Financial aid advisors reaching out to help college applicants, parents with forms

By Jackie Salo
The Miami Herald

For graduating high school seniors, receiving financial aid can be the deciding factor in their decision to attend college the following year. To encourage all college-bound students who are eligible for financial assistance to apply, several Miami-Dade County high schools are hosting a series of free, interactive workshops to walk them through the application process.

The workshops are hosted in collaboration with Miami Dade College’s financial aid counselors and The Education Fund to increase access to financial aid, especially for low-income and second-generation students. Miami Beach High School, which has held these workshops for six years, was the pioneer in the program, which is now offered in seven other Miami-Dade County high schools.

Miami Beach Senior High, on Prairie Avenue, encourages seniors to bring in their families to work on filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) with experts at one of 11 sessions, three of which were held this past month.

For Miami Beach Senior High, which is a Title I school, giving students the resources to understand their financial-aid options has been key to post-secondary enrollment, said Maria Sahwell, the school’s College Assistance Program advisor.

Sahwell first launched the program in 2008 through funding provided by the Parent, Teacher and Student Association (PTSA). Later in 2009, she partnered with The Education Fund’s program Smart Path to College to bring in uAspire, a college affordability service, to lead the workshops. Miami Dade College and Florida International University financial aid counselors volunteer each year to also be on hand to answer any questions the families have.

"This program really makes a difference in helping students not get overwhelmed because they are able to go over the application line by line with an informed advisor," said Lisa Ciacci, The
Education Fund's program manager for the Smart Path to College, also known as the Citi Postsecondary Success Program.

Families gathered in MBSH computer labs Tuesday evening to fill out forms as uAspire financial aid advisor Alvaro Perez explained each step with a PowerPoint presentation. Perez visits the school twice a week to meet with students who have questions about financial aid but cannot get to all of the 598 students in the senior class individually.

Graduating senior Abraham Rodriguez, 18, who attended the workshop, said he probably would not have filled out the application essential to receive financial assistance for college next year had it not been for the program.

"I would have been lost without this workshop," Rodriguez said. "The forms are confusing."

His mother, Maria, who came with him to the workshop, said that it was particularly beneficial as a Spanish speaker to be able to ask advisors questions while filling out the forms.

"It is great for Spanish people like us, because sometimes we need more help," she said. "I noticed them helping people around the room in Spanish and Creole, too."

The workshops have led to more students who do not speak English as a first language enrolling in college the following fall. The Education Fund tracked the percentage of students in the partnered high schools in Miami-Dade County that enroll in college from when they began their outreach in 2009 and 2012. They found a 45 percent increase in enrollment of those who are not native English speakers. Additionally, there was an increase of 42 percent in enrollment among Latinos and 47 percent with African-American students.

"We have seen this program as being very successful and a sustaining model for years to come," Ciacci said. "It has helped students realize that they are eligible for a plethora of financial aid resources and not be turned off by the sticker price of college."

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