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UC Irvine hosts career day for Santa Ana students

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Instead of hanging out by the pool or playing video games, 54 Santa Ana high school students are spending their summers interning for law firms in Orange County as part of Project SELF (Summer Employment in Law Firms).

Project SELF provides high school students in Santa Ana Unified School District an opportunity few teenagers get to experience: a chance to work side-by-side legal professionals while getting paid to do it.

For eight weeks, low-income, minority incoming high school seniors learn the ropes of legal professions and gain work experience that could shape their future, said Nancy Garcia, associate director of the Orange County Bar Foundation.

"It gives them an opportunity to get real life experience," said Garcia. "It's not just a job for them. For many, this opportunity is very unique because it's not a job in fast food or at the mall. They get valuable experience."

Garcia said that the program aims to put students in touch with legal professionals who will provide mentorships while teaching them about their profession.

On July 8, Project SELF students were invited to a career day at UC Irvine's School of Law, where they were given a tour of the campus and received advice from Dean Erwin Chemerinsky, admissions counselors, legal professionals and alumni.

"As part of the public UC system we really see it as a mission of ours to reach out to the community in Orange County and to be involved," said Anna Davis, director of Public Interest Programs at the School of Law.

UC Irvine also hosts Saturday Academy of Law for ninth-grade students interested in learning more about the first amendment and constitutional law.

For many students, Project SELF provides a gateway into the professional world.

"I always thought about entering the legal field as a career possibility," said James Lieu, a 17-year-old student at Segerstrom High in Santa Ana. He is interning at Minyard Morris LLP in Newport Beach. "The best thing about the program is working in an environment where everyone is professional and super friendly. It gives me more of an understanding of what the outside world is like."

Lieu said he is interested in civil rights law and enjoys community service work. He also wants to attend UC Irvine.

This year, more than 40 law firms from Newport Beach, Costa Mesa, Irvine and Santa Ana are participating in Project SELF.

Emily Delatorre, a 17-year-old student at Sergerstrom, is interning with Allen Matkins Leck Gamble Mallory and Natsis LLP in Irvine.

Delatorre first learned about Project SELF when she was a freshman. "I had to wait," she said. "But it was always in the back of my mind. I've always been interested in law."

This year, Project SELF received more than 100 applications for the program. To be selected, students must have above a 2.0 GPA and be an incoming senior at a Santa Ana high school.