

Congress: Teenagers feel the HEP program is worth saving

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The University's program serves 110 students a year who live in residence halls on campus and attend courses for 10 weeks to earn their GED certificates.

Last year, 87 percent of the students enrolled in the program left with GEDs.

Public high schools don't meet the educational needs of some students because they may have been kicked out due to drug problems and/or gang affiliations, Hernandez said.

Or, as was Hernandez's situation, they may have dropped out

of school to support their families and are now too old to get their GEDs from public high schools.

"Of the 42 or 40 students we bring in a term, about half of them, I'd say, have stories the same as mine," Hernandez said.

If HEP funding is eliminated, the goals and dreams of many students will be also be eliminated, Mendez said.

"It would really bring us down as far as our education and our dreams are concerned," she said.

Roman Mendoza, 18, said the program allows students to get

away from negative environments.

"A lot of us come here from really bad situations ... stealing, drugs, gangs," Mendoza said. "When we come here, we're opening ourselves up to more options."

Sixteen-year-old Nancy Gallegos agreed, saying, "This is a great option for me to get an education, to support my daughter and myself, and to get a career."

Others feel that being in the HEP program is a better alternative to what they would be doing without it.

"I think that a lot of these people, if they didn't come here and get an education, they'd be home drinking beer and smoking weed," said Forest Marquez, 16.

"If I wasn't here now, I'd end up dead or in jail," said 16-year-old Eduardo Garcia.

Being away from a public high school helps because the students are removed from the influences of those who don't care if they get an education, said Richard Ramos, 18.

"Here everyone wants an education, and you've got to be clean or you're out," he said.

For others, the best part of the HEP program is how its participants serve as role models for others.

Evelia Sanchez, 17, worked in a packing house until her two sisters, both former HEP program participants, encouraged her to go back to school.

High school drop-outs see people coming out of HEP programs and realize that they can do it too, said Mendoza.

"We serve as examples," he said. "I tell my little brother, 'Hey, it's cool. You can do it too.'"



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