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PROUD TO BE FIRST

How advisers can encourage and prepare
first-generation college students

BY JIM PATERSON

Aaron Lozano is very familiar with the challenges faced by students who are the first in their families to go to college—especially those from other cultures where college attendance is less of a fixture than it is in the United States. That familiarity with the issue is born from personal experience.

Today, Lozano is a journalism teacher and student council adviser at Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Memorial Early College High School in Alamo, TX—located on the Texas border with Mexico—where many students are the first in their families to graduate from high school. In fact, for many, high school is the first opportunity anyone has taken to talk to them seriously about college.

Lozano's own family traveled around the country for years as migrant workers when he was young, then settled in Alamo where he attended high school just a few miles from where he now teaches. He went on to college and into the field of education like two of his four older siblings.

He says experiences as a “first-gen” student—and now working with them—have shown him there are several ways that schools and leadership groups can play a role in helping eligible students move on to college when it hasn't been part of their family's experience.

Follow these tips for helping first-generation students with the college exploration and application process:

Start early. There are a number of excellent online resources where students can explore careers and colleges, and even middle level schools are beginning to take trips to nearby colleges to explore campuses and get students excited about their prospects—especially those students with limited exposure to college.

Include families. Whether you are holding an event for a leadership group, a class, or the whole school, involving parents is key—especially parents who have not had much exposure to college. A college information night sponsored by your students might be a good way for them to combine a service project and a learning experience.

Save, then post. General information about college often remains the same, and schools sometimes keep a library of information online and solicit additional tips from others—like students who attend a particular college or parents and staff members who have enrolled at the same schools that students are considering. Good fundamental information can be helpful for families new to the college experience, and they should be directed to it early and often.

Go local. Within your own school, staff members often have experiences that can be helpful for students or families, and alumni can be some of the best spokespersons, offering very current information from a student's perspective. School staff also are most likely to get another student's attention with warnings or tips that wouldn't be heeded from another adult, like a parent.

Support, but aim high. It is important to provide extra support to any student where needed, and sometimes it may be best to gather information about concerns with a survey or questionnaire. But don't make assumptions about the interests, ability, or engagement of students because their knowledge or enthusiasm seems to be lacking. It may be that with the right information or encouragement, they will be some of the best prospects.

"I find that most first-generation college students, like myself, need a little more patience and exposure with the college application and exploration process," Lozano says. "We were not raised within a college-going culture. Our parents or grandparents were never part of an alumni group or have deep-rooted ties to an alma mater. It's unexplored territory."

That assistance can range from helping with nettlesome financial aid forms or understanding various college features to simply normalizing the college experience. But he and others who work with these students also note that often the students themselves are driven to get more advanced education, and they should not be underestimated.

"These students are raised with the understanding that a postsecondary high school degree will not only help them realize

their individual American dream, but achieve advancement for their entire family's American dream," he says. "Their drive for college success is not just an aspirational educational goal; it's a drive to solidify their family's sacrifice."

Lozano also says given that motivation—and the resourcefulness and grit that often grows out of the experience of being new to this country—these students succeed best when the assistance is well conceived and specific to the individual student's needs.

Rachel Fishman, a senior policy analyst who has studied the issue for New America (formerly the New America Foundation) in Washington, D.C., says high school teachers and advisers should refrain from generalizing students.

"You can't really make assumptions about first-generation students," she says. "By assuming too much, you can discount a strength or overlook an individual need. Each of these students is very different."

OFFER SOME SIMPLE HELP

Advisers can begin helping by talking about their own college experience and answering any questions or addressing fears their students may have.

"It's critical that we actively speak and communicate our own college-going experiences with these students," Lozano says. "For most of them, it's the only stories they will hear about a postsecondary education."

Advisers and school leaders can also direct them to the proper resources to get assistance—their own school, online, or colleges they may be interested in attending. Students should understand, Fishman says, that colleges may be suffering from a slump in enrollment and are seeking qualified minority students, so they should be realistic, but set their sights high.

