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Survey: Hispanic students believe college too costly

Children need more support, activists say

By Deanna Martin

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INDIANAPOLIS -- About half of Hispanic high school students in Indiana would be the first in their families to attend college, and most feel they can't afford a higher education, according to a new survey.

Learn More Indiana's annual survey of high school freshmen and juniors found that most students expect to earn a four-year college degree. But fewer Hispanic students expected a four-year degree compared to their peers.

The study emphasizes the need for all students to consider themselves "college material," said Elizabeth Crouch, spokeswoman for Learn More Indiana, a group of education organizations.

"The majority of students are saying they want to go to college," she said. "When asked if they have a plan or way to pay for it, they don't know."

Following the road map to higher education -- a path filled with tests, applications and deadlines -- can be more difficult for students without family members who have gone to college.

About one-fourth of black and white ninth-graders in the 2007-2008 school year said no one in their household attended college, compared to 50 percent of Hispanic freshmen.

Potential first-generation college students often face more obstacles than others in high school. Researchers say those teenagers sometimes lack the rigorous academic preparation and family encouragement that others have.

Sometimes parents without college degrees urge their children to get jobs instead of continuing their education.

"We have seen a lot of that, and we are really trying to change that," said Gina Platten, education program coordinator at the Indiana Latino Institute.

But some Hispanic parents -- especially those who have recently immigrated to the country -- often push their children to get college educations, said Lisa Sandoval, director of communications at the Hispanic College Fund, based in Washington, D.C.

"Parents realize they're exposing their children to opportunities they didn't have," Sandoval said. "The main barrier is knowing how and having the resources to actually pursue that education."

While 58 percent of all freshmen surveyed said they thought they could afford college, just 41 percent of Hispanic freshmen thought so. Among juniors, expectations were more bleak -- about 54 percent of all juniors thought they could afford college, compared to just 35 percent of Hispanic juniors.

College affordability is a major issue among all students, but can be a daunting barrier for first-generation students. Since parents without college degrees typically earn less than others, it makes sense that their children often worry about paying for higher education.

Education advocates stress that nearly every student can find options for attaining higher education.

"College is the most important investment that you can make in your future," Crouch said.

The survey also found that students who have family members with college experience more often said that they know how to prepare for college, can find college admission requirements and have visited college campuses.

That kind of "college knowledge" is needed to help get students on track to a higher education, Sandoval said. The Hispanic College Fund awards scholarships and provides mentoring programs to help students get to college and succeed once they're there.

"Students have an immense drive," she said.

The Learn More Indiana survey included responses from more than 100,000 students in ninth and 11th grades at more than 320 public and private high schools around the state. Data from the voluntary October survey was compiled by Indiana University's Center for Evaluation and Education Policy.
