Queens College and Liberty Science Center Trip

The importance of exposing students to college at a young age — specifically during the middle school years — cannot be overstated. With this in mind, GEAR UP recently invited middle school scholars on a tour of the local CUNY-Queens College. As they toured the campus, the students asked questions about admission requirements and specific programs offered. Candace McCoy, from I.S. 126, asked the all-important question, “How much does it cost to attend Queens College?” Candace and many of her peers were surprised to learn how affordable Queens College is. As the tour continued, the group saw the dormitories and learned about the rules that govern them, as well as how affordable living on campus can be. The last stop on the tour was the Queens College Library, where they learned that CUNY is there to assist them in all of their research, and if a book or other source is not found at Queens College, they can use other CUNY schools as resources.

After their trip to Queens College, the middle-schoolers were treated to a visit at Liberty Science Center in Jersey City, which engages diverse audiences in “exceptional science learning experiences.” The scholars experienced the thrill of balancing on an i-beam 18 feet high, examining sea creatures up close, testing structures in a 20 mph wind tunnel, and demonstrating the skill necessary to operate a cargo crane.

There are hundreds of things to do, see and learn at Liberty Science Center. Everywhere you look, there are highly interactive, hi-tech, hands-on learning opportunities designed to appeal to every age and stage of learning. In true GEAR UP style, students enjoyed a day filled with academic exposure and scientific interaction.

GEAR UP Newsletter

“Be the Face of Change” Youth Leadership Conference

The “change” movement that swept President Barack Obama into office last November continues to sweep the nation. With “change” in mind, St. John’s University’s GEAR UP program hosted a Youth Leadership Conference for 50 high school scholars on November 14, 2009. The conference introduced GEAR UP students to the concept of becoming agents of change through their own personal success.

Andre McKenzie, Ed.D. — St. John’s Vice President of Academic Support Services — opened the morning conference with a moving address in which he pointed out that each student has the potential for success as long as he or she is willing to work hard and overcome obstacles. After Dr. McKenzie’s stirring words, the students heard from Alice Roberson, Director of NYGEAR UP at the New York State Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC), who defined what leadership means in today’s society and offered suggestions for other ways to develop leadership skills.

Choosing the right college and financing their education is critical for students. In a computer workshop, students prepared for life after high school by researching colleges of interest and searching for available scholarships on the federal government’s student aid Web site: www.college.gov, as well as on other helpful Web sites. “I enjoyed the college and scholarship workshops the most,” student Sharon Villar stated. “Because I don’t have time to do the research at home, I really appreciated having the opportunity to do it at the conference.”

Students also participated in an alcohol and drug awareness workshop facilitated by representatives from St. John’s Student Wellness (SWELL) Peer Education program. The workshop was designed to open a conversation among students about choices that affect their personal well-being and to provide them with the tools necessary to make better, informed decisions.

In a panel discussion that covered the college admission and financial aid processes, six St. John’s undergraduates shared their experiences at college. The GEAR UP scholars heard that everyone faces challenges but what differentiates one person from another are the experiences they’ve had and the paths they chose to get where they are.

The demanding life of a college athlete and balancing the responsibilities of athletics and the academic life were discussed by two members of St. John’s Track and Field team and Assistant Coach Yvonne Harrison. Finally, a career panel introduced the GEAR UP scholars to leaders in the fields of medicine, entertainment and business entrepreneurship who shared their stories about their educational paths and career choices. “I enjoyed the career panel because we learned about non-traditional careers, said student Siskia Gallardo. At the end of the event, the scholars took away some very valuable lessons about what it takes to be an effective leader.
“Throw It in the Bag”
Community Service Day

St. John’s University’s Vincentian mission focuses on service to the less fortunate. GEAR UP scholars recently joined Campus Ministry to follow that mission at a “Throw It in the Bag” event at St. John’s Bread and Life in Brooklyn. On December 12, 2009, 80 GEAR UP scholars from our partner middle and high schools served the community by preparing packages of food for families in need, cleaning and organizing the facility in preparation for the holidays and lending a helping hand in the soup kitchen. Even the coordinators of St. John’s Bread and Life hadn’t anticipated the large volunteer turnout. Students worked excitedly indoors and outdoors, each exhibiting the spirit of service. At the end of the day, they walked away exhausted, but all said it was rewarding to help those less fortunate and felt good to do something for someone else.

