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By Rachel Coleman

• Leader & Times

Students at Liberal High School have just barely completed the first half of the first quarter of the 2013-14 school year. Yet the staff at the LHS counselor's office is already looking ahead to what's next. For their senior-class advisees, that means college.

"This time of year, we're busy all the time," said head counselor Yvonne Rito. "I get scholarship information packages every day, and we're busy with reference letters and college applications for students."



To keep abreast of the workload, the counselors call upon the help of the school's "E-Time" teachers, who run the modern equivalent of homeroom sessions each day. They, like the counselors, have been assigned a group of students that will remain the same throughout each student's entire high school career.

"This helps us build relationships with them, and really understand what they need," Rito said. "That's our whole premise. We want to know our students."

Through the daily E-Time sessions, the counselors distribute information about important deadlines, college visits and scholarship opportunities.

“We’re making announcements every day,” Rito said, adding that for everyone, the last year before college can feel a little overwhelming.

The deadline for application to some Kansas state colleges is Nov. 1, Rito said. She added that while it’s possible to apply later, “first and priority scholarships are decided early, so we encourage students to stay on top of things.”

Additionally, other big scholarship opportunities come with fall deadlines. Rito listed the Gates Millennium Scholarship, as well as the Quest Bridge college match program, which, while not a direct scholarship, opens the door for students to apply to many colleges free of charge. Given the fact that applications to private universities and liberal arts schools can run as high as \$100 each, the opportunity to apply free of charge enables students to explore a wider array of options.

To get students started on the application process, Rito said the counselors required all seniors to fill out a “starter application” to Seward County Community College during their E-time session.

“Some of them said they weren’t planning to go to SCCC, but we explained that it was good practice for filling out applications, and that it’s always good to have a back-up plan if a first choice falls through or it’s just too expensive,” Rito said.

Besides doing those preparatory steps at school, though, students should be working on getting to college when they’re at home. That brings up the question, “What should parents be doing to help their seniors?”

Rito said the first step is to “have that conversation where you talk about where your student

wants to go to school. What are your student's top choices?" They should be starting to narrow down in the next two months, Rito advised.

The next step is to talk about money. The cost of a college education can scare students and families, especially if the graduating senior is the first in his or her family to attempt college.

"There's so much financial aid, and a lot of scholarships out there," Rito said. "We're constantly having to update information on our web page, and that's the best place for students and their parents to check." Rito noted the counselor's web page is accessible through the usd480.net website.

As shown by recent "back to school meetings" planned far in advance by the counselor's office, Rito said, "we're trying to get parents involved in this process, and help them understand how it works. It's more than just keeping the kids on track with their credits and their grades, but parents are our biggest ally and when they understand what it takes to apply to college, they can make a huge difference."

Rito said that while turnout was high for the senior parents' class meeting and for the freshman parents' meeting, "it was low for the sophomore and junior classes," she said. "We're always available, though, and parents can call us or look on the website to get more information about what will help their students most."

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