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## Dominican program gives Marin students a leg up on high school

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Middle school students take advantage of College Academy, a program at Dominican University that is designed to help students transition into high school. Jessica Flores (left) and Miriam Casteneda work on an essay in class. (IJ photo/Frankie Frost)

In a classroom at the center of Dominican University's San Rafael campus, Giulia Welch and her students are defining hope.

"What does hope mean to you?" Welch asks the room of 16 middle-school girls. "When (President Barack) Obama was running for president, he had two bumper stickers, change and hope. What did he mean by hope?"

"Hope he gets elected," one girl suggests.

"Hope means there's always a way," said Breshae Marshall, 14.

Like the other students in the month-long College Academy program, Breshae is excited and more than a little nervous about starting high school in the fall. She's also enthusiastic about College Academy, a new program created by Dominican, **Huckleberry Youth Programs** and the Marin Education Fund to help underprivileged minority students make the transition from middle school to high school.

"We talk about topics that we never talk about in school - things that girls like," Breshae said, adding that she enjoyed reading essays "about the girl who wore hijab (head cover) who talked about the confidence it gave her, or the girl from China whose mother worked two jobs but still had the energy to come home and make her dinner every night."

By the time the program ends July 31, College Academy's organizers hope Breshae and her classmates will have received the kind of preparation in writing, math, study skills, health education, leadership and "knowledge about college" that many more-affluent Marin students take for granted.

"These days, to prepare for college, you have to know what to do starting with the ninth grade," said Dawn Anderson, director of programs for the Marin Education Fund. "You have to take the right course work in order to be eligible. These students are typically the first in their family to be attending college, and so they don't have that role model to pursue. They also don't have access to the enrichment programs that more affluent students have. We're trying to give them a leg up."

Once they begin school, the College Academy students will meet regularly as part of the **Huckleberry Wellness Academy**, which offers help with homework, college counseling, preparation and tours, training as peer health educators and ultimately internships in health services. They'll also receive college advising and college access from the

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#### Marin Education Fund.

"In middle school, the teachers are more encouraging, and the students know exactly what they are supposed to do," said Lissette Flores, Wellness Academy director for **Huckleberry Youth Programs**. "In high school, they don't get that guidance."

That's something that worries 13-year-old Irene Ruano, who's both looking forward to and dreading her first year at San Rafael High.

"It's new people, new teachers, new experiences," Irene said. "It's going to a different school."

Irene said she likes the classes at College Academy, which "teach us not to judge people," she said. During the past week, she and her fellow students - some of whom will be her peers at San Rafael High - have worked on creating an essay that allows them to express who they are. Instructor Welch plans to submit the results to the National Public Radio program "This I Believe."

After hearing a sample essay in which a 13-year-old boy talks about his experiences with Asperger's syndrome, Welch asks her students to consider the extent to which each of them sometimes feels out of place.

"It can be good," Irene said. "But it's also bad. You feel like you can't blend in."

"And junior high is all about blending in, isn't it?" Welch said. "But high school is all about standing out."

Breshae, whose sister is currently attending college in Kansas, said she's not interested in being singled out.

"My sister doesn't talk to anyone she went to high school with. And she likes it that way," Breshae said.

Yet Breshae said she's glad to have met some of the students who will become her classmates next year. She has enjoyed the opportunity to challenge her mind, she said, and she feels a little less nervous about entering high school, though she still has a few reservations.

"I'm scared about what they do to freshmen," she said.

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