

Transcript of Try Harder! Live Panel Discussion
April 26, 2022

00:00:05:05 - 00:00:41:02

Moi Padilla

Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for watching this special preview screening of "Try Harder!" I'm Moi Padilla, Director of the Nebraska College Preparatory Academy, and I'm going to be leading our discussion tonight and spend a little bit of time talking about the college admissions process, the pressures, the challenges, the choice that students face when navigating today.

So, the Nebraska College Preparatory Academy, or NCPA for short, is an innovative college access program that prepares academically talented first-generation students for college and their future careers.

00:00:41:03 - 00:01:13:24

Moi Padilla

And I'm so happy, I'm thrilled to have two NCPA scholars with us on the panel tonight.

The first is Shauntee Mims, Shauntee is a second-year UNL student majoring in nursing. She is a 2020 graduate from Omaha North Magnet High School and NCPA scholar.

With us tonight also is Nayla Torres Ruiz, who is a first-year UNL student majoring in anthropology and Spanish, and Nayla is a 2021 graduate of Grand Island Senior High School and also a NCPA scholar.

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Moi Padilla

Also joining me tonight are two others who have a lot of experience working with students on the college admission process.

The first is Nuria Lemus, who is a bilingual college finance specialist for Education Quest Foundation. Education Quest Foundation is a non-profit organization with the mission to improve access to higher education in Nebraska, and it provides free college access planning services, need-based scholarship programs, grants for high school, college access resources for middle schools and outreach services for community agencies.

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Moi Padilla

It's also the place where I file my FAFSAs, so kudos to Education Quest.

And Dr. Yan Ruth Xia, a professor in the department of Child, Youth and Family Studies, in the UNL College of Education and Human Sciences. And her research interests include immigrant youth behavior and mental health, parent-adolescent relation, and relationship strength and stress among Asian-American immigrant families.

And I have to also say thank you so much to Pamela Duncan who is providing ASL interpretation for us.

So, we're so happy to have everyone here tonight.

00:02:34:20 - 00:03:00:02

Moi Padilla

We hope that, to hear from you in the audience. So if you do have questions or want to join us in the discussion, we ask that you please put them in the OVEE chat box at any time. We want to hear from you and we'll try to answer as many questions as possible.

So with that being said, I am like many others in Nebraska. Allergy season is here, so if I have to cough,

00:03:00:04 - 00:03:35:22

Moi Padilla

I apologize in advance, but allergies are no joke. So, thank you for, for understanding.

So to get us started, I want to go to our NCPA scholars. Looking at Shauntee and Nayla.

You know, you both graduated from high school very recently and navigated this process that we just saw many students go through in the film. And so I just, big question, right? What are your impressions from the film?

Do you see yourself in some of the students there, tell us about that. What resonated, what did not resonate?

00:03:38:23 - 00:04:55:02

Nayla Torres Ruiz

For me, I would say something that did not resonate with me was the whole college application process.

Just because, throughout the pandemic, there wasn't all that much going around. So that was actually a breath of fresh air for me. And I already had submitted, so I already knew that Lincoln was going to be my first, top choice.

But going back to the students I did resonate a lot with them and their sense of academics in particular. Like measuring yourself worse through your grades, the higher the grade the better, and also wanting to make your parents proud. My parents do not know much about the education system here, or colleges, but for a while they wanted me to be a lawyer. And I wasn't, not going to lie, I didn't really care much about what college I was going to go to until I got into my junior year, so I developed my own passions.

So it was mostly me going through the motions of applying to college or thinking about college because I had to, to make my parents proud. So I do like that part, of them being proud. So much that I don't want them to [unintelligible] "But, what happened that you did not get into the college?" But, yeah.

00:04:55:07 - 00:05:08:18

Moi Padilla

Yeah, yeah, it was it was the pressure, right, to do well. Yeah. Yeah, and knowing you. I know that's important. So, what about you Shauntee?

00:05:09:11 - 00:06:02:08

Shauntee Mims

So kind of like Nayla said, the whole college application process wasn't really something that like, I was worried about, because I knew no matter what, I had NCPA to fall back on, and that was kind of like an in. So I knew that no matter what, I had somewhere to go.

