

A close-up, side-profile photograph of a person wearing a dark blue graduation cap and gown. The person's face is partially obscured by the cap, and their hair is visible. The background is blurred, showing other people in similar attire.

# College Access

## NEBRASKA

Successful college access activities from Nebraska high schools

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*College Access Nebraska* is a publication of the EducationQuest Foundation *College Access Grants* Program. If you have questions about the information in this publication, contact Eric Drumheller, Director of Grants & Scholarships, at 800.303.3745, ext. 6622 or [ericd@educationquest.org](mailto:ericd@educationquest.org). Contact information for the schools featured in this publication, and for other grant-funded schools, is provided on pages 25-26.

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# About *College Access Nebraska*

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*College Access Nebraska* highlights successful college access activities developed by Nebraska high schools selected to receive an EducationQuest Foundation *College Access Grant* in 2006. While the activities are based on grant criteria, the schools have found innovative and practical ways to implement the activities at their schools. The program's goal is to increase the schools' college-going rate.

EducationQuest hopes your school considers adopting some of these "best practices" in an effort to make college a reality for more Nebraska students.

## About EducationQuest Foundation

EducationQuest Foundation is a private, nonprofit organization with a mission to *improve access to higher education in Nebraska*. Headquartered in Lincoln, EducationQuest provides free college planning services, funds need-based scholarship programs, provides grants that help high schools increase their college-going rate, and provides outreach services for community agencies statewide.

## About the College Access Grants Program

*College Access Grants* provides funding to Nebraska high schools that wish to increase their college-going rate by developing and enhancing college access efforts. The awards vary from \$25,000 annually for high schools with 1,500 or more students, to \$15,000 for mid-size schools, and \$5,000 for high schools with enrollments under 300. High schools are funded for four years with the goal of increasing their college-going rates by 10%.

EducationQuest selected 13 Nebraska high schools as grant recipients in 2006 and another 13 schools in 2008. These 26 schools are currently sharing nearly \$1.4 million in *College Access Grant* funds. In 2010, EducationQuest will award grants to up to an additional 15 schools.

## Current recipients of EducationQuest *College Access Grants*

### Schools selected in 2006

- Alliance High School
- Aurora High School
- Broken Bow High School
- Falls City High School
- Gordon-Rushville High School
- Grand Island Senior High School
- Hastings Senior High School
- Lincoln North Star High School
- Madison High School
- McCook High School
- Meridian High School (Daykin)
- Millard South High School
- Umo<sup>ho</sup> Nation High School (Macy)

### Schools selected in 2008

- Bancroft-Rosalie Community School
  - Cedar Bluffs High School
  - Central City High School
  - Columbus High School
  - Crete High School
  - Garden County High School (Oshkosh)
  - Lincoln High School
  - Lincoln Northeast High School
  - Omaha North High Magnet School
  - Omaha South High Magnet School
  - Omaha Benson High School Magnet Center
  - Santee Community School
  - West Point-Beemer Junior-Senior High School
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## ACTIVITY Participate in study skills and/or time management skills

*Knowing how to study and manage time are vital skills for college-bound students. Two schools, **Hastings Senior High School** and **Grand Island Senior High School**, developed programs to help students prepare for the rigors of college.*

### Success Academy helps prepare students for college

What started as an after-school program for remedial learning morphed into mid-day sessions open to all students. The *Success Academy* at Hastings Senior High School provides time management and study skills in a group setting, and individualized tutoring in the core subjects. Students are invited to bring their lunches to “Noon Math” or “Noon Science” and will soon have options for English and social studies. The sessions are lead by teachers and upper-class student mentors.

### The Need

Hastings Senior High School discovered that 9th graders who failed one or more classes were more likely to drop out of high school or not attend college. To combat this trend, the school developed a program to help those students experience success.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Hastings Senior High targeted 9th and 10th graders** who were failing one or more courses so they could help the students find success early in high school. The program quickly expanded to include all interested students.
- **The school promoted the Success Academy in a letter home to parents.** Throughout the year, students are invited by staff to attend, and parents can request that their student participates.
- **Team teaching methods are effective.** Teachers and junior/senior mentors staff the daily sessions. Participants enjoy sessions with students near their age who have mastered the skills.
- **Small groups lead to success.** The school has a goal to keep a 5:1 student-to-mentor ratio to foster success among participants.
- **Group session topics vary** and are based on the book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens* by Sean Covey. Topics include:
  - Time management skills
  - Organizational strategies
  - Study skills
  - Test preparation
  - Goal setting
- **Communication is a key component of the program.** Two teachers and an administrator meet weekly with the student mentors to train and guide their progress and activities.

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## College Access Class opens doors for many

Grand Island Senior High takes a unique approach to skill-building for their at-risk students. Over the last several years, the school developed and expanded their *College Access Class* to prepare students for college. Participating students meet with the advisor several times each week as time allows before, during or after school. Interest in the class is growing as more students learn about the class activities.

