

Fraternity steps up to help Booker High School students

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Gamma Xi Boule internship program aims to prepare youth for ‘real world’ work experiences

SARASOTA — A local fraternity wants to give underserved Booker High School students the chance to work in real-world office settings through a paid internship program.

In its second year, the Gamma Xi Boule internship program, sponsored by the Sarasota chapter of national black fraternity Sigma Pi Phi, allows a select group of Booker students to intern for a semester at a maximum of 10 hours a week for \$10 an hour at local organizations such as the Sarasota Police Department, Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe and the Sarasota Herald-Tribune. The programs are paid for in part by the fraternity’s foundation and by the institutions.

“It gives them what we think is invaluable work experience from the perspective of what goes on in a professional work setting,” said Gregory Matthews, one of the program’s founders. “How do people conduct themselves? How do they dress? What do they do? In addition to employment skills, they can pick up soft skills.”

The program began to gain traction when Matthews met with Sarasota Police Chief Bernadette DiPino to discuss the idea. The chief was more than interested; she even suggested the \$10 an hour wage, Matthews said. Booker High Principal Rachel Shelley vetted the program through the Florida Department of Education, and the first students were accepted in fall of 2016.

Once the students apply through Booker for the program, they are taken through an interview process that mirrors what one might find in the “real world,” Matthews said.

“We’re more like the gatekeepers,” Matthews said. “We treat them like they’re applicants for a job. We don’t treat it as though it’s a given, because that’s not the way the real world works.”

Some students have been surprised by the skills they bring to the table once they arrive in the work environment, Matthews said. One student who worked at the Sarasota Police Department found his talents with Microsoft and PCs to be an asset. He became someone other employees could turn to for help with spreadsheets or technical work.

And the inverse has been true as well. Some employers have taken it upon themselves to teach the students skills that aren’t necessarily a part of the workplace but are applicable. At one point, the Sarasota Police Department volunteer coordinator realized that some of the interns did not have a checking account to set up direct deposit payment. So she took them down to the bank and helped them set one up, Matthews said.

“Some of us take these things for granted,” Matthews said. “But when they haven’t worked anywhere, why would they have a checking account?”

Booker teacher Myndel Miller, who coordinates the program from the school standpoint, said the internships align well with Booker’s mission to have all of their students ready for college or a career.

“This provides students an opportunity to see what it would actually be like in a particular field,” Miller said. “In many instances, it’s a once-in-a-lifetime type of opportunity. And it also happens to be a paid internship, which doesn’t always happen.”

Eventually, Matthews hopes to expand the internship program to Manatee County and offer a variety of professions. They are in talks to work with the Gulf Coast Builders Exchange and have currently served 10 students. The organization is also hosting a fundraiser on Feb. 10 at the Ritz-Carlton with proceeds that will benefit underserved youth in Sarasota and Bradenton.