MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

I want to salute all of you – our directors, counselors, support staff, alumni, students and my team for exemplifying the best of human spirit during this challenging time. You inspire me. While I’m an optimist by nature, like many people I sometimes struggle to stay strong and positive in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic, the faltering economy - with its massive job losses, police violence and the nation’s long overdue reckoning over inequality and systemic racism.

I rely on my faith, the wisdom of those whose shoulders we stand upon and the goodness of humanity to help me cope. I also draw inspiration from brave leaders such as Nelson Mandela who dedicated his life to struggle. His words, “do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again,” resonate with me as I think of the challenges we have conquered over the past few months and those that lie ahead.

I worry most about our students, the incoming freshmen and returning students who have faced trauma, grief and loss. Their daily lives have been upended, along with their hopes and dreams. We know from experience that many of our students have overcome adversity in their young lives and must continue to do so. But we also know they possess the capability, resilience, ingenuity and optimism to rise up and triumph.

NEW CHANCELLOR SIGNALS SUPPORT FOR EOP

On behalf of the more than 10,000 students being served by the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) on 49 campuses, we congratulate Dr. Jim Malatras on his appointment as Chancellor. We are deeply grateful to Jim for his support of our program and his pledge to direct a portion of his annual salary to EOP every year. We look forward to working with Chancellor Malatras to achieve our shared goal of ensuring SUNY’s commitment of providing access, academic support and financial assistance to New Yorkers from low-income households across the state who demonstrate the desire and potential to earn a college degree.

“MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD”

EOP Alumni at Binghamton University Host Virtual Call to Action

They may not have been familiar with the old school soundtrack that featured popular social consciousness anthems such as “Wake Up Everybody” and “What’s Going On,” but Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) students at Binghamton University easily connected with alumni who hosted an EOP virtual town hall meeting to help promote civic engagement.

Saying they were “leveraging their love for EOP,” nearly a dozen alums who have stayed connected to their alma mater and the program organized the two-hour event to help students navigate these troubled times and become a voice for change.

“We’re not here to tell you what to do, we’re here to encourage you to be right and to do the right thing because other generations are depending on all of us together,” said Katrina Huffman (’96) who works full-time in ministry and as a youth advocate. “Your shoulder joins with my shoulder, your hand joins with my hand and we do the right thing as it relates to elections, to being in community.”

Organizers noted that citizens in communities of color have historically been underrepresented at the polls. Shawanda Weems (’98), a middle school English teacher in the Bronx said young adults sometimes feel dismayed and don’t see the value of voting. Weems and the group encouraged participants to live their values, become informed, register to vote, cast their ballots and remind their peers to do the same.

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MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR
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I take great solace in the knowledge that our EOP students are not traveling this bumpy road alone. We are enormously grateful for the support we have received from our System Administration colleagues who provided creative resources to help strengthen our online-remote summer programs. We are indebted to the anonymous benefactor whose commitment to equity and access at SUNY resulted in the purchase of more than 2,800 laptops for EOP freshmen, non-EOP foster youth and the laptop loan program for continuing students in need.

I invite you to read about the many ways the Educational Opportunity Program continues to mobilize its collective compassion to keep our EOP family united and strong. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Cheryl D. Hamilton
Associate Provost
Director of Opportunity Programs

EARLY VOTING
Registered New York voters have the option to vote early. Early voting will take place from Oct. 24–Nov. 1.

DR. JOHN GRAHAM APPOINTED SUNY’S 1ST STUDENT ADVOCATE

The Office of Opportunity Programs congratulates Dr. John Graham on his appointment as SUNY’s first Student Advocate. In his new role, Dr. Graham has been charged with elevating and leading Chancellor Malatras’ more student-centric priorities for his administration. Dr. Graham, who has overseen the student affairs and university life department at SUNY system, will now report directly to the Chancellor.

MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD
(continued from page 1)

In breakout rooms, this next generation of leaders, engaged in discussions with alumni about EOP, affirmative action and racial justice. In addition to voting, facilitator Matthew Phifer (’02,’04) who oversees education and employment programs for a community-based organization in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, asked students to consider other ways they could get involved and mobilize.

One student, who described herself as a child of immigrant parents, said she was raised to not stand out. “Clearly that’s not working,” she said. “If I see something is wrong I’m going to speak up.” Another student shared that she felt it is very critical to have a voice and know where you stand. Other participants added “we need to educate ourselves and each other” and “if you’re going to be my friend, I don’t care who you are voting for, but you have to vote.”

Most of the students who represented all classes said they had already registered to vote and each committed to text each other and their friends on early voting days to remind them to cast their ballots.

