

Neto's Tucson: UA mentors helping high school students-to-be

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A trio of high school freshmen had followed recent UA grad Tabitha Venezia onto the campus Mall Thursday morning when she gave a map to one of them.

"So tell us, where are we going?" she asked Joseph Green, a strapping 14-year-old bound for Sunnyside High School.

While the students were off to the Nugent Building, Venezia's question was about something greater.

Where are the students going in their young academic lives?

Helping the soon-to-be high school students answer that and related questions was a weeklong camp called Passport to High School, sponsored by the University of Arizona's College of Education.

During four sessions last month, about 60 high-school-age teens and four mentor students spent the day on campus meeting professors, touring buildings, asking questions about financial aid and thinking ahead. Not just thinking about college but thinking about what they need to do during high school to prepare for college.

"This has helped me figure out high school is very important," said Green, who attended Challenger Middle School.

Sara Chavarria, director of Education Outreach in the Education College, initiated Passport to High School summer camps four years ago. The Tohono O'odham Nation gave the college \$10,000 to finance the program this summer, Chavarria said.

She wanted to create an alternative to the high school summer camps oriented toward a single subject: medicine, engineering, pharmacy, computers. She wanted a broader program that would help students create a productive plan for high school.

But she had a greater personal reason to create the program. She designed it for high school students whose parents did not attend college.

"I was a first-generation college student," said Chavarria, a native of Laredo, Texas.

Her parents, while supportive of furthering her education, "didn't have a clue" what it was like in college, she said.

Eneida Flores, 14, who moves from Wakefield Middle School to Pueblo High School, will be a first-generation college student. She learned that she will need to "bring along" her parents to help them understand what it will require for her to get in and stay in

college. During the Passport program, parents are invited to hear about financial-aid options and university life.

With few college role models, the Passport students can look to mentors like Venezia, who told her group that she came from a low-income family in California and initially struggled at the UA. Her biggest tip to the high school students was "don't be afraid to ask for help."

"All the straight-A students ask for help," she said.

Another role model was Deanna Wilhalme, a fourth-grade teacher at Sycamore Elementary in the Vail School District. She helped design the program and served as the groups' principal teacher. She could relate to the students because she also was a first-generation college student.

"I had to do a lot on my own," Wilhalme said.

But Passport students learned that while high school and college will be challenging, they will get support from their high school teachers and counselors as well as the UA's student-support system.

The Passport program gave the future college students vital information but also something else important to success, said Alexa Rodriguez, 14, who will be a Cholla High School Charger this fall.

"It gives you more motivation," she said.

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