



Renaissance Scholars Program to Aid Foster Youth

September 06, 2006

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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For a former foster youth like Charvett Blincoe, the odds of getting a university education are pretty slim. Barely 50 percent of foster kids graduate from high school.

Yet Blincoe and dozens of other students at California State University, East Bay will get the support they need to earn a degree from a new university initiative launching this fall.

The Renaissance Scholars Program will aid foster youth and emancipated foster youth with scholarships, housing assistance, counseling and emergency funds.

A reception to launch the program was held Sept. 12. Assemblyman Mark Leno, an advocate for foster youth, presented the university with a proclamation at the reception. Leno is the author of AB 2489, reform legislation crafted to help California's foster youth achieve their higher education goals.

The first 20 students will enter Cal State East Bay's Renaissance Scholars Program when classes begin on Sept. 27. Each year after the first year, 10 new students will be accepted into the program. A \$19,000 planning grant from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation is helping jump-start the program.

About 146 former foster kids and wards of the state were enrolled at Cal State East Bay in the last academic year. Foster youth automatically "age out of the system" when they turn 18. Many are left on their own to find housing and jobs to support themselves.

Of the 50 percent of foster kids who manage to graduate from high school, only 20 percent enroll in colleges, according to a report published in December by the Institute for Higher Education Policy in Washington, D.C. Studies show the likelihood of those students earning a degree ranges from less than 1 percent to 5.4 percent.

Blincoe entered the foster care system at age 15 and had five placements before she turned 18. Getting to Cal State East Bay wasn't easy.

"I didn't feel like I had anyone backing me up," said Blincoe, now 21 and a business major. "There was no one saying, 'Wow, Charvett, you can go to college.' There was no one pushing me."

Blincoe, who lives on her own with a five-year-old daughter, first found encouragement through the Independent Living Skills Program for foster youth in Alameda County.

As a Cal State East Bay student, she served on the task force that created the Renaissance Scholars Program. She plans to graduate in 2008.

For former foster youth such as herself, she said, having financial assistance is vital. But the counseling support the program can provide is even more crucial to achieving the dream of a university degree.

"One of the biggest things I need now is the honest truth," she said. "I don't have a parent's support and guidance to offer me direction. I think it's great that the Renaissance Scholars Program will provide that support."

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