All across the SUNY system, students and first time voters are also being encouraged to Pledge to Vote through the ALL IN to Vote platform

IMPORTANT DATES AND DEADLINES

- Nov. 3, 2020, general election:
- Oct. 9: Last day to postmark voter registration (must be received by Board of Elections (BOE) no later than October 14) or register in person at BOE
- Oct. 14: Last day for BOE to receive change of address (only for current New York state registered voters who moved within the state)
- Oct. 27: Last day to postmark absentee request application or submit request via fax, email or BOE web portal
- Nov. 2: Last day to apply in person for absentee ballot
- Nov. 3: Last day to postmark absentee ballot
FREE LAPTOPS PROVIDE A LIFELINE TO DISTANCE LEARNING FOR INCOMING SUNY EOP FRESHMEN

Thanks to the efforts of the SUNY Impact Foundation and a generous donor, the incoming class of Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) freshmen possess the technology they need to complete their coursework at home. The benefactor, who prefers to remain anonymous, provided the funding for the Office of Opportunity Programs to purchase more than 2,800 DELL laptops - one for every admitted student participating in the 2020 EOP pre-freshman summer program.

With the shift to online-remote learning forced by COVID-19, personal computers have become an essential tool for students to effectively engage in their studies at home.

However, access to the needed technology can be problematic for students who come from low-income households who don’t own a laptop or who have to share a device with siblings or other family members.

“The laptops provide a lifeline to distance learning for our students, said Associate Provost and Office of Opportunity Programs Director Cheryl Hamilton. “We want to thank the donor for taking some of the financial pressure off our EOP freshmen and their families during this challenging time.”

Students began picking up their laptops in June at distribution sites set up at the SUNY Global Center in Manhattan, the H. Carl McCall SUNY Building in Albany and at seven SUNY campuses across the state. Though their expressions were hidden by their protective facemasks, students shared their excitement about joining the SUNY EOP family and their sincere appreciation for this generous gift.

Recipients are required to sign a laptop agreement that allows them to keep their laptops as long as they continue to study at a SUNY institution through the completion of their degree.

DR. ALLEN B. BALLARD PROVIDES ORAL HISTORY OF NEW YORK OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS

The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) owes a debt of gratitude to author and retired University at Albany Professor Dr. Allen B. Ballard whose vision and tenacity sowed the seeds of EOP and other New York State opportunity programs.

We encourage EOP Directors to share “The History of New York State Opportunity Programs: A Conversation with Dr. Allen B. Ballard” with their students. The video is available for streaming by visiting the EOP webpage at https://www.suny.edu/attend/academics/eop/. The link can be found under the password protected “EOP Director Resources” portal in the Quick Links sidebar menu.
When “college at home” became the new normal this spring, SUNY Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) directors and counselors did not miss a beat. They immediately began using Moodle, Zoom, MS Teams, Google Hangout and other online platforms to stay connected with their students during this unexpected shift to virtual learning.

The next challenge came quickly as SUNY initially extended online-remote instruction until the fall term. Directors, who had already submitted plans for their upcoming pre-freshman summer programs, were advised to reimagine the experience for a cohort of incoming students who may be coping with their own or their families’ mental and physical health, employment and safety by the coronavirus pandemic.

The summer experience, which is mandatory for all EOP freshmen, has been recognized as a model summer-bridge program for its success in preparing incoming students to excel in their college careers. The key question became how to best support students and help them make the transition to college entirely through the use of technology.

EOP summer programs, which typically begin in July and run from three to six weeks, would need to quickly shift from a highly structured, personalized face-to-face format to a more flexible online/remote experience. In addition to instruction, workshops, credit-bearing coursework and tutoring to strengthen academic skills, summer programming orienting students to the academic community and campus life needed to be delivered virtually.

Thanks to a gift from an anonymous donor, the Office of Opportunity Programs (OOP) was able to purchase a laptop for every EOP freshman to ensure they are able to participate fully in a virtual summer program.

As in years past, academic counselors continued to provide intrusive advising and counseling during the summer program, albeit remotely. The same goes for peer counselors who used their creativity to acclimate new students to the academic and social culture of their campuses and helped promote self-advocacy.

Rather than “social distancing,” EOP summer institutes embraced “physical distancing” by conducting virtual dances, socials, cultural tours, field trips, yoga classes and other enrichment activities that helped foster a sense of belonging and community.

Working in collaboration with SUNY Open Educational Resources (OER) and SUNY Online Services (SOS) faculty and directors were able to identify customizable courses and learning materials that could be adapted for their use this summer at no cost. In an effort to gauge student readiness for online learning, some EOP summer programs used the SUNY Online Student Success Inventory (SOSSI) to identify their strengths and weaknesses to better prepare them for academic and personal success using this modality this summer and beyond.

Also new this summer, OOP is made video presentations and learning modules available to campuses on topics such as cultural competency and the history of opportunity programs.

While moving summer programs online presented new challenges, surveys of students found overall satisfaction with the format and reported that they felt well-prepared for the fall semester.
NYS ASSEMBLYWOMAN WELCOMES INCOMING FRESHMEN TO THE EOP FAMILY

Every summer SUNY’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) mobilizes successful alumni to serve as valued role models and powerful influencers for the incoming class of EOP freshmen. The graduates shared backgrounds and participation in EOP provide a level of trust and respect that empowers students who are embarking on their own educational journey.

In a videotaped message to students who are enrolled in EOP’s intensive online-remote summer bridge programs across the state, the Honorable Latoya Joyner shared her story and offered words of support to students.

