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## **'Boys to Men': Montclair State hosts event to inspire urban teens to go to college**

When Luis Ramos pictured his future, the 16-year-old usually envisioned playing professional baseball or, if that didn't work out, training to be a mechanic.

On Friday, the high school freshman began to think that going to a four-year college might be a better path.

"It could really change my life. And I'd be able to help out my parents," said Ramos, who would be the first in his family to go to college.

Ramos was one of more than 450 male teenagers from urban high schools who spent the day at Montclair State University for the school's annual "Boys to Men Conference." The students, many of whom had never been on a college campus, came from more than a dozen schools in Newark, Paterson, Hoboken and other parts of the state.

The gathering in the university's conference center featured speakers and panels designed to show the high school students the benefits of going to college. Several of the speakers grew up in low-income families and transformed their lives through education, becoming doctors, law enforcement officials and educators.

"I'm essentially trying to set up an experience that could have affected me and my peers," said Daniel Jean, who grew up in Newark and organized the conference. "We are trying to tell students we were once in their shoes."

The conference, now in its third year, has helped boost the number of applications from urban male teens to Montclair State, said Jean, the university's executive director of the Educational Opportunity Fund and academic development.

"Ultimately, we're trying to empower them to see beyond their possibilities," Jean said.

The conference follows President Obama's launch of his "My Brother's Keeper" initiative last month, which highlighted the elevated poverty and crime rates of young minority men.

"By almost every measure the group that's facing some of the most severe challenges in the 21st century in this country are boys and young men of color," Obama said at a White House press conference surrounded by teenagers in a program for at-risk youth in Chicago.

"We assume this is an inevitable part of American life instead of the outrage that it is," the president said.

Several foundations have pledged \$200 million to Obama's "My Brother's Keeper" initiative to support programs to keep minority teenagers out of trouble and give them better access to higher education.

At Montclair State, the teenagers attending the "Boys to Men" conference sat in a seventh floor conference room overlooking the campus. The program included information about applying to college and financial aid, a film about the effects of hip hop and sports on education and a "Swagger Panel" featuring the personal stories of minority men who went to college.

"The path is already set for you guys. Just follow the path," said Bernard Mensah, a panelist who grew up in the Bronx, went to Ramapo College and eventually went to work for the Department of Homeland Security.

Frank Latini, 17, a high school junior from Newark, said he wanted to attend the conference to get a closer look at college life.

"I haven't really been exposed to college. I wanted to see what it was like," he said.

Kierre DuBose, a football player from Malcolm X Shabazz High School in Newark, said he attended the conference to help him decide where he wants to go to college. The senior is considering Montclair, Morgan State University in Maryland and Shaw University in North Carolina.

"I've been here before and I like everything about this college. It's just a warm feeling," DuBose, 18, said of Montclair State. "I will actually be the first person in my family to go to college."

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