Relating to their academics, I was hard on myself and I still am, but I wasn't as hard on myself because I think that, that grades didn't always define me. Like they were important, but like being a well-rounded student is more what, like colleges look for? And also, like, I was like wanting to make the parents proud. I knew like my mom struggled in school, so, so like, being able to show her that I was doing well, it helped her realize that even though she struggled, she still helped me to, like, excel.

00:06:02:16 - 00:06:47:21

Moi Padilla

That's awesome. OK, thank you for sharing that. And so, you know, another thing that that came up in the film and Nuria, I'm, I'm curious if you can share a little bit about your thoughts on this. You know, one of the themes is and, and both scholars right now talked about is the pressure that we see in the pressure that students put, put on themselves to be number one or to exceed or excel academically. So I know you're a phenomenal bilingual guidance counselor with Education Quest and I'm curious to know, just from your experience working with families and students, do you see those pressures for students here in Nebraska?

00:06:49:12 - 00:08:27:02

Nuria Lemus

Yeah, hello everyone. Thanks Moi. Well, I have not dealt with students who have that pressure to be number one. I'm not saying they, you know, they don't exist in Nebraska. I just haven't personally dealt with them. The, the most common pressure that I've, I've seen when helping Spanish speaking families, because that's the majority of the students and family that I work with, they have the pressure of, you know, attending college and holding those prestigious occupations like Nayla said. Lawyer, doctor, because they carry that burden of having to financially support their family once they graduate.

So those occupations will, you know, earn them the big bucks, which in return they will be able to financially support their family. And I see that a lot of those immigrant families putting that pressure on their students. So you know, that's a very common pressure that I see when working with families. And also, you know, getting into the private colleges and then, with full rides and significant scholarships, for instance, the Susan Thomson Buffet Scholarship is a big one that I've see students, you know, beat themselves up for if they don't receive that or are depending on that scholarship. So, you know, I haven't really dealt

with it with students who pressure themselves to be number one. But those, those are the pressures that I've seen.

00:08:29:12 - 00:09:08:21

Moi Padilla

Yeah. You know, and I think what you said about the pressures to pay for college, right. That can be something where our families in, in Nebraska are really attentive to.

Dr. Xia, you know, a lot of your work focuses on parent-adolescent communication, and particularly around Asian immigrant families. So I'm curious, how do you see the expectations that parents have impact their students, both negatively and positively? And what, what are some ways that parents or caregivers can do to better communicate with their student during this time?

00:09:10:24 - 00:13:22:26

Dr. Yan Ruth Xia

So, when we're thinking about communications, we often think about, "okay, communication skills: active listening, be a good listener. Actually, there's really, to have great communications, and that's not stayed only with skills, the communication skills. [unintelligible] In every family, especially in immigrant families and parents and adolescents, children, oftentimes we see the clashes. The clashes, some because of the, the adolescent's development by this stage and children at this stage want to see who they are, start to explore who they are. And so they start to physically separate themselves from parents, but also try to psychologically, emotionally see, test, and particularly, when they test that they are different and when they test, they don't exactly agree with their parents like in the past. and parents now lose their value. When we're little kids in the kindergarten or, you know, grade school and we, we believe all parents said to us.

Then but by the adolescent age, that's not the case, which is natural. It's, it's a good thing to start to experiment. And the parents don't, you know, are not used to that type of feeling. So that kind of create some discomfort or sometimes could be angry, so it doesn't need to be that is a part of that. Actually recognize that it's not that kids are not loving you anymore, or not close to you anymore. That's not the case. And that's not really about the parents. It is part of developmental characteristics, and it, as long as parents know that and understand that, and it's a little easier to see that so that with the communication so it's not be a frustration, that's one thing.

Build the, the bond. You know at that time still, even though sometimes physically, our adolescent children do not want to stay with their parents as long or cling to parents a bit longer. But emotionally they need their parents, need their parents, need their parents' support, and, that develop that bond and emotional connections. That's so important. One thing that we, we see is that spend time together. Even though that, spend time, for example like a dinner time, have regular dinner time. Not that we talk, only talk about problems, talk about concerns. We can talk about anything, talk about, plan things and so it feels natural when something happens, you can talk about openly.

