

Mentors help students on progression to college life

A team of 60 mentors from The Claremont Colleges is working with 60 seniors from Fontana High School to help the high school students successfully transition to the college level.

The effort is part of the Strive for College Collaborative—a program developed in 2006 by Strive For College CEO Michael Carter during his freshman year at Washington University in St. Louis designed to guide low-income students from the prep to collegiate level. The organization currently has chapters at colleges and universities throughout the nation, including the Claremont Colleges.

“Initially, we thought that we were going to have 20 mentors serving about 20-30 students at Fontana High School but this became big with 60 mentors from the Claremont Colleges and we’re regularly going to Fontana High and working with 60 seniors there,” said Pomona College junior Walter Rivera, director of Strive For College’s Claremont chapter. “We’re working with them on the college application process. We started with telling them about the differences between a college and a university, private and public universities and what is a liberal arts college.”

Mr. Carter began Strive for College because of the educational inequities he saw when he transferred from a private school to

a public school during his junior year in high school. He was surprised to see his peers—some of whom had higher grades than he did—not have the guidance to apply for colleges and universities that matched their potential.

“I grew up in a blue collar, Mexican American household and my grandfather would tell me I didn’t know how lucky I was,” Mr. Carter said. “I would tell him that everybody had equal opportunity and he would tell me ‘you’re being a moron.’ Then after I transferred to a public school, I saw how many students were placed under one counselor. And I also saw how many students had the GPA to go college but they had parents who worked 2 jobs, didn’t have a family member who ever attended college or not enough guidance from a counselor.”

What Mr. Carter saw as an “educational gap” led him to begin Strive for College when he first attended college. Within 2 years, he helped 24 of 27 graduating seniors at Eskridge High School in Wellston, Missouri enroll in a college or university. Now the organization has 15 chapters nationwide.

According to Mr. Carter, one of the successful traits of the program is that the mentors work with students who are only a few years younger.

“The magic of Strive For College is taking the kids that just went through the college application process and helping kids that are just a little bit younger than them,” Mr. Carter said. “I honestly believe that we can solve this problem. Getting these students into college is the greatest investment

we could make.”

With the elimination of all of the Fontana Unified School District’s counselors due to budget cuts, Mr. Rivera and his team are bridging the gap for the 60 Fontana High seniors they currently mentor.

The Claremont Colleges representatives visit Fontana High 4 times a week for one hour visits.

“Next year, we would like to open this up to the entire senior class at Fontana High School,” Mr. Rivera said. “We worked with students in AP Calculus and we were seeing that because there were no school counselors, you had students with 4.7 GPAs thinking of just going to a community college. There’s nothing wrong with a community college but these students could get

into a more prestigious school. So we encourage them and show them how to apply to a 4-year school and help match them with the best schools they can possibly get into.”

Fontana High School Principal Lisa Romero said the feedback from her students has been positive.

“We’re so happy to have them here for our kids,” she said. “They come in and work with the students one-on-one. They have an entire curriculum that they’re working through. They’re motivational, inspirational and work so well with the kids. I think it’s great to have active college students coming to talk to students who are just a few years younger than they are.”

—Landus Rigsby

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