



## PROJECT GRAD HELPS TEENS GET COMFY WITH COLLEGE

Project GRAD academies help HISD students get a look at education after high school

■ Group's summer academies aim to get more of HISD's minority and low-income students thinking about education beyond high school

BY ERICKA MELLON  
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The teens turned off their cell phones — for this, it was worth it — and ambled into the upstairs observation room at the Texas Heart Institute.

Jennifer Barrera, an otherwise cheerful 17-year-old, worried that she might faint. But like the others in this special program for high schoolers, she pressed her hands against the glass dome and watched below as doctors performed open-heart surgery on a real-life patient.

This wasn't *Grey's Anatomy*.

Blood circled through clear tubes, and Barrera could see something pink and fleshy. Yet her stomach didn't turn. Her knees didn't shake.

"This," she said recently, "has convinced me what I want to do."

She wants to be a doctor.

The daughter of Mexican immigrants, Barrera would be the first in her family to attend college. She is exactly the type of student Project GRAD organizers recruit for their summer academies. The programs are part of the

nonprofit group's efforts to get more poor and minority students into college.

"Getting kids onto a college campus, not just for a field trip, it just changes so much of what they think is possible for themselves," said Ann Stiles, executive director of Project GRAD of Houston. (GRAD stands for Graduation Really Achieves Dreams.)

The nonprofit has reinstated several of its offerings this summer, after a loss of federal and local funding last year forced cuts.

At its peak, Project GRAD was able to enroll about 1,800 students from the Houston Independent School District in its summer programs. This summer, about 520 students are participating.

They're studying business, nanochemistry and math at Rice University; literature, ethics and computers at the University of St. Thomas; and biology at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston.

Funding from Shell Oil



CHEMISTRY: Yates High School students Arianna Onuba, background, and Toyin Onuba, right, watch Rice University's Dr. Mary McHale perform a demonstration in the nanochemistry lab.



MATH: Reagan High students Gabriela Rubio, left, and Jeanette Blanco work with Yates High teacher Gladys Wyatt in an algebra class at Rice University during a Project GRAD summer program.

helped kickstart Rice's math program, and the Favrot Fund gave new life to the biology program. HISD provided bus transportation.

At Rice one recent morning, about a dozen students gathered around Mary McHale, a chemistry lecturer wearing a tie-dyed lab coat.

She dropped an old penny into one beaker, a new penny into another, and told the students to hypothesize about which would dissolve the most in concentrated nitric acid.

"Like Martha Stewart, I've got my prepared sample," she said, prompting a few chuckles from the shy teens.

They found that the new coin nearly disappeared.

Why?

Newer U.S. pennies are made of copper and zinc, which makes them more reactive than the pricier older coins, which are made entirely of copper, McHale explained.

Elizabeth Alba, who will

be a junior this fall at Sam Houston High School, said she didn't like science before coming to the nanochemistry institute.

"It was confusing. Now everything makes sense," she said. "We've made slime. We've made Silly Putty. We've put Mentos in Diet Coke and watched it explode."

Across campus, other high schoolers beefed up their math skills, getting lessons in algebra II, pre-calculus and calculus from trained HISD teachers.

The classes are similar to those in high school, but the students get more freedom: no bells, no asking permission to use the restroom.

After a day of graphing equations, Judy Delgado, of Davis High School, said she was glad she decided against spending the summer in Mexico — even if she did have to wake up at 7 a.m. to get to Rice.

"You get to experience college," she said.



MATH: Project GRAD participant Maronica Harris stares into her graphing calculator during her algebra class at Rice University last week.

Ericka Mellon can be reached at [ericka.mellon@chron.com](mailto:ericka.mellon@chron.com).

PHOTOS: Billy Smith II  
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