

The Two River Times | Minority Male Initiative Conference

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Minority Male Initiative Conference

February 25, 2016

By Keith Heumiller

Brookdale Community College and the Monmouth/Ocean County Pan Hellenic Council joined a team of industry professionals and dozens of local students on Brookdale's Lincroft campus Feb. 19 for the second annual Minority Male Initiative conference.

The event, titled "Finding a Career That Suits You," paired high school seniors and Brookdale students with established professionals in four separate career clusters: STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics); health care and health science; business and social science; and communications media.

Attendees were able to participate in a career-focused workshop in the discipline of their choosing, learning the ins and outs of potential career paths and the most effective ways to break into specific industries. Students also had the opportunity to secure a few business cards from professionals in their field of interest, and apply for a number of exclusive Brookdale scholarships.

The conference began with addresses from a wide range of speakers, including Brookdale President Maureen Murphy, Pan-Hellenic Council President Kenneth Morgan, and initiative co-founders the Rev. William E. Coleman Jr. and Fidel Wilson.

"Many of you, like me, are first-generation college students," said Wilson, an assistant Brookdale professor and a counselor in the college's Equal Opportunity Fund program. "My parents couldn't tell me about enrollment and majors and financial aid. I had to sort of figure that out on my own. And upon getting to college, I realized that I had no idea what I wanted to do.

"I ended up changing my major three times, and I wasted a lot of time and a lot of money," Wilson said. "It is very difficult to be successful in an arena you are not familiar with. The reason we do this is because we understand the



value of exposure. If we can expose you to professionals who work in different careers, it may spark an interest or motivate you or inspire you. So ask questions, get some business cards. That's what today is for. We want you to make some connections while you are here."

The conference, co-sponsored by Brookdale, the Pan Hellenic Council and Meridian Health, is part of a collaborative, ongoing effort to increase support for minority male college students in Monmouth and Ocean counties, Wilson said.

According to a 2012 report by the National Center for Education Statistics, only 34 percent of black males who enrolled as full-time college students earned a bachelor's degree within six years, as opposed to 59 percent of white males. According to a May 2014 study by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, 12.4 percent of black college graduates age 22 to 27 were unemployed, more than double the unemployment rate for all college graduates in the same age group.

To help close those gaps, conference keynote speaker Pastor Semaj Vanzant said young students need to identify their passions and begin setting strategic goals for their careers. Like many speakers, Vanzant also encouraged the students to seek out teachers, professionals and classmates who share their passions and can help them "stick to the plan."

"Purpose is the blueprint for our lives," said Vanzant, lead pastor-teacher at Second Baptist Church in Asbury Park. "Before this building was built, an architect had to create a blueprint for it. And if they would have strayed away from that blueprint, it's very likely that something would be slanted, out-of-sorts, or the building itself might fall. We have to listen to the voice within."

The workshops, each led by a three-person team of industry professionals, provided an overview of each career sector as well as the educational requirements and employment tracts for specific positions.

Workshop leaders, including media professional Gilda Rogers and Dr. David Kountz, vice president of academic affairs at Jersey Shore University Medical Center, also answered questions from students and provided more general advice, including the skills and personality traits employers are looking for in young professionals.

"I learned that you can't do it by yourself. You have to reach out and ask for help and use your resources," said Neptune High School senior Leclerson Isimeus, who participated in the business and social science workshop with area professionals David Brown, Charles Ozuna and former Asbury Park mayor Ed Johnson.

"They also stressed the importance of building a good foundation, of sitting in the front of the class and things like that. You have to educate yourself because, in business, people will want to know what you know. To be the best, you have to learn from the best. You may not know everything, but you can learn it."

Following the workshops, the attendees were treated to a free "working lunch" featuring presentations by Deborah Simmons, talent acquisition manager for Meridian Health, and Wayne Boatwright, Meridian's vice president for cultural diversity.

Boatwright and Simmons encouraged the students to make the most of their connections and their time in college, where they will have opportunities to intern, volunteer and build career skills both in and out of the classroom.

"Join your alumni association or another campus organization, where you can gain that experience and also meet people and begin to expand your network," said Simmons, volunteering her own contact information to the students in attendance. "We don't look only at academics. We look at what else a candidate has done and how they have gotten involved. We look at how they have used their time. All of that is important."

The conference concluded with an address by Jacob Farbman, director of communications for the New Jersey Council of Community Colleges, and reports from the students involved in each career workshop.

“We learned the importance of stepping outside your comfort zone, of honing new skills and expanding your craft,” said Brookdale music major Bradlee Williams, who attended the communications media workshop with Meridian communications director Mike McCauley, Asbury Park High School instructional technology coach Larrick Daniels, Brookdale professor Chad Anderson and Rogers.

“We also talked about being passionate about what you love. Everyone has something they are passionate about. You shouldn’t be afraid to actually express yourself. Other people may judge you, but they don’t know your experiences. They don’t know what you have been through, and they don’t know what you are capable of. You shouldn’t let that get to you.”

Also in attendance at the conference were workshop leaders Kwesi Daniels, Darryl Hughes, Marcell Pickens and Leonard Thomas; Pastor Terrence K. Porter, senior minister of Pilgrim Baptist Church in Red Bank; and Dr. Webster Trammel, retired vice president for development, community and governmental relations at Brookdale.

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