

Center for College Access keeping its promise to prepare Louisiana high schoolers for college

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Louisiana high school students explore Tulane's campus during one of LCCA's campus tours. For these tours, LCCA staff hosts groups of around 25 students from regional high schools and community-based organizations as they visit three to four colleges and universities in one day. (Photo provided by LCCA)

Three years ago, a program to provide Louisiana high school students with free SAT and ACT prep courses, essay writing workshops and other programs to prepare them for college attracted eight students from four parishes. Fast-forward to today and that program — the [Louisiana Center for College Access](#) (LCCA) — has provided

college access support to 6,049 high school students from 63 parishes.

LCCA is part of [Louisiana Promise](#), an initiative established by President Michael A. Fitts in 2020 to expand access to higher education for Louisiana high school students. LCCA officially launched in February 2021 as a college preparatory resource for students, their families and their guidance counselors, regardless of which university students planned to attend.

“The goal is to level the playing field in terms of access and understanding and give them the opportunity to create the strongest application they can to get into the school of their choice,” said Rebecca Ancira, associate vice president of enrollment management and chief of staff with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions.

LCCA began offering free SAT and ACT prep courses and college readiness workshops virtually during the pandemic, and expanded to [in-person workshops](#) later that year. The workshops cover topics such as finding the right college, submitting a competitive application, perfecting the college essay and applying for financial aid. LCAA recently offered its first workshop in Spanish, with plans for more such courses and hopes to expand into other languages like Vietnamese.

Many of the high school students accessing LCAA workshops are first-generation college students that the team aims to engage in their freshman year of high school.

“We found kids weren’t starting to think about their future until their junior year when they were already halfway through high school,” said Ancira.

To combat that challenge, LCCA introduced a college planning journal last year that is designed to help students think earlier about college and their high school transcripts. These journals enable students to track their interests, summer jobs and extra-curricular activities, but it’s not all just college-related questions.

“When you open the first page of the journal, it says in big letters, ‘This is not an assignment,’” Ancira said. “We want this to be fun.”

The book features stress-relieving activities, creative questions and prompts, word searches, QR codes linking to FAFSA resources, helpful timelines and more. Its core intent is helping students get in touch with their unique journeys across high school, so when it comes to crafting that college essay and application, their story is clear.

LCCA has also taken its programming on the road with LCCA on the MOVE, its college bus tour program. LCCA staff hosts groups of around 25 students from regional high schools and community-based organizations and gives them tours of three to four colleges and universities in one day. The center has partnerships with 13 high schools and has built a network of nine colleges and universities around the state.

“There’s a wide variety of institutions that students can visit right here [in the New Orleans area], and that can help inform their choices even if they don’t want to stay locally,” Ancira said, explaining that these tours help students visualize the college experience for themselves. “A lot of students don’t realize how helpful it can be to step foot on campuses until they’ve done it.”

During the summer, students become even more immersed in the college campus life. The [LCCA Summer Residential Program](#), in partnership with the Tulane Pre-College Program, invites rising high school juniors and seniors to apply to spend two weeks living on campus, taking classes, learning more about the college application process, exploring career choices and more. They also continue tours to higher education institutions around the state. Students are assigned a mentor who will serve as a resource during this program and through high school graduation.

This summer, through a donation from Alec Cecil and Diane Zultkowsky, every admitted student will receive a scholarship to offset or cover program costs.

Ancira said she’s excited for what’s in store after seeing the success of the last three years.

“The more we do, the more we learn about how to focus the needs,” she said.

With goals of adding more language options for courses, expanding the high school and higher ed network, bringing in peer mentors and more, the future of college access in Louisiana is bright, Ancira said.