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# A Degree in Every Home

Is it easy to change your major? Do you get homesick? How do you cope with stress from school? What's harder: high school AP classes or college? The emphatic answer to that final inquiry: "College."

And they ought to know.

The unanimous reply came from a panel of UC Santa Barbara students, assembled to offer insight to 63 visiting high schoolers curious about university life and how to succeed at UCSB. The formers' perspective was especially relatable to the latter given their one big commonality: The future and current collegians all hail from the city of Pico Rivera.

"Time management is huge," UCSB student Vanessa Gomez advised the group from El Rancho High School, her own alma mater. "Being on your own is a big adjustment, because there is no one here telling you every day, 'You have to get up and do this.' You want to be successful, it's all on you."

The pairing, the panel and the entire daylong visit by the younger students, all hailing from El Rancho High School, were a joint effort of UCSB and the nonprofit Generation 1st Degree-Pico Rivera (G1DPR). The educational outreach organization provides scholarships, support services and university preparedness programs in an effort to grow the number of college-eligible Hispanic students in the small community east of Los Angeles.

The ultimate goal, according to G1DPR co-founder and president Jacki Cisneros: a college degree in every Pico Rivera home.

“I’m from Pico Rivera, my mom was an educator there — first as a teacher and later as a principal — my grandfather was the mayor of Pico Rivera. It’s where I grew up,” said Cisneros, who launched and leads G1DPR with her husband, Gilbert Cisneros. The couple started the nonprofit, and the eponymous Gilbert and Jacki Cisneros Foundation, shortly after winning the lottery in 2010 and pledging immediately to use their good fortune for philanthropy.

“I’ve been part of Pico Rivera and its school district my whole life, so when we started our foundation and started creating scholarship opportunities, we knew this was where we wanted to focus our efforts to get more Latinos into college,” Jacki Cisneros added. “Only about 11 percent of high school graduates in Pico Rivera have a college degree. We know that if one person in the household has a degree, more will follow. If the older brother gets one, the younger siblings are more likely to get one, and so on. And we are seeing that trend reflected in our efforts, with brothers and sisters who have gone through the program.”

Campus visits are a key part of G1DPR’s efforts, which are aimed not only at inspiring more Pico Rivera Latinos to pursue college but also getting them into the most selective universities. That includes UCSB.

Designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) by the Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities, UCSB is the only HSI that is also a member of the prestigious Association of American Universities. The campus was among the institutions examined in a recent report, “From Selectivity to Success: Latinos at Selective Institutions,” conducted by Excelencia in Education with funding from the Cisneros Foundation.

“We want our students to go to the best colleges and universities available,” said Gilbert Cisneros. “And when you look at selective universities, they are graduating Latinos and other minorities in very high numbers. We thought it was important to get that information on paper. UCSB has been very successful in graduation rates overall and in graduating Latino students.

“It all goes back to wanting our students to go to an environment that supports education, has a history of good graduation rates for Latino students, and has a mechanism to support and work with Latino students and help them along the way,

to ensure they are successful not just in enrolling in college but in graduating," he added. "For those reasons and because it is a top selective university, UCSB should be a school that students look at."

And look they did.

During their recent visit to UCSB, the university-aiming El Rancho students toured the campus from end to end, going inside academic buildings and lecture halls, the UCSB Library, residential and dining facilities, the University Center and the Student Resource Building, among others. Throughout, they heard directly from current UCSB students about everything from class loads and undergraduate research opportunities to study abroad programs, student organizations and, of course, beach time.

"I didn't expect there to be so many bikes. I didn't expect everything to move so fast," said Juan Gonzalez, an El Rancho senior and aspiring engineering major who made the trip. "I really like the campus. I'm really looking forward to hopefully trying to get into the school and attending. I look forward to getting out of my comfort zone, getting out of LA, going somewhere else and just being around all this diversity."

His mother, Hilda Villaseñor, will be rooting for him. She was along for the UCSB tour, too, at the invitation of G1DPR, which for the first time invited parents to join a campus visit.

"When kids are sitting there looking at acceptance letters, parents are the most influential in helping their children decide where to go," Jacki Cisneros said. "Many being first-generation students, their parents don't have a reference point. They don't know what's on that campus, what's at a university, what it takes. Where will their child eat? Will their children be safe?

"When those things are answered, they come away with a sense of peace of mind about sending their child to that school," she continued. "This component for us is really important —educating parents and inviting them to be a part of the process. If they don't have a reference point, it's hard to feel comfortable sending their child away to somewhere that is ultimately foreign to them. Having the parents here on campus and seeing UCSB gives them a better understanding of the university and the opportunities. If their child gets accepted and wants to come here, the probability is higher because the parents have been to UCSB and seen it."

That’s exactly right, Villaseñor agreed after touring UCSB alongside her son.

“My son is getting ready to leave the nest and that makes me very nervous, so I wanted to experience this with him and see the campus he might be getting into,” she said. “I love it here. The campus itself is so beautiful. It’s rushed, but it’s exciting, so I’m very excited for him. I believe every parent should do this with their children once it’s time for them to apply to college.”

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## About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.