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# Inspiring Students to Create the Future

*An exemplary program based at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay greatly increases the odds that at-risk youngsters will not only graduate from high school but will go on to higher education. The program is also a model of university/community collaboration.*

**BY CYNTHIA SHEPARD, KRISTIN M. VESPIA, AND COLLEEN FITZPATRICK,  
WITH TIMOTHY U. KAUFMAN, LINDA TABERS-KWAK, AND DEBORAH FURLONG**

SOMETIMES ingenuity, timing, and need come together in the right mix to generate a spark that ignites innovative programs that benefit students and communities. At a news conference in February of 2007, Gov. Jim Doyle of Wisconsin introduced elements of his statewide budget plan. He chose to speak on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay (UWGB), in part because a centerpiece of his budget was substantial financial support for a new education proposal, the Wisconsin Covenant. The Covenant is a plan designed to provide all students who maintain good grades with access to a state university and financial aid to make that access meaningful.

In his remarks that day, Gov. Doyle pointed to the award-winning Phuture Phoenix Program as an inspiration for this ambitious educational undertaking. Phuture Phoenix is a UWGB initiative that encourages at-

risk youths to graduate from high school and pursue a college education, and it was the first recipient of the Ann Lydecker Award for Diversity Education. This is the story of how Phuture Phoenix began.

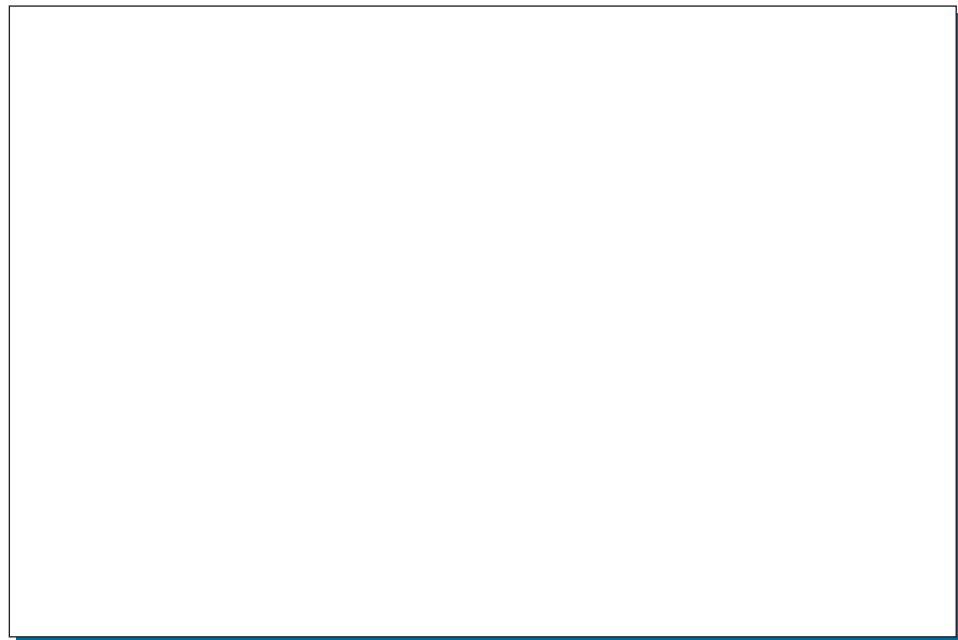
In late fall of 2001, Cynthia Shepard found herself visiting the principal's office of Jefferson Elementary School, a small inner-city school in Green Bay. She was seated across from a fifth-grade boy who had been sent to the office for his disruptive behavior. He looked at her, and she could see the anger in his eyes. Drawing on her more than 20 years of experience in K-12 education, Shepard began a conversation with the young man. One of the questions she asked was what he wanted to do when he grew up. His reply: "I'll probably end up in prison like my dad."

Little did this young man know he was having a conversation with the wife of the newly hired chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. Shepard, a former teacher and administrator, found herself at that time without her usual responsibilities. She had a new role — helping to carry out her husband's mission in the community — but little notion of how to begin. His stated vision was "Communities support universities that support communities," and he was poised to connect the university integrally with the community — although their present connection was not strong. Shepard was being assisted in her efforts to learn about the community by a university trustee and lifelong community member, Virginia Riopelle, who had volunteered to show her some of the support systems for children, including the Green Bay Area Public Schools.

It was one of those tours that brought Shepard to

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the principal's office that autumn day. As an educator and mother, Shepard was greatly saddened and disturbed by the boy's words. How disillusioning that a 10-year-old was already so negative about his future! She asked the principal, Maryanne Anderson, what she and the university could do to help such students. The principal replied with the simple statement, "Role models. We need good role models." And that was the spark that ignited the Phuture Phoenix Program.



The program was conceived on a variety of napkins, placemats, and stray pieces of paper at lunch following the visit to Jefferson Elementary. Shepard and Ripelle named their brainchild Phuture Phoenix, after the UWGB mascot.

