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Field trip to college could pay off with dividends

ROCKFORD REGISTER STAR, EDITORIAL

Three cheers for the “Real NIU Experience” program, which helps high school students who come from families that don’t have a college tradition to embrace the idea that they could get higher education and the lifestyle it affords.

Some of the young people who are attending camps this summer at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb may have spent little — if any — time on a college campus. These Rockford youths, all from Jefferson High School, are living in dorms, eating dorm food, going to class and enjoying some of the activities that college children participate in — the healthy ones.

We hope the experience helps them visualize themselves in a year or so walking to and from classes at NIU or on another college campus. We hope it inspires them to excel and achieve the grades necessary to get into college when they return to Jefferson in the fall.

We hope it helps those who never saw themselves as “college material” to raise their expectations.

The program reminds us of the initiative by the Junior League of Rockford to provide students with support and real help as they consider colleges and trade schools, review career options and apply for admission to post-secondary schools. The pilot project was announced at the end of April. The organization will work with the city, the Rockford School District and the United Way of the Rock River Valley in launching the project in the fall for students from Jefferson or East high schools.

Students will be assigned trained mentors to help them through the process.

The need for the NIU/Jefferson effort and the Junior League program is obvious. Less than 20 percent of adults in Rockford hold bachelor’s degrees, which is low.

The prosperity of our region rests in turning these numbers around.

Adam Smith, the director of education and lifelong learning for the city of Rockford, was right this spring when he said there must be a culture shift in Rockford. That shift must involve putting first priority on educating our kids beyond high school, with training or college.

The Higher Education Alliance of the Rock River Region estimates that 80 percent to 85 percent of the new jobs in the region require post-secondary education.

Visualization is a technique that is used to help people succeed in life, in business, in sports. It could be used to help participants in these efforts envision college as a part of their future.

We hope they use these experiences to put themselves in the picture for a better life, something college or career training can afford them.