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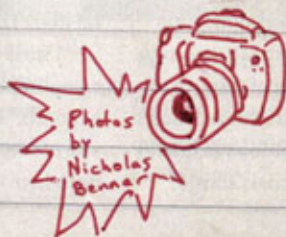
## GO TO COLLEGE

Some Missouri high school graduates don't see college as an attainable goal.

Adam Higgins, through his work with the Missouri College Advising Corps, is trying to turn that around.



story by  
Marcus  
Wilkins



Photos  
by  
Nicholas  
Bennett



**WITHIN THE CAVERNOUS WALLS** of Van Horn High School in Independence, Mo., waxed floors glisten down the length of an unused hallway. Lined with empty lockers and classrooms the Kansas City School District now uses for storage, the darkened corridor recedes toward a window bursting with sunlight.

"The building can hold about 1,300 students, but we've only got about 600 right now," says Adam Higgins, BA '08, as he gives a tour of a school in transition.

Higgins is one of nine MU graduates serving in the Missouri College Advising Corps, and he embraces the task of guiding people toward a brighter future.

"Come this way," he says.

## Corps values

The Missouri College Advising Corps places recent MU graduates in mostly low-income high schools and community colleges around the state. The goal: help high school students into college and community college students into four-year schools. With a \$1 million startup grant from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and a matching \$1 million from MU, the corps strives to cultivate the concept of going to college in areas where many high schoolers don't.

Mizzou is one of 12 institutions to qualify for participation in the National College

Advising Corps. According to the organization, nearly 25 percent of low-income students who score in the top quartile on standardized tests never go to college. Van Horn has its share of such students. Last November, citizens in western Independence voted for a school district boundary change to move Van Horn from the Kansas City district to the Independence School District for academic and geographic reasons.

## Relating to the students

The hire of fresh college graduates such as Higgins is key to the advising corps program. These "near-peer" advisers can better relate to students and serve as role models for the path from enrollment to diploma.

"My family situation was pretty similar to a lot of kids here," says Higgins, who lived in Independence as a child and grew up in nearby Raytown. "I was raised in a single-parent home, and my mom worked a couple of jobs to help get us by." In the working-class community that surrounds Van Horn, the need for financial aid is practically universal.

As the college guide at Van Horn, Higgins helps students schedule and prepare for the ACT, fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, apply for scholarships, grants and loans, and narrow down college options.

"He has a keen analytic mind, and his writing was always very methodical and clear," says Richard Foley, assistant professor of classical studies, who taught Higgins at MU. "He's got exactly the right kind of gift for this kind of job."

Higgins has close contact with juniors and seniors, but he has expanded his focus to underclassmen as well. His easygoing style is a natural fit at Van Horn, earning him the respect of the students and faculty.

When he first arrived, some of the staff mistook Higgins for a student.

"I tried to go into the library to use a computer because I didn't have an office for a month," Higgins says. "A staff member saw me and said, 'Excuse me son, you can't be in here right now.'"



Van Horn's principal acknowledges that Higgins fits right in. "The kids like him," Greg Netzer says. "And his youthful appearance doesn't hurt."

## Breaking the pattern

Students such as Ray Hernandez benefit from Higgins' mentorship. Struggling with grades, Hernandez wasn't sure of his plans after high school.

"Mr. Higgins really helped me with the ACT and getting through to me that you don't need all the money to go to college," Hernandez says.

"In some disadvantaged schools, if you even talk about going to college, you're seen as 'other' or often ridiculed," says Elizabeth Cogswell, director of development and foundation relations at MU, who wrote the



On the bus ride from Independence, Mo., to Columbia for a tour of Mizzou, Higgins explains to 24 Van Horn High School students the importance of investigating prospective colleges. "Getting these kids to visit different campuses around the state really opens their eyes to the possibility of college," he says.

program's grant request. The \$1 million grant will partially pay for Mizzou's corps through the 2010-11 academic year, and the university is already seeking funding to continue the program thereafter. "Ultimately we're hoping that it will benefit the country and the economy to have more students completing college," she says.

At Van Horn, only 23.6 percent of all graduates went on to a two- or four-year college between 2005 and 2007, compared with a statewide rate of 65.2 percent, according to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

With a college diploma, the difference in earning potential is dramatic. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, workers ages 18 and older with a bachelor's degree earn an average annual salary of \$51,206, compared with \$27,915 for those without.



Higgins hosts "College Jeopardy" with a class of freshmen to familiarize them with college requirements. For Higgins, the earlier he can prepare students for the enrollment process, the better.

Hernandez worked to improve his grade point average, and his acceptance letter to Northwest Missouri State University proudly hangs on the bulletin board in Higgins' office.

### *A rewarding career*

Higgins' office door is always open, and one-on-one time with students is central to his approach. But he is always looking



Higgins makes himself available to students. They pop in with general questions or to submit test scores and scholarship applications. The school day ends at 2:30 p.m. for the students, but Higgins usually doesn't leave the building until 5 p.m.

Every chance he gets, Higgins visits his mother, Beth Higgins, in Lyndon, Kan. He is a first-generation college graduate who attributes most of his success to the values instilled by his mom.

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for new and interesting ways to present information. Higgins recently orchestrated a Socratic seminar in which the instructor assigns the class a controversial text and then asks them open-ended questions.

"I totally bombed it," Higgins says with a sheepish grin. "I don't think the article was controversial enough. It was about the value of a college education, and there's not much to argue about. They were pretty quiet."

Despite some trial and error, there's no doubt Higgins is having success. With a student-to-guidance-counselor ratio of 289-to-1 in the state of Missouri, the college guides help counselors with a crucial duty.

**Top:** With more than 600 students to advise, Higgins often eats lunch at his desk while catching up on e-mail or paperwork. **Bottom:** Semone Yang, 17, talks to Higgins after school about his plans to attend Missouri Western State University in fall 2009.

"Adam spends his entire day thinking about how to get kids to college," Principal Netzer says. "It really has impacted their lives."

Case in point: Higgins hand-delivered a card and a McDonald's milkshake to one Van Horn senior after she had a baby boy at Center Point Medical Center. Undeterred by motherhood, the student hopes to enroll at William Jewell College in Liberty, Mo., this fall.

"One of the premises of our program is to be proactive," Higgins says. "Often, the kids

that aren't seeking help are the ones who get ignored."

So does he see a future for himself in education?

"I'm still considering law school, but I've thought about teaching," Higgins says. "I've learned a lot about myself and about communication. I always knew I wanted to work with kids in some facet after I graduated."

"This job teaches you about hard work. You've really got to work hard here to make a difference." ■