Ms. Joyner, who represents a portion of the Bronx as a member of the NYS Assembly, grew up in the borough and was the first person in her family to attend college. She said EOP made it possible for her to go to Stony Brook University, “it changed my life.” While an undergrad, she participated in an Assembly internship program and later earned a law degree from the Law School at the University at Buffalo.

The assemblywoman, who has used her position in the legislature to improve access to affordable housing, reduce racial disparities, advance health care for women and increase funding for EOP students, is humble about her success. “It wasn’t always easy, but it (college) opened doors that made it possible for me to excel in a way that I never had before...the important lesson to learn from my experience is your time as a college student can be life changing.” She urged students to take advantage of the opportunities provided by EOP, which she said will make a dramatic difference for the rest of their lives.

With generous support from the legislature, the Educational Opportunity Program has promoted college access and degree attainment for qualified students from low-income households for more than 50 years. Students admitted to SUNY through EOP show promise for mastering college-level work, but due to under preparation, are unable to meet regular admission criteria. Since EOP’s inception in 1967, more than 75,000 students have earned a SUNY degree, excelled in their chosen fields and climbed the socio-economic ladder.

CONGRATULATIONS SHARON WEBER!

The Office of Opportunity Programs offers heartfelt congratulations to our friend and colleague Sharon Weber. Retirement is your sweet reward for more than 20 years of service to SUNY. You will be remembered for your warmth, kindness and dedication to supporting our team and the entire EOP family. Wishing you a long and enjoyable retirement!
SUMMER PROGRAM FEATURES
LESSON IN CULTURALLY
RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP

For more than 50 years, the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at SUNY has empowered its students to accomplish their academic goals and seek to make a meaningful difference on campus, in their communities and beyond.

Guided by their counselors, faculty and mentors - incoming freshmen begin developing key skills necessary to become effective leaders soon after they enter the program. In addition to decision-making, communication, collaboration and strategic thinking skills – budding leaders must be open to understanding different cultures.

Lea Webb, an EOP alumna of SUNY Broome and Binghamton University is a highly sought-after lecturer on cultural competency. She describes culture as the way we and our larger communities interpret the world. “It shapes how we act, what we believe and also what we know.”

Webb and colleague Jah Davis who work as Coordinators of Diversity Education at Binghamton developed an online workshop for EOP pre-freshman summer programs throughout SUNY. The goal of the Culturally Responsive Leaders module is to provide students with tools to help them navigate their day to day experience and engage in real conversations about race, justice, diversity, equality, equity and inclusion.

Davis reminded students that culture is more than just a person’s race or sexual identity. She said perceptions and stereotyping are part of the human condition. In a group activity that accompanied the lecture, students were directed to reflect on microaggressions, stereotypes, privilege and oppression that can create barriers to becoming a culturally responsive leader and impact an individual’s relations with others. According to Davis, if we fail to talk about these issues, it’s easy to perpetuate them.

WHAT INCOMING EOP FRESHMEN AT SUNY PLATTSBURGH WERE READING THIS SUMMER

A shared reading assignment led to a deep dialogue and critical thinking about racial injustice, inequality, prejudice, and police brutality. While such topics are often taboo in high school classrooms, incoming freshmen participating in SUNY Plattsburgh’s Educational Opportunity Program’s (EOP) summer institute welcomed an opportunity to have meaningful discussions about race with their peers. “This is one of the first opportunities I have had to really express myself,” said one student.

The theme of this year’s summer program was “Stronger Together.” As a requirement of its Freshman Seminar class, EOP students were assigned to read the New York Times bestseller How to be an Antiracist in their Freshmen Seminar class. The powerful book was written by scholar Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, who previously taught at SUNY Oneonta and SUNY Albany before becoming the Founding Director of the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research.

In a weekly Zoom discussions facilitated by their EOP counselors who taught the seminar, the students, talked about how racism has affected their lives. The class also logged into a virtual interview with the author on Facebook where Dr. Kendi shared his own experience with racist thinking and challenged readers to call out racism when they see it. “The only way to undo racism is to constantly identify it and describe it—and then dismantle it,” he said. The professor posits that there is no such thing as ‘not racist’, an individual is either racist or antiracist.

Because the conversations reflected lived experience and personal history, discussions at times became very emotional. “Reading this book helped change my perspective” shared one student who said she now understands how one can be racist against their own kind. Another student said, “It’s important to discuss social justice issues in school and how we feel about these topics...most of us are people of color.”

The shared summer reading assignment not only encouraged critical thinking and reflection, it also connected the students with one another and helped to create a supportive community which is the foundation of EOP.
SUPPORTING OW EOP STUDENTS’ MENTAL HEALTH

While there is no substitute for a shoulder to cry on or a warm hug when times get tough, SUNY Old Westbury’s Educational Opportunity Program continued to make the mental health and well-being of its students a priority during its online-remote EOP Pre-Freshman Summer Program.