Over the following three years, this magical bird would take flight and develop into a large-scale, multi-faceted initiative serving hundreds of students in Northeastern Wisconsin. Its core mission was straightforward, but daunting: to help young people envision brighter futures by increasing regional rates of both high school graduation and enrollment in higher education. To accomplish that mission, the program encompasses five critical components.

1. *Introduction to the university: Phuture Phoenix Day.* The Phuture Phoenix experience begins in the fall of each school year when trained students from UWGB, known as role models, visit participating Title I fifth-grade classrooms in the Green Bay area. These visits are

the first step in the preparation for Phuture Phoenix Day. Approximately 350 college students, half of whom are education majors who earn course credit for participating, serve as role models. They dedicate their time by visiting the grade schools, participating in Phuture Phoenix Day, and following up on their contacts with the children.

On Phuture Phoenix Day, approximately 1,000 fifth-graders are divided into groups of five to seven by their teachers and matched with two UWGB role models. The fifth-graders receive T-shirts to wear for the day (which they frequently cover with autographs from college students and staff). The role models give an extensive tour of the UWGB campus, beginning with a trip to the performing arts center for an introduction and welcome by Cynthia Shepard and a short program by the pep band, cheerleaders, dance team, and the university mascot.

Following the introductory program, the groups venture out to see the campus. Tours include visits to classes in progress, the library, the student center, student housing, the sports center, and the administrative offices. The students also take part in several special learning events coordinated by UWGB faculty and staff just for Phuture Phoenix Day. They have lunch with their role models and spend the day asking questions and learning about what a UWGB student does at the university. The day concludes at the sports center over ice cream with the chancellor — the "really big principal" of the university — who answers their myriad questions about the university. At the end of the day, the children board the buses and return to their grade schools.

The role models pay a follow-up visit during the next week to the grade schools to reconnect with the students and discuss highlights of the day. Role models commit to making at least three additional contacts with the fifth-graders in their groups over the course of the school year. The aim of establishing these personal connections between the elementary students and the UWGB role models is to demystify the university for the fifth-graders and to instill the idea that

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a postsecondary education is an attainable goal.

2. *Continued connections: middle and high school.* The second major component of the Phuture Phoenix Program is maintaining the connection with the fifth-graders by creating a UWGB presence on the campuses of the four feeder middle schools to which they progress. Teams of UWGB students, faculty and staff members, and community volunteers deliver short, student-centered presentations to students in the middle school grades. In collaboration with middle school teachers, counselors, and principals, the teams design presentations to help the students develop some of the skills they need to graduate from high school. Currently, the sixth-grade presentation deals with goal-setting and listening skills, the seventh-grade presentation takes up individual learning styles, and the eighth-grade presentation focuses on organizational and note-taking skills.

As the students advance into high school, we plan to develop new presentations. These may include a career fair on the UWGB campus, a session on applying to college, and perhaps even some partnerships with existing programs, such as Upward Bound or TRIO.

In addition to these educational sessions, Phuture Phoenix creates ongoing and more intensive connections between UWGB college students and the children in the public schools. A Campus Compact federal grant was awarded to the program to provide stipends for 10 fellowships. These stipends are competitively awarded to college students — known as Phellows — who are willing to spend 300 volunteer hours at eight middle or high schools. There the Phellows offer assistance to teachers working with at-risk students, develop ongoing relationships with the sixth- through 10th-grade students, encourage school attendance, help students develop skills to overcome barriers to graduation, promote interest in future educational opportunities, increase student awareness of life options through modeling, and encourage students to prepare for graduation.

The Phellows have established Phuture Phoenix Clubs, where well-trained UWGB students are available on the middle and high school campuses. The clubs are open to students at various times during the school day, depending on the schedules of the Phellows.

It is not just the Phellows, however, who staff these clubs. As an additional measure of support, the education department at UWGB collaborated with Phuture Phoenix to offer from 1 to 3 credits to students across majors who work in the program and are willing to offer extended contact hours to the middle and high school students. These UWGB students work collaboratively with the Phellows to help support the Phuture

Phoenix Clubs, and the Phellows provide leadership.

