

Yuma students get taste of college life

BY SARAH REYNOLDS, SUN STAFF WRITER

June 26, 2007 - 11:19PM

Delbert Vega is only 14 years old but he's already been to college. Vega, a sophomore at Cibola High School, and 108 other Yuma students returned Monday from a week on the campus of Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. They lived in the residence halls, ate in the dining halls and studied projects that were graded by professors - all to give them a taste of university life.

"It was like your own apartment," Vega said when asked about living in the dorms. "You even got your own key, but you had to give the key back."

Vega and his classmates were in Flagstaff as part of NAU's Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, or GEAR UP.

GEAR UP is a \$17 million federal grant program administered through NAU. It is targeted to increase graduation rates and encourage more Arizona students to go to college, said Alvina Johnson, one of the GEAR UP coordinators in Yuma.

GEAR UP works with specific groups of students at schools throughout the state. In Yuma, this six-year grant cycle is targeted at Crane and Centennial middle schools and at Cibola High School.

A total of 374 Centennial students, about 380 from Crane and 100 from Cibola are involved in the program.

It provides a variety of activities over the course of the students' education to encourage them to go to college, until today's junior high school students graduate from high school in 2012.

The previous state grant cycle worked with teenagers from 2000 to 2006, including Fourth Avenue Junior High and Yuma High School students.

More than 2,600 students graduated from high schools in Flagstaff, Kingman, Casa Grande, Mesa, Phoenix, Tucson, Patagonia, Nogales, Pinon and Yuma after participating in GEAR UP, and about 75% of those students continued their studies in colleges and universities. They received \$9 million in college scholarships.

Sixty-five percent of GEAR UP students are minority, predominantly Latino and Native American, and 84 percent are first-generation college prospects, according to program information provided by NAU.

Johnson is headed back up to Flagstaff today(Wed) with a second group of 184 Yuma students. She said it's hoped that this experience will show them what could be in their future.

"It's to expose them to college life and see themselves as university students early on in their lives."

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