



Student Success Agents

Two OU graduates share passion for helping high school students achieve their dreams.

BY CHIP MINTY

When Michael Benko was in high school, college wasn't something he worried about very much. His grades were fine, and his parents would help with tuition and books when the time came. The path to higher education was not as clear for E.J. Carrion, whose parents never went to college.

When the fraternity brothers met at the University of Oklahoma, they got to know about their different pathways to Norman, and those differences planted a seed that would lead to a business success story of enterprise, technology, youth and edu-

cation. The OU graduates are now working to make college a reality for thousands of economically disadvantaged high school students who lack opportunity and support.

It has been a winding journey for the 29-year-old Texans, but with the formation of the Student Success Agency, a company they founded seven years ago, they have built a digital bridge that connects academic mentors to teens who need college counseling. For their innovative achievements and perseverance, the business partners were included on *Forbes'* 2018 "30 under 30" list of high-achieving entrepreneurs from the United States and Canada.

"What we're focusing on is helping young people identify their dreams, then applying strategies that lead to a post-secondary education," Carrion says.

For Carrion and Benko, Student Success Agency (SSA) is as much a cause as it is a business. As a first-generation college student, Carrion says his path to OU was difficult, the

steps weren't always clear and access to guidance counseling was limited.

Ultimately, Carrion earned a Bill Gates Millennium Scholarship, which gives high-achieving ethnic minority students access to higher education. The program provided leadership development opportunities and mentoring, as well as academic, financial and social support.

Shortly after graduating from OU with a public relations degree, Carrion decided it was time to give back, and the first person he called was his friend Benko, who was finishing his degree in entrepreneurship. They both still remember that first meeting in 2012, sitting at a table in McAlister's Deli on West Lindsey Street.

Carrion laid out his plan, and from the sound of it, Benko didn't require much convincing before he climbed on board. Just coming home from a mission trip to Africa, Benko understood the importance of service and he was



Michael Benko, left, and E.J. Carrion met at OU and went on to found Student Success Agency, a company that helps economically disadvantaged high school students fulfill their dream of attending college.

aware of his friend's difficult journey to college. He also shared Carrion's vision for assisting high schoolers who needed a helping hand.

"So many of the great success stories have a common denominator," Benko says. "They all had a mentor. The list includes Martin Luther King Jr. and Oprah, and not only did they have this person investing in their lives, but they also met this person at a young age."

The need is real, Benko says. Right now in America, there is only one guidance counselor for every 500 high school students and, on average, each high school student gets 38 minutes of a counselor's time as they try to make some of the most important decisions of their lives.

"Think about some of our biggest decisions," Benko says. "Think about choosing your spouse in 38 minutes, or even planning your next vacation in 38 minutes."

Carrion says academic advising is often found on the fringes of public education.

"If a student needs advising, they have to stay after school, miss lunch or skip class. That's the only time it's available," he says.

They developed SSA to help young people gain direct access to a mentor who is available any day, any time to answer questions or give advice.

Each student in the program is assigned an "agent" who can be reached by phone, text or email. They don't exchange personal contact information, however. All communication is routed through SSA's mobile and web software system.

"Agent" is a term SSA borrowed from professional sports to help illustrate the role they play in students' lives. Every professional athlete has an agent to help facilitate their careers. Each high school student participating in SSA has an agent to facilitate their path to higher education and a brighter future. SSA employs about 150 college students and young professionals who serve as agents, and they come from college campuses across the country, including OU. They are matched with high school students based on gender and personal interests, and they don't necessarily live near their students.

"Their hours are flexible," Carrion says. "They don't clock in, and they don't clock out. They are paid \$12.50 an hour, and it's the type of job people can put on their resumes. We try to

be the best part-time job for college students and young professionals, and some SSA agents move on to careers in education, social work and psychology."

SSA benefits school districts by supplementing in-house student advisory services with agents who ensure all participating students have access to adequate academic counseling and guidance services. Benko says on average, SSA students and their agents communicate 38 minutes a month — the same amount of attention the typical high school student receives from a counselor in a year. The agent-to-student ratio is 1 to 36, which is a significant improvement over in-house services, Carrion says.

Success was not an easy road, however. Carrion and Benko took part-time jobs to make ends meet in the beginning.

"We didn't know what we were doing from 2012 to 2014," Carrion says. "We were experimenting with a lot of different options."

Ultimately, they changed the company's brand from Student Success Academy to Student Success Agency, and they found their niche among school districts participating in the federal government's GEAR UP grant program.

Under GEAR UP, the government provides financial resources to help increase the number of low-income stu-

dents who are prepared to enter and be successful in college. However, many of these schools lack the advisory capacity needed to serve the higher number of students aspiring to go to college. Carrion and Benko discovered SSA's services were a good fit for many of those school districts. Most SSA students attend high schools that qualify for federal Title I assistance earmarked for low-income populations.

SSA was able to turn the corner, and is now enjoying rapid growth. In 2016, the company was working with only 15 school districts. That number increased to more than 50 in 2017, and its client list grew to 128 districts in 2018. They are currently serving 16,000 students in Oklahoma and 13 other states.

Monica Montano, a former SSA student, was encouraged by her agent to pursue her dream of studying film, despite a lack of support from her school.

"Because nobody else in school had this passion for broad-

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E.J. Carrion, left, and Michael Benko had many late nights and a few false starts before they found the right formula for their Student Success Agency.

cast journalism and film media, I felt like I was alone in it,” she says. “I didn’t really have confidence, but being in SSA helped me find the confidence I needed, and it made me realize that everyone has the potential to achieve success.”

Montano’s agent helped her obtain a college scholarship that allowed her to begin a film study program at Central New Mexico Community College.

In addition to facilitating communication between students and agents, SSA’s digital platform monitors conversations, and the company shares that information with school districts. For example, the system identifies dialogue relating to college, financial aid and tutoring. It also is sensitive to terms that raise safety concerns, such as depression, suicide, abuse and fighting.

“The platform is invisible, but it protects and ensures security,” Carrion says. “The power of what we do can identify the kids who need deeper attention to mental health issues.”

Even though they moved home to start their business in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, Carrion and Benko say they have maintained close ties with OU, where they have found strong support — even recruiting SSA’s first agents from their alma mater. Their primary mentor at the university has been Becky Barker, director of leadership development and volunteerism in OU Student Affairs.

Barker says she’s known Carrion and Benko since they were freshmen.

“E.J. was in and out all the time, and Michael was in and out later in his college career,” she says. “Our relationship has evolved from mentor to friends.”

“They are both just stellar young men,” she says. “Oh, my goodness, great young men, very disciplined and still great friends, even when they weren’t making money. They persevered. I’m just really proud of the way they stuck with it.”

They make a good team, Barker says. Benko is detail-oriented and takes more of a behind-the-scenes role, while Carrion has big-picture perspective and is out front. Barker asked them to stay in touch and to let her know how their business was going, so they stop by from time to time to talk to her about their challenges, she says. Then, they get back to work.

“It’s all they’ve ever done,” she says. “They had to figure out the business on their own, and they had to step up to the challenge with the technology.”

“It was never about the money,” Barker says. “They came to their enterprise with a pure heart. They just wanted to help young people.”

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