### The Need

Over 75 percent of the students at Grand Island Senior High are first-generation, minority students. Even some high-achieving students did not have the computer skills to bookmark a Web page, much less use the Internet to research colleges. The class teaches the necessary skills students need to pursue higher education.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Grand Island Senior High started with a small group** of seniors and expanded to other classes each year. This allowed the advisor to develop the curriculum and recruit qualified students.
- **Separate the students to focus on specific skills.** Each class needs different skill-building tools.
  - Freshmen focus on study skills and time management.
  - Sophomores explore career options that suit their talents and interests.
  - Juniors begin looking at colleges and preparing for the ACT.
  - Seniors focus on applying for college, scholarships and financial aid.
- **Tap your business partners for job shadowing opportunities.** This gives the students a realistic view of various careers. Some students solidified their career plans, and others completely changed course.
- **Colleges have a part to play.** Incorporate college visits for juniors and seniors to help them see what opportunities are available if they stay in school and build their skills.
- **Consider a pass/fail option.** The *College Access Class* does not have homework and students do not earn a grade, but the advisor provides clear assignments and enforces deadlines to keep students on track.
- **Use the EducationQuest Web site** as a college planning tool for juniors and seniors.
  - *Junior/Senior Timeline* – was the basis for the curriculum.
  - *Guided Tours* – give students an overview of the entire process.
  - *College Profiles / Index of Majors* – helps students find schools that match their interests and talents.
  - *Activities Resume* – helps students keep track of their jobs, sports and other activities.
  - *ScholarshipQuest* – provides local scholarship opportunities for students.



## ACTIVITY Take the PLAN or PSAT

*The PLAN and PSAT tests help prepare students for the ACT and SAT and help students understand their academic strengths and weakness.*

**Broken Bow High School and Hastings Senior High School**  
*developed plans for their students to participate.*

### **Broken Bow students benefit from free PLAN and PSAT exams**

Broken Bow High School made a commitment to pay registration fees for the PLAN and PSAT exams for all sophomores and juniors. This created an interest in the college preparatory exams from both students and parents – and helped stir an increased interest in college.

### **The Need**

Broken Bow High School wanted to create an environment that encouraged all students to consider and prepare for college. The principal believed that paying for college preparatory exams would encourage more students to take the exam and open doors to college.

### **Program Highlights and Tips**

- **Create a college-focused environment.** Broken Bow High School picked up the tab for PLAN and PSAT registration fees which created excitement about the exams, and college planning in general, for both students and parents.
- **Require all sophomores to take the PLAN** so students get comfortable taking timed tests, and learn about various career options that might match their interests and academic skills.
- **Provide all juniors the opportunity to take the PSAT.** Students learn their academic strengths and weaknesses so they can be better prepared for the SAT or ACT in the spring. Since the school district paid the registration fees, a significant number of sophomores also took the exam for practice.
- **PSAT is hard, but it helps students focus** on the basics so they can be better prepared for the SAT and ACT.
- **Exposure to standardized exams is helpful** – students benefit from practice so the actual college entrance exams don't seem so intimidating.

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## Dual-purpose testing a hit with students at Hastings Senior High School

School officials at Hasting Senior High found a way for students to take their required achievement tests more seriously. By law, schools must conduct achievement testing so the school uses the PLAN test for the dual purpose of meeting federal requirements and preparing their students for college.

### The Need

Hastings Senior High School discovered that some students found the annual achievement exams boring and simply filled in the ovals without taking the exams seriously. The school needed a way to assess their students while providing a tool that students would take seriously.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Hastings Senior High found a way to test students** that has meaning for the Department of Education and the students' future. By having all sophomores take the PLAN, the students actually tried to earn a good score rather than just fill in the ovals.
- **PLAN exam empowered students to see college as an option.** Many students at Hastings Senior High are first-generation students so this is a new experience for both students and parents.
- **Students take the PLAN seriously** because counselors helped them understand the implications for future college admissions and scholarship applications.
- **Average school scores dropped a bit** because all students are included in the calculation instead of just college-bound students. The school board understood the issues and hopes to see improved scores in the future as the exam becomes a tradition.
- **Testing day became college-focused.** Hastings Senior High freshmen take the EXPLORE exam, sophomores take the PLAN test, and juniors and seniors who elected not to take the ACT could register to take the ASSET exam in school. All other students were encouraged to make college visits or participate in job shadowing that day.



## ACTIVITY Prepare for, and take, the ACT or SAT

*Preparing students for the ACT or SAT is a vital part of increasing the number who take the exams. **Lincoln North Star High School and Meridian High School** have developed programs that are doing just that.*

### **College Prep Academy at North Star offers intensive ACT prep**

For the past two years, Lincoln North Star High School has conducted the *College Prep Academy* - an intensive, one-week ACT preparation program held in June. Eligible participants include students of color, those who qualify for free or reduced lunch, and first-generation students. Participants must have a minimum 2.5 GPA. The *College Prep Academy* helped 21 students the first year, and over 60 the second year.

### **The Need**

When the North Star administrative team found that the average ACT score among their students was below 20, they knew those students were not getting the information and resources needed to succeed in college. They created the *College Prep Academy* to provide eligible students with an intensive prep program for free that would normally cost as much as \$300.

