

Parent University

2020-21 REPORT: YEAR FOUR

Submitted by:

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“Through Parent University, I was able to handle all the changes and at times the chaos the pandemic brought to many of us. Through our virtual meetings, I felt a sense of community and group support. It was so nice to have our WhatsApp group chat to share community resources and moral support.”

– Mother participant

Executive Summary

Parent education models regard parenting as an ongoing and lifelong learning process. The models are diverse in structure and delivery based on parents’ needs, demographics, and community culture. In 2016, the NIU Center for P-20 Engagement developed and launched a new community outreach initiative to engage parents from DeKalb and Sycamore school districts. The initiative, called Universidad para Padres/Parent University, targets Latino parents with children in the K-12 education system. This model offers a platform for parents to learn about community and education resources in a non-threatening environment. The objective is to empower parents to take a more active role in their children’s education, especially parents who must deal with cultural, financial, and language barriers. Universidad para Padres aims to accomplish this by focusing on the parent as an adult learner and subject of their own learning. While the intention of parent university is not a recruitment effort, the opportunity for parents to become familiar with NIU and community resources indirectly supports parents with strategies to encourage their children in the transition to post-secondary education, meeting the goal of increasing a college-going culture in the Latino community. For year four, parents chose to meet three times per month for a total of 14 sessions in the Fall and 14 in the Spring semester. Due to the pandemic’s social distancing restrictions, all meetings were conducted virtually via Zoom on Monday nights from 6 to 8 p.m.

Universidad Para Padres Overview

The objective of Universidad para Padres/Parent University is to provide a learning community to support parents’ personal leadership development and self-advocacy. The focus is on facilitating parents’ personal growth, understanding of the education system in the United States, and parenting skills. Each year a needs assessment is conducted, and results guide the content of topics covered.



Parent University Recruitment

Recruitment continues to follow a collaborative outreach approach by tapping into community and school district resources and allies; we strive to have a presence at schools, back to school events, and various community events (Corn Fest, Pumpkin Fest, Cinco de Mayo Celebration). Our parent participants are also our best recruitment effort, and they have encouraged other parents to join the program. Prior to the pandemic, we attended the “Back to School Bash” program organized by the DeKalb School District in collaboration with local nonprofit agencies, as well as “Parent Nights” at Cortland Elementary, Little John Elementary, and Founder’s Elementary in the DeKalb School District; provided handouts at the DeKalb Health Department, Sycamore Public Library, DeKalb Public Library, and local churches; and shared information with several school district staff. We also partnered with the DeKalb school district Facebook page to post information on Parent University. Due to the pandemic’s social distancing restrictions, recruitment was mainly done by word-of-mouth from our group participants in social media and through a Parent University collaboration with school districts’ food pantries and the community garden pantry pick-up days.

Attendance and Demographics

In 2020-21, Parent University had a total of 38 parents, with 22 returning parents from 2019-20 and 16 new parents. 28 parents (74 % of enrollment applications) attended the first session and continued throughout the year. Parent University had a total of 28 (14/Fall 2020 and 14/Spring 2021) sessions with an average attendance of 22 parents per session (78.5% overall participation). The majority of parents were from DeKalb School District with only 5 parents from Sycamore School District. In terms of gender, there were 8 dads and 30 moms. On the enrollment application, all but two moms listed Mexico as their country of origin. One mom listed Venezuela as her country of birth and the other one listed the Dominican Republic. Most of the participants listed having an 8th grade average level of education. Five parents reported having college education equivalent to an undergraduate degree in the United States.

Parents’ immigration status included undocumented, U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, refugees, and mixed status families. Most families had been in the DeKalb/Sycamore area since their arrival to the United States.