Another very important thing that about communication, when you have that, that bond, and you trust and, and we, we can see that communication will get much smaller. We can see that in the film as well with Alvan. And he doesn't like his mother to kind of helicopter everything, or, or, or him, but also he'd see that, that's the love. That is the way that, that his mother you know, shows her love. So that really help him to understand, to take in sometimes. He just show, "hey," kind of like, that, that type of look. You can still see they are very emotionally connected.

00:13:22:26 - 00:14:11:19

Dr. Yan Ruth Xia

One important things, that we call it "enculturation," which is, make your kids feel proud of being an Asian, descendants of Asian families and African American families or Latinx families. So, you feel proud, since they are confident, they feel good about themselves. There's a high self-esteem and they also feel belong to a community and that's their support system, they can fall back on. So those are very helpful for the communication, actually, between parents. Not just about the, the between parents and adolescents, not just about the communication skills. It's a system.

00:14:13:17 - 00:15:26:25

Moi Padilla

Wow. That's great, Dr. Xia. And I think when, when you point out the cultural clashes that happen, you know, that's, that's very interesting and fascinating too. Well in communication, right? That's really important in how we communicate. You know, there's some interesting comments there. And thank you for the participation of the audience, from, from Hunter and Brooke. You know, talking about how the media and activists need to continue to address tokenism.

Brooke was mentioning, about the best, the best place for Alvan is where he feels most comfortable and we need to try to get students to understand that better. We put a lot of emphasis on statistics and don't look at fit. And so as, as students are choosing where to go to college, that that is really important. In the film, we see that Lowell High School itself is a real pressure cooker, right, like the high school. I was watching it and I'm like, "oh, my gosh, like my high school is not that intense," at least I don't remember it to be that way. But I'm curious, Shauntee, like what was it like at your high school, and what was the stress level like at, at North?

00:15:26:25 - 00:16:25:17

Shauntee Mims

So at the school, it was, it wasn't, like, it wasn't high, it wasn't high stress. But depending on like the classes and the routes you were taking, there could be high stress. So we had like two main things because we were a STEM magnet, we had the biomedical program or we had the engineering program. So if you were in one of those, you had found that there was more stress, like, related into them. So I think like in the school there wasn't. But outside of the school, we were perceived like,

so we're perceived as a predominantly black school just because of where we were. But based on our demographics, there was more white students than there were black students. So we were always looked at as just a sports school, like education didn't matter. So it was hard, like proving to other people that academics actually mattered there.

00:16:25:17 - 00:16:31:23

Moi Padilla

Wow, fascinating. Nayla, what was it like in Grand Island?

00:16:34:19 - 00:17:39:06

Nayla Torres Ruiz

You're talking to a hermit, so I did not go out of my home for much. I didn't participate in a lot of school activities either just because I had my sisters to take care of. But honestly, I did not feel that left out in terms of race, your race and ethnicity, just because there were a lot of Latinx there. I did encounter that things got a little bit more hard when we switched to block scheduling and had like specific programs, or "pathways" as we called them. If you were, if you were in the right path or like if you actually like the path, it was all good. But if not, everybody was complaining about, "Why do we have to go this way, it's just a change in the middle of," most of us were in like in our, the end of our sophomore years so we're like, "why is this happening now? That's not the time to change." So that part, it was definitely tough, but at one point you just got used to it. It was just, you were vibing to it, honestly, it wasn't that hard.

00:17:39:17 - 00:17:42:29

Moi Padilla

Okay, so it wasn't the pressure cooker type environment that we saw at Lowell.

00:17:43:27 - 00:17:51:20

Nayla Torres Ruiz

No, honestly teachers were very chill. Most of my teachers were my friends.

00:17:53:18 - 00:18:17:20

Moi Padilla

Yeah, okay. Nuria, I want to come back to you real quick and ask, you know, you know, sometimes I get a lot of questions about what advice do you want to give parents or their caregivers. So what advice do you have for parents and caregivers as they support their high schoolers through this process, through the application process, scholarship process.

