In a morning in July, a group of seventh graders, attending a summer workshop through Kent State’s Rising Scholars Program, are taking a tour of Coldwell Tree Farm. The farm, which includes 620 acres of certified woodlands in southern Columbiana County, is owned and managed by Dave and Lisa Coldwell and their three grown sons.

The Coldwell family intensively manages their tree farm for a combination of timber production, wildlife habitat, forestry consulting services, salvaged lumber and live edge wood slab sales, education, and community outreach.

Tour leader Jed Coldwell shows the students how to use a tree scale stick to measure the diameter of a tree by Jed Coldwell of Coldwell Timber Consulting, LLC in Columbiana County.

Tree farming is not about a quick sale; it takes patience and planning. The Coldwell family currently plants more than 3,000 trees a year—but what they plant this year won’t be ready to harvest for 80 years. It’s a slow process, but they do it to protect the land, to watch something grow and to plan for future generations.

In that sense, the process of tree farming is an apt metaphor for Kent State’s Rising Scholars Program, which supports underserved students in grades 7-12 who have been identified by their middle schools as having the potential to be the first in their families to complete a four-year degree—an outcome that would be life changing for future generations.

Putting a tree scale stick into students’ hands and showing them how to use it passes a baton to the next generation. It’s a tangible means of emphasizing the importance of basic math skills and encouraging students to care for their local environments.

And, just as woodland managers take measurements to monitor tree growth and make decisions, Rising Scholars managers use an evidence-based approach to measure the program’s growth, evaluate its effectiveness and make a case for its continued expansion (see chart on pg. 23).

The program, known as Rural Scholars when David Dees, PhD ’00, dean and chief administrative officer of the Columbiana County campuses, created it at the Kent State Salem campus in 2011, was renamed Rising Scholars when rolling it out to the other Kent State regional campuses.

In the program, eligible middle school students are nominated by their teachers and guidance counselors at the end of the sixth grade to take part in the program, which combines mentoring with community and corporate assistance to create a support system that prepares the young adults for life after high school.

Beginning in the seventh grade and continuing through high school, students in the program receive a combination of individual mentoring, career and college knowledge workshops and structured program guidance as they work toward specified program outcomes.

The five core outcomes are listed as being: successful students, engaged learners, workforce ready, socially savvy and committed to community.

Program participants who attend Kent State University may receive scholarships and work in the program as mentors, receiving support on their college journey while also giving back by becoming role models to younger students in the program.

The program specifically addresses the workforce ready and brain drain issues that many Ohio communities face. Program activities are designed to teach young adults the skills necessary to succeed in life after high school, and the program promotes a commitment to community service.

The hope is that students who have gone through Rising Scholars will attend Kent State, but the program is designed to help each student find a suitable vocation or career. At the end of the program, the goal is for students to enroll in college or technical school, enlist in the military or enter the workforce.

Based on the program’s success at the Columbiana County campuses, Kent State decided to implement Rising Scholars at all regional campuses, beginning in fall 2019. “When fully implemented, the collective impact of the Rising Scholars Program over Northeast Ohio will be significant,” says Nathan Ritchey, PhD, vice president for Kent State System Integration. “Our regional campuses are small, but together our resources, talent and footprint are quite impressive.”

Ritchey is convinced the timing is right for this program to expand across the Kent State system. “When we look at educational attainment in our region, we see that there are many gaps that affect economic development, personal stability and the overall health of the communities we serve,” Ritchey says. “Through the success of the Rural Scholars Program at our Columbiana County campuses, we are confident that we can begin to address these important societal issues.”

When it comes to finances, Dees says providing a free education for qualified Rising Scholars is not as expensive as it may sound. “Many of these students, because of their background, qualify for a lot of financial aid—Pell Grants and things like that,” says Dees. “When I first started the program, I thought the secret was to get the college paid for. But eight years later, looking back, I see the most important thing is the mentors. The mentors are the secret sauce; those are the individuals who keep the students on the right path all the way.”

At the end of the program, the goal is for students to enroll in college or technical school, enlist in the military, or enter the workforce.

In addition to mentors, support from community members is essential. “The importance of private support cannot be overstated,” says Stephen Sokany, vice president of Institutional Advancement. “We have been successful raising initial funds for the Columbiana County program and are looking forward to this program being elevated to a cross-university priority. “Thanks to the performance-based results from the existing Columbiana County program, we have a great narrative to show the communities surrounding our other regional campuses. It’s easy to see how this program can change lives and lift up the community. “I believe each campus is eager to roll this out—and we need philanthropic support to make that happen.”

