

## WSU offers foster care support

Nicole Hayden | Posted: Monday, October 22, 2012 12:00 am

Melitza Del Valle entered her senior year of high school with an idea of how it would commence. She soon saw her final moments of high school taking turns that she was not expecting. She ended up having what she described as a “rough” senior year tangled in transitions from moving three different times. She is now in her first year at WSU with a Greek mythology major in tow — something statistics would not have predicted her doing.

As a foster child, Del Valle was a ward of the state. Danita Echols — WSU campus Life Coach for the DHS contracted program — said, “youth in foster care graduate from high school at a rate of 54 percent compared to the national average of 87 percent, and then less than 10 percent actually attend college.” Ann Rossi — Michigan Department of Human Services education analyst — added that “only 2 percent of former foster youth actually obtain a bachelor’s degree.”

The Michigan Department of Human Services has partnered with Wayne State through a three-year contract that will provide WSU with \$340,197 to create a hub of support by providing foster youth with assistance for a successful transition to college.

Angelique Day, assistant professor of social work at WSU, foster alumna and one of two program leads, said, “Wayne County has the highest population of young people aging out of foster care in the state,” which means that WSU is a prime university to have an assistance program like this in place.

Del Valle will not be molding herself to statistics. She plans on eventually pursuing a career as a forensic pathologist. Not only that, but she also has made the decision that she will be a “very successful independent woman” who doesn’t always have to rely on assistance. With the help of the DHS contract, Del Valle plans on doing just that. She said she sees the program as a support system that allows her to create opportunities for herself and that the program has provided her with an ample amount of assistance and connected her to great people.

Echols said the goal of the program was to “increase the odds of youth attending and graduating from the university.” She went on to talk about how many times foster youth feel disconnected from society and alone: “it is expected that creating a program like this will assist the young adults into feeling like a part of the learning community and hopefully the larger community of Detroit and the state of Michigan.”

Rossi said the relevance of a program such as this stems from the fact that foster youth may need more assistance than others entering college for the first time. Foster youth may not be academically prepared for college having moved from one high school to another, sometimes falling behind. This

constant moving also may refuse them the comfort of a lasting friendship, she said. Youth transitioning out of foster care may not have the support of family, both for emotional and financial support, and they may also have trouble with housing. They may need financial aid in order to support themselves on their own and they may not have anywhere to go during school breaks and holidays.

The DHS contract, Day said, is relieving the stress of these issues by giving support and assistance.

The contact, according to Day, will provide students with “opportunities for year-round housing, extra financial aid, on-campus employment, mentors, tutoring and coaching assistance to navigate through the plethora of resources and opportunities offered by the university.”

In a Youth Voices article from the Children and Youth Services Review journal, Day pointed out that “(youth) whose lives lacked caring adults didn’t feel cared about and weren’t motivated to succeed academically.” She is hoping that the foster care “champions” from university departments will be able to fill this gap. The foster care “champions” are from counseling and Psychological Services, Scholarships and Financial Aid, Career Planning and Placement, the Campus Health Center, Student Disability Services, University Advising, Academic Success Center, Housing and Residential Life, Admissions, and the Educational Opportunities Center.

In addition to the foster care “champions,” Echols will be acting as the Campus Life Coach. Echols, who is also foster alumna, sees her goal “as assisting the youth in completing their educational aspirations.” She will have individual and group meetings to determine their obstacles and work with them to come up with solutions.

Even though this is only a three year program now, Day pointed out that “students who receive support to successfully complete their first year of college are much more likely to graduate overall.” Echols also said that if successful, the contract could be extended for another two years.

Echols hopes that the “support provided will become part of the fabric of the university once the results have been demonstrated.” She said she is confident that supportive services will increase foster youth alum graduation rates from WSU.