



COMING UP ACES

Montgomery County
Public Schools’
ACES program
bridges the
opportunity gap for
higher education

Story and Photos
by Rosanne Skirble

It’s first-period class and 600 backpack and earbud-wearing 10th graders file into the auditorium at Clarksburg High School for an early morning assembly to learn about their future.

“It’s ACES Day at Clarksburg. I’m here to recruit,” says Terré Thomas, ACES academic coach at the school. ACES stands for “Achieving Collegiate Excellence and Success,” a college-bound program for talented yet traditionally underrepresented students in higher education.

The goal is a four-year college degree. Five years ago, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), Montgomery College (MC) and the Universities at Shady Grove (USG) joined to design a program to address needs of the most vulnerable in the county schools – those who are poor, live in single-parent or immigrant households, take care of younger brothers and sisters, work to supplement family income, and face fears of deportation or family separation.

STUDENTS IN THE ACES PROGRAM AT CLARKSBURG HIGH SCHOOL WORK WITH TEACHER TERRÉ THOMAS (RIGHT). FROM LEFT: MERLINE BROADNAX, ALEXIS CARTER STEWARD, NICANOL CESPEDEZ SERRANO AND ANGELO CRUZAT.



Before a captive audience, Thomas begins to chip away at those barriers by assuring students that college is affordable and within their reach.

ACES coaches like Thomas are employed by Montgomery College and work in 14 county high schools. “We have the knowledge and know-how to help you on the road to college,” she says.

Here’s the roadmap:

In their junior and senior years, students will be offered a steady stream of workshops, ranging from study skills, time management and resume writing to scholarships and self-esteem, that contributes to getting them in the frame of mind to chart a new course for themselves and their families. After high school, ACES support moves with them to Montgomery College for an associate’s degree and

then on to the Universities at Shady Grove to complete their baccalaureate.

ACES currently enrolls 2,500 students across the three institutions.

ACES students, an elite group

At the assembly this talk sounds good, but it is ACES students themselves who bring the message home. When 2017 Clarksburg graduate Natalie Patterson steps to the microphone, she says ACES changed her life. She’s enrolled this year at Montgomery College on her way to becoming a pediatrician.

“I applied for 45 scholarships and was awarded \$16,000,” she says. “That’s more than I need for the two-year associate’s degree from MC. I’m banking the rest to finish my undergraduate studies.” She credits Thomas’ help in guiding her through what seemed like an impenetrable labyrinth of financial forms and scholarship applications.

Then it was Angelo Cruzat’s turn. A 17-year-old, a first generation Filipino, he tells the students his dream to be a medical officer in the military. As a high school senior, he attends ROTC in another school and says no one at home could help him navigate the college process.

“ACES is about trying to get yourself prepared for the future.” But, he adds, “It’s also about building relationships with your coaches and ACES friends in other schools.”

Cruzat says he met students from other schools in the two-week summer program between 10th and 11th grades, where he took classes in financial literacy, literature, SAT prep, and team building. He met those same friends again last summer in a two-day, career-focused seminar.

When the assembly ends Thomas returns to her classroom, an ACES student hangout where her charges come before or after school, during lunch or anytime they have a break between classes for advice, to fill out applications or to snack on noodle cups, macaroni and cheese, power bars, hot chocolate, and tea.

Right now she is hoping that new recruits will beat a path to her door. Thankfully, by lunchtime a line of applicants stretches from her desk to the hallway.

ACES, a life changer

Regrettably, she says, she can only accept 60 students. The same is true for each ACES school. Applications are due in December before winter break.



STUDENTS FROM THE ACES PROGRAM TAKE PART IN A WORKSHOP AT THE UNIVERSITIES AT SHADY GROVE. INSET: ACES STUDENT ZOE TISHAEV SPEAKS TO A CLARKSBURG HIGH SCHOOL ASSEMBLY FOR 10TH GRADERS.

The room is packed. ACES veterans Alexis Carter Stuart, a junior, Nicanol Cespedez, Merline Broadnax, and Cruzat, all seniors, sit around a long table joking and eating lunch. When asked why anyone should apply to ACES, they nod their heads in agreement when Merline says, “There is no reason not to apply. Everyone has a different struggle. This is the moment when you can change your life in two years.”

She calls Thomas the glue of the program. “She is not only there for school things, but she’s like a second mother or older sister. Whatever it is, we talk about it.”

