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Grant to Five Colleges to help diversify teacher ranks

By DUSTY CHRISTENSEN

@dustyc123

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AMHERST — Five Colleges Incorporated has won a \$133,000 grant to work on diversifying the region's teaching force by training paraprofessionals to become teachers.

The grant comes from the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts, and will focus on schools in Amherst, Holyoke, Northampton and Springfield. The money will be used to ensure that 20 black and Latino paraprofessionals receive their teaching licenses and begin working in Hampshire and Hampden County schools by 2020.

"It's both the 20, but it's bigger than the 20," said Five College's Marla Solomon, who is also coordinator of the Diverse Teacher Workforce Coalition that has been working on the program. "They will hopefully be only the beginning of our ability to shift things so it's not as hard for a paraprofessional to become a teacher."

The ranks of paraprofessionals, Solomon said, are more diverse of a group than teachers in all the districts included in the grant. For that reason, and because they are already committed to local students and schools, Five Colleges and the Diverse Teacher Workforce Coalition saw paraprofessionals as a great source for future teachers.

"They're people we would love to have as teachers, and are committed to our community already," said Amherst Superintendent Michael Morris. "We want our staff and faculty to as best we can mirror the students that we have working in front of us. We want to make sure every student has an adult that they can relate to."

The bulk of the funding will go to providing resources, tutoring and support to teachers as they move through teacher-prep programs and take the state's difficult teacher licensure test. Springfield and Mount Holyoke colleges will provide tuition discounts for the paraprofessionals.

"I'm thrilled, obviously, for our district, because it's really going to advance our work of diversifying our faculty," Morris said. "I'm just thrilled the Community Foundation and

other funders recognized the value of having a diverse faculty.”

Dusty Christensen can be reached at dchristensen@gazettenet.com.