00:18:20:10 - 00:20:18:27

Nuria Lemus

So I just have simple advice, be involved. I think it's very important to be involved in, in their process, in their education. You know, you have now I, I feel, or I see more you know, Spanish speaking professionals, whether it's college admissions reps or me, you know, bilingual planners, bilingual college finding specialists, educators, counselors.

You know, reach out to them. Talk to, talk to the kids, the students,

you know, counselors, school, whoever you can communicate with. I feel like sometimes parents refrain from being involved just because they, they see the language as the barrier. But now I feel like resources are available in, in Spanish. Or, I mean, I say Spanish because, you know, those are the clients that I deal with the most. But, but just be involved, participate, listen to what the student wants, what they, what they will make them happy, I think, not so much to instill your, your dream school or your dream career.

You know, listen to your students. Hear them out, sit down, talk to them. And if you don't understand the process, or you have questions, reach out. You know, I have noticed that in, in, with Spanish speaking families, they, they've shown more and more interest because they are able to communicate in their native language and that's powerful. It empowers, you know, the parents to help their, their student in, in their process, in their college process. So be involved, ask questions, participate, stay in contact with, with those representatives or educators that can help you facilitate for you, the student's families and the student.

00:20:20:23 - 00:20:29:15

Moi Padilla

Dr. Xia, any advice that you want to give to parents or caregivers as they're helping their students navigate through this process?

00:20:31:09 - 00:21:17:24

Dr. Yan Ruth Xia

Yeah, I totally agree with Nuria, that, that's involved. But also, I always admired parents who had high expectations for their, their children, their education attainment. This, I see the differences that some parents have the expectations, but not persist. In the movie, we see Rachel's mother and also the father, of Alvan's mother and other, other mothers and the, the father, could be, and are very persistent in having that high expectation for their children.

00:21:18:06 - 00:21:51:29

Dr. Yan Ruth Xia

That may create some kind of a pressure that as long as it is not too high and not reasonable, it's always good. There's a little bit pressure. Pressure, it's not always bad, it's, there's some concrete motivations help to develop motivations. But at the same time, it has to be balanced with warmth, with support, with understanding, with sometimes flexibility. And in just one word, love.

00:21:52:15 - 00:22:24:10

Dr. Yan Ruth Xia

And when that happened together, and that pressure could be, you know, leveled or at least held, it's not to the point where it becomes a problem because the parents just need to be elsewhere and need to have high expectations, but also have the support to, to, to their kids in going through this process. That's very important.

00:22:24:10 - 00:22:25:09

Moi Padilla

Thank you.

00:22:25:09 - 00:22:52:05

Nuria Lemus

Moi, can I add something quick? I just, just feel like I focus a lot on families. You know, we do have those students, we have recognized students that are on their own, guardians, families may not be involved. So I think my advice to them would be, you know, to identify that mentor for, for them, you know? There's always somebody that will care for, for you and for, for the process to help you succeed. So I feel like it's great to identify a mentor in your life.

00:22:53:25 - 00:22:57:15

Moi Padilla

Agreed. Thank you, Nuria, for that. I think that's really powerful.

00:22:57:15 - 00:22:59:00

Dr. Yan Ruth Xia

Yes.

00:22:59:00 - 00:23:15:17

Moi Padilla

Shauntee and Nayla, what advice would you give to your high, you know, to current students or to your high school self? And, and particularly as, you know, preparing for the transition to college.

00:23:18:28 - 00:24:29:18

Nayla Torres Ruiz

If I had to, I'm not going to go into the great side or academics because I struggle with my self worth in that, in that subject. But when it comes to mental health, I started suffering panic attacks. Since like the end of middle school, and I never told anyone and they got progressively worse where they would happen like once or twice a week.

It got to a point where I had a panic attack in the middle class and had to run out of there, scaring my teacher, my fellow students, everybody, no one knew what's going on. And they found me crying in the corner. So that was embarrassing, but it was also kind of like the breaking point.

After that, I went to the school counselor, started talking to them and whatnot, but I would say if I had to give them advice would be do not put off your mental health or something. That is like taboo or something that you feel like may make you weak, because I did. And for my culture, mental health is kind of a taboo topic, but definitely prioritize that because if you put it off, it gets worse. It definitely does.

