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October 28, 2013

For First-Generation Students, Crucial Support



Noah Berger for The Chronicle

Amanda Aldama (right), a senior at San Jose State U., helped produce a video for first-generation students like herself. "There were times," she says, "when someone would say something and part of me wanted to yell out, 'Oh, yeah, I went through that, too!'"

By Eugene McCormack

When Amanda Aldama was applying to college, she couldn't rely on her family for help. Her mother and grandparents, whom she lived with in San Jose, Calif., had not graduated from high school, nor had any of her cousins. She struggled as she tried to navigate the financial-aid system largely on her own.

When she enrolled at San Jose State University, she faced new challenges. She found college-level work far more difficult than her high-school courses. And she had to explain to her family why it was important to take part in extracurricular

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activities.

"There was a feeling of them wanting to understand and to help, but not knowing how," she says.

Ms. Aldama's story is hardly unique at San Jose State, a commuter campus of about 28,000 students where the parents of over half the freshmen did not attend or complete college. That's why the university recently put a high priority on establishing programs to improve the experience of first-generation students.

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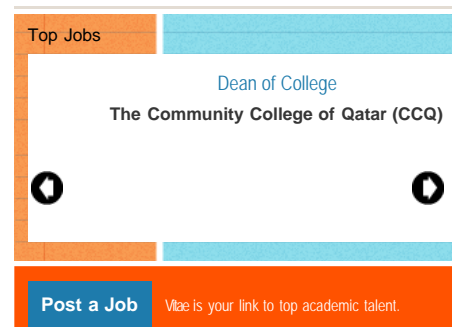
Leading the effort is Jennifer L. Morazes, who has been an educational counselor at San Jose State since 2011. With a background in research on first-generation students, she devotes part of her job to that purpose.

She founded and coordinates a program called Generate, a collaboration among campus counseling services, student affairs, and other offices whose goal is to make the institution more welcoming for first-generation students and to increase retention rates.

Ms. Morazes, who was a first-generation student herself, remembers that her own introduction to college was not ideal. "One of my biggest memories was not only feeling lost and confused and feeling that students whose parents had gone to college had the upper hand in insider knowledge," she says, "but my mom had a really bad experience being denied a loan to help with my financial aid, and so financial stress was very prominent for me."

That memory is why a key feature of the Generate program is an annual fall event called "Come Together," during which first-generation students and their friends and families discuss college issues in a welcoming setting. At this year's event, a half-hour video was shown, in which first-generation students talked about their challenges and achievements.

Ms. Aldama, now a senior, helped produce the video. She found it easy to relate to what she was hearing from the other students. "There were times when someone would say something and part of me wanted to yell out, 'Oh, yeah, I went through that, too!' But then I would remember that I couldn't say anything because I was filming."



Among the programs Ms. Morazes has set up is a series of workshops for first-generation students. The sessions focus on such topics as goal-setting, stress-management strategies, and talking to family members about college.

She also visits local high schools to publicize resources at San Jose State and to provide students with role models, something she hopes to do more of.

Also looking to expand the program is Art King, the university's associate vice president for student affairs. "Right now we only look at first-generation students when they come in, but they are first-generation students throughout their time at college," he says. "My hope is to have programs for second-year students, third-year students, and for fourth-year students, so each group gets appropriate resources and help."

Because the program is new and growing, there is not much long-range data on its effectiveness. Ms. Morazes is tracking the progress of participating students, including retention rates after the first year and progress toward declaring a major and earning a degree. She conducts evaluations before and after events to assess changes in students' knowledge of campus resources, their sense of belonging and connectedness, and whether they feel they are on track to earn a degree.

As a counselor, Ms. Morazes meets with many students one-on-one. Over and over she hears them express doubts about whether they can graduate and whether they will ever fit in. Many of them think their situation is unique.

But, she says, "what we're hearing from students who go to our events is, 'Now I know I'm not alone here. I can do this.'"

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