### **Program Highlights and Tips**

- **North Star created a college access team of teachers** that meets every two weeks to brainstorm ways to help students with college access issues – including ACT test preparation.
- **The school purchased an online test preparation program** and a commercial ACT workbook to train their teachers. A team of teachers took the online instruction, and then adapted it to fit the week-long summer program. The teachers use the ACT practice booklets and build on what they learned the previous year.
- **Rather than “reinventing the wheel,”** North Star adapted existing college preparatory programs and activities to fit students’ needs.
- **The school involves as many people as possible** to increase the success of *College Prep Academy*. Included are counselors, teachers, librarians, and school staff to build school-wide momentum for the activity.
- **In addition, North Star provides an ACT Prep Seminar** the week before each of the scheduled ACT test dates. The school served 69 students during the last seminar. The schedule follows:
  - Sunday – General test-taking strategies (3 hours)
    - English (3 hours)
  - Tuesday – Reading (1.5 hours)
  - Thursday – Math and Science (2.5 hours)

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## Meridian High School expands its ACT Prep

Students report that the Meridian High School ACT prep helps them prepare for the actual exam because they are not surprised by the test format, the questions on the test, or the environment in which the test takes place. The teachers offer three nights of test prep, and a Saturday morning practice exam that mimics the test-taking environment.

### The Need

Meridian High School provided ACT test prep for several years, but they wanted to step up their efforts and provide a test simulation that mimics the actual test environment.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Meridian High School purchased quality materials** including The Real ACT Prep Guide and Cliffs Test Prep, Seventh Edition. The teachers wanted material produced by ACT, and also trusted Cliff's Notes because it included actual ACT exam questions.
- **Two teachers conducted the ACT prep** over three nights for three hours each night. One teacher focused on the reading and English sections, and the other teacher focused on math and science. This team approach gave the students the expertise needed for test preparation.
- **Use practice questions from the ACT prep books.** The questions help students identify their weaknesses so they can focus on those areas outside of the prep classes.
- **About 75 percent of the test prep focuses on strategy.** Based on advice from ACT, the teachers encourage students to use their time wisely, to go back to hard questions, and to make educated guesses when needed.
- **About 25 percent of the test prep is content-based.** The ACT is based on curriculum so students learned the information in school over many years – they often just need grammar tips and basic mathematical formulas.
- **Students are encouraged to analyze missed questions** and use the ACT prep books to understand the logic behind the questions. This helps students perform better during the actual exam.
- **Saturday morning ACT test simulation is the event students find most helpful.** The teachers provide tickets to get in, check IDs, have name tags at each desk, and check students' calculators. The school uses an actual ACT exam from a prior year and simulates the same environment students will face for the actual exam.

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In 2007, the average ACT composite score in Nebraska was:

- 22.7 for Asian students
- 22.4 for white students
- 19.2 for Hispanic students
- 19.1 for Native American students
- 17.9 for black students.

Source: ACT High School Profile Report (2007)

## ACTIVITY Learn about Dual Credit/Advanced Placement Classes

*Helping families understand ways to earn college credit while in high school is especially helpful for first-generation students. Millard South High School and Gordon-Rushville High School presented dual enrollment information to families, and worked directly with local colleges.*

### Millard South holds AP/Dual Credit Night

To better inform students and their parents about AP/dual credit courses, Millard South High School in Omaha established *AP/Dual Credit Night*. Now held annually in November, the event targets 9th - 11th grade students and their parents. Attendance at the meeting has grown over the past three years, and the number of students taking AP/dual credit courses has increased.

Presentation topics include:

- How to earn college credit in high school
- The impact of AP/dual credit courses on GPA and class rank
- AP/dual credit course options at Millard South

### The Need

Many eligible students at Millard South were not taking advantage of the AP/dual credit program. In the past, few students knew about the program or understood the potential impact to their GPA. In addition, many first-generation families didn't understand how dual credit courses could make college more accessible and affordable.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Millard South matched its AP course to the curriculum** at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. All courses are taught at the high school by teachers with master's degrees in the subject area.
- **As part of a district initiative**, Millard South urges all college-bound students to take at least one AP/dual credit class.
- **Sophomores can now take two AP courses:** AP Human Geography and AP Computer Science.
- **Students can earn college credit in two ways:** pay the dual enrollment fee and take the course, or take the course for free and then pay to take the AP exam. Scholarships for the AP exam fee are available for low-income students.
- **A follow-up to the AP/Dual Credit Night** takes place with advisors during students' homeroom, and during registration.

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## Gordon-Rushville uses multi-faceted approach

Having built relationships with several area colleges, Gordon-Rushville High School takes a multi-faceted approach to their AP/Dual Credit program. Some classes are offered as distance learning, some as online courses, and others are taught in the high school. Some of their students have graduated with 21 college credits for a nominal cost.

