

Cal State L.A. program caters to students who skip high school

By J.D. Velasco, Staff Writer

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This week, as graduation ceremonies are held all across the San Gabriel Valley, thousands of teenagers are no doubt pondering life after high school.

At 17, Catrina Chitjian of Monterey Park has even more to think about - what she wants to do after college.

Chitjian, a biochemistry student at Cal State Los Angeles, is the youngest student to graduate from the university this year.

She's not alone in graduating at such a young age. Chitjian was joined by 23 others, 10 others from the San Gabriel Valley, who graduated Friday and Saturday as part of the university's Early Entrance Program, or EEP.

Those 11 San Gabriel Valley students are between 17 and 21 years old. Many skipped high school - students can start in the program as young as 11 if they are ready.

Richard Maddox, director of the program, said Cal State L.A. is one of only a dozen schools in the country, and the only university in California, with such a program.

"We're the only game in town," he said.

Maddox said the program typically admits about 30 students a year based on test scores and interviews.

So why are these students anxious to leap headlong into a college career at such a young age?

For some students it's a necessity, Maddox said.

"The reason students apply for the program and the primary reason we accept students is need," he said.

According to Maddox, especially intelligent students often become bored and unmotivated when stuck in a regular classroom. Some even stop attending class altogether.

High school - it bores gifted students," he said. "We don't want to lose that wonderful brain trust." Boredom with regular school was exactly what drew Chitjian to the EEP program.

"When I heard about the program it's something I knew I wanted to do," she said. "In eighth grade and before they make you do a lot of repetitive work and it was pretty frustrating."

And while some people might wonder about the experiences she missed out on by skipping four years of school, Chitjian doesn't see it that way.

"High school was a much scarier thing for me than college," she said.

Plus, the EEP program offers age-appropriate events such as dances, laser tag and field trips, she said.

Pasadena resident Cristina Marie De Cesare, a 19-year-old student graduating with a degree in computer science and a minor in math, said the program let her network with people she felt more comfortable with than her high school peers.

"There's a lot of camaraderie there," she said. "Before I came to the program, I didn't have that many friends that I had these things in common with."

Maddox said the program is designed to foster a sense of community among its students. It even has a student government that helps plan activities.

"The primary goal is to simulate a social environment one would have in high school," he said.

Both Chitjian and De Cesare said even with that support system in place, having classes with students that could be 10 or more years older than them was "awkward" at times.

De Clare said other students would sometimes tell her she looked young. When they found out she actually was, they were often shocked she would be in college at her age.

"I always feel kind of humbled because I'm not the kind of genius you think I am," she said.

De Clare has already been offered a job at a small software company in Pasadena. Chitjian hopes to go into the field of cosmetic chemistry.

The nine other area students graduating from the program are:

Crystal Fang, 18, of Hacienda Heights, who is majoring in business arts/prelegal and minoring in economics;

Vincent Matthew Johnson, 18, of Sierra Madre, majoring in business administration-finance and minoring in economics;

Jillian Kwong, 21, of La Habra Heights, majoring in political science;

Frances Lee, 19, of Walnut, majoring in biology;

Lawrence Mak, 20, of La Puente, majoring in history;

Lea Urpa, 20, of Pasadena, majoring in biology and minoring in geology;

Tin-Shuk "Timmy" Wong, 19, of Monterey Park, double majoring in computer science and mathematics;

David T. Wang, 19, of Walnut, majoring in biochemistry;

Christine Chow, 18, of the San Gabriel Valley, who is majoring in TV, film and media studies.

justin.velasco@sgvn.com

626-962-8811, ext. 2718