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Apr 28, 2009 By Alison Hewitt

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## Field trip: From DNA Day to frat parties

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It was a day of eclectic information for about 80 high school students from King-Drew Medical Magnet High School visiting UCLA. They learned that it's OK to change your major a couple of times, and that UCLA scientists can make skin cells that mimic embryonic stem cells. The students even got advice on attending frat parties.

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The high school freshmen and seniors were on a science-oriented field trip for DNA Day, an annual, national celebration of the double helix's discovery. UCLA professors talked about cloning, stem cells and bioethics, and UCLA students shared details about life in the residence halls, with tips about academics and — you guessed it — UCLA's social scene.

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Across the country on April 24, hospitals and universities sent staff and faculty to high schools to engage high schoolers in science for DNA Day. This year, UCLA took a different approach, explained Professor Edward McCabe, co-director of the Center for Society and Genetics.

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A King-Drew Medical Magnet High School student leans in to listen to a speaker during his DNA Day visit to UCLA. Photos by Reed Hutchinson.

"Instead of going to their school, we thought it would be better to bring them here," McCabe said. "A lot of these kids will be first-generation college attendees, and we want them to feel comfortable coming to a

university campus. It can be intimidating, and this helps overcome the unknown. We remind them that it's a public university and encourage them to come back for things like the libraries and the museums while they're still in high school."

The King-Drew magnet school, a 60% black, 39% Latino campus located in unincorporated Willowbrook between Watts and Compton, has the highest acceptance rate to the UC system of any Los Angeles Unified School District high school, McCabe added. About 20 of the students have been accepted to UCLA this year.

UCLA also runs a pilot program at King-Drew, where McCabe and his wife, UCLA Professor Linda McCabe, teach an introductory course on the promise and controversies related to DNA and genetics.

In a conference room in a De Neve residence hall, professors talked about DNA-related research and also about how the high schoolers could follow their academic career paths. Linda McCabe talked to the students about advances and setbacks in cloning research, noting that there are still many mysteries that scientists can't explain, such as why cloned animals are often born larger than normal offspring and are more likely to develop lung infections.

Assistant Professor Julian Martinez, who studies fly stem cells to discover new applications for human stem cells, captured the crowd's attention with his tale of growing up in Puerto Rico before becoming a medical doctor and stem-cell researcher. The students asked how to get a Ph.D. like him and the McCabes, and followed his careful explanation of how UCLA researchers can create stem cells out of skin cells, instead of relying on the controversial use of embryonic stem cells.



High schoolers from King-Drew Medical Magnet try not to giggle as Professor Julian Martinez

Erica Stanley, research manager of the Center for Society and Genetics, talked about ethics and genetics — such as concerns that genetic testing could be used for discrimination — which sparked questions from the students about the possibility of job

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discrimination.

talks about reproduction and stem cells.

The high schoolers saved most of their questions for the four UCLA undergrads who came to tell them about student life. They talked about time management, and how the first quarter of classes is likely to be the hardest. They emphasized the importance of persistence in finding and applying for scholarships.

“What happens if you switch your major?” one King-Drew student asked.

“Major-switching is very common,” said fourth-year student Jaina Pallasigui, who switched from pre-med to anthropology. “There’s no extra fees.”

“What’s ‘poli sci’ mean?” another student asked. “Do they give you furniture in the dorms, or do you bring your own?” called out a third. “Is it all work and no play in college?” asked one apprehensive student. “How do I find scholarships?” several asked. And finally, “Do you guys have parties here?”

“Yes,” Pallasigui answered, with some surprise, before adding teasingly, “But frat row parties are mostly on Thursday nights because they don’t want high schoolers showing up. That would be awkward! ... But the thing with UCLA is, it’s party hard, but study harder.”

“Do you go to the frat parties?” the high schooler followed up.

“Yes,” first-year Pauline Dinh answered slowly, as if uncertain whether the high school students should know about frat parties. “One thing to remember: Make sure when you go to frat parties, you bring along friends who you trust.”

“And,” Pallasigui added, “make your own drinks!”



UCLA senior Jaina Pallasigui talks to high school students from King-Drew Medical Magnet about life on a college campus.

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