COMMENTARY

Beth Swanson and Walter Massey: Nonprofit is helping City Colleges of Chicago students make it to the finish line

By Beth Swanson and Walter Massey
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Graduates of Malcolm X College stand May 1, 2022, at Wintrust Arena during the City Colleges of Chicago commencement ceremony for associate degree earners. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)
For nearly half of U.S. college students, the dream of higher education begins in community college. For far too many of them, it ends there too.

So let’s take a moment to celebrate the 3,600 City Colleges of Chicago graduates who were honored at commencement ceremonies on Saturday. Each of those diplomas is a hard-won ticket to economic mobility.

The success story within that success story is One Million Degrees, or OMD, a Chicago nonprofit that helps community college students overcome barriers that can derail their hope of earning a degree. This year’s graduates include 274 who benefited from the program. Remarkably, three of seven valedictorians in City Colleges this year are OMD scholars.

- Jamiyah Lee from Harold Washington College took advantage of an apprenticeship program through a partnership between City Colleges and Aon. She’s now working toward a bachelor’s degree in finance at DePaul University.

- Christina Bernabe from Richard J. Daley College interned at Argonne National Laboratory and was part of the inaugural cohort in a program for students interested in combating climate change. She’s now studying business at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

- Stephanie Meeks from Olive-Harvey College earned an associate degree in psychology and now is enrolled in the medical assisting program at Malcolm X College. She plans to transfer to a four-year university to earn a nursing degree.

Despite an array of challenges and setbacks — financial, personal and academic — they were able not just to complete their degrees but also to excel.

As Chicagoans, we owe it to our young people and to our city to do everything in our power to provide all students with such opportunity. Despite its aspirational name, though, One Million Degrees has historically served only a relative handful of students who had to discover it and apply to participate. Now is the time to make a significant public investment in this proven model.

Last fall, we joined fellow members of the City Colleges of Chicago board of trustees in approving a four-year plan to embed OMD’s services throughout the City Colleges system and begin to transition to public funding. Under this partnership, thousands of City Colleges students will automatically be enrolled in the OMD program, giving them access to professional and academic coaching and financial support.

[Meg Bates and Mariana Barragan Torres: How to keep students in Illinois for college]

Research by the University of Chicago Inclusive Economy Lab shows that an associate degree translates to a person increasing their earnings by more than 30% over a lifetime. But despite the
relatively low cost, those diplomas aren’t within easy reach for many students. Nationwide, only 1 in 3 community college students earn an associate degree within three years, according to federal education data.

Why? Because cost is only one of many barriers. Low-income students at City Colleges already qualify for federal Pell grants or Chicago STAR scholarships, which cover tuition and books. But they face a number of other hurdles.

Many are first-generation college students with no adult mentor to guide them through admissions or financial aid applications. They need help selecting and scheduling courses strategically, and they may lack the study skills to succeed academically. They need help setting goals, writing resumes and building networks that will help connect their degrees to employment opportunities. Many are family breadwinners or caregivers who must juggle their studies with other daunting responsibilities.

One Million Degrees takes on all these obstacles simultaneously. It provides last-dollar financial aid, personal coaching, free tutoring and mandatory professional development workshops for which students earn annual stipends of up to $1,000.

Grades slipping? Your OMD program coordinator can help adjust your course load and sign you up for tutoring. Missing class because of commuting costs? OMD can cover your bus fare. Second thoughts about your major? Talk it through with your coach.

Early results of an ongoing randomized controlled trial conducted by the University of Chicago’s Inclusive Economy Lab show that OMD scholars are more likely to enroll full time, to persist through their first year of community college and to earn a degree or certificate within three years when compared with a control group. Overall, 46% of OMD students in the trial graduated in three years compared with 39% of similar students.

Because of this documented success, City Colleges and OMD are determined to offer these services throughout the system — and have the confidence to seek public funding to do so. Under the plan approved in November, City Colleges will invest $5 million from 2023-26, supplemented by more than $10 million in philanthropic support. City Colleges has committed to covering direct costs in Year 5 and beyond.

This partnership will provide life-changing opportunities for thousands of aspiring college students. They’ll emerge prepared for the jobs that are critical to Chicago’s economic well-being. It’s hard to imagine an investment that promises greater return for taxpayer dollars.

Beth Swanson is CEO of A Better Chicago, a venture philanthropy that invests in nonprofits that help children escape poverty. She is vice chair of the City Colleges of Chicago board of trustees and
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