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## **Encouragement key in students' education treks**

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Two graduating seniors in Fox Tech High School's law and research magnet program thought they'd spend this spring semester as interns in a local law office.

When their supervisor learned they had no college plans, he gave them one assignment: Apply to college.

"The fact that these two girls, both of whom are incredibly smart and gifted, didn't have the information (about college) and it wasn't being showered on them daily -- it's horrifying," said Diego Bernal, a staff attorney at the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, where the girls were interns.

One adult's faith gave Samantha Bernal and Adriana Almanza permission to raise their ambitions.

Neither considered herself college material, though Adriana earned mostly A's, had once teetered on the verge of her class's top 10 percent and carried a letter in her backpack from former University of Texas President Larry Faulkner promising admission to UT-Austin.

Samantha, a less stellar student but a gifted writer, had given up hope of a four-year university.

With Bernal's encouragement, Adriana raced, postmarking the application on the day it was due. She applied elsewhere, too, and was accepted at the University of Houston and the University of Texas at San Antonio. She was wait-listed at UT-Austin and Texas State University-San Marcos.

Adriana had planned to attend St. Philip's College, with hopes of transferring later. She's been accepted at the University of Texas at San Antonio, but now is torn about whether she can afford it.

Often, one person can make the difference for a student thinking about college.

At Southside High School, students say Angelica Guzman, an English teacher and coach, encouraged them to choose UT-Austin over the comfort of a community college.

Guzman, a Southside graduate, shared her own regret that, when she attended St. Mary's University, she lived at home rather than in a dorm.

She sat her advanced English students in a circle at the beginning of the year and asked them about their college plans, then urged them to shoot higher.

"Coach Guzman said, 'You need to go, Gabi, Just go,'" Gabriella Gonzalez said. "Some of the teachers really do care. We're here so long, and this school is so small, they're like our second parents."

Fox Tech, where Adriana and Samantha go to school, sent 12 percent of its 2005 graduates to four-year colleges, fewer than any other San Antonio Independent School District high school, though all serve low-income students, according to data gathered by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

Sylvia Rendon, the district's director of counseling and guidance, said the numbers are worth examining to see what more can be done at schools like Fox Tech.

The girls described a chaotic environment where they had signed up to see counselors for college discussions but were never summoned and where military recruiters were easier to find on campus than college recruiters. But both girls also said they bore some responsibility for not being more assertive.

Still, Bernal said he was shocked at how little they understood about the college application process.

"You know what it's like trying to walk these girls through this process? It's like helping somebody over the phone to disarm a bomb," he said. "They approach the process with the same trepidation."

Moreover, he said, "they had internalized all these myths about money and how smart you have to be. They thought college was for the Doogie Howsers of the world."

At Brackenridge High School, where the college-going rate is significantly higher, veteran counselor Jeff Blum still worries.

"The ones that are troubling are the ones that are in the middle, who don't seek out the help," he said. "Come the end of the year, they wonder, 'What am I going to be doing next year?'"

That was Samantha.

"I was just like, 'I don't know how to apply,'" she said. "Over these past four years, I've been struggling."

Both girls agree with a one-word answer to why they have found the confidence to

contemplate starting off at four-year schools: "Diego."

Samantha, whose sophisticated, introspective writing impressed Bernal, spent time searching for a small Christian college because she believed it would help her focus. Ultimately, she found Azusa Pacific University, where she was accepted and is awaiting word on financial aid.

Diego Bernal said he feared that he may have caught the girls too late in a process that should have begun much earlier, in school.

"Even if they do get the applications in on time and they're accepted, there's a lot of follow-up we have to do and there's a lot of catch-up," he said. "It seems strange (for schools) to say there's no time to focus on the future."

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