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Mesa students learn, earn on the job

By Cathryn Creno
The Republic | azcentral.com
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Part of a \$3 million grant to Mesa Public Schools from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is being used this summer to introduce high-school juniors to health careers.

Learn to Earn, a new program developed by the Gates-funded Mesa Counts on College, is paying students \$1,500 each as they develop entry-level job skills at Cardon Children's Medical Center and Mountain Vista Medical Center.

"The career I am looking into requires a lot of lab work, so this is a great opportunity," said John Condon, a 17-year-old Red Mountain High School student. He said he also has a part-time job at a Salt River tubing company, but Learn to Earn is helping him develop job skills he will use as a professional.

Condon hopes to earn a degree in veterinary medicine at Colorado State University. But rather than work as a vet, he hopes to work at a corporate pharmaceutical lab developing drugs for animals.

Condon was assigned by the program to Mountain Vista's laboratory, where he is spending a month serving the hospital's blood bank, phlebotomy and blood-typing methods and hematology processes.

"So far, I've been learning about blood typing," he said. "It's important because one simple mistake could kill a patient."

Other students in the program are spending time in hospital imaging, physical therapy, nursing, radiology and business administration departments.

Mesa Counts on College staffer Amy Trethaway said 119 Mesa Public Schools students applied to Learn to Earn, but the program didn't necessarily select those with the best grades and academic honors. A higher priority was given to students who voiced passion about pursuing health or science careers, she said.

Hannah Gallo, 17, another Red Mountain student who is assigned to Mountain Vista's lab, is a B+ student who has had a long-term interest in medicine and forensics.

"I was that kid with a doctor kit, and my favorite television show is 'Criminal Minds,'" she said. "Working in Mountain Vista's lab was my top choice."

Dobson High student Dylan Hancock, 17, meanwhile, is hoping for a college engineering scholarship. The A student and varsity football player was encouraged by his mother to try for a Learn to Earn position — otherwise he would have spent the summer cutting lawns.

"I really want to be an electrical engineer, but I thought this experience would be fun," said Hancock, who is assigned to Cardon Children's imaging department. Besides, electrical engineers often work on hospital building projects.

Trethaway said that while it was easy recruiting applicants through high-school science teachers and guidance counselors, finding hospitals willing to employ high-school students was a challenge. Only



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two were willing to take on the Learn to Earn students.

While the students are paid with Mesa Counts on College's Gates funds, the hospitals were asked to donate the time of supervisors who mentor the students.

"We were intrigued by the idea of the program," said Jay Stallings, associate administrator at Banner Desert and Cardon Children's medical centers.

But he also had some concerns: "We take our patient confidentiality and safety very seriously," he said.

"We felt strongly that if it was to be a learning experience, it was to be treated as a real employment opportunity. We required background checks, drug tests and TB tests. And we had all of the students sign confidentiality agreements."

At Mountain Vista, students went through a streamlined version of the hospital's employee orientation, at which they learned how to dress on the job, rules about keeping cellphones quiet and courtesy to patients.

"We explain that our patients are our customers," said Mountain Vista Human Resources director Melissa Nissen. "In this day and age, customers have a choice about where they can get health care. I have two high-school students myself. I tell them all the rules and regulations at school are just preparing them for work. The rules aren't going to go away as they get older."

Although Mesa Counts' Gates funding ends this summer, Trethaway said the program's directors intend to seek other grant money and expand Learn to Earn next summer to include aerospace companies.

"We have not identified specific companies as of yet, but intend to reach out shortly," she said.

If Learn to Earn continues to be successful, experiences with education, technology and tourism jobs eventually will be offered to students, Trethaway said.

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John Condon



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PHOTO BY: Nick Oza/The Republic

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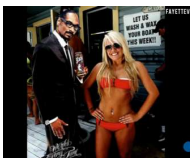


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