High School Scholars Visit Five Towns College and SUNY Farmingdale

GEAR UP has always recognized the importance of exposing its scholars to various colleges, both large and small. In February, GEAR UP organized a pair of trips to two small New York colleges that offer unique majors.

On February 11, 2010, 20 high school scholars interested in music and entertainment traveled to Five Towns College in Dix Hills, where they examined professional studio equipment, experienced the small classroom environment and learned about the different majors offered there, including music media, music business, mass communication, audio recording, composition and songwriting, as well as many others.

On February 17, 2010, another group of high school students interested in visiting a small state school traveled to SUNY Farmingdale. Set in a scenic natural environment, Farmingdale consists of four schools and offers degrees in nursing, architecture, visual communications, mechanical engineering technology, dental hygiene and many more.

Saturday Science Program

GEAR UP’s Saturday Science Club welcomed 45 middle-school scholars on February 13, 2010, during a trip to the Tanglewood Preserve on Long Island. The new GEAR UP scholars asked what they might expect during the upcoming year and which animals they might encounter that day. While they were somewhat anxious about meeting the snakes, lizards, alligators, the owl and the chinchilla, they were mostly interested in learning about the animals and their natural habitats.

Dr. Rayann Havasy, Founder of the Center for Science Teaching and Learning at Tanglewood, joined the group to explain how animals are used in the manufacture of such items as handbags, shoes, wallets, belts, coats and jewelry. Students walked away with a newfound appreciation for the animals and the importance of taking care of them and preserving their environments.

College Readiness and SAT Prep Workshop

With high school graduation looming and entrance to college just around the corner for many GEAR UP high school scholars, St. John’s GEAR UP program is working overtime to ensure that students are college-ready. Recognizing that applying to and preparing for college are never easy when one is ill-prepared and unorganized, GEAR UP has made the process easier by offering SAT Prep and College Readiness workshops, which began promptly at the start of the new year.

The SAT Prep workshops focus on the exam’s format, grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary-building and provide a review of the mathematical formulas commonly found on these tests. Each week students use practice exams to identify their strengths and weaknesses. SAT Prep has shown to be effective for many of the GEAR UP scholars, who are pleased that it’s absolutely free.

College Readiness workshops cover the preparation, organization and financial aspect of applying for college.

PAC Meetings at I.S. 145

The Parent Action Committee (PAC) is designed to help parents by providing a support network and offering many different services and tools so parents can become more engaged and better equipped to support their children’s academic lives.

As middle-school students transition to high school, their parents are in turn experiencing their children’s transition into adolescence. To assist both students and their parents during this challenging time, GEAR UP holds a series of PAC Meetings to address what to expect and how to prepare for it. Workshops include Understanding Graduation Requirements; Helping Your Child Transition From Middle to High School; Effective Communication between Parents and Children; Job Search Resources for Parents; and Preparing for College Starts Now. During these workshops it becomes clear that parents want to be involved when it comes to their children’s lives, but sometimes don’t know what to do or where to get help. Consequently, GEAR UP serves as a support system and a refuge where parents can voice their questions and concerns. This close collaboration with parents helps GEAR UP in reaching its primary goal of serving the youth more efficiently and effectively.

Bridging the Digital Divide for Parents

A recent study conducted by the Kaiser Foundation indicates that children between the ages of eight and 18 spend an average of 11 hours per day using technology. With this growing reliance and dependence on computers, GEAR UP determined that it was essential to assist parents in enhancing their children’s computing skills by offering a computer-training course.

On Saturday mornings from January through April, I.S. 145 parents in the advanced track have the opportunity to create flyers and PowerPoint presentations, build websites, etc., while those in the beginner track learn to navigate the Internet and use specific software programs such as Microsoft Office (including its E-mail application) and other key computer applications. Parents understand the importance of adapting to today’s technology demands and this is reflected in the number of parents participating each week.