

Group revived to support Latino student leadership

The Latino Student Congress, an organization of student leaders from Sonoma County high schools, is back in action after a nearly 20-year hiatus. | 



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Maria Salcido, a senior at Analy High School, looks around the county and sees few leaders who she feels represent her and other Latino students.

Changing that, she said, is part of the reason she joined the Latino Student Congress, an organization of Latino leaders from local high schools that a Sonoma State University professor and leaders at the North Bay Organizing Project are reviving after a nearly 20-year hiatus.

"I saw in my community, there's a lot out there to be done, but there's not a lot of people who are willing to actually help," she said. "I feel there needs to be better people who are representing us in the right way."

The program was created in 1992 by Sonoma State University professor Francisco Vazquez to fill a gap he perceived in leadership education for Latino youths.

Students from 15 different high schools met monthly to talk about issues facing Latino students. Each year culminated in a conference, attended by more than 500 students, that focused on issues such as sex education and gang prevention.

But the program lacked a full-time coordinator, and when Vazquez was appointed provost of SSU's Hutchins School of Liberal Studies in 1997, he didn't have time to continue it. Ever since, people have been asking him to revive it, he said.

It wasn't until this year that he found the time and support to do so. He is now semi-retired, and the North Bay Organizing Project has hired a full-time staff member, Karym Sanchez, to run the program.

Davin Cardenas, a lead organizer for the North Bay Organizing Project, said his organization decided to support the effort out of "an overall desire to work with high school students to build power with them."

"We want them to have agency" he said, "to have a voice about social issues."

Vazquez said time hasn't diminished the dearth of Latino representation in local government. Indeed, he said, it was felt sharply last fall when 13-year-old Andy Lopez was shot and killed by a Sonoma County sheriff's deputy who mistook the BB gun the boy was carrying for an assault rifle.

The ensuing protests included marches filled with students, many of them from local schools and most of them Latino.

So far, students from Casa Grande, Montgomery, Rancho Cotate, Analy, El Molino, Piner, Sonoma Valley and Elsie Allen high schools, as well as some junior highs, have participated in this year's congress. Organizers hope more schools will join as the year progresses.

Salcido got involved in the program through a campus club, MEChA, which connects Latino students to leadership and career opportunities.

Christy Lubin, faculty adviser to MEChA, said she learned about the congress through work she does with Cardenas and the North Bay Organizing Project as an advocate for Latinos.

The congress, she said, will be valuable to students as a “vehicle to find mentors, connect with other students and get involved with causes of social justice.”

The idea is for students appointed through school clubs such as MEChA to convene once a month at Sonoma State University, share stories and talk about challenges they’re facing, and then discuss how to develop policies to address those challenges, Vazquez said.

A support staff of SSU and Santa Rosa Junior College students, professors and community leaders will work with the students to help them achieve their goals.

One concern Salcido brought to the group was about school counselors’ knowledge of issues facing undocumented immigrants. Her family came from Mexico to the United States when she was 5, which made her eligible to apply for a federal program, DACA, that grants some of those who immigrated as young children a temporary legal stay in the country. After she applied last year, she approached her high school counselor for advice.

“I wanted to know if there were other ways I could use it to further my education,” she said. But instead of getting more information from her counselor, she said, she had to explain to her what it was.

The congress discussed ways to teach counselors more about DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Salcido said the experience was encouraging. “If there’s a problem going on that you don’t know how to fix, you can take it (to the congress) and they have connections and knowledge that help you feel empowered,” she said.

The 25 students who attended September’s meeting focused on voter registration in light of next month’s general election.

Some students will be helping to register voters in the Roseland area. Others, including Salcido, will be registering voting-age students at their schools.

Now, Cardenas said, the goal is to build partnerships with school counselors, teachers and school groups so the students can have a structured way to share the information they learn with classmates.

Santa Rosa City Schools officials expressed interest in the program when Vazquez and Cardenas presented it at a recent school board meeting.

The board did not vote on whether to officially support the endeavor but directed district staff to help program organizers get in touch with various high schools. One board member expressed concern that community members might take issue with a group focused on serving just Latinos.

Vazquez responded that, while it's called the Latino Student Congress, anyone can attend. In the 1990s, he said, student representatives recruited friends who were not Latino to attend, and they were welcome.

Vazquez, who sits on the Community and Local Law Enforcement Task Force created to address issues raised by Lopez's shooting, said the task force plans to recommend supporting the program to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors later this year.

Alumni of the first congress said they were glad it was returning.

Omar Medina, a county eligibility worker who sits on the North Bay Organizing Project's education task force and is running for a position on the Santa Rosa City Schools board, said he remembered attending conferences and lectures that allowed him to meet and be inspired by Latino leaders.

"As a young Latino male, it was great to see all these educated Latinos doing great stuff," he said. "I felt like, 'If they can do it, I can do it.'"

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