

A Taste Of Higher Learning

Academia Latina continues to grow, giving students a look at college life

By [Sam Wheeler](#)

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Academia Latina has a serious case of growing pains.

In its 12th year, the weeklong youth academy for Latino students has swelled from 25 applicants in 2001 to 135 this year — the most ever, says Director Juanita Gomez-Ephraim.

"We had to beat the bushes the first year for students," she says. "This year, we had to turn so many away because we just don't have enough money."

The program started Sunday and is in full swing this week, as 80 seventh- through ninth-graders work through daily classes at Southern Oregon University. They experience the full run of campus for an early taste of college life, including sleeping in the dorms and eating in the cafeteria.

The program simply can't keep up with its growing reputation among adolescent Latino students, says Academia Latina instructor Jonathan Chavez-Baez.

"We could have a 4.0 (GPA) only program," Chavez-Baez says, "but we want struggling students around to learn from the 4.0 students."

Jose Rivera, 21, who attended the academy for three years as an adolescent, came back this year as a senior instructor.

"The program pushes people to believe they can do anything with hard work and dedication, and go to any college," Rivera says. "It encouraged me to further my education."

Teaching mural art to students at Academia Latina this year is a pleasure, says Rivera, who is entering his final year as an art major at SOU.

The culture and history surrounding murals in Mexico and throughout the world are as important for his class to learn as the artistry used to create them, Rivera says. On top of the class work, his students are working on a large banner for Academia Latina organizers to keep and display annually, he says.

Elementary- and college-level math classes, creative writing, geography and history, and Portuguese are a few of the other classes this year.

Salsa dancing is the favorite of 15-year-old J.J. Quirarte, who attends South Medford High School and is in his third year at Academia Latina.

Students previously accepted into Academia Latina must maintain a higher grade-point average than the year prior to be considered again.

J.J. ended last year with a 3.8 GPA and hopes to get accepted into Academia Latina as a counselor in a few years.

Most of the academy's applicants live in Southern Oregon, Chavez-Baez says, but many have been accepted from outside of the region and state.

The program draws most of its financial support from a handful of regional sponsors, foundations and GEAR UP, a U.S. Department of Education grant program designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in post-secondary education, according to its website.

Nearly all of the students accepted into Academia Latina are given scholarships that pay for \$650 of the \$700 cost of enrollment. About 5 percent of those accepted who don't qualify as low-income or who reside outside Southern Oregon pay the full amount, Gomez-Ephraim says.

As Academia Latina's budget depends primarily on the availability of grants and the generosity of donors, recessionary cutbacks have made it challenging to keep the program running strong, Gomez-Ephraim says. Increasing that budget anytime soon looks bleak, she says.

Chavez-Baez, who also works as admissions counselor in charge of minority outreach at SOU, has been working with the Academia Latina for the last 10 years, he says.

There is a demand for the program to grow around, he says, one that didn't exist 10 years ago.

"Here at SOU, we are really already seeing the fruits of this program," Chavez-Baez says, pointing to a more than 25 percent increase in Hispanic student enrollment at SOU last fall.

One of the things that's changed most about the program since it started is the wide array of professions and degrees Academia Latina's students say they plan to pursue after graduating high school, Gomez-Ephraim says.

"It's really too bad," she says, shaking her head. "I would love to not have to turn students away who are more than capable to attend."

Reach Ashland Daily Tidings reporter Sam Wheeler at 541-499-1470 or email swheeler@dailytidings.com.