### The Need

With 50 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch at Gordon-Rushville High School, paying for tuition and books for AP/dual enrollment courses is a challenge for students.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Students can earn up to 12 college credits free** through the Oglala Lakota College-Early Entry Program. Students take classes in their high school, the school purchases the text books, and students earn both high school and college credit.
- **Distance learning is available through Western Nebraska Community College.** Students pay half-price tuition and receive dual credit, earning up to six college credits.
- **High-ability students can take online classes from Chadron State College.** Students pay full tuition and are supervised by high school staff.
- **The school purchased dual enrollment college text books** for the students to check out saving families the cost of purchasing text books.
- **Gordon-Rushville keeps students focused on college.**
  - Eighth graders complete Personal Learning Plans that follow them into high school and help students stay focused on college prep classes.
  - Recent graduates share their college experience with juniors and seniors — and allow students to ask questions about making the transition to college.
  - Counselors discuss academic transcripts with juniors and seniors. This helps students understand the importance of good grades as part of the college application process.



## ACTIVITY Coordinate activities in collaboration with Nebraska colleges — including campus visits

*Students who visit college campuses are more likely to attend college and find a school that matches their interests and talents. **Lincoln North Star High School and Madison High School** found innovative ways to engage students in the college search process.*

### North Star conducts monthly campus visits

By coordinating campus visits, Lincoln North Star High School has made college one step closer for first-generation students. Each month, a group of 20-40 students board a bus and visit local colleges to gain first-hand knowledge of campus life. The students tour the college and meet with an admissions representative – but more importantly, they see college students who look just like them.

### The Need

North Star realized that many of their students have never been on a college campus because their parents had not attended college. The team knew the only way to make college visits happen was to rent buses and take the students themselves.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **North Star created a college access team** of teachers that meets every two weeks to brainstorm ways to help students with college access issues – including college visits.
- **The school contacted the local colleges** and arranged to visit one college per month. Each team member contacted a college to make plans for a campus visit and group session with an admissions representative.
- **Space was limited** so the school targeted first-generation juniors and seniors who might not make college visits on their own.
- **North Star planned ahead for crowd control** and took at least two staff members on the college visits to help keep order. They often recruited teachers who were alumni of the colleges to participate in the field trip and provide an insider's view of the school.
- **The team planned other fun activities** like a college sweatshirt day for teachers, and placing college pennants in their school cafeteria to represent where each staff member attended college.
- **North Star plans to survey participating students** to learn the effectiveness of the activity and ways to improve the college visits in the future.

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## Juniors at Madison High School visit local colleges

The counselor at Madison High School worked closely with the administration and teachers to arrange college visits for the entire junior class. The students loaded buses and visited the closest four-year and two-year colleges in the area – Wayne State College and Northeast Community College. The students heard from Madison High School alumni who currently attend the colleges, toured the campus, and learned about the academic programs.

### The Need

Almost 40 percent of students at Madison High School are Latino and first-generation students. Although the students are bilingual, many have parents who speak only Spanish. This situation makes it unlikely for parents to make college visits with their children, or to even encourage a college education. Madison High School staff felt that exposing all juniors to college would help increase their college-going rate.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Madison High School loaded buses** and took the entire junior class to visit a two-year and four-year college.
- **Students toured each campus in small groups** so they could freely ask questions of the tour guides and get the feel of the campus.
- **General sessions with college administrators** allowed students to learn about all the academic programs. Wayne State College had the dean of each college give a brief presentation on their programs.
- **Many of the students are low-income** so Madison paid for lunch in the college cafeteria. This allowed the students to experience campus life like traditional college students do.
- **Tangible reminders are important** so Madison purchased inexpensive college t-shirts for each student so they have a reminder of what they are capable of achieving.
- **First-hand accounts from alumni made a big impression** on the high school students. Madison high school alumni who attended Wayne State College participated in a panel discussion with the students. It helped students to see familiar faces and know that people just like them are attending college.



## ACTIVITY Involve families in college access efforts

*Involving parents and students in the college planning process eases the transition from high school to college and helps increase the college-going rate.*

*Millard South High School in Omaha and Grand Island Senior High School expanded their services to include parents.*

### Millard South extends counseling hours to meet parent needs

Millard South High School keeps its guidance office open on Tuesdays until 8:00 pm. The counselor on duty primarily works on a first-come, first-served basis, but does take some appointments. This allows the counselor to spend additional time with families and provide more helpful service than is possible over the phone or via email.

#### The Need

Millard South High School recognized that many parents were trying to address school-related issues over the phone from work. Many parents just couldn't get to the counselor's office before it closed at 3:45 pm.

#### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Concurrent scheduling is key to the success of the extended hours.** Millard South plans many school functions on Tuesday nights so parents can visit the counselors and attend other meetings.
- **Parents interact with other parents dealing with the same issues.** Often parents who are waiting to speak to a counselor will overhear another parent seeking the same information and join the conversation.
- **Students use the extended hours, too.** Juniors and seniors are encouraged to visit their counselor on Tuesday after school to complete scholarship applications.
- **Counselors enjoy working with families during the extended evening hours.** It's helpful for both the parent and student to hear the same information and have the opportunity to ask questions.

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## Parent University a success at Grand Island Senior High

Grand Island Senior High School works closely with Grand Island's Welcome Center for Immigrants to provide *Parent University* – a program that helps immigrant parents understand the American education system. *Parent University* places special emphasis on college planning.

