Succeeding for 40 Years
The Educational Opportunity Program Celebrates a Milestone
C.J. Jones was a 24-year-old graduate student in the summer of 1970 when a job opened as co-director of the new venture Central was calling the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). The program was the brainstorm of George Wyer, a 28-year-old mathematics instructor. Its purpose was to identify high school students who had the potential and desire to do college-level work, but who did not meet admissions standards, and offer them a crash course over one summer that would prepare them for entering college. Most importantly, the program would provide those students with a support system to help them succeed.

Wyer found champions for the idea in the University administration and held the first summer session, with 31 students, in 1969. A very high percentage of those students went on to graduate. Still he couldn’t guarantee Jones the program would be a long-term success. But one thing Jones had learned during his four years at Central, was to engage with passion. He took on the EOP assignment as though he had invented it, little suspecting how dramatically it would succeed or that he would remain at its helm for a quarter of a century, while also coaching Central basketball before being named athletic director in 1995.

EOP alumni returned to Central last year from as far away as Seattle, Washington to celebrate the program’s 40th anniversary at events in the summer and fall. They, and their fellow EOP alumni, stand as inarguable evidence of the program’s effectiveness.

Listen to Aida Silva ’86, for instance. “I had emigrated from Puerto Rico in 1980,” she says. “I completed my last two years of high school here. I wanted to go to college, but no one else in my family had gone. I was clueless about the process. I didn’t know how to handle the college experience.” Thanks to the EOP she enrolled at Central, graduating in 1986. She worked for a while at the International Institute of Connecticut before landing a job at UConn, where she subsequently earned her master’s degree and where she is now associate director of admissions. “The EOP was my first exposure to what success could be,” she says. “The program helped us learn to believe in ourselves.”

It’s a conviction you will hear again and again from EOP alumni. In a typical EOP class there are about 50 students. These are educationally and economically disadvantaged young people. Most are the first person from their family to attend college, and
they have a lot of impediments to overcome. Yet, says Awilda Reasco, the current director, the program’s retention rate is in the 90 percent range.

“Nearly 2,000 students have graduated from the EOP over the past 40 years,” she says. “We’ve had alumni go on to successful careers in law, television, administration, politics, business and education. For these kids, EOP is a gateway to hope.”

Take Henri Alexandre ’76, who came to the United States from Haiti in 1967. Like Silva, he was a bright young person, but woefully prepared for the college experience. “The program provided structure for students who didn’t know how to organize and study,” he says, “but there were lots of programs to help us develop as individuals, also.”

After graduating from Central, Alexandre worked as an administrative assistant for the Judicial Department of Connecticut and applied to the UConn Law School. Today he is an assistant attorney general and head of the Public Safety Division of the Attorney General’s Office.

Again and again, alumni employ the same metaphors to describe what the EOP meant to them, when it was their conduit to a college education, and what it has meant to them as their professional lives have unfolded.

“The summer that changed my life,” is the way John L. “J. L.” Williams ’80 remembers the EOP. He was a high school wrestler who grew up in a large family. Central provided him with a partial scholarship for wrestling. The EOP took care of the rest.

“The EOP made it possible for me to get into college,” he says, “and that enabled me to become an engineer.” For the past 28 years he has worked at Boeing in Seattle, Washington.

“It was exceptionally important for me,” says Lillian Ortiz ’86, dean of institutional development at Manchester Community College. A Hartford High School graduate, she landed a work-study job in C. J. Jones’ office during her years at Central. “He was my mentor, advisor and trainer,” she says. “Without that great start I probably wouldn’t have made it through.”

“EOP gave me the discipline to succeed,” says David Busanet ’79. How much discipline? A resident of Meriden who had no car, Busanet walked to and from the campus, a distance of 10 miles each way.
who was associate director of the EOP from 1987 to 1999. She regularly hears from alumni of the program, people whose lives and contributions to the betterment of the world have been measurably greater thanks to the EOP. “It was an opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of these young people and it was, far and away, the most gratifying experience of my professional life.”

In 1968, George Pattison III, who was then known as George Wyer, was a math professor who had joined the faculty of Central a year earlier. A young man with a passion for teaching and a desire to see his students succeed, he had quickly discovered, in his classes, “many minority students who were talented, but fell behind” for lack of effective preparation for the college experience.

“These were bright youngsters, but their high schools hadn’t given them the tools they needed to succeed in college,” he recalls. “They were poorly equipped.”

Determined to do something about it, he wrote a proposal for a summer experience to address the needs of those students. The program he envisioned would quickly introduce disadvantaged students to the overall college experience and resources that could help them succeed, and give them a taste of what kind of academic expectations they could anticipate.

Pattison, who had taught both junior and senior high school and at a junior college before coming to Central, was a big believer in rules. His plan was built around a set of standards to which all participating students would be required to adhere.

He soon found champions for his proposal in the University’s administration and launched it in the summer of 1969. Thirty-one students enrolled in the first session and their success rate was so striking that the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) quickly became an accepted thread in the CCSU fabric.

Pattison remained at Central for five years and then left to accept a position in the West Hartford public schools, where he remained for the balance of his career. He retired in 1998 and moved to Florida. The EOP, however, goes on, affirming its value year after year.

One Passionate Teacher Makes a Difference

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