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NEWS: Early College!

New Oakland program ties high school with community college classes.

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Zach Menken and Ellie Schuldinger, both 16, of Walled Lake, share their thoughts with Gary Weisserman.

Gary Weisserman is hard to miss as he strides around campus at the Orchard Ridge branch of Oakland Community College in Farmington Hills.

Tall (he says he's 5'18") with a goatee and "resigned to being bald," Weisserman, a native Detroiter, is the proud head of school of Oakland Early College (OEC), a program he designed and implemented. It's the first attempt in Oakland County to become part of the growing nationwide experiment to combine high school and community college.

"Our kids are doing it seamlessly," he says of the 99 high school students chosen for the fledgling educational endeavor. It is co-sponsored by OCC and the West Bloomfield School District, where he taught social studies and English and coached basketball for 12 years.

"We're the supporting organization and Gary is the driving force behind it," says Orchard Ridge Campus President Jacqueline Shadko, Ph.D., who sat in on some of the dozens of personal interviews with prospective students.

"We interviewed for days and days," says Shadko, who also grew up in Detroit, graduating Mumford High School before earning degrees at Barnard College and Yale University in music history.

Every student has to be at grade level because although OEC isn't a traditional high school, "it's also not an 'alternative high school,'" Weisserman says. "Our goal isn't remediation."

They're looking for college-appropriate kids who for one reason or another - too smart, too unconventional or whose school system isn't delivering - would do better in a different kind of high school setting.

"We're especially interested," Weisserman says, "in helping to increase post-secondary access and opportunities and in improving the quality of education to students who are being underserved by traditional, comprehensive high schools."

The Beginnings



Indeed, the program began in September with a class of mainly juniors who come from as far away as Oxford and as nearby as Farmington Hills. OED will expand over the next two years, until it reaches 300 students.

At no cost to them, students take an extra year of classes, graduating with both a West Bloomfield High School diploma and up to 60 hours of transferable college credit and/or an associate's degree from OCC. Even their college course textbooks are free.

In addition to Weisserman, the West Bloomfield district provides four full-time teachers, who are also advisers and coaches, and a full-time secretary and counselor/social worker. OCC provides classroom and office space as well as access to the college's classes, tutoring opportunities and campus gathering spots and activities.

Each student from outside the West Bloomfield School District brings state money with him or her, which funds Oakland Early College. OEC then pays OCC for each college course its students take.



Weisserman was surprised when kids applied from schools like the International Academy, a nationally acclaimed magnet high school administered by the Bloomfield Hills School District, as well as several private schools and home schools. The bulk of the students, however, come from traditional public high schools across Oakland County.

"I've never met a more diverse group of kids," Weisserman says. "My goal is for this to be a progressive lab for what early college high school education can be. Educationally we can't focus on just getting kids through high school anymore."

Positive Feedback



"The people who go here are really cool people, and the teachers are really nice," says Marissa Randel, who transferred from Walled Lake Central. "I decided on OEC because I felt this was a great opportunity. You get college classes for free, and I will end up being a year ahead of my friends."

"What I love about being on a college campus is that you can walk outside, there are no bells, you can wear what you want and use electronic devices," says Randel, a high school junior whose family belongs to Temple Israel in West Bloomfield.

Gary Weisserman has become a familiar figure on the OCC campus.

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— Gary Weisserman

"I love it for her," Marissa's mom, Jaclyn Randel, says. "Gary Weisserman's there to meet the kids [in the morning] and he knows them all by their first name. He'll pull them aside and see how they're doing."

"He was there to help Marissa pick her classes," Jaclyn says. "They're really interested in the interests of each student. She's getting a lot more individual attention even though it's on a big college campus. It's a campus within a campus."

"I have his e-mail address, his cell phone and he's always here," says Whitney Williams, a junior transfer from Southfield-Lathrup High School,

when asked about Weisserman. She attends OEC "for a better education, smaller school and the opportunity to take a college course."

"I like being able to go to college classes at night and have an easier school day so I have more time to focus on music - I play bass guitar," says Nicki Friedlaender, a junior transfer from the Roeper School in Bloomfield Hills.

"I see Gary Weisserman like every day, he's always walking around," says the West Bloomfield resident who is a member of Temple Israel in West Bloomfield.

Victoria Greenstein is one of only three students admitted as a high school senior. She transferred from the Frankel Jewish Academy in West Bloomfield, having completed most of its curriculum. She's taking 14 college credits - economics, freshman composition, Calculus II and Spanish.

"I can walk into Mr. Weisserman's office and we'll just talk." says Greenstein, a West Bloomfield resident whose family attends Adat Shalom Synagogue in Farmington Hills, "He's an open warm person. Everyone on campus is getting to know him."

"He bent over backwards to help us," chimes in her mother, Annette Greenstein. "Gary Weisserman is the epitome of a mentsh."

Shifting Sands

"When I left high school [Farmington Harrison], I wanted to be an artist," Weisserman says. "When I left college, I wanted to be a writer. And when I was a teaching fellow in creative writing, I realized what I liked was the teaching."

After years of straddling the line between high school and college teaching (see story below), Weisserman got interested in the early college movement, co-creating the Genesee Early College on the University of Michigan-Flint campus in 2007 in partnership with the Genesee Intermediate School District.

The opportunity to create an early college within Oakland County, where he lives and grew up, and in partnership with the West Bloomfield School District, where he taught, was irresistible.

"This is where I live. This is where my kids go to school. Working within my community is a big part of who I am and what I want to do."

More information on Oakland Early College is available at www.oaklandearlycollege.org.

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