Some leadership groups find that a way to better educate their own members and help other students in their school gain a greater understanding of the college exploration and application process is to put them to work. Student council groups can encourage students to help organize a college fair, a campus visit, or a workshop on the application or financial aid process. Organizing a group activity with college preparation as a theme embeds the information with the members and their families and spreads the information to others in their school who need it.

"We do as much as we can for these students," says Amber Cowgill, a leadership teacher at David Douglas High School in Portland, OR, a school with a growing number of immigrant students. "First-generation kids are unable to access the resources at home and have many parents who don't even know where to start, let alone speak English."

She explains to students how leadership skills can help them as they apply to college and when they get to campus, where the very different social experience for a first-generation student can sometimes cause them to struggle or drop out.

PREPARING FOR COLLEGE LIFE

Alecea Standlee, a sociology professor at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, PA, says the college experience—which can be so exciting and attractive to some students—can be intimidating to those for whom it is new.

“High school staff members and administrators do a good job of preparing students academically, but often don’t prepare first-gen students for the cultural expectations of college,” she says. “Students who are first generation are often working class and are thus unprepared for the middle- and upper-class norms of college.”

Standlee says advisers might survey students to find out what questions or concerns they or their families have and provide clear, fundamental information—and encourage them to seek assistance.

“Often they don’t know how to ask for help, how to utilize institutional resources, or manage the difficult schedule for college applications,” she says, and suggests that leadership teachers and advisers should provide hands-on assistance regarding the process and structures to provide support for students and families.

Angela Conley, a counselor with a special program in Houston schools that helps underserved, high-performing students get to college, says the cost of college and financial aid options are often a stumbling block because they are confusing, even for families more accustomed to the process.

Parents, she says, may be ashamed of their income levels or worried about whether their students will have enough for expenses beyond what scholarships or “free college” programs provide. They may not understand that the information will be confidential, and therefore they’re concerned about their information being compromised, especially if they are undocumented, she notes.

A SUCCESS STORY

Jenny Rodriguez, a student at Orange High School in Orange, NJ, navigated those resources successfully. In fact, she was named the winner of the National Honor Society (NHS) Scholarship during the 2017–18 school year, selected from among 15,000 applicants for the prestigious award.

NHS granted more than \$1.5 million in scholarships to NHS member students in the 2017–18 school year. Approximately 475 national semifinalists received a \$2,850 scholarship, then 24 national finalists were awarded \$5,150. From that group, Rodriguez was chosen to receive the top award of \$22,650.

“I believe that there is a danger in underestimating the ability of first-gen students. Needing assistance should not be equated to not being capable of achieving greatness.” –JENNY RODRIGUEZ, 2018 NHS SCHOLARSHIP NATIONAL WINNER

Rodriguez, a first-generation student who has now completed her freshman year at American University, continually helped classmates and was active in a number of organizations, says Marcey Thomas, NHS adviser for Orange High School. Rodriguez was vice president of the school’s NHS chapter, served as a key leader in a variety of service projects, and worked as a youth group leader, all while maintaining an excellent GPA.

“There were long days that stretched into even longer evenings of service and activities. I knew that I could count on Jenny’s creativity, empathy, and integrity,” Thomas says, ticking off the many major projects she led and small ways she helped classmates, noting that her involvement in NHS allowed her to utilize and get credit for those skills.

Rodriguez says as she applied to college, she needed help with “the complexities of financial aid” and “learning how to ask for help from others without the worry of judgment.”

“My parents did not finish college and they are not aware of the college process,” she says. “Because of this, I looked for support from others who did know and who were able to guide me through this long process.”

However, Rodriguez, who has documented her experience in national publications, thinks that first-generation students also should be recognized for their abilities.

“I believe that there is a danger in underestimating the ability of first-gen students. Needing assistance should not be equated to not being capable of achieving greatness,” she says. “I have seen how underestimating some students has led to adults having lower expectations, which can also lead to the student lowering their expectations of themselves.”

She said that, for her, it was important to have a strong belief in her own abilities.

“The most important thing is to remember that being first-generation does not mean that we are unable to follow in the footsteps of others, but that we have the challenge of creating our own for the first time.” •

Jim Paterson is a writer based in Lewes, DE.