

NYC Students Inspired by Latino University Students and NY/NJ Professionals

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New York City, NY - Imagine more than 100 middle school students raising their hands in unison and saying "Yes, I am going to college." That was one outcome of a day-long conference for students from three New York City schools.

Hosted at Columbia University by Hispanics Inspiring Students' Performance and Achievement (HISPA) and Latino student members of the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, the conference featured interactive activities among middle school students, university students and professionals.

The agenda featured a team exercise, motivational speakers, a panel with Columbia and CUNY students and technology and engineering workshops including App development (sponsored by the Verizon Foundation and Samsung), sports programming (hosted by ESPN's Hispanic/Latino Employee Resource Group *Goal!*), and building a rocket that actually flies (presented by AT&T Latino Employee Resource Group HACEMOS).

"I didn't really know whether college is for me," said one student. "But being here today showed me that with a college education I can be what I want to be." Participating schools included Inwood Academy for Leadership, Manhattan Bridges and PS 279.

The student panel imparted empowering messages, "Never take no for an answer, People told me that as a Latina I would not make it to an Ivy League college or that a girl should not study engineering, if I had listened, I wouldn't be here now," "Don't be afraid to ask for help along the way," "Never lose the ability to dream big. You need to work hard to make those dreams come true." The audience of middle school students cheered after each comment.

HISPA Role Models are Latino professionals, many with careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), go into middle schools to share their stories, explaining how they overcame adversity, persevered and went on to higher education and successful careers. "HISPA's focus on Latino students is particularly important for our country's ability to innovate," said Dr. Alicia Abella, the event keynoter, the Assistant Vice President, AT&T Cloud Technologies and Services and a Columbia alumna. "Jobs that require STEM can benefit greatly from more diversity. Diversity of people leads to diversity of thinking, and diversity of thinking leads to innovation." Abella, of Cuban descent, showcased her exciting career and how important STEM professionals are to the advancement of technology.

Based in Princeton, NJ, HISPA operates throughout New Jersey and in San Antonio, Texas and New York City. "The needs are great, and we can make a difference today," said Ivonne Díaz-Claisse, Ph.D., founder and president of HISPA who grew up in Puerto Rico. "Seeing middle school students interacting with Columbia University students and with the Latino professionals was truly powerful – they could look around them and think, that could be me 5, 10 or 15 years from now.." At the end of the conference, one student rushed to Díaz-Claisse to say: "Thank you for being an inspiration to us. You made us believe that anything is possible and that we can follow our dreams."

Díaz-Claisse is quick to recognize the steady support HISPA has received from such companies as Comcast, Educational Testing Service, ESPN, Southwest Airlines, UPS, and Verizon and professional organizations such as SHPE. "They get it," added Díaz-Claisse. "Over 40% of New York City public school students are of Latino heritage and the companies that support us know these students are the future of America, their future employees, their future customers."

With a Ph.D. in mathematics and as a former AT&T data analyst, she knows about the power of numbers. "Our survey data show clearly that our Role Model Program and our conferences – 17 so far – move the needle," she explained. "The students' desire to go to college grows significantly. We eradicate the lack of role models as a reason for Latinos students not going to college."

The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics recognized HISPA recently as a “**Bright Spot.**” Created in 1990, it addresses the educational disparities faced by Hispanics and leverages and encourages collaboration among stakeholders focused on similar issues. To view the “Bright Spots” catalog visit www.ed.gov/HispanicInitiative. For more information about HISPA visit www.hispa.org.

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