National surveys have shown the number of students suffering from depression, stress or anxiety has been growing in recent years and has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. The public health crisis has led to intense emotional, financial and academic instability and underscored pre-existing inequities for students of color, first generation students and students from low-income households.

EOP counselors serve as academic advisors and mentors who help students learn to advocate for themselves when they face personal, academic, financial or social concerns. They also triage mental health issues.

Mindful of the current climate, EOP Director Dr. Jerrell Robinson wanted students to have a better understanding of mental health and wellness issues and have tool-box of self-care mechanisms to manage their stress and anxiety. Working with a licensed social worker, he designed a comprehensive health and wellness component for the summer program.

“The ability to manage previous trauma, current stressors and ongoing challenges is a great predictor to long-term success,” said Dr. Robinson. “Improving EOP students’ ability to communicate, advocate for themselves and show emotional flexibility could greatly improve the students’ ability to become academically prepared, socially adjust and thrive as OW students and beyond.”

Kay DeSimone, LMSW facilitated the group workshops which were highly interactive and focused on building therapeutic and social emotional skills. During the final class students were asked to share what they had learned from the program and what they will be doing to take care of their stress and anxiety. Responses included physical exercise, journaling, making art, playing games, talking to family and friends and going to a park.

DeSimone reminded students that their EOP family will guide them and have their back but they must also have the courage to reach out when they need help. “We’re here for you in the short term and also for the long term,” she said.

In October, SUNY launched a comprehensive plan to expand access to mental health services to every student. The initiative includes access to a network of 6,000 licensed mental health service providers; a tele-counseling program for students and an expanded peer-to-peer assistance hotline.

FROM PARIS TO MANHATTAN: FIT EOP ALUM OFFERS WISDOM TO INCOMING FRESHMEN

“Fashion is a demanding field, it’s about loving and living it.” Bruno Miera, an Educational Opportunity Program alumnus (’16) of the Fashion Institute of Technology told incoming EOP students at FIT to not be afraid, “FIT and EOP chose you, you are the best of the best.”

Miera, who displays a maturity beyond his years, grew up in Queens and majored in International Trade and Marketing. He works as a social media executive in Paris for Paco Rabanne, a luxury brand known for its fragrances and fashion.

Miera connected with students during an EOP summer program Zoom session. They peppered him with questions about balancing personal life and college studies, how to overcome shyness and launch a career. His advice, “find a mentor who has been there, done that...seek out people who understand your struggle, your story.”

As a SUNY Presidential Scholar and recipient of the Chancellor’s Award for Student Excellence, Miera encouraged freshmen to make the most of their time at FIT and distinguish themselves. His suggestions included creating a personal brand, wearing their designs and seeking guidance from faculty, advisors and their EOP counselors. “Treat yourself as a diamond to be polished,” he said. “You are going to shine so much.”
CORTLAND EOP FRESHMEN EXAMINE VALUE OF EDUCATION

Thirty-five incoming first-year students in SUNY Cortland’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) recently completed a Summer Institute that considered the implications of a weighty philosophical question. What is the value of education?

Using readings by philosophers Plato, Alfred North Whitehead and others, “The Value of Education” course began with the premise that a student must first understand what education is before they can know if they are getting one.

Dr. Lewis Rosengarten, Director of EOP did double-duty this summer teaching the online course with colleague AnnaMaria Cirrincione, Director of the Multicultural Life and Diversity office. Rosengarten reminded students that education is more than just an acquisition of facts. According to social psychologist Dr. Sheldon Solomon, a former colleague of Rosengarten, education also requires socialization, critical thinking and esthetic awareness, moral courage and a reconstruction of self. “Since you just finished high school you haven’t been exposed to the whole range of disciplines that you will be in college and beyond...you can now start making decisions, instead of having those decisions made for you.”

Blending the classics with contemporary influencers, powerful messages from a Beyonce Jay-Z music video, the Spike Lee film “Do the Right Thing,” the writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., scholar W.E.B. DuBois and novelist Alice Walker were used to illustrate the components of imagination, creativity and hard work and the role of education as the great equalizer.

Cirrincione asked students to think about what role imagination and hard work will play in their academic success. “You’re using your imagination to figure out what your future holds, but the hard work is also important, right?” she said. “Because if you don’t do the hard work that is necessary to make those goals happen then they will stay in your imagination and won’t come to fruition.”

Enrollment in and successful completion of the Summer Institute is a requirement for all new, entering SUNY Cortland EOP freshmen. The four-week long SI helps students make the transition from high school to becoming a SUNY Cortland freshman student.

“You’re here because you have been deemed as someone with fantastic academic potential and potential in life,” Rosengarten told students. “We want you to be a force on this campus, armed with all these academic tools.”

USING VISUAL ARTS TO ENRICH BUFFALO STATE EOP STUDENTS’ UNDERSTANDING OF LOCAL HISTORY

Visual artist, hip hop musician, jewelry designer, and entrepreneur - Edreys Wajed is often described as a renaissance man. Wajed, a graduate of Buffalo State College who earned a degree in graphic design, presented an online workshop on local history to incoming freshmen participating in the college’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) Summer Academy. The three-week long summer program helps ease the transition to college life by acclimating students to campus and the surrounding community.

