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Students studying and realizing social change

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On a pleasant 80-degree day in May when high school students are more likely to be found outdoors catching a few rays with friends, about 20 high school students are gathered in small groups at the Mestizo Coffeehouse at 631 W. North Temple Monday afternoon. They're engaged in research on how the news media treat people of color.

The students are part of the Mestizo Arts & Activism program. They are west-side high school students committed to social change who have dedicated the past academic year to conducting research, producing a blog to assist undocumented students who want to go to college and filming a docudrama titled "Dreaming of No Judgments," which explores issues of stereotyping and discrimination, among other projects.

"These students not only dream about a world with 'no judgments,' they're doing something about it," said Caitlin Cahill, assistant professor of urban studies in the University of Utah's College of Architecture and Planning.

She and collaborators Matt Bradley of the U.'s Honor College and David Quijada of the U.'s department of education, culture and society, mentor the students engaged in the participatory action research program. Participating students receive a stipend, college credit and valuable experience in conducting research and using their findings to help change attitudes and social policy.

The script for the docudrama "Dreaming of No Judgments," for instance, was extracted from focus groups conducted among other high school students. One story portrays a Latino family interested in renting a new apartment. When the family visits the building, they're told there are no units available, despite being told earlier in the day in a phone conversation that there are units for rent.

The docudrama, found at my space.com/dreamingofnojudgment, also tells the story of a Hispanic student who goes to his school counselor to attempt to transfer out of a math class that does not challenge him. He wants to be placed in a more rigorous class because he has an eye on college. The counselor checks his grades — straight A's — but tells him he should stand pat and that she has a lunch appointment so he needs to go. "That story is one I've heard told over and over, only in different ways," Cahill says. It's an all-too-common experience among Hispanic students who receive too little support in the public education system and of whom there are low expectations, she said.

The beauty of the Mestizo Arts & Activism program is that the students select the issues they will investigate and attempt to bring about social changes. The students are keenly aware of the high dropout rate among Hispanic/Latino students, let alone the challenges students face if they want to attend college.

To help with the latter issue, the students created a blog to help undocumented high school students access information about college, applicable state laws, scholarship opportunities and

entrance requirements. The blog, found at www.educatexcambio.blogspot.com, is particularly important because the students' research revealed that undocumented students are afraid to ask school counselors for assistance because of the fear of deportation. Students constantly update the blog, which is written in English and Spanish.

Perhaps what is most impressive about the student work is the tremendous amount of research behind every effort. Many adult advocates could learn a great deal from these students. Another bonus is that U. students also help mentor the high school students while they conduct their own research on the activism project itself.

The program is supported by the University Neighborhood Partners program and the Mestizo Institute of Culture and Art, which is the perfect incubator for such work.

As Cahill says, "We're all committed to social justice. That's what all of these projects revolve around."

Mestizo Arts & Activism will conduct an open house from 5-8 p.m., Wednesday, May 27, at the coffeehouse. The public is invited.

Marjorie Cortez, who looks forward to the students' findings on the news media and people of color, is a Deseret News editorial writer. E-mail her at Marjorie@desnews.com

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