### The Need

Grand Island Senior High serves many low-income immigrant families who need college planning information. The students would be first-generation college students so their parents are learning the college selection process along with their students.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Start with promoting education in general.** Some families do not place a high value on education, so a connection must be made to the career potential and financial benefits made possible through education.
- **Stress the importance of parent involvement in education** by encouraging parents to ask their students about their classes and grades. Parents are also encouraged to attend parent/teacher conferences.
- **Involve students during the day through activities like the college access class.** The program is geared toward first-generation, low-income students and provides assistance with the entire college planning process. These students strongly encourage their parents to attend the sessions in the evening.
- **Promote higher education by helping families with the FAFSA,** and using the college planning tools on the EducationQuest Web site. All students involved in the college access class created an *Activities Resume*, used *ScholarshipQuest*, and found a list of potential schools via *College Profiles*.
- **Don't forget the colleges.** Speakers from the University of Nebraska - Lincoln and the University of Nebraska at Kearney were invited to speak at *Parent University*. A Spanish interpreter attends the meetings in case the service is needed.
- **Save room for dessert.** Dinner and dessert is provided at the FAFSA meeting in January. Attendance is good because the school tied a social activity with a major component of college planning – applying for financial aid.
- **If you want fresh ideas, ask the students.** Grand Island Senior High plans to freshen their approach with parents and will survey students in the college access class for ideas. Students will know the best ways to reach their parents.



## ACTIVITY Develop activities involving community/business partners

*Students who can connect their education with employment opportunities are more likely to find careers that suit them.*

***Aurora High School and Falls City High School found creative ways to engage students in career exploration.***

### **Career & College Day at Aurora High School opens door to the future**

Aurora High School and the Aurora Chamber of Commerce teamed up to host *Career & College Day*, an all-day conference-style event for juniors and seniors. The morning focused on career choices and included three breakout sessions. In the afternoon, seniors attended an in-school career fair featuring more than 40 local business representatives.

#### **The Need**

Aurora High School juniors and seniors need guidance and information about career paths and post-secondary education options. This is especially critical because over half of the students have parents who did not attend college.

#### **Program Highlights and Tips**

- **Students prepared for the event in their advisory (homeroom) groups.** They were instructed to dress up for the event, and received a list of potential questions to ask the attending businesses and colleges.
- **The local Chamber Development Committee recruited representatives** from their membership to staff the career tables.
- **Area colleges sent representatives** to address careers not represented in the local community.
- **The career fair started with a keynote address on goal setting,** followed by breakout sessions that included community members representing a variety of educational backgrounds.
- **The career fair featured tables grouped by career clusters** identified with colored balloons. Students talked to business representatives in the career cluster(s) that interested them.
- **Students collected at least three signatures of representatives** they talked to so the counselor could make sure the students used their time wisely.
- **Seniors then attended a day-long writing seminar** lead by a college representative who helped the students fine-tune their resumes and develop admission/scholarship essays.

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## College Access Day at Falls City High School creates excitement for higher education

*College Access Day* is a day-long conference held each October in Falls City. Students attend two general sessions, choose from 10 breakout sessions, and then select one of three field trips to local businesses. The evening features a college fair and financial aid presentation for students and parents.

### The Need

Over 75 percent of students at Fall City High School have parents who did not attend college. This creates the need to inform all students, in particular potential first-generation college students, about college and career options. The *College Access Day* was created to meet this need.

### Program Highlights and Tips

#### ■ General session topics are age-specific.

- Freshmen and sophomores learn about study skills and attend a Health Career Mini-Fair.
- Juniors and seniors focus on college planning, scholarship searches, and learn about college life from an alumni panel.

#### ■ Study skills session features two college students who share their experiences overcoming adversity and getting an education. Both discuss what it takes to be a successful student and stress taking advantage of high school opportunities.

#### ■ Students choose one of three career-related field trips.

- Agriculture – farm machinery, agricultural technology and global positioning
- Industry – three factories supporting the transportation industry
- Healthcare – medical and non-medical career opportunities

#### ■ Evening college fair features a financial aid presentation that covers FAFSA preparation, scholarships and financial aid.

#### ■ A team of people makes the day possible.

- Student council and class officers help with guest parking, hauling supplies, and escorting speakers to their classrooms.
- Teachers host session leaders in their classrooms.
- Teachers plan and attend the field trips with the students.
- EducationQuest staff person conducts the financial aid session.

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For every 100 ninth graders in Nebraska...

- 82 graduate from high school
- 53 enter college
- 37 are still enrolled their sophomore year, and
- 26 graduate within 150% time.

Source: United States and Nebraska  
Higher Education Pipeline (2006)  
[www.higheredinfo.org](http://www.higheredinfo.org)

## ACTIVITY Conduct a scholarship search during both the junior and senior years

*Paying for college presents many challenges for families, but earning scholarships can ease the burden of financing higher education. **Gordon-Rushville High School and Lincoln North Star High School** go the extra mile to help students look for scholarships*

### **Gordon-Rushville provides numerous ways to search for scholarships**

Almost any day of the week, students at Gordon-Rushville High School are learning about, or applying for scholarships. The counselor takes a multi-faceted approach by conducting parent meetings, providing extended office hours, posting scholarships in the local paper, and encouraging students to use online resources.

### **The Need**

Many students and families are not aware of scholarship opportunities to help them pay for college. To best serve their population, Gordon-Rushville High School provides numerous ways for families to learn about scholarships.

