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CREDITS AND CONFIDENCE: EASTERN IDAHO STUDENTS LEARN AND GROW WITH ADVANCED OPPORTUNITIES

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(BOISE) – For two students in eastern Idaho, the State Department of Education’s Advanced Opportunities Program has done more than get them started early on earning college credits; it’s given them the crucial confidence they can succeed in college.

That’s important for many students, who are unsure if they have what it takes to go on to college. The state has set a goal of getting 60 percent of its high school graduates to go on and earn college or other post-secondary degrees or certifications.

“Before I took any of the dual credit classes I was very nervous and anxious about college and had an overwhelming feeling of possible failure of a course,” said Narda Lopez, who graduated from Ririe High School this spring and now is attending Idaho State University with a long-term goal of obtaining a doctorate in dental surgery. “After I took the (Advanced Opportunities) dual credit classes, I felt more reassured and positive about my future college experience. From an educational standpoint they encouraged me to work just as hard in my regular high school classes.”

Advanced Opportunities involves four distinct but related programs where the state reimburses all or part of the costs to help students graduate early or with significant college credits already in hand by the time they leave high school. The 8-in-6 Program allows students in grades 7-12 to take summer and overload courses. Fast Forward is available to high school juniors and seniors to help them pay for dual credit courses—classes that count both for graduation and as college credit.

As part of the Early Completers Program, students who have completed state graduation requirements (except for senior-only courses) can use state aid to pay for dual credit courses. And students who wind up graduating from high school at least one year early are eligible for a scholarship of roughly \$1,400 to an Idaho post-secondary institution of their choice under the Mastery Advancement Program. The state spent \$3.5 million on subsidies and support for those programs last year, but only 29 percent of the eligible students took advantage of them. Rebecca Bitikofer, a 16-year-old student at Aberdeen High School, noted that the dual enrollment classes she has taken at her high school “helped me to be inspired and work harder in school. It’s a really fun challenge.”

“My mom raised me and my two brothers and one sister on her own. She’s an untraditional student herself and she’s been working towards getting her own degree. She’s always pushed me and my siblings to work hard and to go to college.”

Bitikofer began her march toward college with the 8-in-6 program the summer before her freshman year, after being encouraged to take advantage of the Advanced Opportunities program by her middle school principal, Ann Menear.

She wants to become an engineer and the Advanced Opportunities Program dual credit classes she’s taking will help her get through the general studies requirements in college and earn her



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degree faster.

“I know the savings will be substantial,” for her family, and that’s important, she said. “Without Advanced Opportunities I would have to spend close to two times as much on my generals for college. I’m so appreciative for the chance to get ahead,” she said, adding that by advancing through college faster because of the head start she now has, she’ll not only save money but also will “be able to get a job quickly.”

For Lopez, Advanced Opportunities has been important to her family, as well. “I am a natural born U.S. citizen, and my parents and brother are immigrants from Mexico. Both of my parents do not have a high school diploma and have worked back-breaking jobs to provide for my brother and me. My brother and I are the first generation to attend college.... Watching my parents struggle to provide for our family definitely instilled a good work ethic in myself.”

After being encouraged to do so by her principal, Chad Williams, “to save money in my future college endeavor,” Lopez began utilizing Advanced Opportunities in her sophomore year. She could have graduated in February of 2015, but stayed to graduate with the rest of her class that May, in part in order to give herself a chance to take one more college class under the Advanced Opportunities Program. She estimates the college credits she earned while in high school have saved her family at least \$3,500.

The Advanced Opportunities Program also helps give participants a heads up to the differences between college and high school. “The college classes differ from high school classes because the professors aren’t concerned if I do my homework or not,” said Lopez. “No one will chase me down to find out if I turned in an assignment. I have to be self-motivated and push myself harder than I ever needed to in high school in order to do well in my courses.”

Both Lopez and Bitikofer said they have encouraged their fellow students to take advantage of the Advanced Opportunities Program.

“If I could give someone advice regarding the Advanced Opportunities programs, it would be to take advantage of every single program there is,” Lopez said. “The benefit of taking college classes in high school helped me both economically and socially. I saved so much money, and I am more confident now about college because I knew what to expect out of my courses. If I could go back in time and tell myself one piece of advice, it would be to start the programs as soon as I began high school.

“I am so thankful I had the option to participate in the Fast Forward Program. The program truly did make a difference in my academic career. I studied harder and wanted to take as many college courses as I could possibly take. It opened up doors in my academic career that I never even knew were there to begin with.”

For more information about the state’s Advanced Opportunities programs, contact your local school’s guidance counselor or go to the State Department of Education website at <http://www.sde.idaho.gov/sectr/adv-opp> for more information

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