Parent University Signature Programs:

- **College-prep Boot Camp:** This spin-off initiative was created at the request of Parent University participants with children in high school. This is a partnership with the Illinois Latino Council on Higher Education (ILACHE) with the objective to assist parents and students making the transition from high school to post-secondary education. Topics include college prep courses, scholarships, FAFSA, career exploration, college visits, SAT prep, importance of extracurricular activities, service learning, social and emotional learning, budgeting and personal finances, time management, study skills, college essay writing, professional presentations, and career exploration. This program met two Saturdays per month, 9:30 – 11:30 a.m., at NIU Founders Memorial Library. The program offers 3-4 sessions that includes parents and students to help parents learn about the transition to post-secondary education and resources available for families with college-bound students (parent sessions are conducted in Spanish). The curriculum includes “Preparing for College” (the National Pass Center textbook, 2021), various career exploration resources, and planned college visits. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, sessions were conducted via Zoom. A counselor provided differentiated support to students by developing individualized plans based on interests and career paths. A total of six students participated in 2020-21. Four graduated and enrolled at Kishwaukee College and plan to transfer to NIU.

- **Book Club 2020-21:** This initiative started in 2018-19 at the request of parent participants. The book club is guided by a parent leader and promotes social-emotional support through literacy. The first book read and discussed was “The Four Agreements” by Don Miguel Ruiz. The group decides what book or journal to read next and Parent University covers the cost of books. The group meets 45 minutes prior to Parent University meeting time. The group continued to meet on zoom due to the pandemic and discussed various topics of interest through discussion of articles and news magazines of current events from Mexico and other countries in Latin America. The group is deciding on the next book to read.
- **Flor de Café- Mexican Folkloric-dance group:** This group became an initiative after Parent University members attended the State Bilingual Parent Summit in 2019. Interested parents started regular practices and a participant with experience with traditional folkloric dances took the “dance instructor” role. The group was ready to perform at the 2020 Bilingual Parent Summit, but due to the pandemic the event went virtual, and rehearsals stopped. They are meeting again outdoors to practice in preparation for the 2022 Bilingual Parent Summit in May to finally be able to perform in front of a big audience.
- **Immigration Updates:** The purpose of these sessions is to bring important immigration legislation updates and resources to parents.

2020-21 Highlights

- **Parent University Goes International:** Parents had the opportunity to learn from former Northern Illinois University international alumni from Colombia and Spain who facilitated workshops for Parent University participants. This opportunity encouraged parents and kept them motivated during the pandemic.
- **Parent University hosts visiting Bilingual Parent Advisory Committees (BPACs):** To increase BPAC parent participation, Parent University partnered with representatives of Elgin Area School District U46 and DeKalb School District to host a dialogue among parents to exchange experiences and learn more about benefits of BPAC parent involvement. Visiting BPAC members included parents from Boone, Lake, and Cook Counties that joined our virtual meeting.
- **Social-Emotional Wellness:** The group invited DeKalb high school social worker to address social emotional wellness in high school. This is a topic of interest for parents’ own wellness but also to understand the challenges their children might be facing that have an impact on their emotional wellness.
- **COVID-19 Testing clinic:** A collaborative effort with Parent University, Community Health Partners of Illinois (CHP), and Real Connections Church. Provided information in Spanish on COVID vaccine and CHP, and completed 100 COVID tests.
- **COVID Vaccination clinic:** This was a collaborative effort with the Illinois Migrant Council and the Boone County Health Department.
- **Posada (this event was canceled due to COVID):** This is a great way to end the fall semester. This program provides the opportunity for Parent participants to bring their spouses and children to a traditional holiday celebration. Parents collaborate with decorations, and everyone brings a dish to share. Parents organized a food contest and coordinator organized an Angel Tree” for children to have a present at the posada. The event also has a piñata and traditional Christmas Carols. We’re looking forward to having this program in December 2021.
- **Parent Leadership Development (Conferences and Lectures):** Due to the Pandemic, the Illinois Latino Council on Higher Education (ILACHE) conference and the State Bilingual Parent Summit were conducted virtually. Parent University received an invitation from the Illinois State Bilingual Parent Summit to submit proposals for the virtual conference. We presented two sessions in Spanish that were attended by 60 conference participants, and a total of 10 parents participated in ILACHE’s Parent Academy (parent component of the annual ILACHE conference).

Overall Evaluation Report

The overall feedback from end-of-year evaluations continues to be positive and encouraging. Parents noted how helpful it was for them to be able to continue our meetings virtually after the Shelter in Place Ordinance. Parents also ranked high satisfaction in the following sessions: community resource awareness during the Pandemic, immigration updates, computer literacy, U.S. education system, “Know Your Rights” workshop, understanding learning disabilities, and personal development. Parent participants also provided positive feedback on having two “Zoom” monthly sessions during summer 2021.