### **Program Highlights and Tips**

- **Gordon-Rushville High School enlists help from the community.** The local newspaper features a “scholarship of the week” to keep students and parents focused on scholarships throughout the year. Interested students contact the donor or the high school counselor for an application.
- **All local scholarships are included in the *ScholarshipQuest* database.** Juniors and seniors complete a *ScholarshipQuest* profile at EducationQuest.org to find scholarships that match their criteria. This saves students from sifting through paper files, and allows them to focus on the most promising awards.
- **The counselor’s office is open Monday nights for parents and students** to conduct scholarship searches or discuss college/career planning. The extended hours help families whose schedules make it difficult to visit the counseling office during the day.
- **The school conducted meetings for parents of juniors and seniors** to discuss scholarships and college planning. The agenda also included a timeline, information about the Personal Learning Plan, and the importance of getting involved.
- **The counselor provides many resources for students** including Nebraska Career Connections and Nebraska Career Information Systems. Both resources provide interest inventories and scholarship information. The software is especially helpful for first-generation students and for parents sending their first child to college.
- **Scholarship information is widely available.** The counselor posts scholarships on the school Web site and discusses scholarship opportunities during the homeroom period.
- **EducationQuest staff presented to seniors** about scholarships, college planning and ways to pay for college. This daytime program helped seniors know the steps needed to make college possible.

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## North Star offers many options for families seeking scholarships

The counselors at Lincoln North Star High School recognize that students are tuned into technology, so they use email and Web sites to help students find scholarships. Also, juniors and seniors are invited to attend *College Club* – an after-school activity that provides guidance on scholarships and college planning.

### The Need

Over 40 percent of students at North Star High School receive free or reduced lunch, and over 30 percent are first-generation students. The school also has a diverse population that spans many cultures, ethnicities and income levels. The one thing they all have in common is the need to manage the high cost of college.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **At the start of the school year**, counselors meet with all seniors individually to discuss college planning strategies, ways to look for scholarships, and the admissions process.
- **Parent meetings for each grade level are held in September** to discuss college planning. For parents of juniors and seniors, emphasis is placed on college admissions and scholarships.
- **North Star High School offers *College Club*** during their early release time every Tuesday. This allows counselors time to work one-on-one with students.
  - Open to all students, but the counselors target seniors.
  - First 10 minutes of each meeting is a group session, followed by individualized counseling or Web-based work.
  - Refreshments are provided.
  - Students earn *College Club* t-shirts after attending three sessions.
- **Students are encouraged to use online scholarship searches** including *ScholarshipQuest*, *Scholarship Monkey*, *Scholarship Express*, *Fastaid*, and more. North Star also has a Web page with local scholarships and many of the applications are available online.
- **Counselors promote scholarship Web sites to parents of seniors** via email to a home or work address. The feedback has been very positive and the North Star scholarship site received over 3,000 visits in the last 12 months.
- **Campus visits are helpful** because students learn about college-based scholarships directly from the admissions representative. This encourages students to apply for college-based awards and complete their admissions applications before the priority deadline.



## ACTIVITY Attend a College Fair or Educational Planning Program by December - senior year

*Selecting a college can be overwhelming – that’s why attending a College Fair or Educational Planning Program is critical. **Aurora High School and Falls City High School** brought college reps to their schools to help students learn about potential schools.*

### Careers and College the focus of event at Aurora High School

Aurora High School devotes an entire day for juniors and seniors to explore options for their futures. Students attend career sessions in the morning, and then learn about colleges and educational programs in the afternoon.

#### The Need

Over half of the students at Aurora High School are first-generation students. Planning for college takes extra effort because most of their parents are unfamiliar with the process.

#### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Aurora High School sponsored a day-long event** that allowed juniors and seniors to focus on college and careers. Both topics helped students consider their options beyond high school.
- **The event started with an inspirational speaker** who focused on the importance of goal-setting. The students really connected with the speaker so the day started off right.
- **Variety added energy to the day.** Students rotated through three 30-minute breakout sessions each focusing on a different aspect of career planning:
  - Business Tips – from Head to Heart
  - Career Journeys
  - Achieving Success in the Workplace
- **A skit helped students learn** how to approach career and college representatives. A student role-played on stage how to greet adults, shake hands, and ask appropriate questions. A teacher discussed the importance of first impressions, how to state your personal interests and goals, and how to close a conversation.
- **Over 75 careers were represented at the career fair.** Students asked questions about careers that interested them – which set the stage for exploring higher education later in the day.
- **Additional breakout sessions were targeted to each class.**
  - Juniors: college panel from 4-year public, 4-year private, and 2-year public
  - Seniors: focus on college funding through scholarships and financial aid
- **Students received sample questions** to begin their conversation with college representatives. The counselor prepared the students in advance so they knew how to dress, shake hands, and ask open-ended questions.
- **Juniors and seniors had 85 minutes** to visit with their choice of over 60 colleges. The representatives commented on how well-prepared the students were for the college fair.