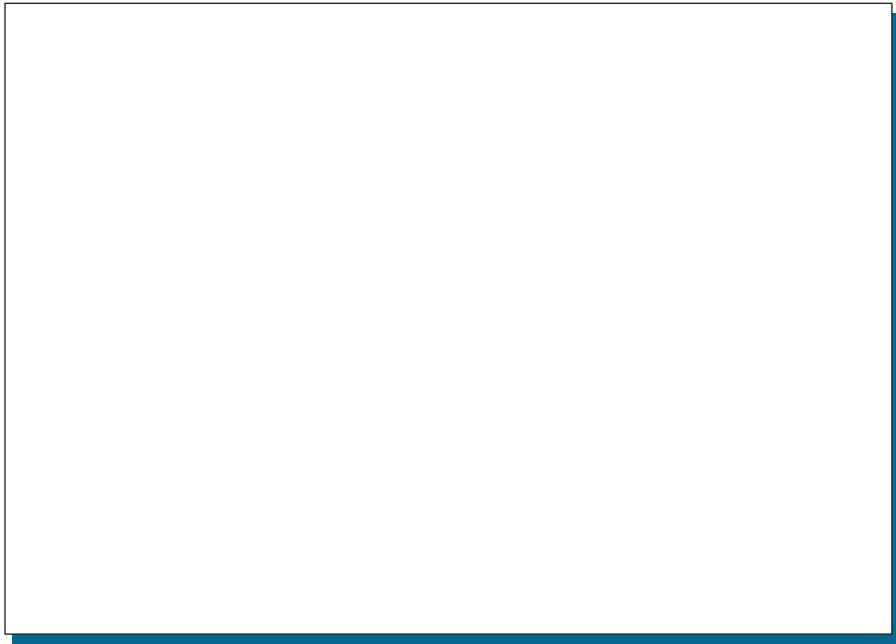
In Fall 2006, even more support became available to the clubs and the middle school and high school students they serve. Since Phuture Phoenix creates a natural conduit for fieldwork, teacher education faculty members have incorporated involvement in the Phuture Phoenix Program into existing coursework. All candidates selected into UWGB's teacher education program automatically become participants in the Phuture Phoenix Program. All new students are required to do 35 hours of fieldwork per semester in the clubs. They are instructed and supervised by UWGB faculty so that their experience can be used to enhance their preparation for teaching. Integrating the program with UWGB's teacher education program allows these future teachers to gain valuable experience with the children and communities they will one day serve.

3. *Community involvement: Phuture Phoenix Philanthropists.* A unique feature of Phuture Phoenix is the support it receives from the surrounding community. This program is funded almost entirely through the charitable donations of the Green Bay and Northeastern Wisconsin communities. With the exception of the Campus Compact grant, which is directly distributed in its entirety to the appointed Phellows, Phuture Phoenix receives no money from the university or from state or federal programs.

After the successful completion of the first Phuture Phoenix Day in 2003, the community became aware of the program through press coverage and active community volunteers who spread the news. The early efforts of more than 40 community volunteers developed into a small foundation, the Phuture Phoenix Philanthropists, which now includes well over 120 members. Each year, community supporters join the Philanthropists by making monetary donations. Indeed, most costs for operating the program are covered by these donations, and most donors have committed to long-term monetary support through the yearly fund drives.

In addition to providing the necessary funding to operate, the donated dollars go into an endowment to support future scholarships for the grade-school students involved in the program. Phuture Phoenix promises the possibility of financial help for those students taking part in Phuture Phoenix Clubs and activities that improve their chances of graduation and college entrance. This program component was developed with the understanding that we cannot raise students' hopes and expectations without providing some tangible support for the realization of their dreams.

4. *Parent programs.* Programs that motivate students to do their best in school and look toward the future



sistants have surveyed fifth-grade participants, college student role models, and fifth-grade teachers regarding their experiences with the program. In addition, members of the UWGB faculty and staff have initiated longitudinal research to investigate the long-term impact of the program by following a group of participating students and a sample of students not exposed to the program. Researchers intend to compare the students' backgrounds, interests, educational and occupational goals, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. They are interested in knowing to what degree Phuture Phoenix produces positive changes in students that go beyond expected developmental changes over time.

In addition to these formal evaluation efforts, we have already observed benefits of the program in a variety of ways. One primary indicator

has been the manner in which the university, community members, and the school district have united in a collaborative effort to improve education, and all have mutually benefited from this relationship. The school district has seen an infusion of hundreds of new volunteers and tutors, the university has become much more visible in the community and is poised to grow, and in the long run the community will benefit from the educated work force that the public schools and the university hope to produce.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In the end, what is it that brought Gov. Doyle to Green Bay on that cold February day? What is it that lights the spark to create innovative educational programs? In the case of Phuture Phoenix, it was the coming together of the right people in the right place at the right time. One young boy's simple remark ignited a spark in others. However, making that spark a productive fire required patience, attention, hard work, and good choices. Phuture Phoenix was created by inspiration, but it has grown and developed through intentional organization, collaboration, and adherence to a common mission. Those efforts turned the spark into a flame, one that spread to envelop, engage, and unite a university, a community, its schools, its citizens, and an entire state. **K**

must include a connection to parents and establish support at home in order to be successful. The Phuture Phoenix Program offers four yearly parent forums, organized in collaboration with the United Way and the Green Bay Area Public Schools, groups with a vested interest in the success of students in the community. Each quarter, these stakeholders hold an open forum in a convenient location for parents of at-risk students. Presentations at these forums explain Phuture Phoenix in detail and provide an opportunity for addressing a range of issues, problems, concerns, and solutions. Such topics as the availability of financial aid, the college application process, and encouraging students to do homework are always on the agenda.

Many UWGB students — along with the director of the Phuture Phoenix Program, the superintendent of the Green Bay Area Public Schools, and United Way workers — have attended the forums. Often particular groups within the community are invited to these forums so that they can speak about their individual needs. Those involved in Phuture Phoenix believe that establishing lines of communication early between parents, the district, community services, and UWGB will lead parents to encourage their children to take advantage of the programs available to them.

5. *Program evaluation.* The final component of Phuture Phoenix is its research program. Faculty members, staff members, and trained college student research as-

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