Room 2028 of the William J. Raggio building is bustling with activity.

A pot of chili warms on a Coleman camping stove, while Robert Edgington, director of the Dean’s Future Scholars Program, prepares lunch for about a dozen students who have gathered for study groups or to work independently on a row of computers lining the wall.

It’s a typical Tuesday morning at the University, nowhere near time for finals, but this group of students is firmly focused on the finish line. As Dean’s Future Scholars, they have been preparing for college since the sixth grade.

Created in 1999, the Dean’s Future Scholars Program is designed to encourage low-income, diverse and first-generation students to attend college. Each year, 50 sixth-grade students are selected by their teachers to become part of a College of Education mentoring program that will follow them for the next six years and into college. In 2010, 90 percent of the participating students graduated from Nevada.

“My family thinks it’s a really big deal that I will be the first generation to graduate,” says Libier Martinez, a freshman from Wooster High School in Reno who plans to pursue a degree in criminal justice. “They’re really proud of me and appreciate how the Dean’s Future Scholars program helped me see what a degree could do for me.”

Inspired by these success stories, Edgington ’75M.Ed. (school administration), ’78M.A. (counseling and educational psychology) and his wife, Patricia Miltenberger ’68 (psychology), ’85Ed.D. (educational administration/higher education), established a scholarship fund last year to specifically assist students in the Dean’s Future Scholars Program who have limited financial resources. Miltenberger was raised in Fallon, and is the first generation in her family to attend college. She is now a professor emeritus of higher education administration at Nevada.

“These kids have given me and my wife a lot of joy,” Edgington said. “This is our way of trying to give back to them.”

The couple has seen the students’ trials and triumphs firsthand, and recall the immense hurdles many of these youngsters face: family members in prison, gang activity, low-income neighborhoods.

Clearing the hurdle of college acceptance is just the first step. Without scholarship assistance, these students would be unable to pay for a college education.

The Robert Edgington and Patricia Miltenberger Scholarship Endowment aims to allow students to focus more fully on their work, helping them move closer to fulfilling their dreams of obtaining a college degree.

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“These kids are bright enough, but the problem is when they don’t have money, they start working two jobs, three jobs, start taking some classes at community college, then boom: they drop out,” Edgington said. “We’ve seen kids do that.”

The Dean’s Future Scholars Program also received generous support in 2010 from USA Funds, Nevadaworks, AT&T, NSHE, GEAR-UP, Lifestyle Homes Foundation, Phil and Jennifer Satre ’80M.Ed., and other donors. USA Funds, a nonprofit, Indianapolis-based student loan guarantor, has supported the program since 2002.

—Roseann Keegan