

Education MAY 27, 2015

First time Miami-Dade grads take on high school, college — all at once



Edwin Morales, 17, Maria Saenz, 18, and Carlos Eguiluz Rosas, 18, are three of the advance high school seniors at Mater Academy Charter who are the first in their families to graduate from college by completing their college associate degree while still in high school. | **CARL JUSTE** - MIAMI HERALD STAFF

BY CHRISTINA VEIGA
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A sense of déjà vu may wash over Carlos Eguiluz Rosas as he strolls across an auditorium stage on Friday, taking his last steps towards a high school diploma.

The 18-year-old Mater Academy charter school student has already graduated once before: from Miami Dade College with his associates degree.

That graduation, at the beginning of May, marked a huge first for Eguiluz Rosas and for an increasing number of other students across Miami-Dade County. They are becoming the first in their families to go to college — and they're doing it while they're still in high school.

"I'm a success," Eguiluz Rosas said.

It's graduation season in South Florida and it's particularly special for the 55 students at Mater and almost 300 in Miami-Dade public schools who took advantage of dual high school and college enrollment programs at Miami Dade College to graduate with a college degree. County-wide, almost 4,000 students took dual enrollment at MDC last year. Another 6,000 took similar classes at Florida International University.

They took on the added challenge for many reasons: to take advanced courses not offered at their high school, get a head start toward earning advanced degrees and — in an age of historic student debt and rising tuition — for the opportunity to earn free college credits. Even the books are paid for.

It also makes college more attainable for students like Edwin Morales, who also earned his AA while attending Mater, a charter school in Hialeah Gardens. Even finishing high school is a feat within his family, Morales said. But he understood the opportunity that college presents.

"It gets you out of the routine your family is accustomed to, and you know you're going on to bigger and better things," said Morales, 17.

In some ways, Morales has already beaten the odds. Only 36 percent of students whose parents didn't graduate from high school go on to enroll in college, according to a 2001 National Center for Education Statistics study. But Morales is now headed to Brandeis University in Massachusetts with a full tuition scholarship.

Morales found motivation in a counselor who pulled him out of class one day to let him know he qualified for dual enrollment because of his grades. As a freshman, Morales had watched as lists of seniors went up in hallways all around school, along with the college they had been accepted to.

"I knew I wanted to be on that list," Morales said.

Morales and his classmates are graduating with their AAs after a grueling three years of high school and college work. The high school day begins at 7:30 a.m. and lasts until the bell rings at 2:30 p.m. Then dual enrollment students head to MDC or FIU where classes often run into the night. Some Mater students took up to nine courses a semester.

In addition to subjects like anthropology or algebra, students learn what it's like to be in college — a valuable experience for first-generation students who often report feeling lost or isolated.

"I was kind of afraid to ask for help at the campus," Eguiluz Rosas said. "I didn't want to look stupid. I wanted to be educated."

Maria Saenz is also graduating with her AA, making her the first in her family to attend college. She described feeling shy in a large, auditorium class at FIU and quickly learning a lesson in college social norms.

"It's really different having a teacher or having a professor," Saenz said. "You don't call a professor 'Mr.' They're like, 'I'm a doctor.'"

Saenz is going to Hamilton College in New York on a Posse Foundation Scholarship. She plans to major in International Relations and Latino Studies.

Rosario Roman, director of school and college relations at MDC, said the dual enrollment experiences are invaluable for students, pointing to studies that show that those students tend to perform better once they enroll in college full time.

"It's completely different from the environment at the high school, so that exposes them to an environment where they feel successful and know that they can do it," Roman said. "It's a big, big motivator."

The Mater students seem unfazed by the bleak statistics that first-generation students face. About a third of undergraduates are first-generation college students. Three of five of those students will not complete a degree within six years, according to a 2009 study by the National Center for Education Statistics. Of those, 44 percent will drop out without ever earning a degree.

But Eguiluz Rosas is determined to finish college so he can help provide for his family.

After his father was deported to his native Peru when Eguiluz Rosas was just 13, he took on extra responsibility for his family, including his littler sister, while his mother sold flowers in the streets.

“Since he became the man and the father in the house, his studies motivated him,” said Eguiluz Rosas’ mother, Veronica Rosas. “I feel very proud of him because even though we had a lot of setbacks in this country, he didn’t get depressed. He moved forward.”

Rosas, president of the science club and vice president of the math club at his school, landed a Gates Millennium Scholarship through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Whereas paying for college seemed like an impossible task as a steady stream of rejection letters for scholarships came in the mail, Rosas now has 10 years of college paid for.

He’s now thinking about a doctorate degree in engineering. He’ll start at Wesleyan University in Connecticut this fall.

“The dream would be to create a company that’s better than NASA,” Rosas said.

Follow @Cveiga on Twitter.

A NOD TO MENTORS

The Miami Herald would like to recognize all those mentors who helped anxious teens navigate course credits and college applications to become the Class of 2015.

We’re asking graduates to snap a photo with someone who played a big role on their road to high school graduation. Post it to social media with the hashtag, #GratefulGrad, and the Miami Herald may share your post with our social media followers.

Make sure to tag @MiamiHerald on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Try to include the names of anyone pictured and a brief description of how your mentor helped you on the road to a diploma, as well as the name of your school.

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