At 33, Thomas says this is the best job she’s ever had. She was raised by a single mother who couldn’t help her negotiate the college process, which she eventually did on her own with great difficulty. After college and graduate school, Thomas taught English in South Korea, but it was in her work as an admissions recruiter for Mount St. Mary’s, Trinity Washington University and Montgomery College where she



observed that many students aren’t ready for college.

“They didn’t have the skills and needed remedial help and someone to advise them,” she says.

When she got the job as an ACES coach three years ago, she knew the program had a winning formula. “Anytime you have a one-on-one, you’re going to get more out of the situation. ACES gives them a club to belong to and a community that absolutely cares about them,” she says.

Unlike a typical high school counselor whose roster may include 400 students, Thomas guides 120.

“Each year I have had a 100 percent college acceptance rate,” she says with pride.

Damien Robinson coordinates ACES coaches as part of his job as the assistant director of the program, in which he served as an ACES coach at Seneca Valley High School.

“Our goal is for the students to finish community college

in two years, transfer to the USG and then to have the skills to earn a job when they graduate,” he says of the partnership between MCPS, Montgomery College and the Universities at Shady Grove.

He says this year ACES has added a career component to the curriculum. “Starting in their junior year (of high school), students will have exposure to internships, job shadowing opportunities, resume building, and 21st century career readiness workshops.”

The student-side of the bargain is to show up and be the best that he or she can be.

Getting students and families on the same page

Robinson says ACES partners at all levels recognize that the program must also engage the family.

“We understand that at the end of the day, we can only do so much. Ultimately, if we can help families change their trajectory, they will contribute to Montgomery County, to the state of Maryland, to the United States and beyond.”

That’s where Kimberly Bloc-Rincan, ACES engagement coordinator, fits in. “Our

programs make sure that the whole student and family is served. My work is supporting the wrap-around services,” she says. “Our goal is to equally engage the parents encouraging them to attend workshops, ACES parent meetings or serve on the ACES student-parent advisory council.”

ACES community engagement brings in area nonprofits to work with students on non-academic skills like mindfulness and conflict management. Her team also arranges concerts, museum trips, and training for students who advocate for the program in the community as ACES ambassadors.

ACES students are encouraged to finish their degree at the Universities at Shady Grove, although some transfer to other colleges. USG accepts only transfer students and offers 80 undergraduate, graduate and certificate programs from nine Maryland institutions which have campus extensions at USG.

“Local access is really important to us,” says Stuart Edelstein, USG executive director. “Our mission is to provide a local talent pool so people who live here can work here.”

Eighty-eight percent of USG graduates are working in the region in their intended career field. Four thousand students

attend classes at the Universities at Shady Grove, and when the construction of the \$162 million biomedical sciences and engineering building is completed in 2019, enrollment capacity is expected to grow to 7,500 students with the added degree programs, according to Edelstein.

Putting a dent in the opportunity gap

ACES began in the 2013-14 school year to address the changing demographics in MCPS. In the early 1990s, 60 percent of the students were white, a number which within 20 years had reversed with minority populations becoming the majority in many schools. The educators recognized that large numbers of these students weren’t going to college.

“We wanted to make a very big dent in dealing with that problem,” says Edelstein. “We knew there was talent out there, but there wasn’t opportunity. We are trying to deal with the opportunity vacuum.”

The ACES model fits into the national debate in higher education about access.


“Who gets served and who gets served well,” says Edelstein. “(With ACES) we’re doing this with a very good school system, a very

good community college and a university system that is dedicated to providing access to these students,” he says.

Among those in the pipeline are Julie Resendiz and Viviana Coy, both 20. They went to Rockville and Albert Einstein high schools respectively, attended Montgomery College and currently are finishing degrees at USG – Resendiz in social work from the University of Maryland-Baltimore County and Coy from the University of Maryland’s Smith School. They’ve had ACES coaches and mentors at every stage of their studies.

“Long term I would really like to get a dual degree in social work and business administration and one day start a nonprofit to help my community,” says Resendiz. Coy’s plan is equally ambitious. She’d like to start her own business, which is what her mother, a Colombian immigrant, did. She says ACES has been critical to her success.

“In the beginning, you don’t think that you’re good enough, but then you (look up) and see that you’re one step closer to your goal,” Coy says.

And, they add with a smile, “We will graduate debt free.” 

USG Partnering institutions

Students in the ACES program can advance to earn college degrees from these schools: University of Maryland-Baltimore County, Towson University, University of Maryland-Baltimore, Bowie State University, University of Maryland-College Park, University of Maryland-Eastern Shore, University of Maryland-University College, University of Baltimore, Salisbury University