“Art has a place in change-making,” Edreys told students. He said his work has been impacted by Buffalo’s diverse history. Today the streets of his hometown have been enriched by his creative talents. Edreys was one of four artists of color who contributed to The Freedom Wall, a massive mural commissioned by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery’s Public Art Initiative. It features images of 28 local and national civil rights leaders.

Edreys created seven panels including depictions of Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X and Frank Merriweather. The Freedom Wall is located at the entrance to the Michigan Street African American Heritage Corridor. The mural chronicles 200 years of Black history in 300 feet. It was created to celebrate the nation’s historic and ongoing struggles for political and social equality, including the lasting contributions of local leaders to the cause. EOP founding father, NYS Assembly Majority Leader Arthur O. Eve of Buffalo is among the leaders featured.

“Art is the shining star during this challenging time...murals can be found all around the city,” said Wajed, “I’m using my art to try to change the narrative of this impoverished and segregated city.” Edreys invited the EOP students to venture out into neighborhoods that they might not frequent or visit to check out the art.
EOP NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS PROVE IT’S NEVER TOO LATE TO LEARN

“I tried college at 18 and I tried again in my 20’s,” lamented David Mejias, a 35-year-old father of two who credits the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) for much of his academic success at Hudson Valley Community College.

Mejias, who last semester earned a 3.8 GPA, is among the adult learners who have been admitted to SUNY through EOP. The 52-year-old program is offered on 49 SUNY campuses, including 19 community colleges. It provides academic, personal, and financial support to low-income students who show promise of succeeding in college but who may not have otherwise been offered admission.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, over 40 percent of current college students are over the age of 25, almost 30 percent have children, and over 60 percent work at least part-time. Of the nearly 10,000 EOP students enrolled in the fall of 2019, more than 640 were defined as adult learners. They come from diverse backgrounds, range in age from 25 to over 65, and share a hunger to learn and a deep desire to complete their degrees.

Adult Learners Demonstrate Grit and Perseverance

“School is hard, especially in the beginning. It’s a different world on campus, Mejias said. “I didn’t realize my potential, but EOP made me feel supported. I’m living proof that it works if you try.”

EOP supports students throughout their college careers. Each student is assigned an EOP counselor, attends a pre-freshmen summer program, has access to one-on-one and group tutoring and supplemental instruction and receives a modest stipend for books, supplies and other educational expenses. These services are particularly important for non-traditional students who often have interrupted their educations and may need to strengthen their study and time management skills to get back on track.

Ebony Parmer has wanted to be a nurse ever since she was young girl. She worked as a home health aide in her teens and went on to complete a licensed practical nurse program. A 33-year-old mother of four, Parmer aims high and hopes to one day become a pediatrician. She is currently majoring in Health Care Studies at Finger Lakes Community College.

Despite working full time and raising her family, Parmer is determined to complete her studies in two years and take the national licensing exam necessary to become a registered nurse. “I just take it day by day,” said Parmer who expressed gratitude for the personalized attention she receives from her EOP counselor who she said checks in regularly and helps her get through her classes.

“Welcoming and wonderful” is how Imogene Lockwood described her EOP counselor and the staff at SUNY Broome Community College. Lockwood a 46-year-old married mother of five with two grandchildren said whenever she has a problem “EOP is always available to steer her in the right direction.”

Lockwood, who is majoring in liberal arts, said it took her twenty years to enroll in college. She decided to go back to school when she lost a civil service position that required a degree. She has since found another job and now works full-time in the billing department of a private firm while completing her last semester remotely at BCC. “I was very hell bent that I was not going to postpone it (my degree) any more. “

Maizie Millwood, a 54-year-old single mom is setting an example for her two daughters who are also attending college. Millwood began her college studies at Syracuse University a number of years ago before stopping out. She transferred to the nursing program at Onondaga Community College where she currently maintains a 4.0 GPA despite working full time. Millwood said it was hard to get started again but the EOP staff at OCC have helped her in every way that they can. “I encourage people all the time to go back to school, you are never too old to learn.”
The following is a transcript of an interview with long-time Monroe Community College EOP Director Brenda Smith, who recently retired from her position at MCC after 17 years of dedicated service. Brenda not only had a tremendous impact on the lives of her students, she also served as a confidante, a mentor and an inspiration to a generation of new EOP directors.

Brenda devoted her entire career to nurturing students. Before taking over the helm of EOP at MCC, she served for 15 years as an EOP counselor and Director at Finger Lakes Community College. After graduating from Bethune-Cookman University, a private historically black college in Florida, she became a middle school teacher. Brenda later moved to Rochester and obtained a master’s degree at SUNY Brockport where she was first introduced to opportunity programs.

Some of the questions and responses of this interview have been edited for brevity and clarity.

Brenda Smith’s connection to the Educational Opportunity Program began more than 30 years ago at The College at Brockport when she was admitted to the Counseling Minority Group, a program that trained students of color in the master’s program to become counselors. One of the requirements was an internship - hers was with EOP. Brenda reported to Gary Owens, who later became the director of EOP. Yanick Jenkins, who now serves as EOP Director at Buffalo State College, was one of her classmates.

