Blazing A New Trail
Mentoring Program Helps Meet Unique Needs Of Latino Youth

BY CANDACE SIPOS
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HARRISONBURG — When Sergio Yabeta decided he wanted to go to college, he was lost. The Bolivian native could have used the help of a relative who had already jumped through the hoops, but no one in his family had gone to college. Knowing first-hand what it’s like to be a first-generation high school student with dreams of going to college, Yabeta wants to help other Latino youth through that same process.

“You don’t know what you’re really getting into until you get into it,” especially when it comes to college, he said.

Yabeta, 20, a sophomore at James Madison University, is one of three JMU students involved in a year-old mentoring program at the university that is meant to provide Latino students the necessary tools and encouragement to pursue higher education.

“Most Latino youth don’t pursue college education for fear that it’ll disrupt families,” said Carlos Aleman, associate professor of communication studies at JMU and the coordinator of the mentors.

Program Works Toward Finding Mentees Financial Aid For College

Mentors

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through the university.

Parents of would-be first-generation college students are often especially concerned about how it would affect the family dynamic, he said.

“But for Latinos, since the family center is so important, we really have to emphasize this idea of an education as an opportunity to develop, not as a threat to their identity.”

Last year, 75 percent of Hispanic Harrisonburg High School students graduated on time, up from 64.5 percent in 2011. Overall, 85 percent of HHS students graduated on time. The rates are based on the percentage of students gaining diplomas within four years of entering high school.

About 40 percent of Harrisonburg’s public school students speak English as a second language, among the highest rates for Virginia school divisions.

The Shenandoah Valley Scholars’ Latino Initiative matches JMU sophomores with Latino Harrisonburg High School sophomores in a three-year mentoring program designed to keep high school students.

Virginia began with a program through the University of Richmond and, most recently, through JMU.

While the mentees are not guaranteed a full ride to college after completing the program, the initiative does work toward finding financial assistance for those students, according to Emily Richi, who helps to organize the program.

The students chosen as mentors are JMU Centennial Scholars, students with need-based, four-year scholarships.

The local branch of the organization is “looking to be the center of the hub” for other programs throughout the Valley, Aleman said.

“The program is not only helpful now; it is going to be an invaluable resource in the next five years,” he said.

The initiative at JMU will celebrate its one-year anniversary Saturday at 7 p.m. in the Newman-Riddle Building at 2 N. Main St. The event will include hors d’oeuvres, live music and, likely, an announcement of who was chosen for the next round of mentees.

The three high school students in the program and their mentors were at a Thomas Harrison Middle School as part of a program through JMU to send academic support to diverse schools that typically have a high percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. That role allows him to head up the AMISTAD program and help with the initiative.

The groups collaborated to clean up the overgrown trail near the school as part of JMU's Big Event, an annual day of community service involving more than 1,000 students helping at various sites in the area.

Yabeta and his mentor, Raul Bauta, 16, a sophomore at Harrisonburg High School, were among those clearing the trail of downed branches and debris.

Being a part of the initiative has helped Bauta stay focused on his future, he says.

“It just gives you more of a push,” he said. “We’re more prepared now.”

The activities he’s participated in with his mentor include visits to several area colleges and going to a class at JMU.

Luis Parada, 21, another mentor from JMU, echoed many of the sentiments, Yabeta expressed.

“I’m really thankful for this program,