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Where every grad earns a scholarship



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Ron Anderson has a perfect record. Of the 180 students who have graduated from Southland College Prep Charter High School since 2014, every one of them has received a college scholarship, and many have been offered more than one.

Harvard, Yale, Duke, the University of Pennsylvania, Washington University, Notre Dame, the University of Illinois, and the University of Virginia, just to name a few, have provided the scholarships.

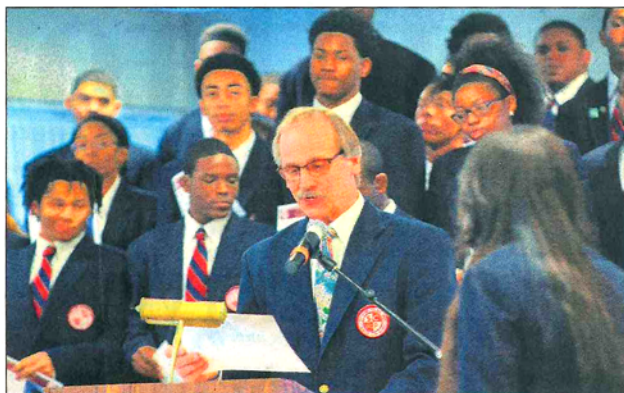
On Wednesday, the school in Richton Park held a ceremony for its second class of graduating seniors, at which it announced the scholarship offers each student has received.

Anderson, the college counselor, has mentored each of this year's 109 seniors individually for two years, getting them ready for that moment.

Students at Southland College Prep do not have to qualify for the high school through academic achievement. They are not chosen by race or economic need. The school is open to any eighth-grade graduate who resides within the Rich Township High School District 227 attendance boundaries. A lottery is held each year to determine which of the students who apply will get chosen.

Despite the random nature of the selection process, 100 percent of the graduating seniors have been awarded scholarships.

"That's \$12.5 million worth of scholarships for this year's class," Anderson said, proudly adding, "Those aren't scholarships tied to income. Those are purely instructional scholarships."



GARY MIDDENDORF/DAILY SOUTHTOWN PHOTOS

Southland College Prep Charter High School teacher James Kowalsky calls up each senior during an ceremony to announce what scholarships each student has received.

He quickly credits the faculty at Southland College Prep for the academic achievements of the students, and Blondevan Davis, its chief executive officer, who basically launched the first charter school in the suburbs out of frustration with the public high schools in District 227 (Rich Central, Rich South and Rich East).

Davis, who also is superintendent in Matteson School District 162, grew tired of watching her students excel at the grade school level only to struggle academically coming out of high school.

After a prolonged battle with District 227 school officials, who didn't want to share financial resources with a charter school, Davis ultimately convinced the state to grant the charter, although negotiations resulted in requirements that Southland accept students from throughout the district (not just Matteson) and that enrollment be limited to 500 students.

One of the many prominent innovations she enacted was the hiring of a specialist (at a six-figure salary) to prepare students to be accepted by universities after graduation.

"I was retired," Anderson recalled. "I had been chief of staff at the City Colleges of Chicago and for 13 years was at the University of Chicago. I was an administrator there for admissions in the MBA and Ph.D. programs."

"I ran into an old colleague who was going to work at Southland Prep and she began telling me about this new school and the approach it was going to take and I thought maybe I would volunteer there and see if I could help out in some way."

Davis talked to Anderson, now 64, and the next thing he knew she was offering him a job.

So what is Anderson's secret? Even allowing that

teachers at Southland are special, the administration extraordinary, getting scholarship offers for every graduating student has to be a record, if ever matched, that cannot be exceeded.

"I think that one thing we do that makes us special is that we have a very individualized, customized process for each of our students," he said. "It starts at the end of their junior year, after they have taken their ACT exams. We use a matrix, based on their grade-point average and ACT, to determine what

there are people on our staff who may know people there. And we try to find out as much about a school's admission practices and policies as we can. Why do they choose certain students and reject others? What is it they are looking for in a student and what scholarship opportunities are available?"

Together with the student, he draws up a list of goals.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg. Anderson works with each student individually on his or her writing and personal inter-



Blair Flowers waits for his name to be called Wednesday at an assembly which honored this year's 109 seniors.

schools might be best for them and where they might have the best chance, not only of getting a scholarship, but succeeding in college once they get there."

Anderson also talks to the students, a lot, about what they want. What sort of college are they looking for, big or small? Is there a particular area of study they are interested in? Would they like to travel far from home, and if so, is that something they could handle emotionally, as well as intellectually?

"We eventually identify a pool of schools, maybe 10 or 15 colleges, where a student has a real chance of acceptance based on their academics and personal needs," he said. "Since I've been in this business for many years, I have contacts in schools across the country, people I know, and then

view techniques.

"I help students tell their stories," Anderson said, when asked what it is he does that has produced such success. "Most students, even the ones who have great academic records, really have a difficult time talking and writing about themselves."

"I believe, based on my years of experience, that you can write yourself into a school or write yourself out of a school. That's how important the essay portion of a college application is."

"So I have the students keep a diary, actually I call it a log, where they have to write something every day. Three to five times a day they just have to write something, logging the time of day and what they are doing. It's an effort to get them to think about writing, to improve their writing, so that when it comes

time to the essay they can tell their story in a way that will get the attention of the admissions office.

"The personal interview, and in many colleges once you get them to read the essay you have to sit down for an interview with the admissions board or the people who will award scholarships, is almost as important. Again, you have to be able to talk about yourself in a way that isn't bragging, but communicates to the person in the interview just who you are and why you deserve this great opportunity."

"So we work on these things, the writing and the interview. And if you can write, it will help you in every aspect of your life, even after high school and college."

"In this day and age of talking and texting, writing is a skill that very few people have. I want them to tell a very compelling story about themselves, and that's the key, I believe."

The process doesn't end with acceptance to college and the offer of a scholarship.

"We believe it's important to make sure our students are doing well, both academically and personally, once they leave here," he said. "So we try to keep track of all of our students in college. We want to know how they are doing in class and outside of class. We try to put them in touch with someone on campus who we know can mentor them, a faculty member, administrator, even another student."

"We want them to have someone they can go to for help when they're away from home and have a question or a problem."

"At Southland we're not just interested in preparing students for college, but making sure they do well in college and that they are successful after college, in their careers and their personal lives."

Southland College Prep is in the process of forming an alumni club so that the students who graduated can return and help the students currently enrolled.

I asked Anderson, given his record of success obtaining scholarships and college placements for students, if there's one university that he has been unable to crack.

"Harvard," he said.

"We've come close a couple of times. But I have a couple of candidates right now, juniors, who I believe have a really good chance of getting admitted to Harvard next year. I'm confident we're going to do it. Soon. But Harvard is really a tough nut to crack."