

## Riverland's "Be Your Best" Recognized by the Human Rights Commission

This summer 20 students have enrolled in the second annual ***Be Your Best Summer Academy***, a Riverland Community College initiative focused primarily on serving under-represented and under-prepared, bi-cultural/bilingual high school students in pursuit of completing a college education. The communities Riverland serves have undergone a major demographic change in the past decade, and the individuals represented in that change don't always have the access, financial wherewithal, or academic background needed to attend college.

Outcomes for the ***Be Your Best*** participants include: completion of college prep and college-level coursework; increased knowledge about options for higher education; increased knowledge about costs of college attendance and payment options, including financial aid; increased knowledge about resources for college students including tutoring and counseling services, developmental classes and English Language Learning resources; and personalized, individual advising for appropriate college course work.

The ***Be Your Best*** program is funded in its second year under a grant approved through APEX Austin. In 2007, 24 students (who were chosen from an applicant pool of over 60 individuals) enrolled in Riverland's first effort, coming from the communities of Austin, Albert Lea, Alden, Brownsdale, Northfield, Taopi and Walters. The 2008 cohort primarily hails from Austin; however participants also come from Northfield, Waseca, and smaller communities around the Austin area.

College leadership is concerned about inequities related to access and enrollment of under-represented students. Jan Waller, Dean of Liberal Arts, notes that "Riverland is committed to the core themes of human diversity and global perspectives in its curriculum, and the college mission and vision intends to serve the needs of entire community, including those who have substantial barriers to achieving a higher education."

Minorities enroll in higher education at a much lower percentage than non-minorities. Many non-traditional high school students face multiple barriers to higher education including citizenship status, language skills, cultural expectations and lack of basic reading, writing, mathematics and science skills. Poverty/income disparities also exist between minority and non-minority household incomes.

This year's ***Be Your Best*** participants will complete the program in August. Last year, 94% of the participants successfully completed the program (nearly 90% of who were enrolled in high school, aspiring to attend college, but not yet prepared for a full load of college-level coursework). Overall Grade Point Average (GPA) was 3.28 on a 4.0 scale. After completing the program, forty percent of the 2007 cohort enrolled fulltime in college in 2007-2008 while simultaneously attending high school.

Riverland Community College established this initiative to make a positive difference in the participation rates of under-prepared and under-served students in college. This is why the

Austin Human Rights Commission recognizes the ***Be Your Best Summer Academy*** as an investment in ensuring that all members of our community have access to a higher education.

The Austin Human Rights Commission has the local charge to safeguard the legal and social rights of all members in the area community. It does so in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights.

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