- The “Hoy Aprendí” (Today I learned) prompt provided insight on what parents are taking away from the program. We collect this through a Qualtrics survey that parents complete after each session.

Universidad para Padres Impact on NIU and Community

While the intention of this program is not a recruitment effort, the opportunity for parents to become familiar with NIU’s campus and educational resources indirectly encourages and supports parents with strategies and resources to encourage their children in the transition to post-secondary education, meeting the overall objective of increasing a college-going culture in the Latino community. Universidad para Padres also supports NIU’s vision of diversity and inclusion and it is testimony of a “Communiversities” approach to Latino family engagement. Additionally, Universidad para Padres has a presence at local and state conferences, giving visibility to NIU and the Center for P-20 Engagement. Founders Memorial Library not only opened their doors to host two sessions, but also opened access to parents by providing a courtesy library card to interested parents. This is a positive experience for parents and their students who are attending Kishwaukee College and may encourage transfer to NIU to complete a four-year degree. Overall, parents are becoming familiar with programs and services offered at NIU and are taking advantage of concerts, lectures, museum exhibits, and other enrichment opportunities that bridges the gap between community and university by eliminating the myths and obstacles of pursuing a college education. Also, during summer of the pandemic, several students participated in NIU STEAM virtual summer camps. These prompted a student to start “Sisters Greatest Adventures” (see YouTube links below).

Making Crystal Candies: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0I6HBIr4qU>

Spaghetti Tower: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ESzpAaoGN8>

Homemade Lava Lamp: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qtPlCDwKnE>

Northern Illinois University Partners: NIU STEAM, Undergraduate Admissions, Latino Resource Center, Center for Latino and Latin American Studies, Financial Aid and Scholarship Office, Student Organizations, Founders Memorial Library, NIU Department of Police and Public Safety, College of Education Learning Center and Professors (Dr. Nieto and Dr. James Cohen).

Community Partners: First Midwest Bank, University of Illinois Extension Programs, DeKalb School District, Sycamore School District, DeKalb Public Library, Sycamore Public Library

Northwestern Medicine-Community Health Education

Kishwaukee YMCA, Illinois Latino Council on Higher Education (ILACHE),

DeKalb County Youth Service Bureau, Illinois Migrant Council, Community Health Partners of Illinois, Immigration Law Office of Jeremy Lime, Immigration Law Office of Rocio Becerril (NIU Law School Alumnus).

Moving Forward: 2021-22

Our goal for 2021-22 is to strengthen collaborations within NIU, Kishwaukee College, and school districts to increase parent participation, engagement, and empowerment.

Parent University 2021-22 Calendar

August 30	January: 24, 31
September: 13, 20, 27	February: 7, 14, 28
October: 4, 8, 25	March: 7, 11, 28
November: 1, 8, 15	April: 4, 11, 18
December: 6, 13,	May: 2, 9
December 18: Posada (location TBD)	May 2: End of year Ceremony

What do Parents Say

- Parent University has been a motivation to believe that our children can be a better version of us.
- Parent University is a unique opportunity because we are creating new knowledge that helps us in our present and future.
- Thank you for caring about us and having the time to organize and bring speakers and ask ourselves in which topics we want to improve and help us to be better parents and human beings.
- I am grateful to Susana and Araceli for this program. They have helped us a lot with their issues.
- We have had the opportunity to have sessions with professors from the University of NIU and also from universities in Colombia and Spain.
- I have learned to be a better father and to have a lot of patience and to achieve the motivation for my son to go to university.
- Being part of this program has enriched me as a person because we have covered topics such as education, health, family, mental health, and active parenting and now I feel I have the tools to move forward as an individual and parent.
- It has put in our hands knowledge and resources that if we put them into practice, as immigrants they will make us people with more capacity and confidence in ourselves to develop our own goals as parents and as adults with aspirations.
- I am happy to be here in this program and the way they work with us and for the friendships we have developed.