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## Reaching for a better life

By **Bill Choy**

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Niria Garcia may only be 12 years old, but she already values what a college education can give her.

"I think a lot of kids think it's too hard and don't think going to college will be fun," said Garcia, a Talent resident. "But if you study and put effort into it, it can be easy and fun. It's important for kids to understand what they want to do with their future."

Garcia is one of 58 students from throughout the region participating in Academia Latina this week at Southern Oregon University, part of the university's extended campus programs.

The weeklong program, in its fourth year, is designed for Hispanic students in 6th through 8th grades.

Juanita Ephraim, co-director of Academia Latina, said the program is a vital tool to demonstrate to local Hispanic students and their families that education is important and can better their lives, as well as the lives of their family members.

A large percentage of Hispanic students in the community are not continuing their education, Ephraim said. More than 50 percent of Hispanic students in Jackson County do not graduate from high school, with many of their families believing going on to college is either not attainable or not important, she said.

"I hope this helps to give them options and tells them to get their education, not drop out, and go on to college," Ephraim said. "Being here shows them college is an option for them and that they can do this."

Ephraim, a teacher at Talent Middle School, said it's important to teach these students the value of education when they are young. She said the majority of Hispanic students who drop out do it in the 10th grade.

"They don't catch up, get left behind and say 'this is too hard for me' and leave," Ephraim said.

Although it's only been in existence for four years, Ephraim knows the program is working.

All of the 26 students who participated the first year are still in school, she said.

"We made them risk-takers," she said. "They're trying the harder classes and are staying in school. It's definitely made a difference."

The students stay in the residence halls and take classes in subjects such as the geography of Latin American countries, writing and poetry, computer science and theater arts. All but eight are from Jackson County, with the rest coming from Klamath and Josephine Counties. The courses are taught by teachers from throughout the area.



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Garcia said it means a lot to her and her fellow students that there is a program like this that encourages them to be good students.

"I think it's awesome that they realize kids do take the time to think about what college will be like," she said.

This has helped her realize that college opens up so many doors, Garcia said.

"It's good for Latino women to show that they can be educated if you put a lot of hard work into it," she said. "Women don't have to just be in the kitchen; they can work and be educated."

Garcia plans to major in art or theater in college and go to Harvard or another "outstanding" school, she said.

Stephanie Torres, a 12-year-old from Grants Pass, was all smiles after completing a theater exercise where she mirrored the exact movements of her partner.

Torres hopes to go to Stanford University and study acting.

The program has instilled in her the importance of staying in school, she said.

"If you drop out of high school, it's going to be tougher to get a job and you'll receive less pay," Torres said. "If you go to college, you'll get a fun job and be able to buy a house and earn enough money for your children to go on to college."

Hector Flores is teaching two history- and geography-based classes as part of the program. For Flores, it's vital to offer opportunities like this to Hispanic students to instill interest in education and college.

"It's just fantastic," he said. "From the moment I heard about it, I've wanted to get involved."

Flores has been impressed with the students' excitement and motivation.

"They have so much energy," he said. "They could go 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week."

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