When the program is fully implemented, Kent State will have the capacity to assist nearly 1,000 underserved students from seventh grade through bachelor’s degrees. Ritchey says, “We are reaching students long before they enter college with a program that ensures they are ready for college in terms of academic preparation, finances and confidence. This program is a game changer.”

Together WE RISE

How the Rising Scholars Program at Kent State helps promising students from low socioeconomic backgrounds get on track for a productive future.

By Jan Senn and Julie Miller, BS ’97
ANDREW EICHER
two years of her degree.
She will transfer to the Kent Campus to complete the last
at an insurance agency she visited with other scholars
management—a path she chose after talking with agents
new scholars in the program and majoring in business
State University at Salem campus, where she is mentoring
graduated high school in 2018 and enrolled at the Kent
path toward higher education and careers.
the Rural Scholars Program, whose purpose is to identify
had been selected by teachers at her school to be part of
organ Briand was beginning seventh grade when
there wasn’t a problem—there was a promise. She
Anderson Junior/Senior High School in Lisbon,
and sophomore at Kent State
University at Salem.

Scholar and Mentor
organ Briand was beginning seventh grade when
she was called to the principal’s office at David
Anderson Junior/Senior High School in Lisbon, Ohio. “I was a little scared because I didn’t know if I was
in trouble or if there was a problem of some sort,” recalls
Briand, who had just moved to Lisbon from Leetonia.
There wasn’t a problem—there was a promise. She
had been selected by teachers at her school to be part of
the Rural Scholars Program, whose purpose is to identify
underserved students with potential and help them find a
path toward higher education and careers.
After six years of participating in the program, Briand
graduated high school in 2018 and enrolled at the Kent
State University at Salem campus, where she is mentoring
new scholars in the program and majoring in business
management—a path she chose after talking with agents
at an insurance agency she visited with other scholars
during one of the program’s career exploration workshops.
She will transfer to the Kent Campus to complete the last
two years of her degree.

“Wanting to be a mentor pushed me to be a better person and to do better in school. Now I’m setting an example for my mentees.”
—MORGAN BRIAND, 2018 Rising Scholar Program graduate, mentor and sophomore at Kent State University at Salem.

Founder and Facilitator
ny story of a student who navigates successfully from high
school to college is heartening for David Dees, PhD ’00,
dean and chief administrative officer of the Columbiana
County campuses, who created the Rural Scholars Program at the Kent State Salem campus in 2011. He had started thinking
about the need for such a program in the early 2000s, partly as a
reflection of his own journey as a college student.
A self-described “rural Appalachian hillbilly from Kentucky,” Dees was in college at the same time as his mom and brothers.
He earned a bachelor’s degree in communications with a minor
in biology and a master’s degree in theatre from the University
of Kentucky. After short stints as a college football coach, disc
jockey and theatre teacher, he went on to earn a PhD in cultural
foundations of education from Kent State University.
Along his educational journey, he experienced many of the
challenges that first-generation college students face: being
unfamiliar with academic terms, feeling reluctant to ask for help
or talk with professors, struggling with the time commitment and
navigating the system and the culture change with family and
friends who weren’t able to assist with the process.
“Although my family was supportive, when I went away to
college, I was getting lost in the shuffle, and I was struggling,” says Dees. “Even then, I thought, ‘There’s got to be a better way to help
students navigate from high school to a university or college.’”
That thought kept coming up as he became a professor
and administrator. One of his graduate students was
interested in college access and studied programs across the
United States that focused on rural or urban students. The two
of them wrote a white paper in the early 2000s, taking the best
ideas from those programs and creating a system to increase
college access, retention and graduation rates. Although their
concept—which included mentoring in middle school—was
powerful, financing remained a stumbling block.
Then, while Dees was working at the Kent Campus directing
the Center for Teaching and Learning, a colleague suggested he
apply for an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America)
grant to help implement the program. He received the grant,
and AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer Wendy Pfrienger came to help
him create the community partnerships and program design
necessary to support the program’s first cohort of admitted
seventh graders in fall 2011.
“We went to the community and asked, ‘What are the
issues in Columbiana County that we, as a university, can help
serve?’” says Dees. “And they told us, ‘We are losing our best and
brightest; we have high-paying jobs we can’t fill; we need more
educational opportunities; we need kids who are ready for the
workplace—not just ready for college, but ready for whatever is
next in life.’”
“To build the program, we took the best practices and ideas
from programs around the country we had identified through
research and put them together with the community input we had
obtained over yearlong conversations.
“I think that’s why we’ve had so much success. We did our
research, we followed through, and we had a lot of community
buy-in for what we were trying to accomplish.”

