

Program celebrates 40 years of supporting "ATYP-ical" young students

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KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Most sixth graders don't know what career they want to pursue when they get older. But **Stephanie George** knew she wanted more of a challenge in her schoolwork and college was her goal.

"I not only wanted a challenge, but an experience that would give me a diverse knowledge base and open the door to additional opportunities for the future," says George.

Now a graduate student in Western Michigan University's distinctive physician assistant (PA) program, George says WMU's precollege **Academically Talented Youth Program (ATYP)** and the Battle Creek Area Math and Science Center (BCAMSC) honed her study and work habits, preparing her not only for the rigors of college but her life beyond college and the workforce.

This academic year marks the 40th anniversary of ATYP (pronounced "A-Tip"), a program that began with 22 advanced middle school students from seven area school districts and offered them the chance to take part in high school-level math and language arts programs, regardless of their ability to pay. During the past four decades, the program has welcomed nearly 3,000 students from 60 school districts and has served as a model for similar programs developed across the state.

Each high school math and English class offered through ATYP is conducted once a week on WMU's Kalamazoo and Battle Creek campuses, taking the place of the middle



Instructor Becky Cooper reads "Macbeth," a tragedy by William Shakespeare, with her ATYP students.

school class the student would take at their home school. Students take the SAT or ACT test to qualify for ATYP.

"Besides being with others who are like-minded, students need that challenge in their school day to exercise their skills. When you're not being challenged, you're not growing and learning," says **Dr. Kelly Schultz**, director of ATYP.

The program expands instruction beyond its talented instructors, graders and tutors by also including guest artists and lecturers.

The students "like coming to campus for class each week —or coming to our online community space," says **Becky Cooper**, instructor with ATYP. "They appreciate working with people who respect them and want to see them succeed. And I have noticed, especially, how they treasure the friendships they make along the way."

There is a "sense of accomplishment that comes with teaching challenging material at an accelerated pace which is satisfying, but the relationships are truly what I enjoy the most," Cooper adds.

Marking a milestone



Middle school students wait to be picked up outside of Sangren Hall from their ATYP classes.

On **Wednesday, May 11**, those involved with the program in the past and present are invited to an anniversary celebration from **5:30 to 7 p.m.** in room 4110 at the College of Health and Human Services. [RSVPs are requested.](#) Light refreshments will be served.

In addition, the program announced the creation of the **Charles C. and Lynn L. Chen-Zhang Academically Talented Youth Program Personnel Endowment.**

It's the most recent contribution from

alumni and philanthropists **Charles Zhang** and **Lynn Chen-Zhang**, chair of the WMU Board of Trustees and WMU Foundation Board of Directors member. Both have generously donated to Western and the community over the years, including the creation of the [Zhang Legacy Collections Center.](#)

The endowment supports an ATYP coordinator position; the inaugural recipient will be Cooper, who first taught for ATYP in 1997 as a graduate student. From 2007-10, she was an assistant coordinator and became chair of the ATYP English program in 2010.

"I love being on this journey with them. I love seeing every 'ah-ha' moment, every smile of delight, every spark of scholarly fire in their faces. I appreciate how much they care about our explorations together and how much they care about each other and the world around them," says Cooper. "I think the students enjoy the sense of accomplishment that comes from mastering the skills they obtain through a program that challenges them."

Inspiring the future

A Battle Creek native, George studied a year of algebra and two years of English in ATYP. The experience was her first with Western but not her last. She was a Medallion Scholar and 2018 alumna with a bachelor's degree in biomedical sciences before returning to WMU for graduate school.

"I remember getting my Bronco ID card in middle school as an ATYP student and thought that was pretty cool," George says. "When I went on and became a Medallion Scholar, it was an amazing opportunity for me. Then for grad school, I knew I wanted to be at Western. Besides the program's prestigious reputation, you get to know all the PA professors and they know you. They are there to support you, and it's like a family."

George says this support at Western was apparent even as a middle school student in ATYP. The program "helps build connections with other kids in the community who have similar interests as you, so you're not going into it alone," she adds. "ATYP instructors helped you think more critically: not just cover what was being said but 'why?'"

She adds, "Being in ATYP prepared me for the future in so many ways including attending the BCAMSC, receiving a WMU Medallion scholarship as an undergraduate and, most importantly, refining my critical thinking skills to this day even as I enter the field of healthcare."

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