

Event Tailors College Prep Advice to Hispanic Teenagers

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Wilberg Rivera raised his hand again and again.

Do you have to be poor to qualify for grants, he asked, and is it true that you won't get docked points if your facts are wrong in your SAT writing sample? Where, he wanted to know, is Haverford College?

Wilberg, 16, said his construction-worker dad persuaded him to go to college by dragging him to a work site a few years back. But when it comes to applying, he said, his parents – Salvadoran immigrants who never studied beyond high school – are at a loss.

Hence Wilberg's many questions, which he asked yesterday at Marymount University in Arlington. Wilberg, a rising junior at Woodbridge's Gar-Field Senior High School, was there with about 120 other Latino high-schoolers from the Washington region for the Hispanic Youth Symposium.

The goal of the three-day retreat, organizers said, is to motivate the teenagers to attend and finish college. The students, all nominated by school officials, include star scholars and those with average grades but blossoming potential. Many would be the first in their families to finish high school, let alone attend college. Many are poor.

At the symposium, sponsored by the Hispanic College Fund, students have competed for scholarships, brainstormed solutions to gang violence and sampled dorm food. But for students such as Wilberg, crucial information came during sessions on the basics of paying for college, penning application essays and fathoming the SATs.

Some teenagers in the affluent Washington suburbs can count on college-crazed parents to hire writing coaches and line up resume-boosting summer internships, but education observers say students who are immigrants or children of immigrants often go it alone.

Studies show that many Latino parents – many of them immigrants with low incomes, modest educations and little familiarity with the American system of higher education – know nothing about financial aid and are bewildered by the college application process.

“There’s a lack of legacy,” said Jeffrey Vargas, a federal worker who helped run the event. And, he said, a lack of money: “No one’s paying the X amount of dollars” for test-prep classes.

The symposium ends today. Another three-day program begins next week in Baltimore. A third symposium will be launched in Fresno, Calif., in August.

Yesterday, students were told the difference between grants and scholarships, were instructed to take a stab at SAT questions if they could eliminate at least one answer and were urged to keep a journal about essay topics.

In one seminar of about 14 students, all but one raised their hands when asked whether they worry about paying for college. In each session, the college dream was evident.

“What’s something that’s important to you?” asked Amanda Calderon, a Brown University admissions counselor, attempting to start a discussion on possible essay topics.

“Going to college,” whispered a girl in a green hooded T-shirt.

“Why?” Calderon asked.

“First generation,” the girl said.

In the cafeteria at lunchtime, Eugene Chigna, a gregarious rising senior who admits to having racked up “horrible grades” at Arlington’s Washington-Lee High School, said school mentors helped him select his dream school: Sarah Lawrence College, an institution he finds attractive for its placement “in the middle of nowhere” but within reach of Manhattan. The college is just north of New York.

His parents, Guatemalan immigrants who never set foot in a college classroom, are rooting from the sidelines, he said.

“The whole system, the whole scholarships, the whole funding, the grants is sort of foreign to them,” said Eugene, 17.

That can make it a bit overwhelming for students. Adriana Flores, 15, looked woozy after a seminar titled “Strategic Application Process” (which, according to

two admissions counselors leading it, involves shooting for several “likely,” “target” and “difficult” prospects) and headed for a session on the SAT.

“I don’t know what to expect from it,” said Adriana, a rising sophomore at Parkdale High School in Riverdale, of the test. Then there is the application essay, she said, shaking her head. “You have to know what you’re going to write about.”

Adriana said her mom, a Salvadoran immigrant who works long hours at a factory, has told Adriana she will have to figure out the college thing on her own.

During the SAT seminar, a test-prep teacher noted that the SAT takes about five hours, prompting Adriana to smack her palm to her head. Afterward, the long-haired teenager said that the seminar eased her worries a bit. She said she has law school ambitions, but at mention of the LSAT, she shook her head.

“I don’t know what that is yet,” Adriana said. “But I’ll learn.”