Q. What drew you to this work?

Brenda Smith: Working with a disadvantaged population, that particular group of students who need a bit more nurturing, I was drawn to that. I was always a person that liked to help people, to help young people find their way, whatever that way may be. When I got the internship while working on my master’s at Brockport, I thought this is my niche. I really fell in love with it.

Q. Do you feel you were able to make a difference in your students’ lives?

A. A lot of times you don’t know how you impacted a young person until they come back to you and say “oh, Miss Smith you remember when you said this to me or Miss Smith do you remember when you did this to help me out- it made a difference. You encouraged me, even when I was doing poorly in class you said don’t give up, you can get through it, here’s some resources, let’s work on this, let’s not throw the towel in yet.”

Q. You mentioned that you have always found joy as a Director? Can you give me an example?

A. Those students who were just right on the edge (academically). To see those students work hard, use the services, persist and graduate - that is what brought me joy. Those students who we weren’t sure about, but we gave them that extra opportunity and they did well. I found my joy in that.

Q. Once you became an EOP Director did you find you had less contact with students?

A. I always tried to know every student by name and reach out to them. I worked on it. I was a hands-on kind of director. There were times at Monroe when we were short-staffed and I would have a caseload of students.

Q. It sounds like you put in a lot of hours over many years?

A. You just have to make that commitment. I’m in charge of this program, I want to help my students so I made myself available. For example, when we went from a residential summer program to a remote program this summer, all of my students had my cellphone number and they could call or text me at any time. I wanted to make sure the students knew that we care about them, they matter, they are important to us as a student at Monroe Community College.

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EOP Profiles in Courage: Brenda Smith (continued from page 10)

EOP wasn’t about me. I always gave praise to my staff. You have to have the people working with you to make your program a good program. Along the way I have always had others who have mentored me, took me under their wing. I have always appreciated that as well.

Q. Speaking of mentoring, what advice would you offer a new director?
A. Don’t be afraid to ask questions, don’t be afraid to reach out to one of the more seasoned directors and certainly use the resources of the Office of Opportunity Programs to help you be a good leader and guide the program. Be a part of the professional development that comes along the way to help you grow and help you grow your program. I love EOP, I really love opportunity programs because students who take advantage of it can go far. My job and your job is to convince the students of that.

Q. This interview is taking place just a few days after you began your retirement. Do you have any plans?
A. I’m still trying to find my way. I went from 24/7 all the time to wondering what do I do with myself. I have been relaxing and doing some projects around the house. My husband and I like to spend time with our nieces and nephews. We like to travel. I’m going to try to volunteer more with my church and in the community.

*Profiles in Courage is modeled after the biography written by President John F. Kennedy. In each issue of this newsletter we profile individuals who exhibit courage and remarkable devotion to the Educational Opportunity Program.

“Stick To Your Art” - EOP Alums Advise Incoming Freshmen at Purchase College

“Once EOP, Always EOP!” It’s a truism for students who are admitted to a SUNY college through the Educational Opportunity Program. Graduates, who often describe EOP as “transformative” and “life-altering” stay connected to their EOP counselors, mentors and peers long after they complete their degrees. Their continued involvement is a critical part of the success of the program.

When an invitation was extended to EOP alums to participate in a virtual meeting with incoming freshmen on a recent Saturday afternoon at Purchase College, twenty grads were there to represent. A third-grade teacher, an emergency room physician, a celebrity photographer, business owners, a federal investigator and an actor/dancer on a popular television series were among the proud alums who dropped by to share their stories and wisdom and offer words of encouragement.

Fifty students at Purchase were among the nearly 2,800 EOP students on 46 SUNY campuses participating in a rigorous state-supported college readiness program this summer. The mandatory summer experience, which is normally residential, is a foundation of the Educational Opportunity Program and contributes to the first year retention of its students.

Jason Rodriguez (‘12) who plays Lemar on the FX hit series ‘Pose’ welcomed the students to the EOP family. In addition to being a cast member, Rodriguez is also a movement coach and choreographer who teaches a class at Purchase. He encouraged students to, “stay focused on what you want to do... stick to your art.”

With tears in her eyes, Dr. Gina Oviedo-Batt, a practicing Emergency Medicine physician (‘00), told students she had a difficult life growing up, but with all the love and support she received from her EOP counselor, she made it. “No matter where you go in life,” she said, “they will always be there for you.”

“I am absolutely living my dream,” said Dr. Janette Yarwood, (‘96) a Fulbright Scholar, who worked as a researcher at the U.S. State Department before taking a position with the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Africa. “You cannot get through college alone. I am more than willing to speak with any student who is interested in an internship on the Hill,” she said.

“My word of advice is listen,” Antonio Santiago (‘00) told students. As a Dean of a community college, Santiago knows what it takes for students to be successful. He described his experience at Purchase as “unforgettable.” He said it has been 20 years since he earned his undergraduate degree but he still feels connected to EOP and the counseling staff.

