Summit creates college culture for Santa Cruz County students

By Kara Guzman
kaguzman@santacruzensentinel.com
@karambuton on Twitter

SANTA CRUZ — A sea change is happening in Santa Cruz County schools: Students are preparing for college at an earlier age, and the results are showing.

Half of the county’s seventh-graders, 1,400 students, attended a summit on college eligibility requirements Friday at UC Santa Cruz. The event was part of a series attended by all county students, starting with a fourth grade field trip to Cabrillo College and ending with a college and career night for high school juniors. In April, the rest of the county’s seventh-graders will attend a similar event at CSU Monterey Bay.

The series is hosted by Santa Cruz County College Commitment, a collaboration of educators started in 2011 and sponsored by the County Office of Education. Ray Kaupp, SCCC’s executive director, said the countywide, collaborative approach helps students meet certain milestones on the path to college and career.

“In fourth grade, they decide to go to college. In seventh grade, they decide to take the classes they need to get into college, and in 11th grade, they choose their school,” Kaupp said.

College

Requirements, rates

Workshops focused on the “A through G requirements,” or the minimum high school coursework required to be college-eligible.

Michelle Whittingham, UCSC’s associate vice chancellor of enrollment management and the summit’s lead organizer, said preparing for those courses begins before high school.

“It’s critical that students know that what they’re doing in grade school matters,” she said. “The better they do in grade school, the more prepared.”

The most recent state education department data shows 48.5 percent of county high school graduates completed their A through G requirements in 2013, up from 40 percent in 2011.

The biggest gains were in Pajaro Valley Unified School District, which had a 58 percent completion rate among 2013 graduates, compared to a state average of 39 percent.

Murry Scheckman, Pajaro Valley assistant superintendent, said these gains have been a long time coming. For several years, his district — where 75 percent of students are low-income — has taken a target-driven approach to college preparation, such as requiring all students to register for a college financial aid application.

“You put this huge net out there, like a big fishing net,” Scheckman said. “You have every kid complete it, and then when the right speaker comes in or the right external stimulus takes place, then the kid may jump.”

Beyond the numbers

Whittingham said high school coursework, GPA and test scores are only half the picture when it comes to UC admissions decisions. Two candidates with the same GPA are not necessarily equal, she said, and the other half includes other academic accomplishments, talents and life experiences.

“It’s about the student challenging themselves within the context of their particular school and community,” she said.

Capitol’s New Brighton Middle School student Leo Johnson, 12, said he wants to be the first in his family to attend college. He learned of college coursework requirements for the first time at the summit, he said.

“I’m definitely going to start getting better grades now and now I know there’s hope of going to college,” Johnson said.