



A MATTER OF DEGREE

SCHOOLS, PARENTS AND COMMUNITY COME
TOGETHER TO NURTURE FUTURE COLLEGE STUDENTS

BY GALEN RICARD

THE GRADUATION CEREMONY had all the usual pomp and circumstance – speeches, diplomas and the parents’ proud and beaming faces.

Except that in this standing-room-only auditorium, those walking across the stage to receive their diplomas were the parents themselves.

It was the first graduating class of its kind on the Central Coast.

The 160 participants were graduates of the Parent Institute for Quality Education, which is partnering with Cal Poly and The California State University to help parents take a more active and supportive role in their children’s educational efforts – starting in elementary school – to set them on the path to a college degree.

“It’s a great opportunity for our university to reach out to a local underserved community,” said Robert Detweiler, former Cal Poly provost. “The PIQE program educates parents about the importance of the educational success of their children and how they can help their children prepare for success in college. It has a wonderful record of success, and it makes good sense for Cal Poly to promote PIQE in our region.”

Sam Cortez, the university’s lead facilitator for the project, was instrumental in making certain the partnership was successful.

“The goal is to demystify the process – whether it’s how to ask the right questions at a parent-teacher conference or how to apply for scholarships and financial aid,” said Cortez. “We tell the parents, ‘You can change your child’s life if they attend college – and these are the steps to get there.’”

Adds Cornel Morton, vice president of student affairs, “We tend to think that people are either qualified or not qualified for college. But if you don’t have access to information and resources, it’s not a level playing field for students. Low-income families in our state, particularly Latinos, have had poor rates of college participation. This program is giving underserved families access to that information.”

All the recent grads have children in elementary or junior high schools in Guadalupe, a predominantly Hispanic community about 30 miles south of Cal Poly’s campus. For many

participants, the distance had seemed much farther and more daunting before their PIQE training.

Prior to taking the course, most participants were not sure how the college application process works, said Maria Elena Meraz, executive director of PIQE’s Los Angeles office. “Some didn’t know the questions to ask. Some are intimidated by the college application process. All felt college would be prohibitively expensive.”

Cal Poly’s partnership with PIQE is funded by a \$25,000 grant from the CSU Chancellor’s Office that is matched by PIQE. Cal Poly also covers a portion of the program costs.

Parents who enroll in the free nine-week program learn skills and techniques to improve their child’s motivation and ability to attend college. And by their “commencement,” parents see that college is within reach.

Denise Campbell, associate vice president of student affairs at Cal Poly, noted these are working parents – many of them field workers – yet they spent evenings investing in their children’s future.

“At the graduation ceremony, it was most impressive to see that we had come together as a community – PIQE, parents, the schools, the school district and the university. It was community collaboration at its finest,” she added.

The ceremony was packed with people – and emotion. For many parents, the certificate they received for completing the program marked the first recognition of an educational achievement in their lives.

A special moment, recalls Meraz, was when Detweiler spoke. Obviously moved by the many personal stories told at the ceremony, Detweiler shared some of his own. “You see me up here, a successful person with an important job and a good life. But it was not always that way. Like your families, mine had to work hard just to make ends meet,” he said. The son of migrant workers, Detweiler said no one in his family finished elementary school. He had attended more than 22 elementary schools. “I have a better middle-class life because I got an education,” he said. □