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FINDING WAYS TO SPREAD SUCCESS STUDENTS HASH OUT IDEAS IN S.J. TO BOOST GRADUATION RATE

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California is nearly broke, the educational system is struggling and the economy remains wobbly. But a large group of energetic and idealistic young college students gathered this weekend in San Jose to strengthen the one thing they can count on: one another.

In a competition of inspirational ideas for boosting graduation rates, teams of students from California's community colleges swapped strategies that ranged from peer counseling to a massive textbook exchange. The winners got grants worth up to \$7,500 and one year of professional advice from the group Mobilize.org, supported by the Knight Foundation.

"It was empowering," said De Anza College student Osvoldo Cordero, 20, who was awarded a prize for his project to assist and organize undocumented students. "Knowledge is power -- and through hearing each others' experiences, their knowledge became my knowledge."

The atmosphere felt electric at the conference, held at downtown San Jose's Hilton Hotel, attended by 100 students -- hand-picked by organizers -- from Northern California community colleges.

At an elegant Saturday night dinner, they listened attentively to a dinner speech by California Community Colleges Chancellor Jack Scott, and exchanged names, email addresses and phone numbers on business cards made for the event.

Also, on Sunday, an event called "Hands Across California" was held on community college campuses statewide. Celebrities, political and community leaders held hands with students, in a human chain, to raise scholarship funds.

With more than 3 million students enrolled each year, California's community colleges constitute the largest system of higher education in the nation. The 112 campuses already are reeling from \$400 million in budget cuts. An \$800 million or more "all-cuts" solution would result in denying access to more than 400,000 students -- roughly the same number enrolled in the entire California State University system. Only three out of every 10 students achieve the schools' most basic goal of earning a two-year degree or transferring to a four-year university.

Exchanging ideas

The odds of achieving that kind of success are even slimmer for students such as undocumented resident Jose Arreola and former foster child Ralph Hall. But on Sunday, both young men gave presentations that were eloquent, original and inspiring.

"I want to reach out so other undocumented students feel less isolated," said Arreola, who came to the U.S. from a small Mexican rancho when he was only 3, but then excelled at Mountain View High School. He graduated from Santa Clara University, thanks to private scholarships, and now helps Latino community college students. But a job remains out of reach, because he has no Social Security number. "I'd love to be able to work," he said.

Hall, an English major at Chabot College in Hayward -- now headed to Cal State Dominguez Hills -- said, "I want to create a program for foster youth that creates stable relationships with faculty and mentors, beyond just the three-month semester, because many of them have never experienced that."

The participants weren't, in the words of organizer Ayofemi Kirby, "the usual suspects" -- the class presidents, student council representatives or other traditional campus leaders.

Rather, most were the enterprising children of poor and undereducated immigrants who, against stiff odds, are proving themselves. Some were foster children; others were undocumented. To be selected to participate in the three-day conference, they had to be recommended by faculty or community leaders. 'Building democracy'

Among the many enterprising proposals, one sought to establish a "Book Lenders" project, to spare students the cost of purchasing expensive textbooks every semester. Another aimed to effectively inform undocumented students about the breadth of resources available to them and to organize a small fund to help them defray transfer fees. A third sought to establish student-run "orientation programs" to advise incoming students on ways to succeed in school.

"We are educated and ready to contribute," said Luis De Paz, 19, an undocumented student at Skyline College who hopes to be a teacher, or to enter politics.

Mobilize.org got its start in 2002, when student David Smith started his senior year at UC Berkeley working two jobs and living 45 minutes away from campus, because affordable on-campus housing was hard to find. With other students from around the state, he met elected officials on Cal Lobby Day -- an effort that eventually led to the passage of a \$30 million housing bond to build more student housing. It grew into a nationwide movement in 2007, and now underwrites projects that help young people build solutions to tackle community problems.

Devoted to the "Millennial Generation" -- the 80 million Americans born from 1976 to 1996 -- its credo is: "Building the democracy we want to inherit."

In an effort to help develop networks of young leaders in five cities, including San Jose, last Friday the Knight Foundation awarded the organization \$1 million.

The students' parting words, many of them anonymous, were scribbled on a big Mobilize.org banner. "The revolution starts in the classroom," said one. "Each one -- teach one," said a second. And another: "I love education."

And from student Ruth Limon: "United, we can change the world!"

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