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Ricardo Nava, left, tutors Ruben Chavez at the SCCC/ATS student success center. Nava, the oldest of four siblings, plans to pay his way through college with federal financial aid, work study and his own earnings so that his parents can set money aside for his brothers' and sisters' college expenses. L&T photos/Rachel Coleman

Volunteers help students find financial aid this weekend at Liberal High School

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Ricardo Nava can't be certain, but he's pretty sure that, without College Goal Sunday, he would not have started his college career.

“I didn’t know what I needed to do to get help for college, or how to do it,” the Seward County Community College/Area Technical School freshman recalled. “I knew it had to do with taxes, but I didn’t understand how taxes worked.”

What Nava did know, as he finished his senior year at Liberal High School, was that “it was down to me to pay for college. My family doesn’t make that much money.”

Nava would have to rely on scholarships and financial aid, along with his own earnings, to pay for higher education. The first step? Filling out the FAFSA — the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, a detailed, online form that determines a student’s eligibility for help. The process can be daunting, said SCCC/ATS financial aid officer Shannon Davis.

“It can be an intimidating process for parents and students, who are hoping to get to college and are already worried, wondering where are they going to get that money from,” she said. “We want them to have the assistance they need to complete a FAFSA.”



That’s why SCCC/ATS, in cooperation with LHS, sponsors College Goal Sunday, a one-day, one-stop resource to help families complete FAFSA. This year’s free workshop is set for 2-4 p.m. Sunday at Liberal High School. SCCC/ATS spearheaded the event, but that doesn’t mean participants commit to a certain college. They simply establish eligibility for funding through federal programs, and the money is available to the student wherever he or she decides to attend.

The funds students may receive make all the difference.

“Money is the biggest factor in students deciding not to go to college,” said Mariah Cline, a counselor at LHS. “The sad thing is a lot of kids don’t realize they could get help. I don’t think they really understand what FAFSA is, or what it means. It’s this amazing opportunity.”

The maximum Pell Grant for low-income students is \$5,500 per year, enough to cover a fair chunk of tuition costs.

When her students see their estimated grant after filling out the form, Cline said, their eyes widen “and I can see the look on their faces: ‘Oh, this is what she’s been talking about.’ It makes it real,” she said.

Perla Hernandez, also a freshman at SCCC/ATS, said College Goal Sunday not only helped her get federal applications in order, it connected her to local scholarship opportunities. A business administration major, she had planned to attend college at Marquette University in Wisconsin.

“But when I got the presidential scholarship from SCCC/ATS, I stayed here,” she said. “The earlier you do FAFSA, the more likely you are to get financial help.”

For Hernandez, that meant a tuition grant from SCCC/ATS, along with Pell Grant funding.

“I was able to get a laptop, go on my college visit, do well in school. That extra money I wouldn’t have had otherwise helped a lot,” she said.

Hernandez credits Cline with encouraging her to complete FAFSA and access the help she needed.

“I wouldn’t have known how to do it, and neither did my parents,” she said. “Walking through it with the College Goal people helped me. I was able to fill out my own FAFSA this year.”

That's good news to Davis, who noted that the target audience for College Goal Sunday is first-generation college students of all backgrounds.

"So many don't know what's available to them. The parents may not speak English, or they just never went to college themselves," she said. "We want to help students and families who are in unfamiliar territory."

Nava, too, fits that profile. The first in his family to seek higher education, he is keenly aware that his performance in college will set the mark for his three younger siblings.

"There's more pressure on me. I have to be the example," he said. Nava lives at home in order to cut back on college expenses, and said his parents are "really supportive. They tell me, 'We'll follow whatever you choose, just go to college.'"

That point of view was the driving force for the family's immigration from Mexico nearly 20 years ago, Nava said. Working through the legal requirements and challenges of life in a new country has already paid off.

"My other cousins my age are struggling in Mexico," he said. "They're trying to come here because they see we have a better opportunity. I tell my parents, 'don't feel bad that you can't help me more with the money.' The way I see it, they got me here and I have all these opportunities now."

As Nava looks back on the process of getting to college, he sees that College Goal Sunday gave him the tools to take advantage of those opportunities.

"If I hadn't had that help, I probably would have tried to do the FAFSA myself, but I don't think I would have been successful," he said. "I would have half done it, put it off. Then I wouldn't be here."

Davis hopes to see similar stories unfold as students attend this year's College Goal Sunday.

"We've had it four years, and feel it's something that yields long-term benefits. At this point in their senior year, a lot of students are focused on getting in to college and only later do they think 'how am I going to pay for this?' A lot of students drop out because they can't afford it," she said. "This way, they can spend maybe 45 minutes with us, get the paperwork done, ask their questions, and know that they'll have help when it's time to pay for college."

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