

Thousands are expected to get info or scholarships

Football weekend furthers higher ed

The football game, parade and battle of the bands get most of the attention during the annual Circle City Classic, but the weekend's chief goal is to promote the serious business of higher education.

In fact, the Indianapolis Black Alumni Council's college fair, which starts today and concludes Friday, is the nation's largest gathering of admissions counselors for historically black colleges and universities, or HBCUs.

The college fair, with its booths, brochures and admissions counselors, predates the gridiron hoopla. It was started in 1979. The football game was first played in 1984.

The 65 colleges and universities that will be represented at the fair are expected to give away up to \$6 million in scholarships Friday. "Some will be partial scholarships, some will be full rides," said Ruth Woods, a Pike High School guidance counselor and college fair organizer.

The event is open only to HBCUs, of which there are about 90. The college fair lasts two days and is two-tiered. From 6 to 9 p.m. today at Crispus Attucks Medical Magnet High School, the colleges will set up booths and answer questions from prospective students and their families. About 3,000 to 4,000 students are expected.

"A lot of students do this instead of going on a tour of the (HBCU) colleges," said Robert Henderson, president of the Indianapolis Black Alumni Council.

From 8 a.m. to noon Friday, the counselors move to Martin University to court high school seniors with cumulative grade-point averages of 3.0 or better.

About 400 to 500 students are expected at that event, few enough that admissions counselors can conduct interviews and make scholarship offers on the spot.

Advocates of HBCUs say such schools are more hospitable to black students than other schools.

"It's their nurturing aspect," said Woods, whose four children went to HBCUs. (She'd have liked to go to one, but her parents insisted she go to Indiana University.) "The professors take the time to know the students."

She pointed to a study released last month by the Thurgood Marshall College Fund that found the number of black male graduates from public HBCUs in science, technology, engineering and math had risen 36 percent since 1999.

An Associated Press study of all four-year HBCUs released last spring, however, found that while select schools, such as Howard University in Washington, D.C., and Spelman College in Atlanta, have exceedingly high graduation rates, among all other HBCUs, about 37 percent of students finished with a degree within six years.

That is 4 percentage points lower than the graduation rate for black students at all schools.

“You have people who have to leave school for financial reasons,” said Michael Jefferson, a Pike High School graduate and a freshman at Florida A&M University, “but there’s the discipline aspect, too, like at any college. A lot of students come to college, and it’s their first taste of freedom, and they do everything they’re not supposed to do, and some of them go home.”

A year ago, Jefferson was at the college fair with a 3.2 GPA. He was offered two full rides on the spot, one from Alabama State University, the other from Florida A&M.

The scholarship covers tuition, room and board, books, a laptop computer and \$500 in spending money each semester.

“It was a very rewarding evening,” Jefferson said.

The college fair operates independently of the Circle City Classic, but the two events have synergy. The Classic raises scholarship money — \$1.5 million so far.

Marc Williams, the Classic’s new executive director, has said one of his main priorities is getting more teenagers involved.

At Washington Community High School, where Williams went last week to drum up interest among students, he emphasized not football but college. “There is scholarship money out there for you,” he said. “Don’t let it go unused.”

One of the students, Wilson Lopez, had never heard of the Circle City Classic, but he zeroed in on the scholarship talk. “This gives me more ambition,” he said.

Jenaya Hooks, a 17-year-old senior at Tech High School, knows she’s going to college (her GPA is 3.7, and she plans to become a veterinarian), but she doesn’t know where. By Friday, after the college fair, she might know. “It’s whoever gives me the most money,” she said.

It’s a heady feeling. “Just to have a chance at a full scholarship,” Hooks said. “I’m so blessed. I just have to stay focused. I have to keep working.”

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