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## Falls City hosts a College Access Day and Mini College Fair

For the past three years, Falls City High School hosted an all-day *College Access Day* that included career information, breakout sessions, career-focused local field trips, and a mini college fair. Four area high schools participated in the college fair and parents were invited to attend an evening session featuring college representatives from across Nebraska.

### The Need

Since 75 percent of the students are first-generation, the counselor must pay special attention to college planning activities that involve both students and parents.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Falls City developed a day-long *College Access Day*** to help all their students focus on future careers and the required education. The first year, the day started with a motivational speaker. The second year, Falls City participated in a KnowHow2GO pep rally to kick off the day.
- **Breakout sessions kept the day moving quickly.** The counselor combined many of the EducationQuest *College Access Grant* requirements in the following session topics:
  - Student success and study skills
  - Time management
  - Leadership skills
  - Scholarships, financial aid and college planning
- **A mandatory session for juniors and seniors** helped them learn how to meet and greet college representatives. A panel of admissions representatives explained how the students could maximize their discussions with college representatives at the fair, the admission application process from the school's point of view, and the importance of filing the FAFSA.
- **Four area high schools were invited to attend** the mini college fair during the day. The students were bused to Falls City and visited the college tables for an hour in the afternoon. The college representatives appreciated seeing so many students in one day.
- **Falls City High School students and parents** attended the college fair in the early evening. This helped with crowd control and allowed parents to attend the event after work.

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Nebraska's college-going rate is 66.7 percent, but for low-income students, the college participation rate is only 41.2 percent.

Sources: Nebraska's Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education and Postsecondary Education Opportunity

## ACTIVITY Complete at least one college application during the senior year

*The road to college starts with the admission application.*

**McCook High School and Gordon-Rushville High School** work closely with their students to encourage them to meet college application deadlines.

### McCook High School strongly encourages college applications

To help make the transition to college easier, the McCook High School counseling office keeps close tabs on the senior class. In September, each senior completes an inventory sheet indicating their top three to five colleges – or other plans beyond high school. The counselor then provides each student with group or one-on-one planning sessions to keep them on track.

### The Need

Students at McCook High School tend to procrastinate when it comes to applying for college. When surveyed, students cite money, grades and uncertainty about career goals as the reasons for delaying future plans. Some students feel overwhelmed and just need help gathering the required information for the applications.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **McCook High School created an inventory sheets for the entire senior class.** Among other things, the form asks for each student's top three to five colleges.
- **The counselor talks to each student about their future plans.** Students who intend to enter the military or workforce also talk to the counselor to solidify plans.
- **Academic transcripts are readily available to students.** This makes answering questions about GPA, entrance exam scores, and courses much easier.
- **Some students need an extra nudge.** McCook High School found it was necessary to push students rather than assume they would apply for college on their own – especially before priority deadlines.
- **The counselor offers group sessions and one-on-one help** with college applications. Some parents like to be involved in the sessions so scheduling can become an issue.
- **January 1 is a goal for college applications.** By reaching that goal, seniors are positioned to apply for financial aid in February and campus housing in early spring.

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## Gordon-Rushville High School takes a one-on-one approach to college applications

All students at Gordon-Rushville High School are assigned an advisor to help them prepare for college. Part of the preparation includes career exploration and a group demonstration of how to complete an online admissions application. The advisors also provide individualized help completing an actual college application.

### The Need

About half of the students at Gordon-Rushville High School qualify for free or reduced lunch, and many are first-generation students. The school recognized the need to provide extensive college planning services because the parents are unfamiliar with the admissions process.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **The Gordon-Rushville High School counselor spends class time** using college search and career exploration tools from NCIS and Career Connections. The school used grant money from Carl Perkins and ESU #13 to purchase the software programs so students have free access to the information.
- **Students make the connection** between future careers and the required education through help from the counselor and the online planning tools.
- **Students search for colleges that offer their intended major.** When students have an idea of potential career options that match their skills and interests, it makes it easier to search for colleges that might be a good fit.
- **The counselor/advisor helps students one-on-one** to complete college applications. The individualized help makes it easier for first-generation students to complete the required forms because their parents are unfamiliar with the process.
- **Extended office hours one night a week** allow parents to join their students for one-on-one college planning sessions with the counselor.
- **Advisors complete the loop by using *ScholarshipQuest*** to help students look for scholarships to pay college tuition.



## ACTIVITY Attend a Financial Aid Presentation before February of the senior year

*For many families, college costs are a barrier to higher education - so learning about financial aid is an important step. **Umo<sup>o</sup>ho<sup>o</sup> Nation High School and McCook High School** found unique ways to help students and parents discover how to pay for college.*

### **Umo<sup>o</sup>ho<sup>o</sup> Nation taps local community college for Financial Aid Program**

After assessing the needs of their community, Umo<sup>o</sup>ho<sup>o</sup> Nation High School in Macy decided the best way to discuss the financial aid process was to invite a representative from the local community college to speak with area families. The representative discussed the types of financial aid, the FAFSA application process, and tribal grants for eligible students. The high school also invited a current college student to discuss campus life and ways to assimilate outside of the Native American community.

### **The Need**

Most of the students at Umo<sup>o</sup>ho<sup>o</sup> Nation High School are low-income and first-generation and have little exposure to life outside their Native American community. This makes it difficult for students to find an adult who can help them through the college planning process, or find ways to pay for college.

