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Funds needed to continue Mesa Counts on College

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By Gary Nelson

The Republic | azcentral.com
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Three years ago Mesa bagged a \$3 million grant from the prestigious Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to put more kids on the road to higher [education](#).

The foundation, established by the founder of Microsoft Corp., believed the money would help Mesa, the city's public-school system and Mesa Community [College](#) break a historical pattern that kept 92 percent of Mesa's ninth-graders from eventually earning a college degree.

The three entities established a program called Mesa Counts on College. Since mid-2010 the program has solidified partnerships among the city and the schools, using internships and other methods of putting students on a college track.

Now the grant is expiring. But the work — and the need for it — isn't.

Amy Trethaway, a city employee who is the director of Mesa Counts on College, told the City Council this week the effort will continue with new public outreach and hoped-for new sources of money.

For years, Mesa Public Schools' graduation rate has been the best among the nation's big-city school districts. And, Trethaway said, about 66 percent of Mesa's high-school graduates do enroll in post-secondary programs.

But whether it's for a vocational certificate, a two-year or a four-year degree, Trethaway said, only 29 percent of Mesa's high-school grads complete their programs.

Among low-income kids, the picture is far worse: Of those who begin post-secondary work, only 7 percent finish.

Further, she said, about 56 percent of MPS graduates need remedial classes in basic math, reading or English before they can even begin college work.

Her report dovetailed with comments made early this year by Shouan Pan, president of Mesa Community College, who said it could take 10 years before a concerted community effort would bear fruit.

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One goal, Trethaway said, is to help kids understand they don't have to be on a four-year degree track to develop marketable job skills. A certificate in welding will serve as well.

City Manager Chris Brady said Mesa, the public-school system and community college will continue to provide leadership staff for Mesa Counts on College.

But program funding is another matter. The organization will need more grant money, and Mesa United Way has agreed to serve as a conduit for that because, Brady said, private foundations may balk at giving money directly to a city.

Mesa Counts on College also has forged partnerships with the Mesa Community Action Network and its parent agency, A New Leaf.

Those agencies, Trethaway said, will carve out space in their building on East Broadway Road for a

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“college access center.” Low-income clients visiting the facility for other services may be directed to the center for information on career paths. It would be modeled after similar programs in Phoenix and San Antonio.

Eventually, she said, the private colleges that have established new campuses in Mesa may have representatives there. “They are looking for students,” Trethaway said. “We are looking to educate our community. So there’s really an opportunity there to partner with our new colleges.”

Other possible sites for college access centers are the new ThinkSpot creative incubator at the Red Mountain branch library and the Mesa Center for Higher Education, which houses two of the new colleges downtown.

The primary focus, Trethaway said, will be on low-income populations.

Mesa Counts on College also will seek to leverage Mesa’s HEAT initiative, an acronym stressing Mesa’s health-care, education, aerospace, tourism and technology sectors.

Health-care internships already have been established and aerospace is next on the list. Internships in education and technology will come later.

Vice Mayor Alex Finter applauded the expanded program.

“What’s nice to feel is the changing culture,” Finter said. “These kinds of topics in decades gone by would have never been discussed at the city level. It was always the schools and the higher education. So to be a part of it — it just feels good.”

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