Alvernia president: Turning college access to college success

Dr. Thomas Flynn discusses his university's efforts to work with Reading students.

Written by By Dr. Thomas F. Flynn

As a young academic dean in the late 1980s, I had the opportunity to be included in an exciting national initiative encouraging college leaders to open up access to "underrepresented" groups seldom found in the nation's universities. Some wealthy, prestigious schools soon boasted about their successful recruitment efforts, but few could report happy endings. Periodically, the national media would document distressing stories of students who dropped out, having felt isolated, even helpless, despite their scholarships and their talent.

There have been noble attempts locally to expand collegiate opportunities for inner-city students. These, too, while well-intentioned, have had generally disappointing results. Relatively few students have made it beyond first year; even fewer earned degrees. Reading High School's dynamic principal, Eric Turman, discovered that of the members of the 2012 senior class who even began college, only 13 percent graduated from college four years later. He has made it his mission to change this.

There was an essential lesson in this devastating national and local story of lost potential: It was not enough for colleges to admit low-income, first-generation students and provide scholarships; we needed to address the multiple barriers they face and support them as they take the steps to graduate!

This is the key lesson that has made possible the early success of Alvernia's Reading Collegiate Scholars Program: Money is essential, but it is not sufficient.
Make no mistake: The 38 Reading Scholars at Alvernia would not be in college if not for four-year, full tuition scholarships, funded half by Alvernia's budget and half by a generous donor or local business.

But unlike other such programs, Alvernia's Reading Scholars have benefited from "college readiness" programs held during 10th and 11th grades and a special senior-year program targeting the college search process. Also important have been an intense, multidimensional mentoring program and a safety net woven by the entire university community. Sometimes it does take a village!

These students have responsibilities that take your breath away. Many are working, not to afford college but to pay the family's household bills; some are the only family members who speak English or drive a car. Most are helping raise younger siblings and caring for grandparents.

We borrowed a concept from the national "Posse Program" and created intentional cohorts of students each year. They proceed through college together. A pre-college summer bridge program orients them to college and to Alvernia. Faculty mentors serve each group of students in addition to their regular faculty advisers. Impressive community mentors are assigned to (and adopt) each student.

Perhaps most valuable is the support provided by the students themselves. They know best the barriers faced and the burdens carried by fellow students. They know best the pressure to succeed and make their families proud. So they are best able to judge when a peer needs a soft shoulder or a tough-minded challenge.

There is another, perhaps most important, factor in the success of these scholars. They are as talented as they are deserving. They have stronger high school records and higher test scores than our typical freshmen. They are college material; they just need the opportunity and support so they can make this happen.

And they have succeeded impressively: 100 percent of the first cohort of scholars will graduate, with a cumulative average of B+ and resumes already filled with important contributions to Alvernia and their local community.

Overall, 34 of the 38 current Reading Collegiate Scholars still are enrolled at Alvernia. Many are modeling the Franciscan call to be "brother and sister to all." They already are "paying it forward" to their community by mentoring younger peers at Reading High, where hundreds more students are being helped by our Holleran Center Student Fellows.

Turman recently convened a forum at Alvernia, co-sponsored by the Berks County Intermediate Unit and the Berks Coalition to End Homelessness, that gathered representatives from 13 colleges and high schools to discuss ways to ensure talented young people from our area don't just attend but actually graduate from college. The student panel was memorable; their challenges are daunting, but there resilience is inspiring.
Investing in talented inner-city (or rural) youth who have never imagined themselves as college students is an investment that helps them realize their often bold dreams. But it is also an invaluable investment in our community's future.