### **Program Highlights and Tips**

- **When most of the student body can't afford to make a college visit,** bring the college to the students. Umo<sup>o</sup>ho<sup>o</sup> Nation High School invited the local community college in to discuss the types of financial aid, how to apply, and where to go for help.
- **The school had all the financial aid forms available,** even if the program was before January 1, so parents and students could get familiar with the forms and FAFSA Web site.
- **Tribal funds are available for eligible Native Americans,** so the counselor discussed the application process, funding amounts, and necessary forms.
- **Include information about adjusting to college.** Umo<sup>o</sup>ho<sup>o</sup> Nation High School also invited a current college student to discuss college life to lessen the students' fear of the unknown.

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## Financial Aid Breakfast a hit at McCook High School

The counselor at McCook High School found a fun — and delicious — way to talk to families about the financial aid process through a *Financial Aid Breakfast*. A local financial aid director shared the podium while students and parents enjoyed a free breakfast buffet.

### The Need

When surveyed, McCook seniors identified money as one of their top three obstacles to college. They didn't know how much college will cost or how they were going to pay for it.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **McCook High School sent an invitation to all seniors and their parents** for the *Financial Aid Breakfast*. The school requested an RSVP for the date that worked best for the family.
- **The school provided several small group breakfast sessions** on different days of the week to accommodate schedules. The invitation stressed that the event fills up quickly and RSVPs are accepted on a first-come, first-served basis.
- **Free breakfast at a local restaurant** was a fun way to get more people to attend. The counselor arranged for a breakfast buffet in the restaurant's banquet room.
- **The financial aid presentation was conducted** while students and their parents enjoyed breakfast. The school invited a financial aid representative from a local college to share the podium. The audience enjoyed having two speakers and learning about scholarships from the local schools.
- **A business partner will host a *Financial Aid Dinner*** and serve pizza to provide an evening option for families. The school does not need to spend grant funds for the evening program, and families have one more option to accommodate busy schedules.

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In 2006-07, 88.4% of Nebraska students graduated from high school. However, the high school graduation rate is only:

- 68.7% black and Hispanic students
- 60.1% Native American students

Source: 2008 Nebraska  
Higher Education Report

## ACTIVITY Complete the FAFSA or College Funding Estimator

*The cost of higher education is a significant barrier to college.*

*Falls City High School and Broken Bow High School encourage seniors to keep their college options open by completing the FAFSA.*

### FAFSA events successful at Falls City High School

For several years, Falls City High School has hosted two events to help families apply for financial aid. The first is a *Financial Aid Night* held in November where families are treated to pizza while they learn about the financial aid process. The second event is in February to help families complete the FAFSA. Both events are held at the high school.

### The Need

Falls City, like other rural communities, has many low-income families who, like most families, are very private about their finances. Some parents are reluctant to complete the FAFSA because they don't understand the process or don't believe they will receive enough financial aid to make a difference. The challenge is to help all parents, in spite of income level, understand the importance of filing the FAFSA form.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Falls City High school scheduled the *Financial Aid Night*** well in advance so it did not conflict with other events.
- **The school reminded parents and students about the event.**
  - Sent a letter followed by a postcard to the home.
  - Included the event in the school bulletin.
  - Added the event to the school's Web-based calendar.
- **Refreshments bring a crowd.** Provide pizza or some other light meal or refreshment to make the event fun.
- **A second event might be helpful.** Follow up with FAFSA completion sessions for those uncomfortable using a computer. This can be done at the school or at EducationQuest.
- **Demystify the FAFSA filing process** so families can apply online without help in future years.

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## Broken Bow welcomes surrounding communities to FAFSA event

Every year, Broken Bow High School offers a *Financial Aid Program* to families in the surrounding area via distance learning. Even though the format is not face-to-face, families can easily ask questions of the presenter. All families who participate not only learn about financial aid, but are encouraged to apply for a Department of Education PIN and follow up with FAFSA completion.

### The Need

Broken Bow High School has the ability to broadcast from its distance learning room to surrounding communities that do not have the technology to do so. Sharing resources makes good fiscal sense for the entire community and provides families with a way to gain valuable information without a long drive to a central location.

### Program Highlights and Tips

- **Broken Bow High School broadcast their Financial Aid Program** via distance learning. This is a helpful tool for rural communities. Families could ask questions of the speaker even though she was miles away.
- **The program provided the opportunity to share local scholarship information.** The counselor discovered that more people attend the event if scholarships are on the agenda.
- **The school helped students apply for a Department of Education PIN.** A community volunteer came to the school three times during the first semester to walk students through the [pin.ed.gov](http://pin.ed.gov) Web site in preparation for FAFSA filing.
- **The school counselor encouraged families** to run the *College Funding Estimator* at [EducationQuest.org](http://EducationQuest.org) to estimate their financial aid eligibility. This information helps seniors know if they should apply for need-based scholarships.



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## Contact information for high schools featured in *College Access Nebraska*

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### **Umo<sup>n</sup>Ho<sup>n</sup> Nation High School**

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## Contact information for other EducationQuest grant-funded high schools

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