College 101 for Parents
Helping moms and dads help their first-generation students succeed

By Kelly Field | FEBRUARY 05, 2017

PHOENIX

The first reaction Denny Gutierrez had when his mom said he had to join her for eight weeks of college-prep classes this past fall was "but I have soccer games Wednesday nights."

"I thought it was going to be a waste of time," the high-school freshman recalled at his graduation from Arizona State University's American Dream Academy, in December. "I never thought my mother could understand me."

But after the first class, Mr. Gutierrez and his mother were already communicating better, he said. They stopped arguing over his low grades and started working together to improve them.

These days, his mom, Gisela Avalos, sits with him when he reads and does homework. She said she listens more than she used to. And she understands now the steps that it will take to get him through high school and into college.

"Our dream has been for him to go to college," said Ms. Avalos, who moved to the United States from Mexico in 1994 and owns a window-tinting business. If he makes it through, he will be the first in his family to earn a degree.

Ms. Avalos is among the more than 35,000 parents who have graduated from ASU’s American Dream Academy over the past decade. The program serves two purposes: to give parents of first-generation students like Mr. Gutierrez the information and confidence they need to help their children succeed in school, and to sell Arizona State to communities that may be less familiar with the university.
Research shows that family engagement is critical to student success in school and college. Students who have involved, supportive parents are more motivated, less likely to miss class, and more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college.

Yet surveys also show that many parents of first-generation students aren’t sure what it takes to be effective partners and advocates for their children.

Most college-access programs focus on the student, educating the child as a way to compensate for gaps in the parents’ knowledge. The programs may offer a workshop or two on applying to college, or on applying for financial aid, but they rarely involve parents in substantive ways, said William G. Tierney, a University of Southern California professor who has studied parent engagement.

"Programs frequently give lip service to working with parents, but with limited budgets the vast majority have to focus on direct services to students," Mr. Tierney said.

That is slowly starting to change, as more colleges and nonprofit groups offer multiweek seminars, savings accounts, and scholarships aimed at getting more parents of first-generation students involved in their children’s education.

The American Dream Academy was in 74 elementary and secondary schools in Phoenix and Tucson in 2016. All the schools that offer the program are Title I institutions, meaning that at least 40 percent of their students are low income. More than 85 percent of the parent participants speak only Spanish. For many of the parents who complete the course, it will be their first time graduating from anything.

That was the case for Roberto Esqueda Hernández and his wife, Maria López de Esqueda, who graduated from the program with Ms. Avalos and her son this winter. The couple grew up in the Mexican countryside, and left school after the fourth grade to work on their families’ ranches. Mr. Hernández, who spoke at the graduation ceremony, said that before he enrolled, he assumed he and his wife wouldn’t be able to afford college for their children.

"To be honest, I always thought that the middle class had no chance of a higher education," he told the audience at Maryvale High School, "that the American dream was to slave like a mule in this country, trying to learn a trade."

The classes, he continued, taught him "that if some of us couldn’t or didn’t do it, our children can."

The early evidence from programs like the American Dream Academy is encouraging. Parents who attend multiweek seminars like ASU’s show marked improvements in their awareness of how to help their children succeed in school, as well as how to plan for sending them to college and communicate with teachers and administrators. Even more encouraging: Their children are enrolling in college at much higher rates than are their peers.

It’s harder to say if such efforts are having an effect on college-graduation rates. Most of the parent-oriented programs don’t track students through college, and those that do haven’t been around long enough to claim many graduates.

Surveys do show that a majority of low-income and minority parents want their kids to attend college. But such students remain underrepresented in higher education, especially at four-year institutions.

In part, that’s because parents of first-generation students tend to overestimate how much college costs, and assume, like Mr. Hernández did, that it is financially impossible. At the same time, they’re often uncertain how to advocate for their kids or support their schooling.
Alejandro Perilla, director of ASU’s Center for Community Development and Civil Rights, says that nearly all the parents who take part in the academy “are 100 percent committed to their children’s education.” When he asks parents, “Who is your child’s first and most important teacher?” they almost invariably say they are. But when he asks, “Do you know how to get your child to college?” most will confess they don’t.

“They’ll say, ‘I don’t know what to do with my children,’” he said. “They seem lost.”

The American Dream Academy, which offers its two-hour morning and evening classes in both Spanish and English, aims to bridge that gap. It teaches parents how to navigate the educational system, demystifying standards, assessments, and educational tracks, and to negotiate the often intimidating process of applying for college and student aid. It offers tips on communicating with teachers, counselors, and principals, and shows parents how to create a supportive home learning environment and build their child’s self-esteem.

In the process, the program tries to get parents to see themselves as partners with their child’s school, rather than beneficiaries — or victims — of it, and to get them to plan for their children’s future.

That can be a significant shift for the program’s mostly Hispanic immigrants, many of whom expect the school to educate their children and can’t think too far beyond the next rent payment, said Mr. Perilla.

“This is not a community that plans a lot,” he said. “We’re changing the conversation from, I trust you, school, to do everything for my child, to, Let’s begin to work together.”

The academy grew out of the Parent Institute for Quality Education, a nonprofit that started offering nine-week parent seminars in San Diego 30 years ago. The program, which gets funds from California State University, now operates in 36 out of 58 counties in California and has been copied by 11 states.

But the first place to which it was exported was Arizona State University, in 2006. Even today the academy remains the only university-run replica, and the only one that actively promotes a particular college.

The educational materials are branded with the ASU logo, and “there is an expectation that your child will consider ASU,” Mr. Perilla said.