Perhaps the message students most needed to hear as they embarked on their educational journey this summer was “you’re out of the nest now- go fly.” Thanks to supportive EOP alumni they have already made an important connection and are well on their way.
THE EOP STUDENTS AWARDED SUNY’S HIGHEST HONOR

The Office of Opportunity Programs congratulates these six outstanding EOP students who were among the 213 awardees of the 2020 Chancellor’s Award for Student Excellence. Each year recipients are recognized for their integration of academic excellence with other aspects of their lives including leadership, campus involvement, community service, arts (creative or performing), athletics, and/or career achievement.

SARA KANAMPORE
SUNY Adirondack, Liberal Arts, Humanities and Social Science

Sara was the recipient of the Norman R. McConney, Jr. Award for the Educational Opportunity Program for Excellence in October 2019, and made the Dean’s List that same year. She is an active member of the Upsilon Beta Chapter of Phi Theta Kappa, and is a resident assistant on campus. She is a liberal arts major, with plans to become a social worker.

ALODIE KEZA
University at Albany, Public Policy & Management

Despite experiencing displacement and homelessness at a young age as a refugee, Alodie emerged as a first-generation American, graduating with a bachelor’s degree. During her time at the university, Alodie served in the student government, studied abroad in Cuba, mentored numerous peers, tutored several subjects, and was amongst SUNY’s representatives in a Model EU conference in Brussels. Alodie has also been a recipient of the Spellman Academic Achievement Award and the Initiatives for Women scholarship.

OMSALAMA AYOUB
Hudson Valley Community College, Biological Sciences

Omsalama Ayoub was born in Wad Madeni, Sudan, and moved to the States in October 2011. Omsalama attended KIPP: Tech Valley Charter school and the Doane Stuart School, which built the foundation for her work ethic, social values, and ambition. She is a biological sciences student and serves as the student trustee on the Board of Trustees, vice president of Scholarship for Alpha Xi Sigma of Phi Theta Kappa, and staff writer for the Hudsonian.

RAKIA AKTER
Buffalo State, Childhood Education

Rakia Akter is a senior majoring in Childhood Education holding a grade point average of 3.89. Rakia hopes to be a teacher in the Buffalo Public School system with a focus in fostering social, emotional, and ethical learning. Rakia has conducted two research projects during her time as an undergraduate student. One of which took her to Yangon, Myanmar under the leadership of the Creative Studies Department. Rakia is the Student Ambassador for the International Professional Department Schools (IPDS) and she’s a member of the Kappa Delta Pi Education Honor Society. Rakia plans to continue her education as a Graduate student at Buffalo State College pursuing her certification to be a English as a New Language (ENL) teacher.

KATHERINE MARTINEZ-MUNOZ
SUNY Oneonta, Biology

Katherine is an exceptional student leader who excels in all she does. She is consistently recognized for her GPA, is an active member of multiple national honor societies and organizations, and has conducted important biological research in the Adirondack Mountains, Amazon Rainforest, and at Michigan State University. Katherine is a dedicated peer tutor, flautist, and volunteer. In 2019, she was one of eight students who traveled to Puerto Rico to help with hurricane cleanup efforts.
EOP ALUMS SEND MESSAGES OF HOPE AND ENCOURAGEMENT

#EOPSTRONG #SUNYEOPPROUD

Amid the anxiety, fear, isolation and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic one thing holds true—SUNY’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) students and alumni always support each other. EOP prides itself on establishing a sense of community, a family and that bond continues long after graduation.

When campuses were abruptly forced to go virtual for the remainder of the 2020 Spring semester in response to the coronavirus outbreak, SUNY Broome EOP Director Venessa Rodriguez sprang into action. Rodriguez, an EOP alumna herself, put out a call to her former students. She asked them to send inspirational messages to current students to try to help “keep their spirits up” during this time of great upheaval. Rodriguez’ campaign which she hashtagged #EOPStrong and #SUNYEOPProud went viral at Purchase College and other campuses.

SHAVON FRAZIER
SUNY Oneonta EOP 2009

I just wanted to stop by and give a couple of words of encouragement. I want to make sure that no matter what you’re going through, whether you are family-wise or education-wise or in any way, I don’t want you to be discouraged. I want you to remember who you are. I want you to remember why you chose to go to college, why you choose to get an education and hold on to that. Hold on to hope and remember that going through this is only going to make you stronger. You got this!

ISABELLA SOSA
Purchase College EOP 2015

I’m sure it’s hard out there. I’m sure there is a different struggle every single day. But what’s new? We know all about the struggle, how to make things work even if it seems like the whole world is working against us. Right now is just another struggle, we’re all going to get through. We’re members of EOP. I never could have imagined that I would be teaching my 25 second graders through Google classroom and I’m sure you could have never imagined that you would be at home on your laptop teaching yourselves new concepts, trying to get that paper in. You’re still making sure that no matter what, you’re successful because as a member of EOP, you know you are resilient. You were resilient before this pandemic, you’re going to be even more resilient after this pandemic and think about the stories you are going to tell future EOP classes. It’s going to be okay.

