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St. Louis Graduates help high school grads prepare for college

In [Education](#)

By [Dale Hart](#), Beacon intern

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Christian Coffman, 17, just graduated from Cardinal Ritter College Prep High School and is looking forward to studying accounting at the University of Missouri at Kansas City in the fall.

“I’m the first in my family to go to college,” said Coffman. “There’s a lot of questions I need answers to like how I’m going to pay for it, if I’m able to take a job while studying and just advice on being independent.”

To help ease this passage and answer those kind of questions, [St. Louis Graduates](#) has opened its [High School to College Center](#), a pilot program for the St. Louis region. The center, at 618 N. Skinker Blvd. in the Delmar Loop, will be open from noon to 5 p.m. daily through Aug. 18.



Barlow Photography
Students and counselors meet on center's opening day.

At least three counselors and financial aid advisors will be on hand to provide assistance with financial aid, housing, transportation, acceptance letters or any other questions students may have.

“We have invested so much time and money into giving these students dreams and ambition,” said Faith Sandler, executive director of the [Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis](#) and co-chair of St. Louis Graduates. “It’s just not financially, socially or educationally acceptable not to see them through.”

The program looks to target low-income and first generation college-going students who often fall foul to the “summer melt” phenomenon -- students who are accepted and enrolled at a college but fail to show up in the fall.

“Having an acceptance letter or financial aid award letter can give the mistaken impression that all a

student needs to do is show up in the fall,” said Sandler in a press release. “The center will take steps to ensure everything’s in place; they’re enrolled in classes and ready to go in August.”



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Sarah Caudill, a 21-year-old junior, knows first-hand how difficult it can be climbing the bureaucratic application mountain alone.

“I was the first in my family to go to college so it wasn’t like my parents could walk me through the process,” said Caudill. “I was so excited about going, it even didn’t occur to me about sorting out financial planning; how much room, board and meal plans were going to cost.”

Caudill attended Lindenwood University in the fall of 2010, but after budget cuts saw her lose her access grant, a financial lifeline keeping her in college, she was forced to leave.

“I didn’t want to; I’d made good friends there, especially my roommates,” said Caudill. “I really needed someone to help plan my future, my high school counselors was helpful, but there was nobody there during those crucial summer months.”

After leaving Lindenwood, Caudill attended St. Louis Community College at Meramec earning a teaching associates degree. She is now heading to UMSL in the fall with her 17-year-old sister Jessica.

“She asks me a lot of questions about college that I can’t answer; I’m just glad she now has somewhere to go to get her future on track.”

To streamline the process, the center will be using an online road map system designed by [College Bound](#), an organization also focused on helping low-income students. It will help guide counselors and students through the process of transitioning from high school to college.

“The road map is like the TurboTax of high school to college solutions,” said Lisa Orden Zarin, chief executive officer of College Bound and a member of the St. Louis Graduates steering committee.

The system is essentially a step-by-step checklist keeping students from falling through the cracks before they turn up to campus in the fall.

“If there is a specific issue a student is having problems with, let’s say, financial aid, then we’ll pair them with a counselor from the St. Louis Scholarship Foundation,” said Laura Winter, project manager at St. Louis Graduates. “If there are any other pending issues, they can be directed to any one of the 57 counselors who will guide them through the necessary process.”

Participating counselors hail from College Summit, STLCC, Missouri College Advising Corps, the Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis and Wyman Center, as well as individual counselors from 12 area high schools and nonprofit organizations.