

SF City College students put cool in recruitment

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Do call it Frisco.

That is, if you want a thousand-plus San Francisco high school graduates with no college plans to miraculously get all energized about higher education, the thing to do is stage a marathon college fair on a Friday in April, and call it Frisco.

Friday = Successful College Opportunities. "Frisco."

"That's perfect," said Desiree Keifer, one of six San Francisco City College students drafted to rescue school administrators from their own lack of cool as they organize the first annual mandatory college fair.

Cool is an essential ingredient, often lacking, when recruiting teenagers to college or anything else. So the administrators asked Keifer and the others what music to play at the fair. What food to serve. What entertainment, clubs, programs and services to feature. And, chiefly, what to call the whole thing.

The administrators knew they needed help. They'd been calling the fair "Transition Day."

Crisis in the making

But as fun as they hope their college fair will be, the administrators say it's a serious attempt to tackle a crisis in the making: About a third of San Francisco's high school graduates from last spring didn't go to college, according to the National Student Clearinghouse. That's 1,121 students - up 22 percent in two years.

So the Gates Foundation is spending \$3 million over three years for City College and the school district to get more students to college. Part of the plan is for every public high school senior to take part in the citywide college event on April 29.

Seniors with college acceptance letters will attend orientation sessions in hopes of reducing "summer melt," in which students chicken out and never enroll.

Seniors without an acceptance letter will have to fill out an application to City College and take its placement exam before April 29 - "whether they like it or not," Associate Dean Laurie Scolari said with a smile. "The goal is for everyone to have an acceptance letter."

Those students - applications and placement tests behind them - will attend a festive, daylong fair at City College. The idea is to convince them that committing to years of additional study is in fact their fondest wish.

On Wednesday, the six student advisers brainstormed about how to make that happen, as Scolari took notes.

At first they sounded like any group of slightly nerdy students planning a school dance.

"What about a raffle and prizes?" Joseph Duperval said.

"I think skits would help," said John Sirles.

Theresa Cullen suggested pizza.

Target students

But Scolari had chosen these students for a reason. "They're the kids we want to target," she said. "African American. Low income. Students of color." Students most often on the short end of the achievement gap.

Some in the group were young parents. Some had addiction and homelessness in their past. Some had dropped out of school, and one had been in foster care.

And all of them - Cullen, Sirles, Duperval, Keifer, Necash Hunter and Musiliu "Moose" Adewunmi - were, like Scolari herself, the first in their family in college.

Now planning careers in business, counseling, education and fashion, they vividly remember their fears and ignorance about college - and what it took to help them cross the chasm into a future of possibility.

Mainly it was up to chance. Sometimes a counselor took an interest, or a good speaker showed up at the Youth Guidance Center. For Adewunmi, it was his dying father's last wish that his children go to college.

What Scolari wants is to take college out of the realm of chance.

But the six student advisers warned that balloons, a hip-hop DJ and free food would hold kids' interest for a few hours at best. To hold it for good, they said the fair would have to offer counseling and financial aid advice. And it would need the right attitude.

"We need to be really friendly," Sirles said, recalling his own early apprehension.

In considering what to name the day, the students toyed with "415," "Generate Your Future," "City2College," "Pursuit to College," "SF College Pilgrimage," "CEO" and "UFO" before settling on "Friday = Successful College Opportunities."

Frisco, it turns out, has been reclaimed from its pernicious past by millennial youth who wear the word without embarrassment on T-shirts and hats.

Who knew?

In the end, Scolari walked away with a notebook of ideas and this key admonition:

Give stuff away. Not lanyards.

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