00:24:29:18 - 00:24:56:05

Shauntee Mims

I think for me, I would say that you shouldn't limit yourself. Like I wish I would have applied to more schools, even though I knew I was going to Lincoln. It's just one of those things like, you can look back and like those were accomplishments. You realize that I, like, I would realize that I didn't need NCPA, like I could have gotten into a school on my own. So that's something

00:24:56:05 - 00:25:13:04

Moi Padilla

Great. Any, any other comments from the panelists as you reflect on this film? Things that stood out to you, or you think it's important for counselors, students, community leaders or members.

00:25:15:29 - 00:26:53:24

Dr. Yan Ruth Xia

I feel that we need to continue to educate, our not only our students and teachers, we need to work with the whole community to work and remove stereotypes. And the, they suggest that, you know, if you're Asian, you must be good in math or science or whatever that's "Asian." It's such a, a diverse group, you know, with 50 families of origin, from countries, of family origin from Asia and that's also different religions, different cultural traditions, and different level of income, education. So just not to kind of have that stereotype, it's important. It's particularly when we try to help individual students and families, that's so, so important. And on the other side, and so, the, the another stereotype is that, if you, you may not be good enough, and if you are people of color, that's not true either as well. So it's so important for, for us as a community to be aware of that and to keep addressing those issues.

00:26:58:09 - 00:27:13:11

Moi Padilla

Couple of reactions from, from the comments to Nayla's comment about mental health, talking about great advice, so mature to recognize this and prioritize this. And in another comment, "these young people are impressive." And I agree.

00:27:13:11 - 00:27:14:05

Dr. Yan Ruth Xia

Yeah.

00:27:14:05 - 00:27:22:08

Moi Padilla

I think it's really important to and Nayla, you talked about this earlier, right. A grade is a grade, it's not an identity marker.

00:27:23:15 - 00:27:47:14

Moi Padilla

And so although grades are really important, it's important to not attach that to who you are and your worth, right. So whether you have A's or you have B's, you're still a great human, and, and I, I think that sometimes that students, that they're, with the pressures of going to college and getting a scholarships, somebody was talking about the Buffett scholarship.

00:27:47:14 - 00:28:11:26

Moi Padilla

You know, I, I sense the pressure, the stress, the students carry at times too, as they're, they're applying and, and waiting for a response. It's, it's, it's wow. That gets impressive, I guess. But, but yeah, it, it's pretty, pretty cool to see to see the scholars talk about it.

Yeah. Go ahead.

00:28:11:26 - 00:28:48:11

Nayla Torres Ruiz

Let me say something. You focus a lot. We talked about how parents can reach out to their children and, you know, be more understanding, but not all parents are going to actually, like, take that first step forward. I would say, students if you're having a hard time, can't deal with it anymore, just tell your parents sometime. Because if not, you are going to come to a point where you're going to explode and that relationship is going to get strained in some ways. So definitely speak out. And they may not understand it, but at least you got that off your chest, so that way you won't explode and not strain that relationship.

00:28:50:15 - 00:29:28:29

Moi Padilla

That's great advice. Okay. Anything else, panelists?

Well, I want to thank you all again for joining us, and my immense gratitude again goes to Nayla, Shauntee, Nuria, Dr. Xia, thank you for your time and again a big, big thanks to Pamela Duncan, our ASL interpreter, thank you for your great work. I'm Moises Padilla, Director of the Nebraska College Preparatory Academy and it was wonderful to, to serve as your discussion leader today.

00:29:29:18 - 00:30:02:20

Moi Padilla

Thank you so much for joining Nebraska Public Media for this preview screening of "Try Harder!"

"Try Harder!" premieres nationally on Independent Lens on Monday, May 2nd, so you can watch it online at PBS.org/independentlens and you can watch it on Nebraska Public Media on Sunday, May 8th, at 10 p.m. central. So if you're looking for more information or resources, you can visit NebraskaPublicMedia.org/engage to see a discussion guide for the film and more resources.

00:30:02:20 - 00:30:09:02

Moi Padilla

So with that, thank you again. I hope everyone has a great night and talk to you later. Thank you.