

Family College Conferences

Families In Schools

Los Angeles, California

Giving students and their families a firsthand look at college is the goal of the Family College Conferences, which take nearly 500 fifth and sixth graders and their parents to a local campus for a half-day of information sessions and tours. The conferences, held this year at the University of Southern California and California State University at Los Angeles, are the culminating event of a year-long introduction to college planning, called “Going On To College!” GOT College! is offered by Families In Schools (FIS), a non-profit organization that works with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

Besides a tour of classrooms, dormitories, sports arenas, and the all-important cafeteria, the students and their families hear a variety of speakers on different aspects of college and have an opportunity to ask questions about campus life and career options. Local school superintendents, elected officials, college students, and young graduates now in the work world participate in the various panels and presentations. Breakout sessions cover the college admissions process, financial-aid options, and course and testing requirements. All sessions are offered in both English and Spanish.

The conferences were open to all first-generation low-income students and their families in Districts 4 and 5 of LAUSD. More than 480 students from five schools and their family members, along with four district administrators, 25 school staffers, and 50 community members participated. Often students and parents who have not had previous college

experiences do not recognize the opportunities that college creates. FIS holds the conferences to promote a desire for higher education among these students, and remove some of the road-blocks they might encounter.

In addition to acquainting participants with colleges, FIS hopes to help parents understand how they can support their children through elementary and secondary school so that they will be prepared for higher education. For some parents, the conferences clearly met their goals: “I have a more open mind about having my children go to college,” one parent said in a post-conference evaluation. “As parents, we have to work hard to motivate our children and help them go to college,” said another.

Collaborating with LAUSD, the participating colleges, universities, and community and business partners, FIS coordinated all aspects of the event, arranged for campus facilities, and raised money to meet other expenses. Public funds, private donations, and in-kind contributions supported the two conferences, which cost about \$10,000 each. FIS also formed partnerships with private universities interested in recruiting students from underrepresented minorities. In the future, FIS plans to seek additional partnerships by encouraging colleges to host early outreach programs for students in elementary and middle schools.

In addition to the Family College Conferences, the GOT College! program integrates student and parent workshops, field trips, and teacher-mentor professional development opportunities designed to make college

an achievable goal. Students attend workshops twice a month focusing on study habits, college entrance requirements, careers, and financial aid. Their parents meet with teachers regularly to learn how to support their children’s college plans. Students and parents then participate in monthly joint sessions with classroom teachers. Topping the list of goals for this program is to increase parents’ belief that college is a realistic expectation for their children.

Students attending the college conferences were enthusiastic: “I like that the panelists shared their experiences with us; they really inspired me,” said one student. Another remarked, “Now I know about the opportunities to make my dreams come true.”

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