus, he said. That includes starting a first-generation student organization, offering specialized introduction to college courses geared toward first-generation students, and organizing workshops and lectures on topics such as transitioning to college.

Reporter Nancy Rodriguez can be reached at (502) 582-7079.



University of Kentucky President Lee Todd said the First Scholars Program will help open the doors or opportunity to all of the state's students. (File photo)

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