



Ad

Education

Students encouraged to apply to college, while in class



English teacher Joe Talarico, right, helps Lourdes Hernandez to apply to college during the school day at Columbia Heights Educational Campus in Washington on Nov. 5. (Astrid Riecken/For The Washington Post)

By **Nick Anderson** November 9 at 7:54 PM Follow @wpnick

On an ordinary day, Lourdes Hernandez and her D.C. classmates in Advanced Placement English literature would have devoted these 85 minutes to analyzing “Wuthering Heights.”

But they set aside Emily Bronte’s 19th-century novel one morning last week at the [Columbia Heights Educational Campus](#), instead spending precious class time on an urgent task: applying to college.

Hernandez sifted through paperwork on various local colleges that her teacher handed out and sought to hone her application essay.

“The hardest part is doing the personal statement,” the 19-year-old said. “Sometimes you don’t know what to say, what the college is looking for. You have to be spontaneous. You have to be unique.”

This public school on 16th Street in Northwest Washington is one of two dozen citywide that is spending class time this week on applications, part of a growing national movement to help students who face disadvantages take perhaps the most crucial step on the way to college.



Colleen E. Campbell of the Institute for Higher Education Policy helps D.C. students to apply to college during a regular school day at the Columbia Heights Educational Campus on Nov. 5. (Astrid Riecken/For The Washington Post)

Whatever else schools do to get students ready for college, one thing is certain: Those who don’t apply won’t get in.

The American College Application Campaign, sponsored by higher education advocacy group American Council on Education, aims to eliminate that barrier. The campaign began in 2005 at a high

school in Siler City, N.C. Within a few years, hundreds of schools in that state were participating. Soon the Lumina and Kresge foundations, among others, were providing funds to spread the idea.

Organizers estimate the campaign last fall helped 153,000 students from 2,500 high schools apply to college. This fall, about 4,000 schools nationwide are participating, including at least 21 in Maryland and 43 in Virginia.

Why spend class time on applications?

Bobby Kanoy, an educator from North Carolina who directs the campaign, said many students from low-income families, especially those whose parents did not attend college, do not have enough support at home. Students might not have regular computer access. They might have part-time jobs or family obligations. They might have questions about the process for which parents or siblings have no answer.

Even for students in privileged circumstances, applying to college can be daunting. For those who come from more modest means, it just might seem impossible.

“There’s just too many roadblocks,” Kanoy said. “That’s why it’s important to do it during the school day.”

D.C. education officials say the campaign, called College Application Week, is now in its third year in the city. What started at eight schools in 2012 spread to 13 last fall and now reaches 24.

The city also has taken another key step to facilitate applications: Students in public high schools were able to take the SAT this past month for free during the school day.

This year applying during English classes was a new wrinkle in the application campaign at the Columbia Heights school. Officials said they tried to have students apply during lunch last year, but few participated.

On Wednesday, AP English teacher Joe Talarico roamed his class to hand out paper applications for the University of the District of Columbia, Montgomery College and Northern Virginia Community College.

“Anyone need NOVA?” he asked. “NOVA applications?” Hands shot up. He had paperwork for qualified students to obtain fee waivers that would enable them to apply to college for free, and he dispensed stickers and rubber bracelets marked “#iAPPLIED.”

Talarico, who graduated from Georgetown University in 2006, said he views guidance on college applications as part of his job. He helps proofread essays for students who are applying to major public universities — University of Maryland at College Park, George Mason University, Pennsylvania State University — as well as prestigious private institutions. He said that he gives some essays for proofreading to his mother, who also is an English teacher.

Talarico said he preaches attention to detail. “Make sure every comma is correct,” he says.

Hernandez said she is considering Marymount California University and Wesleyan University. She also is hunting for scholarships. She showed a poem that she wrote for one grant application, with a stanza that reads: “Not the first in the world / The first in my world / The first in my family / The weight on my shoulders I carry with pride.”

Among her classmates, Shirlene Brown, 17, was preparing to create an account on the Common Application Web site, a portal for hundreds of colleges. Henry Yu, 16, was filling out an online application for George Mason. On it, he noted that he was also interested in Penn State and the University of Maryland Baltimore County. Hinijia Quintanilla, 17, said she was filling out a fee waiver form for Montgomery College.

Devon’Te Brooks, 16, said that within the past week he had finished applications to George Mason, U-Md. and St. John’s University. He said he sees himself studying communications, perhaps becoming a sports writer.

“Being the first to go to college in my family is really big,” Brooks said. “I want to be able to break the cycle. It will show I’ve come a long way, and I’m ready to contribute.”



A former Post education editor, Nick writes about college from the perspective of a father of three who will soon be buried in tuition bills.
