

'It's OK to dream big': Local students prepare for Black college tour



Standing next to the answer A poster Saturday, March 30, 2024, area students react after finding out that they selected the correct answer to How many all women HBCU's are there? during a Four Corners ice breaker game at the start of the HBCA College Tour Student Orientation at New London High School. (Dana Jensen/The Day)

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March 30, 2024 9:11 pm • Last Updated: March 31, 2024 11:20 am

By **Terell Wright**, Special to The Day

More than 40 high school students packed the library in New London High School Multi-Magnet Campus on Saturday morning as they prepared for a five-day tour of historically black colleges and universities.

Since 1992, Historically Black College and University Alumni Inc. has taken students throughout New London County to see what life looks like outside of Southeastern Connecticut for Black scholars.

"Southeastern Connecticut is not it," program alum Kiea Beard told the students. "Everything changed when I left Connecticut."

The program's success is extensive. Alums who completed the college tour, like Beard, went on to attend HBCUs, and several return every year to help lead the trip.

Alum Aisha Taylor, who attended Grasso Technical High School, pushed the students to aim for their ambitions.

"It's OK to dream big," Taylor said.

The program ensures students have a support system by providing additional resources, such as financial aid workshops, resume help, networking opportunities and one-on-one mentorship with college-educated Black alums in the community.

Ray Malone, vice president of the HBCA, began the college tour program in 1992. Thirty-two years later, Malone believes now is more important than ever to empower Black students seeking to attend college.

With the Supreme Court's overturn of affirmative action and the rollback of diversity, equity and inclusion commitments in higher education, Malone says, HBCA has every intention of moving forward.

"For our program, we just keep doing what we're doing," he said.

Many students didn't know what an HBCU was before the program. But as they learn how Black colleges can provide educational and cultural stimulus to Black students, they've become more eager to apply.

"It's an eye-opener for the students when they go on a tour and they walk the campus and see everything. ... It really motivates them to want to get educated, finish high school and move on to higher education," said Malone.

Cole Baumgartner, 16, is a junior at Waterford High School. With the Supreme Court's reversal of affirmative action, there is increasing uncertainty for students of color seeking admission into predominantly white schools. Baumgartner is hopeful HBCUs will provide him a space to grow as a learner and a leader.

"I'd say HBCUs are definitely more of an option. If (predominantly white colleges) aren't going to accept as many people of color, that's a big issue because you're not going to have people with better worldviews," he said.

Throughout the day, speakers delivered information on college life, career and scholarship advice, and trip experiences. State Reps. Anthony Nolan, D-New London, and Derell Wilson, D-Norwich, urged them not to take any moment for granted.

"This is a big experience that is going to shape a lot of what you do when you get back," said Wilson.

On a five-day trip beginning April 9, students will visit Howard University, University of Maryland, Morgan State University, Bowie State University, Hampton University and Norfolk State University.

The program costs \$350 to county residents, though local high schools and community partners covered the costs for several attending students.

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