

CHARISTA'S CORNER

30,000 Degrees initiative important for Island



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For the Staten Island Advance

Editor's Note: Charista's Corner is a weekly feature from our teen correspondent.

There is an important project called 30,000 Degrees being spearheaded by three top Staten Island college leaders: Dr. William Fritz, president of the College of Staten Island; Dr. Richard Guarasci, president of Wagner College; and Dr. James O'Keefe, vice provost of the Staten Island Campus of St. John's University.

Recently, I had the pleasure of interviewing these three distinguished gentlemen to discuss the 30,000 Degrees Initiative and each of them had such wonderful insight on this program that aims to improve college readiness in the borough.

But first, some background information: The 30,000 Degrees in 2025 initiative aims to create and support a college-going culture to increase students' attainment of a college degree by providing educational mentoring within the pre-K-16 educational pipeline. For the purpose of advancing these goals, these three institutions of higher education have come together to form The Staten Island Educational Partnership.

Modeled after the successful The Greater Louisville Inc. Degrees at Work Program, 55,000 Degrees, The Staten Island Educational Partnership will leverage and align existing college readiness activities to achieve an additional 30,000 baccalaureate or higher graduates by the year 2025.

All three institutions have partnered up with different high schools on Staten Island to help prepare high school students for higher educational learning.

The College of Staten Island has partnered with New Dorp High School and Staten Island Technical High School. St. John's University has partnered up with Ralph McKee Career and Technical Education High School, and Wagner College has partnered with Port Richmond High School.

I asked Drs. Fritz, Guarasci and O'Keefe what the inspiration, goal, and purpose were for the 30,000 Degrees initiative and here's what they had to say, respectively.

DR. WILLIAM FRITZ, PRESIDENT OF THE COLLEGE OF STATEN ISLAND:

"Well I think it's really all about improving the quality of life. I'd like to say that at the College of Staten Island, we're a part of Staten Island, not apart from Staten Island. Having a baccalaureate degree in today's society is



From left are Dr. William Fritz, Dr. James O'Keefe, Charista Santos Mroczek, and Dr. Richard Guarasci.

really the way to improve the quality of life, everything from job satisfaction to having a good job.

"College graduates [collectively] make about one billion and a half dollars more over their lifetime than those who don't have a college degree. They also have better health care than those who don't.

"We looked at the demographics of Staten Island and found that Staten Island lags behind the other boroughs in New York with the percentage of the adult population that has college degrees. We hope to increase this number through this initiative, 30,000 Degrees."

DR. RICHARD GUARASCI, PRESIDENT OF WAGNER COLLEGE:

"The 30,000 Degrees Initiative is really about improving the island by increasing the number of college graduates, both two- and four-year. Each one of us has our own little institutional twist on this. So for Wagner, about 10 years ago, we started looking across

at neighborhoods of distress on Staten Island for low graduation rates in high school, poor health care, and so on and so forth.

"We looked at one neighbor in particular: Port Richmond. It was about 2 miles from our campus so it wasn't directly on our doorstep, but we said: can't we align our social capital, tutoring possibilities, entry possibilities, and our expertise of our faculty and staff? Couldn't we align that with one neighborhood in a specific way? Not doing it for the neighborhood, but doing it with the neighborhood to help that neighborhood lift itself up.

"So we started an Academy for high school kids at Port Richmond High School to get through high school successfully and get to a college, whether it be at Wagner, CSI, St. John's, or any college in United States. We've now actually linked a program back to a middle school, I.S. 51, that actually feeds into Port Richmond School. We're now actually moving to Elementary School 21 which feeds I.S. 51, which feeds the high school. So this builds this 'pipeline model.'

Our goal is to help this community lift

itself up, through the education sector in particular."

DR. JAMES O'KEEFE, VICE PROVOST OF ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY:

"We are doing a lot of the same things at St. John's University. Service has always been an important cornerstone of our mission. Our professional programs correspond nicely with a lot of the occupations and careers that Staten Islanders have traditionally held.

"We have educational programs, criminal justice, homeland security, hospitality management, and of course business, finance and education. A lot of these things are the things that Staten Islanders used to go into and they did well. They had a nice middle-class life and that was it because college wasn't required back then for a lot of these things.

"Now, we are trying to keep Staten Island up to the times as these educational requirements increase. We want them to have the credentials to pursue the careers that their mothers and fathers did. And there's no doubt their mothers and fathers did well in those areas."