

DIVERSITY IN ACADEME

Program Helps Students Navigate the Unfamiliar Terrain of College

Family issues, racial taunting, and other challenges threaten to derail an education



Noah Berger

Gabriella Perez hugs Susana Pinzon at year's end at Saint Mary's College of California. The college's High Potential Program steered them both toward helpful campus resources.

By Ben Gose | MAY 18, 2015

As a freshman at Saint Mary's College of California, Gabriella Perez faced the usual challenges that first-generation students encounter during their first year on a college campus, and more: She worried that her parents would be deported to Mexico.

They had to hire a lawyer to avoid that fate, and her father lost his job, so Ms. Perez was forced to take out a pricey private loan to attend the college, located in the San Francisco Bay Area. And she says she endured racial taunts from other first-year students in her dormitory.

Diversity in Academe: First-Generation Students

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The cumulative stress led Ms. Perez to think about dropping out, but a long-running program that provides support to first-generation students helped her stay in college. The university's High Potential Program, which started in 1973, features a two-week summer institute to prepare first-generation students for college, a peer-advising program, and weekly classes during the school year on topics such as time management, study skills, and financial aid.

For Ms. Perez, whose father is a butcher and mother works for a federal food-assistance program, the informal aspects of the program made the difference. "The people in the program," she says, "they became the tools that were missing in my toolbox."

The director of the High Potential Program insisted that Ms. Perez meet with her weekly after Ms. Perez responded angrily to racial remarks made by others on her dormitory floor, and talked about dropping out of the college. The program's staff helped her get a job on campus, provided emotional support, assisted her in negotiations with the financial-aid office, and directed her toward classes where they thought she would succeed.

By her sophomore year, Ms. Perez was thriving — even though she was working three campus jobs to help pay tuition. She graduated last May, and will start a master's program in higher education and student affairs in the fall at the University of San Francisco.

Gloria Sosa, a co-director of the High Potential Program and an assistant professor of counseling at the 4,200-student institution, says first-generation students like Ms. Perez face greater challenges than their peers because they don't know how to successfully navigate at college, and their parents may take actions that hurt rather than help. The student may have aced classes at an undemanding high school, leaving parents confused — or even angry — if their son or daughter is labeled academically underprepared by Saint Mary's. Some parents may also expect their child to return home every weekend, leaving too little time for the student to study.

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"It's not that the parents are saying, 'Don't go to college,'" Ms. Sosa says. "They want the student to go to college. But they don't always understand the significant stressors that students face."

During the year, the peer mentors in the High Potential Program meet with new students as often as once a week and help steer newcomers toward resources they learned about during the summer program. "The peer mentor will say, 'You went to the career center during boot camp, but let's go there again,'" Ms. Sosa says. "It's really about keeping the dialogue going."

Freshman-to-sophomore retention rates for participants in the program have matched or exceeded retention rates for others at the college, sometimes by large percentages.

Ms. Sosa says the retention data show the program is working, and now she's trying to expand it. She has applied for a grant from the federal TRIO program that would be worth about \$1.5-million over five years. She'd like to expand the summer program from two weeks to four, begin placing students together with their

first-generation peers in blocks of two to three courses, and offer more support to students after the first year.

Ms. Perez, who served as a peer mentor for three years, would like to see the program help even more students. It currently enrolls 40 students for the full slate of services, including the summer program. Fifty more students receive help during the school year, including peer advising and access to the classes on topics like time management.

"I always joke with the directors that I'm going get my master's degree and come back and run the program and see how much money I can get to expand it," Ms. Perez says.

This article is part of:

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