

STARS Program at MCC making a difference

**By Kyle Kernan - Staff Writer
Manchester - posted Thu., Mar. 1, 2012**

Russell De Guzman, 19, a graduate of STARS and a culinary arts major, Zuhaib Khan, 19, and Alvin Rodriguez, 19, a graduate of STARS and mentor to new STARS students. Photo by Kyle Kernan.

The STARS Program at Manchester Community College is one of the school's best-kept secrets. Every summer, 32 students who are transitioning from secondary school to MCC are chosen to take part in a six-week program that includes a three-credit English course, cultural enrichment activities and one-on-one work with tutors, peer mentors and advisors.



The students chosen for STARS are typically first-generation, financially-disadvantaged and academically under-prepared students that require special attention in preparing for their first academic year of college. These students have families who never went to college and may not have the proper support system to succeed in school.

“They do great stuff. It’s fascinating to see the student’s tremendous growth,” said Jason Scappaticci, interim coordinator for the Office of Transitional Programs.

Zuhaib Khan is an example of how the STARS program can encourage tremendous growth. Khan learned basic English grammar while in Pakistan, but when he moved to the United States in sixth grade he found that his skills were limited compared to other students his age. He struggled in high school and doubted his ability to be a college student, but persevered.

“It was very difficult at first, but with the help of my advisors and teachers in the STARS program, I was able to improve,” said Khan. Khan took the placement test during the program and got into English 093. He needed to pass English 093 while in the STARS program to get into the college level English 100 course, and he did just that.

“In our English courses, the students write a lot, read a lot, and then we retest them. Khan spent a lot of time working with the faculty,” said Scappaticci.

Khan’s mother and father both have a minimal understanding of the fundamentals of American society or the English language. Now they rely on Khan to help them understand the American banking system, their finances and English.

“I’m very proud of Zuhaib,” said Scappaticci, who noted that Khan is currently taking five courses and working 20 hours a week at McDonald's.

“All of the faculty members are great. I can talk to them almost about anything,” said Khan, who hopes to be an accounting major at a four-year university.

The programs were a lot of help to Khan, as he received study skills instruction on how to write essays and take efficient notes and learned ways to read text-books and understand the college in general.

Students like Khan demonstrate that students who are eager to learn and use the resources of STARS can be successful, said Scappaticci. Retention and graduation rates for students who graduate the STARS program are better than non-STARS students at MCC.

A recent FAFSA study suggested that only 17 percent of students who attend MCC graduate, said Nathan Ormsby, the student retention specialist at the Office of Transitional Programs. Out of the 32 students in the STARS program last summer, 29 had completed it, and most carry strong GPAs, said Scappaticci.

During the STARS program last summer, seven of the 29 students mastered English 066 to place into English 093 and eight of the 29 passed English 093 into English 101.

“Every year 50 to 60 percent of our students test into a higher level English class at the end of the program. These numbers are very good when you consider we only have six weeks to improve the students' writing and reading skills,” said Scappaticci.

Scappaticci attended a grant meeting for STARS on Feb. 29 at the Department of Education in Hartford to report the program's progress and how the money is being spent in the program.

As the English program for the STARS students has been so successful, additional funding for a math course has been attained, said Scappaticci. “I'm excited that we are now going to be preparing future STARS students in math,” said Ormsby, who is 27, and who thinks of himself as an older brother or young uncle to the STARS students. “I can relate to these kids because I was one of them,” said Ormsby, who grew up in a poor family and learned how to be an adult on his own.

Ormsby is happy with the success of STARS, but thinks it can do more. He sees the program as a sandbox to test different strategies of teaching that can help a struggling student to succeed. “My goal is to bring more students to the program and get all of them fully engaged and successful,” said Ormsby.