

Boys & Girls Club program prepares teens for life after high school

Lauren Loftus, Special for The Republic 10:09 a.m. MST January 6, 2016



(Photo: Alexis Macklin/The Republic)

The teens gathered around the meeting table made up of hodgepodge desks and flimsy chairs are discussing the art of the college-elective course.

They can be fun and downright weird - think The Science of Garbage and The Feminism of Beyonce - but they can also mess you up when working toward a degree, says Antoinette Cauley, a project coordinator with the Boys & Girls Clubs' "BE GREAT: Graduate" program at the Stevenson branch in east Mesa. But people don't talk about college electives a lot.

This is a common scene for high schoolers, especially for teens like these, many of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. They aren't always shown how to navigate college beyond SAT prep and testing requirements. Occasionally they might get help on an application. But things like how class schedules work in college, required courses for a major and how to apply for work-study are often overlooked.

That's where the Boys & Girls Club comes in. The "BE GREAT: Graduate" program prepares teenagers for life after high school in ways that often aren't covered by the schools. The main goal for each participant is to graduate on time with a plan for the future, whether that be college, trade school, solid employment or the military, according to education coordinator Tonia Smith.

"BE GREAT: Graduate" is part of the Academic Success and Good Character and Citizenship programming in after-school programs at Boys & Girls Clubs of the East Valley. Through Season for Sharing funding, nearly 4,000 children received academic and character development at the five branches that make up the East Valley division: Tempe, North Tempe, Guadalupe, Mesa and Stevenson.

At the Stevenson branch, most of the dozen or so teenagers who gather in the portable classroom on the Stevenson Elementary campus each week are focused on college.

Think back to when I was a teen and what I wish I had learned, when planning discussion topics, Cauley says.

There are plans, she says, for comprehensive lessons about financial aid, applying for scholarships and grants, what it means to take out loans and how to avoid debt.



- Last year we raised \$2.6 million (<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenix/2015/03/25/season-sharing-raises-millions-inspires-gratitude/70469712/>)
- Parrish: Your generosity adds up (<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2015/11/12/arizona-republic-season-for-sharing-holiday-giving/75676752/>)
- Infographic: How your money helps (<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2014/12/10/season-for-sharing-infographic/20195489/>)
- 2014 Season for Sharing recipients (<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2015/03/26/season-for-sharing-thank-you-thursday-agencies/70476846/>)
- Donate to the 2015-16 campaign (<http://pages.azcentral.com/season-for-sharing/donate.html>)



Emily and Jessie discuss an answer to a trivia question about Arizona universities during the Be Great Graduate program at the Boys and Girls Club Stevenson Branch in Mesa on Dec. 9, 2015. Be Great Graduate program is a college prep/readiness course for underprivileged teens. (Photo: Alexis Macklin/The Republic)

As for this day's electives lesson, Cauley stresses the need to be careful when planning a schedule. "Go see your adviser," she says.

Set a timeline so you know which courses you have to take to graduate on time and when you'll have free time to take that weird elective like Building Your Own Religion.

Vanessa Hernandez, an outspoken high school junior in plaid, loves the idea of college electives, particularly for music. They'll allow her to continue playing guitar while pursuing a degree in either architecture or engineering. "Guitar would be for fun," she says.

Through the "BE GREAT: Graduate" program, Hernandez has already started planning for college, despite being only 16 and a year away from applying. She's laser focused, having already visited Northern Arizona University and considering the engineering programs at Kansas State and Arizona State.

"But I do have two free years at Mesa Community College if I don't get a free ride to one of the others," she says. Hernandez would be the first person in her family to go to college.

Read or Share this story: <http://azc.cc/100jXQe>