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College Changes Everything conference kicks off statewide campaign

By Ashley Rueff TribLocal reporter July 28 at 4:32 p.m.

Martha J. Kanter, undersecretary for the United States Department of Education, told state educators at a conference in Tinley Park last week it is critical that more of America's students attain post-secondary education to prepare them for the high-skilled jobs that will propel the economy and country forward.

"There's just a lot of momentum in the (economic) recovery, and we want to make sure students are ready for those jobs," she said. "It's about getting students into college and graduated and ready for the future."

The July 27 College Changes Everything conference spearheaded by the Illinois Student Assistance Commission drew 300 educators and community leaders to discuss programs and strategies that will increase college retention rates and achieve the national and state goals of sending more adults into the workforce with post-secondary educations.

According to The Illinois Public Agenda for College and Career Success, for every 100 students entering the 9th grade, only 20 will earn a college degree.

President Barack Obama has set a goal for America to have the highest proportion of students graduating from college throughout the world by 2020.

"In the biggest picture, this is about the future of our country," Kanter said in an interview during the conference. "And for us, our agenda has to do with getting more students educated with high quality programs so they can be employed and civic-ally engaged in the future of the country."

Eddie Brambila, managing director of community services for ISAC, said the conference was a kickoff to a statewide campaign designed to help everyone understand the importance of education and its effect on all aspects of society.

"Let's take the theme of this conference and incorporate it into our daily lives," he said, encouraging attendees to continue wearing their "College Changes Everything" lanyards after the conference.

Through the visible campaign, ISAC officials said they hope to promote the messages that education increases positive societal goals such as greater voter registration and decreases negative issues, such as violent crime rates and health risks.

With an agency goal that 60 percent of Illinois adults will have post-secondary certificates or degrees by 2025, Jacqueline Moreno, managing director of college access initiatives for ISAC, said the message needs to be heard by those outside of the education sector as well to make it happen.

"It's everybody's policy issue," she said. "Education is at the heart of all of the various public policy and social issues that we're trying to solve, so we're trying to engage the community at large."

Raquel Duszynski, assistant director for institutional research and planning at Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills, said she and fellow colleagues attended the conference in search of ideas for increasing the school's retention and graduation rates, specifically among its high-risk students.

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The college saw 67 percent of its first-time, full-time students return for a second year of classes from 2008 to 2009, but only 34 percent of its first-time, part-time students returned, according to information on the college's website.

Duszynski said MVCC implemented its own completion agenda following Obama's call to increase graduation numbers, but the officials continue to look for more ways to improve.

One idea she picked up from the conference was how to better engage students in remedial courses by tailoring the content to their interests. For example, an automotive student in a remedial reading course may benefit if that course deals in automotive topics.

Elena Herrera, 42, of Blue Island attended the conference as both a low-income, first generation student and an employee of Women Employed, a conference co-host.

After working minimum wage jobs for 20 years, Herrera enrolled herself at Moraine Valley Community College in 2007 at age 38 with the intent of majoring in nursing so she could better care for her aging parents.

With assistance from the financial aid office, she learned she could afford school with the help of the Monetary Assistance Program.

"If it wasn't for that grant I wouldn't be where I am today," she said.

Herrera is a senior at the University of Illinois at Chicago currently working toward a degree in urban planning and public policy. She also works as a student organizer for Women Employed, traveling to community colleges around the state to encourage students to share their education needs with their legislators.

She plans to work in the higher education realm where she can help other low-income students realize the benefits of an education and how to make it through to graduation.

"Having a college education, now I can pursue my passion," she said. "I have the knowledge and experience to point them in the right direction and support them on their way."

For Herrera, an education "just opened up the whole world," she said.