

Why Michigan? The Blavin Scholars Program Changes the Odds

There are more than a half a million children in the foster care system in the United States. As a whole, this group is statistically an extremely underserved population, however at the University of Michigan those statistics are improving thanks to the couple behind the Blavin Scholars Program.

Fifty percent of the women coming from the foster care system are pregnant before the age of 19, 20 percent of those who age out of the system are homeless within 2 years, only 2 percent of children coming from the foster care system attend college and less than 3 percent who attend college earn a 4-year degree.

In 2007, the Blavins instituted the Blavin Scholarship and in 2009 Blavin Scholars Program was established. The program was designed to promote success for University of Michigan students who were formerly in foster care.

“I was a lucky guy who was not in foster care, but could have been...and want to help those who have not been as lucky,” Blavin said.

The process begins with an application for the undergraduate Blavin Scholarship. Students awarded the scholarship join the Blavin Scholars Program, which works to ensure the success and well-being of all scholars throughout their undergraduate careers. Blavin Scholars Program Director Rachel Naasko, LMSW, and her staff are committed to assisting Blavin Scholars in navigating all that the University of Michigan has to offer in order to maximize their Michigan experience.

In addition to financial support, the Blavin Scholars Program provides comprehensive and tailored academic, personal, and life-skills support to all scholars so that they may succeed both at the university and after graduation.

“Some students are very open about their time in foster care and others are not,” Naasko said. “You cant help but feel compelled about their experience and once a student has been accepted into the Blavin Scholar Program, they begin working with their coach, who will follow them through their academic career...and help them with everything from getting their room set up to university system navigation to give them the best possible Michigan experience.”

“The Blavin Scholar Program has a 95 percent retention and graduation rate,” Blavin explained. “There are scholarships in other areas focused on those who are underprivileged...but ours goes a bit further by focusing on foster care...some of these students need to overcome poverty along with other significant obstacles...and we want to make those obstacles a little less daunting.”

In addition to providing scholarship dollars, the Blavin Scholars Program provides year-round housing, an active mentoring program where each scholar is partnered with faculty, emergency funding for unmet needs and student welcome packages.

“We have more faculty mentors than scholars,” Naasko said. “This program is driven toward success!” Blavin believes that the scholarship wouldn’t work without the support of the overall program and the direction and guidance of Naasko.

Currently there are 32 undergraduate students who are Blavin Scholars in four-year schools and 23 students are undergraduates at the University of Michigan. This past year, the program celebrates its first graduate school scholarship recipient, Corey O’Neill, who successfully completed his MSW.

The program has several scholars who have gone on to graduate school, graduated a Fulbright Scholar and the program even has a student attending Harvard Medical School.

The Blavin MSW Scholarship Award provides support to social work students as they gain the theoretical foundation, the clinical and policy perspective and the field experience to make meaningful change in the lives of vulnerable people. “By investing in a MSW degree, Paul and Amy Blavin not only changed Corey’s future but also transformed the trajectory of the foster children he works with and advocates for,” says Dean Laura Lein.

When asked, “Why University of Michigan?” “The University of Michigan is near and dear to my heart,” Blavin said. “I went there, my father attended and now my son is attending. “Michigan was receptive to my vision and E. Royster Harper, vice president for student life, pushed very hard to make it happen.”

The Blavins’ hope for the students in the program is to have a better life, which allows them to pursue their passion and reverse the cycle of poverty with education and career success.

“Our goal is to have 100 students enrolled with scholarships each year,” Blavin said. “Amy and I think the Blavin Scholars Program personifies the quote by the longest-serving president at the University of Michigan, James Angell, who provided the vision of the University of Michigan as, “an uncommon education for the common man.”