The mentors are the secret sauce; those are the individuals who keep the students on the right path all the time.”
—DAVID DEES, PhD ’00, dean and chief administrative officer, Columbiana County campuses
Proponent and Program Director

Donny Larabee, BA ’18, could be a poster child for the Rising Scholars Program, even though he grew up prior to its founding.

He started out as a mentor in the program three years ago, while he was studying psychology at Kent State University at Salem, and his psychology professor, Rachael Blasiman, PhD, recommended him. After graduating with a bachelor’s degree in psychology last May, he became a master mentor to coach new mentors and assist with programming. Recently, he was named interim program director for the Rising Scholars Program at the Columbiana County campuses.

From the first time Larabee heard about Rising Scholars, it resonated with him. “I immediately fell in love with it,” he says. “I’ve always had a large part of my heart devoted to helping kids.”

Perhaps that’s because his own childhood had a rocky start. Both he and his older brother, A.J., were removed from their biological mother and stepfather when he was seven years old and his brother was eight. They were placed in a group home before going to live with foster parents Richard and Sherry Larabee, his parents gave him a lilac blossom in memory of his mom, who loved lilacs, and a fan, along with his initials, RAL; on his right forearm is the Detroit Tigers in memory of his dad, who was a Tigers fan, along with his initials, KLL. His parents gave him a loving, stable home, but both of them had worked in factories, so they weren’t able to help him navigate the college admissions process.

Larabee joined the military and was in active duty for eight years, stationed in Alaska and Kentucky, with three tours in Iraq during that time. After meeting his wife, Katie, who is from Ohio, the couple moved to Columbiana County six years ago when he left the military. Katie Larabee, who recently gave birth to their second son, is taking courses at Kent State Salem in business management and is also a mentor in the Rising Scholars Program. Larabee says he is making every effort to stay with the program indefinitely.

“I feel this is kind of a calling for me, because I’ve had all these life experiences,” says Larabee of his new position. “I’ve come from living in extreme poverty with no one to guide me, to having the right people come into my life at the right time. I’ve worked at a variety of jobs, including pizza delivery, telemarketing, cook in a hospital kitchen, the right time. I’ve worked at a variety of jobs, including pizza delivery, telemarketing, cook in a hospital kitchen, guide me, to having the right people come into my life at the right time.”

“This summer, tenth grade Rising Scholars participated in a workshop titled “Locationology” and learned about regional enterprise and the economy, as well as geology, astronomy, geography, anthropology and history. Above, they are helping identify different species found in river water at a local park during a lesson on soil and water conservation.

In this program, I want to share my experiences with the students and give them an idea of what’s available out there.”

—DONNY LARABEE, BA ’18, interim program director, Rising Scholars, Columbiana County campuses

The Rural Scholars Program assesses the developmental assets of program participants via an annual health and wellness survey. Results are extrapolated and compared with the participants’ peers within Columbiana County. Rural Scholars students outperformed their Columbiana County peers on both internal and external developmental assets as indicated on the chart above, which gives just a sample of the findings. See the complete 2018–2019 Rural Scholars Impact Report at www.kent.edu/supportrisingscholars

RURAL SCHOLARS IMPACT REPORT AT WWW.KENT.EDU/SUPPORTRISINGSCHOLARS

HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN GET ON TRACK FOR COLLEGE:

Read with them every day when they are younger; keep them in the habit of reading as they get older.

Encourage them to participate in a variety of extracurricular activities, allowing them to be involved in their community.

Talk to them about their interests; help them look into related careers.

Check in on their academic progress using online tools like ProgressBook, an integrated student information and learning management program.

Push them to take challenging classes rather than seek easy As; make sure they are meeting high school requirements for graduation and college readiness.

As they get older, accompany them on college visits and help them make the decision that is best for them.

See bigfuture.collegeboard.org for more checklists and advice.

Learn more about Rising Scholars at www.kent.edu/supportrisingscholars

FOR COLLEGE:

GET ON TRACK

HOW TO HELP

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—DONNY LARABEE, BA ’18, INTERIM PROGRAM DIRECTOR, RISING SCHOLARS, COLUMBIANA COUNTY CAMPUSES

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