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School-university partnership helps Staten Island students develop 'college self-esteem'

Project expands into feeder middle and elementary schools

by LINDA JACOBSON

When Destiny Padilla applied for the Port Richmond Partnership Leadership Academy at her Staten Island high school, she expected to learn a little bit about choosing a college. But she says the internships, college-level courses and opportunities to get involved in community issues were “a good shock.”

“Anything that would get me further toward my future goals, I would say yes to,” says Padilla, adding that in addition to the academic benefits, she’s “gained more ability for public speaking and volunteering for things.”

Now a freshman at Wagner College, about a 15-minute drive from Port Richmond High School, Padilla is already a semester ahead in her courses, is volunteering at Edwin Markham Intermediate School 51 as part of a similar leadership program, and is considering a teaching career. “I’ve always been interested in working in schools,” she says, adding that helping middle school students “has validated that feeling that it’s something that I can do.”

Wagner College, a private, liberal arts institution, created the academy program in 2013 in collaboration with the New World Foundation’s Civic Opportunities Initiative Network. The program targets sophomore students who are the first in their families to attend college and have a deep interest in improving their local communities.

“These are kids who show a lot of promise and need the extra support,” says Kevin Bott, the dean of civic engagement at Wagner’s Center for Leadership and Community Engagement (CLCE). He adds that by the time the academy students finish high school, “they’re ready for the rigors of the classroom, ready for the independence that a lot of first-generation college students don’t usually have.”

Beginning in the summer before their junior year, the cohort of 12 academy participants take part in an intensive five-week program that includes high school and college courses, service projects and two weeks spent living on campus. They repeat the summer program before their senior year, and before they enter college, they can spend all five weeks in a Wagner residence hall.

“They live like college students, and they are treated like college students,” says Leo Schuchert, who served as a mentor for the students during the academy’s first summer in 2014 and is now

the associate director of the CLCE. He was also the first coordinator of the Wagner College Raiders Center, an office at Port Richmond High where students participate in weekly seminars that might include workshops, movies, debates, and reading assignments on issues such as poverty, immigration and hunger.

The education pillar

The leadership academy is part of the Port Richmond Partnership, a broader relationship between Wagner and the Port Richmond community that had its genesis in a 2005 breakfast meeting between Wagner College President Richard Guarasci and Timothy Gannon, the former principal at Port Richmond High. “We hit it off right from the beginning,” says Gannon, who now supports other principals needing to make improvements at their schools. “I was a new high school principal in a tough area. I wasn’t going to say no to anybody.”

The partnership is based on five pillars — with education and college readiness being the strongest. The other four are immigration and advocacy, health and wellness, economic development, and arts and culture. The Raiders Center at the high school also serves as the hub for organizations that work with Wagner as part of the partnership and offer students community-based internship placements during their five-week summer program. Students, for example, have worked on a Port Richmond asset map, built and tended a community garden, painted murals and got a taste of political issues at Staten Island Borough Hall.

One student did his internship with a neighborhood food bank and was so successful that he was hired to run the program, says Arlette Cepeda, the director of the CLCE, adding that many students, even after they’ve graduated from high school, continue to volunteer as mentors to younger children and with other nonprofits in the community. “They are building on top of their relationships that they started in the summer,” she says, “not because they are forced to, but because they want to.”

Broader impact on the school and the community

While participation in the academy is limited to a dozen students each year, the partnership seeks to benefit all Port Richmond High students. The Raiders Center, for example, also serves as a supplemental college advising office where all students can find information about the college application process. Schuchert also encouraged the academy students to bring their friends into the center during lunch or at other times to find out what was available. All students also participate in Wagner College campus tours as freshmen.

Beyond the academy, other partnerships evolved, such as a nutrition project involving Wagner College’s nursing students and the high school’s culinary arts program. Over time, students developed what Gannon calls “college self-esteem” or the belief “that they can go to college and succeed in college.”

Last year, efforts began to spread awareness about preparing for college among younger students as well. As part of the Markham Leadership Academy, 12 middle school students participate in a high school readiness program in which they take high school-level courses and also participate in weekly seminars. The coordinator of the Markham program also spends one day a week at

P.S. 21 Margaret Emery-Elm Park School where partnership leaders are conducting a needs assessment and implementing some college awareness programs for the elementary school students.

“The whole idea of the entire pipeline,” Bott says, “is to figure out what college readiness looks like at all these levels.”