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Number of Baltimore County high school graduates going to college increases

But more work has to be done to keep students in college long enough to graduate

By Liz Bowie, The Baltimore Sun

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Tony Smith was an average ninth-grade student with an interest in basketball when one of his teachers at Owings Mills High suggested he sign up for a program that would help him get into college. Now a junior, Smith has taken the SATs twice, compiled a list of colleges to apply to and set a career goal of becoming an accountant.

Without being taught study skills and pushed to take more advanced-level classes, Smith and a number of students at Owings Mills High in Baltimore County said they would be right where many of their friends are: with no idea where to apply to college or what academic skills they need to survive there.

"I was more mediocre," Smith said but the program at Owings Mills "gave me more study time and study habits."

With the help of efforts like the one at Owings Mills High, the county has had success in increasing its rate of students attending college in the past several years. The county saw 61 percent of its graduates in 2009 go to college, up from 54 percent in 2002.

Baltimore County is one of a handful of systems in the state that keep track of such data. In Harford County, 64 percent of its graduates went to college in 2009; Montgomery County had 68 percent; and Baltimore City had 47.5 percent.

"Teachers and administrators have worked very hard to change the college-going culture in our schools," said Lynne Mullen, head of guidance counseling in Baltimore County. "So students have gotten the message ... [that] having a bachelor's degree is the answer to being competitive in a global economy."

Even though school districts are working to get more of their students to college, far too many capable students still don't make it and educators argue the country's economy needs them. While not every student needs to go to college, the Obama administration has set a national goal of having 55 percent of young people finish college by 2020. A Georgetown University report released last week said unless the nation changes course, there will be a dearth of 3 million workers with the right training and education by 2018.

Baltimore City and Baltimore, Harford, Montgomery and St. Mary's counties use the National Student Clearinghouse, a service they must pay for, to track what happens to their graduates. Maryland's data system isn't yet good enough to know what is happening after its students graduate.

But it is clear that a lack of preparation in high school and financial aid has meant many students never earn a college degree.

In Baltimore County, more than 80 percent of the students attending college return for their sophomore years, but then the numbers drop off. Only 31 percent of 2003 graduates earned a two- or four-year degree within six years of finishing high school. That compares with 38 percent in Harford, 51 percent in Montgomery and 11.7 percent in Baltimore City.

"These are not good numbers," Sonja Brookins Santelises, chief academic officer for Baltimore public schools, said of the city's statistics. "We, in our secondary schools, have to really grapple with how do we prepare our students to be successful in college."

William E. Kirwan, chancellor of the state's university system and who has made the issue a priority, calls the city's graduation statistics "a tragedy." He said the data point to a need for more collaboration between school districts and colleges and universities.

The country's college attendance and graduation rate has international ramifications because of the global competition for jobs.

"For most of the 20th century, we led the world in high school and college completion and that gave us a huge competitive edge. We built the strongest economy and a large middle class," Kirwan said.

But that has changed and the nation now ranks 10th in the world in the percentage of young adults with a degree. About 39 percent of young people in the United States have a college degree, although Maryland does better at 43 percent.

Like many suburban counties in Maryland, Baltimore County has opened up advanced placement courses to all students. It gives the PSATs to every student beginning in ninth grade and has instituted programs like Advancement Via Individual Determination, a class for students in the academic middle who show promise but who aren't necessarily headed for college. AVID teaches students study skills and time management and gives them academic supports to move to honors and advanced classes.

Diane Garbarino, principal of Owings Mills High, said the faculty talks to students about college more than ever before. But there are still obstacles.

"Parents who haven't been to college don't have the experience with how to apply to college," she said.

She added that some of her students face financial barriers and that more are going to two-year colleges than they did a few years ago, she said.

A group of students in the AVID classes at Owings Mills, a racially and economically diverse school in Baltimore County, said most of their friends say they want to go to college, but many haven't done much to get there.

"Almost everyone wants to go to college. They just aren't as dedicated or they have a lack of knowledge," Smith, the rising senior, said.

"This class puts you out there into the adult world learning about what standards you must meet," said Monique Dupye, who wants to go into fashion design or marketing.

Santelises and Kirwan believe that the adoption of the new common core standards by a number of states, including Maryland, will help boost the rigor of high school courses. Kirwan said there is a large gap between what students need to learn to graduate from high school and what skills they need to go to college. But the new curriculum that will be developed for students will start with the assumption that if you graduate from high school, you should be able to do college-level work.

The university system also is trying to reach out to middle-schoolers through an initiative called Way to Go Maryland, which informs parents and students that they must begin to take tough courses as early as middle school to prepare. In Baltimore City, for instance, most students don't take Algebra I until ninth grade, so late that students would have difficulty taking calculus by the time they graduate unless they doubled up on math classes.

"One of the things we know that keeps kids in high school is if they can imagine themselves in college," said Nancy Shapiro, the university system's associate vice chancellor for academic affairs.

The program also tries to help parents understand the financial aid that is available and how to get it, since one of the barriers to going to college is paying for it. The university system also is encouraging students to start at two-year colleges and finish their degrees at a four-year university, which will save students and the system money and allow for an increase in the number of students who can earn degrees.

"How do you expect students who have never been to college to navigate this very complicated process?" Shapiro said.

Kirwan thinks public school guidance counselors, who often advise hundreds of students, may not have the time to do as much college advising as is needed, particularly in families where the parents have never gone to college.

"We are realizing that there is a huge amount we can do to make this process more efficient. It is not just that the courses have to be taught at a higher level," Shapiro said.

Kahrah Williams said that when she is around her friends at Owings Mills, she understands just how powerful a force her AVID class has been over her high school years. "I want to ask them what is their goal," she said.

"I have my mind fully made up," she said, but without the push, "I never would have thought about college."

liz.bowie@baltsun.com

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