Stamford college program aims to combat ‘summer melt’

Sophie Vaughan
June 22, 2019

Rebecca Wilson, Coordinator for College and Career Readiness, Stamford Public Schools, addresses recent high school graduates at a Kickoff event for a new "Bridge to College" program at Stamford’s Old Town Hall on June 20, 2019. Stamford Cradle to Career organized the event, which is working to address the gap between the percent of Stamford ...

Photo: Matthew Brown / Hearst Connecticut Media

STAMFORD — When Nevin Avila got an envelope from his guidance counselor at Stamford High School earlier this month he felt a weight lift from his shoulders.
The envelope contained information about a new pilot program — Bridge to College, that aims to decrease the number of Stamford Public Schools students who graduate with the intention of attending college but fail to follow through come the fall, a phenomena known as “summer melt.”

Nationally, “melt rates” range from 10 to 44 percent, according to Lindsay Page of the University of Pittsburgh and her research partner Ben Castleman at the University of Virginia, who study the problem. Rates are higher for low-income students, those who intend to enroll at a community college and those who are the first generation in their family to attend college.

In Stamford, overall melt rates are unknown, but last year, only 63 percent of first-generation Stamford Public School graduates bound for Norwalk Community College actually matriculated at the school.

“What happened to the other 37 percent? We don’t know, but hopefully we’ll never say that we don’t know again,” Rebecca Wilson, Coordinator for College and Career Readiness for Stamford Public Schools, told the crowd at a kickoff for the Bridge to College Program Wednesday night.

A few parents were scattered across the room, but the bulk of attendees, about 60, were students who just two days before graduated from Stamford High or Westhill High School.

Of the 1,076 students who graduated from Stamford’s public high schools on Monday, approximately 190, or about 18 percent, reported that they plan to attend NCC in the fall. All of these students were invited to join Bridge to College and attend the kickoff.

Among them was Avila, who just graduated from Stamford High and said he’s planning to attend NCC because it will allow him to save money.

There was also Louise Pretesto, who immigrated to Stamford with her family from the Philippines two years ago and on Monday, graduated from Westhill.
scholarships and course registration at the school.

Stamford High graduate Tairi Contreras heard about the event from her friend Michael Leiva, who just graduated from Westhill.

“I thought it was a good way to get informed because I wouldn’t know what to do otherwise,” said Contreras, who wants to study nursing at NCC and said her mom graduated from college in Puerto Rico but like her, has difficulty navigating the U.S. college process, including complicated federal financial aid and enrollment forms.

Andrea Forlenzo and Thomas Agosto’s sole goal this summer as counselors for Bridge to College is to help the NCC-bound students through the hurdles—financial, familial and logistical, that could discourage students like Avila, Pretesto and Contreras from starting at NCC in the fall.

Forlenzo and Agosto will put close focus on first-generation students, who account for about half of the 190 students planning to attend NCC. One of the program’s main goals is to raise the matriculation rate for NCC-bound first-generation students from Stamford Public Schools from 63 percent to 75 percent.

Posters with Forlenzo and Agosto’s phone numbers lined the room Wednesday, and they urged the students to text or call them whenever they have a question or hit a roadblock in preparing for NCC.

Both have experience working with students in the district. Forlenzo just finished her fourth year as a counselor at Stamford High, where she also coordinate’s the school’s College and Career Center.

Agosto is Stamford High’s dean of students. He told attendees Wednesday that for him, the Bridge Program is personal because he himself attended NCC, with guidance from his sister, and said NCC opened doors that allowed him to later graduate from Fairfield University, participate as a Peace Corps volunteer in Costa Rica, and rise to his current position.

“If I didn’t have my sister to assist me with that process I possibly wouldn’t have attended Norwalk Community College, so that’s my goal, to assist you in any way I can,” Agosto
Bridge to College, estimated to cost about $26,000, is organized and primarily funded by Stamford Cradle to Career, a program of the United Way of Western Connecticut, in partnership with Stamford Public Schools and other community organizations, such as the Stamford Public Education Foundation.

“Eventually we want to scale this program so it reaches the number of students who need this support,” said Cradle to Career President Bridget Fox, who noted the idea for Bridge to Career came from models that have seen success throughout the country.

The program is being spearheaded by a Cradle to Careers committee jointly chaired by Wilson, the coordinator for college and career readiness for the Stamford schools, Board of Education member Jennienne Burke and Academy of Information Technology & Engineering Principal Tina Rivera.

Wilson said Bridge to College is personal for her, much like it is for Agosto. She, too, went to NCC after graduating from Stamford High because her family didn’t have the resources for her to go to a four-year school.

“The reality is that I started in many places (the Bridge to Career students) have started. From the same neighborhoods and the same sort of life,” Wilson said in an interview the day after the event. “There was a gap for me and things happened in that gap of time and I wish I had been in that chair to get the type of support we’re offering.”

Wilson was a teen mom and said NCC gave her the base she needed to go on to graduate from Sacred Heart University and later earn her masters in social work from Fordahm University. She then graduated from a sixth year school counseling program at Fairfield University.

For a decade before coming to work in the school district’s central office, Wilson worked as a guidance counselor at Stamford High and told the students she couldn't help from “dropping jewels” of wisdom because she wanted them to have the opportunities she didn’t.

“Make the commitment that first of all, you deserve to be in college at NCC, you will be there, you will achieve and, already claim it, you will graduate,” Wilson told the students Wednesday.
The results of Bridge to College won’t be apparent until NCC classes start in August, but students this week seemed responsive and open to the opportunities and encouragement Wilson and the other Bridge to College staff are providing.

Avila, the Stamford High graduate, said some in his generation struggle to “have a sight” for their future.

“But we know what direction to take once we get the required help,” he said.

svaughan@hearstmediact.com; 203-964-2265; @SophieCVaughan1