

DIVERSITY IN ACADEME

Student Mentors Keep High-Schoolers Engaged Through College



Javier Garcia

Valerie Barrientos (left), a student in the U. of Texas at Brownsville's South Texas Engineering, Math and Science program, trains a mentor in how to work with high-school students.

By Katherine Mangan | MAY 18, 2015

Valerie Barrientos's first experience with college was in a high-school classroom, where student mentors from the University of Texas at Brownsville made science fun.

Her favorite activity was the anatomy contest, in which she and other students raced to see how quickly they could pull internal organs from a mannequin, label them, and stuff them back in. Field trips to a cloud forest in Mexico and an astronomy park in West Texas were interspersed with science experiments and snippets of insight into college life.

Diversity in Academe: First-Generation Students

Check out the rest of our special report on efforts to help this growing group of students succeed.

Her mentors with the university's South Texas Engineering, Math and Science program, or STEMS, explained what it would take to get there.

"I didn't know anything about applying to college, that you had to take the ACT or the SAT and that you had to prepare for it," says the 23-year-old senior from La Feria, Tex., outside Brownsville. "My parents couldn't tell me because they didn't know."

The closest either of Ms. Barrientos's parents came to getting a college degree was when her father obtained a certificate in automotive maintenance. She wanted to study medicine, and the university's 26-year-old STEMS program cracked open a door into that world. Now she's a mentor with the program, which sends Brownsville students into 44 low-income schools across the Rio Grande Valley to spark interest in higher education through hands-on science.

While other colleges are casting far and wide to reel in talented first-generation students, Brownsville, which is located on the Mexican border in one of the nation's poorest communities, recruits locally.

Some 77 percent of its entering students have parents who didn't graduate from college. For the student body as a whole, the percentage drops to 56 percent of the 7,500 students enrolled full time. Some of those students transfer to other colleges, but many others drop out.

You won't find many clubs or seminars there specifically designated for first-generation students. Because they represent the overwhelming majority of incoming students, intensive support programs are open to everyone. It would also be hard to reserve blocks of time for first-generation students exclusively to get together, administrators say.

While many first-generation students at private colleges receive scholarships and attend full time, the students at Brownsville are more likely to be juggling work and family responsibilities, says Javier Martinez, interim provost and vice president for academic affairs.

In close-knit Hispanic communities, he says, "their priorities are family, work, and school," in that order. That's the reality administrators will continue to face as the university merges with the University of Texas-Pan American and adds a new medical school this August. It will be known as the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley.

To help keep students enrolled, nearly all of the sections of courses with high dropout rates — including first-year English, math, and history — have embedded tutors who meet right after class with students to be sure they understand the material. Programs like STEMS, says Ms. Barrientos, show students like her that "there's a whole world out there" and that college holds the key.

This article is part of:

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