JONATHAN OLIVO
SUNY Oneonta EOP 2010

and

LIANA MINAYA
SUNY Oneonta EOP/CAMP 2012

We know there is a lot going on right now across the world and the amount of pressure you must be feeling at this very moment. There were a lot of obstacles you had to overcome in your life to get to where you are and into this program. This is not an obstacle. This is just a pause in your journey. Sometimes in life you just need to pause, step back and look at what is in front of you to get the whole picture. Know that what you have done and what you will accomplish is important. What you will create is already beautiful and impactful. Keep in mind you are not alone in this. You have family, friends, EOP staff and past alumni. Every single one of us is ready to listen and help bridge the gap towards your future.

JASMIN SIERRA
Purchase College EOP 2014

In my time at Purchase it always felt like family and I’m sure that tradition remains. From one EOP family member to another, I just wanted to share some love and offer some words of encouragement during this time. I wish and pray that you all are healthy, safe and sound as well as your family members and friends. We’re all going through some challenging times, but I just wish for everyone to be healthy and remain so. I’m a student myself, back in school so I can sympathize because it’s not an easy transition especially being an undergrad at SUNY Purchase. You are learning new things and meeting new people. You’re discovering new interests. It is sad to see that put on hold. But I just wanted to say it’s important in these times to stay positive, stay hopeful and be kind to yourself.
EOP FOSTER YOUTH TOUTS NEW RESOURCE GUIDE TO HELP STUDENTS SUCCEED IN COLLEGE

Nikolas Vasquez, an Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) student at the University at Albany candidly admits the road to success has been difficult for him. Like many young people with a foster care background, Nikolas did not see college in his future. "I was somebody who literally had nothing and now I am going to Albany on a full ride," said the Harlem resident who today is a successful college student who is passionate about advocating for foster youth on SUNY campuses.

New York State has the third largest foster care population in the country, with approximately 16,000 children and youth in the foster care system every year. But the future often looks bleak for youth aging out of foster care. Statistics show one in five will become homeless after age 18, nearly half will be unemployed in their early 20’s and less than three percent will graduate from college. Vasquez credits counselors who saw something in him for changing the trajectory of his life.

By the age of 18, Nikolas was supporting himself by working 35 hours a week at McDonald’s. He said his counselors sat him down, convinced him to apply to college. One of the greatest challenges he faced was accessing documentation from the courts, social services and other agencies - to verify his status to apply for financial aid. But Nikolas persevered, “I got accepted into Albany, it was one of the greatest things that happened, through EOP. He completed his first semester with a 3.2 GPA.

Vazquez helped launch a group for students at UAlbany who share a similar background. Fostering Leaders of Our World (FLOW) works to raise awareness about foster youth in college and advocate for policies and programs to help students achieve their goals.

Nikolas took time out from his summer job to share some personal reflections about the challenges he faced navigating the application process and paying for college during a recent webinar hosted by the Fostering Youth Success Alliance (FYSA). And he is doing his part to spread the word about the Alliance’s new College Resource Success Guide and a series of webinars to educate financial aid professionals, faculty and other staff about ways they can better support students from foster care as they make their transition to college. In 2015, the Alliance successfully advocated for the establishment of a statewide initiative to provide resources and services to support foster youth who want to attend college. New York State’s Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI) has provided $27 million in state funds for students who have experienced foster care or are eligible orphans to attend college by covering their expenses for housing, meals, medical care, transportation and educational supplies.
UALBANY EOP NAMED FINALIST FOR AWARD IN SUPPORTING LATINO STUDENT SUCCESS

The University at Albany’s Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) has received national recognition for advancing equity for Latino students. UAlbany EOP was one of twenty programs selected as finalists for Excelencia in Education’s 2020 Examples of Excellence which recognizes and promotes evidence-based practices accelerating Latino student success in higher education.

“Identifying and advancing what works is central to Excelencia’s tactical plan to accelerate Latino student success,” said Deborah Santiago, CEO of Excelencia in Education in a news release. “We look to these evidence-based practices and the leaders working directly with students and community as exemplars of what others can do to ensure our students are served well.”

UAAlbany EOP Students Offer Praise for Program

EOP “is your family away from home. They make you feel safe, so that you have support and a sanctuary, academically, emotionally and physically,” commented a junior from New York City. Another junior in EOP stated, “it is a great opportunity for students to get adjusted to campus before classes start. They offer us a lot of opportunities – tutoring, jobs and internships. EOP sets us up to succeed.”

For the 2018 – 2019 academic year, 97 percent of Latino EOP students at UAlbany were retained in their first year compared to the institutional average of 79 percent. As of Fall 2019, 68 percent of Latino program participants graduated in six years compared to 61% of Latino non-program participants.

UAAlbany EOP and the other finalists will be featured in Excelencia’s Growing What Works Database—the only national online, searchable database for institutional leaders, funders, and policymakers interested in identifying what works for Latino students.

NEW POSITION

Marcus Watts, Director, Geneseo