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## Mentors assist college's first-generation students

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EUREKA — Eureka College sophomore Rahmell Brown was the first person in his family to go to college.

"It was a really big deal," he said of his post-2010 high school plan.

The Peorian said he knows the range of emotions many first-generation freshmen bring to campus.

"There's a sense of pride that you're different (from students whose parents are college graduates). But there's also a sense of responsibility not to let your family or yourself down," he said.

That's why he signed up to be a peer mentor in Eureka's year-long first-generation cohort. He'll spend the year attending different events with freshmen in the group, and he'll be a person they can turn to for questions they might face about what is "normal" in a college experience.

On average, about half of Eureka's 650 students are the first generation in their families to attend college.

Last week, the school kicked off the second year of this program with "Early College" weekend — a four-day program including teambuilding exercises, an introduction to campus traditions, and a trip to the Illinois Shakespeare Festival in Bloomington. Classes begin Aug. 24.

Later in the year, they'll go as a group to Chicago, visiting The Art Institute, attending a ballet.

Freshman Sammantha Chapin, from Forest City, Iowa, attended.

Being a first-generation student "is a little nerve wracking because I don't know what to expect and neither do my parents really," she said. The jovial atmosphere of the cohort meeting — about two weeks before the fall semester's start was helping ease her worries.

Administrators say because of its small size Eureka students, regardless of being first-generation or not, are provided close attention about navigating the way to a college degree — being engaged, balancing work and study, and understanding financial aid. But the first-generation program's coordinators Sarah Jiter and Rhea Edge say while most colleges and universities do provide extra attention to first-generation students, Eureka aims more for a liberal arts appreciation.

Freshman Eric Roth of Danville attended the "early college" workshop. He hopes to teach history, and maybe be a museum curator. With a Eureka degree, he'll be the first among his siblings and parents to earn a bachelor's degree.

But, he's going to have to work as a lifeguard to help fund his education, so he thought attending the weekend, and being a part of the cohort would help him be more engaged from the start.

The majority of Eureka's students seek business or education degrees, said Jiter, coordinator of orientation and transition programs. This program's dose of intensified liberal arts exposure aims to expand their worldview, engage them in campus activities, and bind them to each other as peer support. Those are all factors that can improve their chances of college success, she said.

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“Our hope is that students will begin to understand that a liberal arts education prepares them for all of the opportunities that lie ahead of them in their lives,” said Edge, who also heads Eureka’s fine arts and theater arts department.

When first-generation student Ben McCauley arrived from Mendota in 2008, he felt a career driven aspect to his life. “I didn’t really know what I was walking into — I was focused just on getting the degree,” he said.

Now a senior, the mentor in the first-generation program said he’s confident this new effort will help freshmen gel friendships with people who share common pasts, and to recognize the broad opportunities afforded on a small liberal arts campus. As for him, he’s looking forward to the pride he’ll feel as his parents watch him graduate in May.

The Eureka program is funded by a two-year \$25,000 Wal-Mart grant.