

Ready for college?

At Community College, most Philadelphia grads have to start out doing remedial classes.

by Wendy Harris

While many college-bound students make a long list of universities they'd like to attend, Dominique "Peak" Johnson had only one school in mind.

"My main focus was Temple, even though I remember my 9th grade counselor telling me not to put all my eggs in one basket," Johnson said.

For Johnson, the university was close to home and his job. And for the aspiring writer who wants to pursue journalism, Temple – which has a strong communications program – just seemed like the right fit.

So, during his senior year at Delaware Valley Charter High School, Johnson applied to Temple for the fall semester of 2007.

But he didn't get in.

Four years later, Johnson (a former intern at the *Notebook*) has just received his associate's degree from Community College of Philadelphia and is vying once again for admission to Temple.

Like Johnson, a large number of District graduates end up at CCP, even if their original aspirations were elsewhere. Since 2003, 32 percent of those who went on to college after graduating from District schools enrolled at the

community college, making it far and away the number one choice. That represents more than 2,000 Philadelphia public school students each year.

But new District data show that only 17 percent of those earn a degree within six years of finishing high school.

Many simply aren't ready for the academic rigors of higher education because of a misalignment between secondary standards and postsecondary demands. In short, often due to ineffective teaching and watered-down curricula, students fail to acquire in high school the skills necessary to excel in college.

As a result, a large number are forced to enter remedial education courses at CCP to help bridge the instructional gap, which translates into lost time and dollars. Students must often spend a year or more trying to satisfy basic requirements that they should have fulfilled in grades 9-12.

"Remediation is the taxpayer and students paying twice for the same education, and in Pennsylvania that's almost \$100 million" (in the 2007-08 school year), said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, which is focused on helping the nation's K-12 systems produce college-ready graduates. "So we need to get it right the first time, and that is in high school."



Overbrook High graduate and Community College of Philadelphia student Brittany Perry says she wishes she was serious about her studies in 11th and 12th grades.

Harvey Finkle

According to an Alliance policy brief, remedial education is a major issue nationwide, not just in Philadelphia. About one out of every three students entering postsecondary studies will have to take at least one remedial course.

In 2007, Johnson's need for remediation blocked his best efforts to get into Temple. After his rejection, he worked some connections to get into Temple's summer bridge program with the assurance that if he passed three classes – freshmen seminar, English, and math – he could have a second chance. But Johnson failed the math class, knocking him out of contention yet again for a slot on the Broad Street campus.

"The math they were teaching at Temple, I didn't know it because in high school my math was completely mixed up. In 10th grade I got Algebra 2 and I never even had Algebra 1. Then they put me in Geometry and that was terrible because the teacher wasn't good," said Johnson.

"It was a huge blow to me to not get in Temple, and I was mad at my high school for not preparing me."

After Temple rejected Johnson, an instructor at his afterschool program suggested he apply to CCP for spring semester 2008. Like every incoming student, he took the placement test to assess his academic abilities, and once again he came up short in math.

Johnson was placed in CCP's basic

remedial math class. He had to take the second level of remedial math twice before getting to his credit-bearing courses. Still determined to achieve his goal, in 2009, Johnson entered CCP's dual admissions program, allowing him to accrue credits that also count at Temple, and he expects to transfer there in the fall. Associate's degree in hand, he's filled out the proper paperwork, satisfied all the academic requirements, and is waiting on his final acceptance.

A preparedness barrier

College-bound doesn't necessarily mean college-ready.

Eileen Abrams, a CCP English instructor, said that 70 percent of incoming students are not ready for credit-bearing courses.

"Typically students in my developmental class can't put a standard five-paragraph essay together," she said. "They have a hard time understanding what a thesis statement is and how to create and develop one. On the reading side, students have difficulty discerning main ideas from examples and details, and a really big issue is vocabulary development," she said.

CCP has four levels of remedial classes in English and math, each of which must be satisfied before students can take credit-bearing courses toward their degree.

Clifton Clemons, a second-year
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