At the high-school graduation ceremony, students receive mock Arizona State student-ID cards, and parents are given a certificate granting their children conditional admission to the university (assuming they meet academic requirements). Parent graduates also get two nails: one on which to hang their certificate, and one to leave empty, awaiting their child’s college diploma.

The awards are symbolic and a bit hokey. Still, Mr. Perilla said, they send an important message to the immigrant community that the academy serves: “We want your kid.”

In a 2012 national survey of outreach programs, two-thirds of respondents said their programs had a parent component. Most common were college-awareness workshops and financial-aid counseling, which were offered by more than half of those programs. A little over a third of programs offered campus visits and tours.

But parent participation was mandatory in only 20 percent of the programs that included them, according to the survey, by the Educational Policy Institute.
"Most programs start with the student, and then reach out to the parent," said Deborah Santiago, vice president for policy at Excelencia in Education, which promotes education policies and institutional practices that support Latino academic achievement. She worries that the programs’ frequent focus on financial aid "sends the message to parents that their primary role is to pay for college," not to prepare for it.

Researchers have a few theories about why programs haven’t made priorities of parents, but most of them come down to resources and this: Parents of first-generation students are busy. Students are a captive audience, but their parents often work unpredictable hours or hold several jobs, making it hard for them to attend a weekly workshop. Even those with regular routines may struggle to find child care during the sessions.

Recognizing that challenge, several of the more successful programs have created incentives to reward parental participation. The Family Development Institute, part of the University of Southern California’s college-prep program for low-income kids in the neighborhoods around the university, requires parents to attend at least 80 percent of its seminars for their children to be eligible for a full ride. Alamo Colleges, in Texas, which offers $1,000 scholarships to parents of young children through a partnership with the League of United Latin American Citizens, takes that approach a step further: making the child’s scholarship conditional on the parent’s completing his or her credential.

Helen Vera, director of San Antonio College’s Services for Women and Non-Traditional Students, said the child scholarship helps the five Alamo Colleges retain their parent students, who are striving toward undergraduate degrees or certificates.

"It keeps them going," she said. "They know, ‘I’m doing this for my child.’"

Inversant, a Boston-based nonprofit that provides matched savings accounts and monthly seminars for savers, has experimented with a variety of incentives to encourage parent involvement, including raffles at its seminars and bonuses for regular savers. Parents don’t have to save a lot to receive the bonus; they just have to be consistent. Inversant raises the money for the matching and bonuses from corporate and private donors.

"The savings is merely a reinforcement of commitment," said Charles F. Desmond, chief executive of Inversant. "It shows how committed I am to this long-term expectation that my kid will go to college."

Yet even with these efforts, many programs struggle to attract and retain parents. Fewer than half of the parent recipients of Alamo Colleges’ scholarships over the past 20 years have earned their college credential and secured a two-year scholarship for their child (some of the parents are still in college). And Bob Hildreth, Inversant’s founder, said his group, which has opened 1,000 savings accounts in eight years, has "dealt with recruitment issues and disappointments" from the start.

"I thought by offering to double their money, people would be running across the street to us," he said. "It just isn’t so."

One thing that has helped: college-sponsored scholarships, or as Mr. Hildreth puts it, "the big win." Not everyone will hit the jackpot, but the prospect of a full ride to one of five Boston-area colleges serves as a potent recruitment tool, and encourages families to stick with the savings and the seminars.

The American Dream Academy doesn’t offer parents any financial incentives, but it does offer modest bonuses — $40 or so — to instructors who graduate at least 80 percent of their participants. The Parent Institute for Quality Education provides instructors with a $600 stipend upfront, but docks it if the instructors lose more than 30 percent of their participants (they rarely do).

Both programs also depend on the power of personal testimony and peer pressure, using graduates as recruiters, and calling parents before each class to remind them to attend. PIQE’s completion rate is above 90 percent, and the Academy’s hovers around 80 percent.

In its first semester, in the fall of 2006, the Academy graduated 251 parents from two schools; this past fall, it graduated 1,268 parents from 32 elementary, middle, and high schools. It also graduated 476 high-schoolers this past fall.
ack at Maryvale High School in December, Marcela Lopez, assistant director for the Academy and a "proud Sun Devil" herself, took photos of the graduates. She showed them how to make the pitchfork sign, ring finger to thumb, then led them in a chant.

"Now, cinco veces, ASU," she said.

"ASU, ASU, ASU, ASU, ASU," the students cheered, hands raised.

In the years from 2007 to 2014, 80 percent of the children of graduates who were seniors in high school went on to college — twice the rate of Arizona students generally. A quarter of the students went to ASU, while half enrolled in colleges in the Maricopa Community College District. The remainder went to technical programs, the military, and out-of-state colleges.

Denny Gutierrez, who wants to study science and engineering, said he’s considering Arizona State, Louisiana State University, or the University of Oregon.

In his graduation speech, he said that the class "should be required so everyone can have this connection with their parents."

Mr. Hernández and Ms. Esqueda, who never even made it to middle school, said they wanted to give their youngest daughter, Alondra, the opportunities they couldn’t give their older children.

"We didn’t know how to help them," Ms. Esqueda said, in an interview after the ceremony. "They didn’t go to college."

"College seems more real now," added Mr. Hernández. "I never thought it would be possible, but now I think differently."

Kelly Field is a senior reporter covering federal higher-education policy. Contact her at kelly.field@chronicle.com. Or follow her on Twitter @kfieldCHE.

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