

Valley Academy senior Rachel Duran studies for a final Wednesday. Duran will be moving on to Santa Clara University.

Valley Academy Asked More of Good Student

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They raised expectations, and Rachel Duran rose to meet them.

Now, she will be among the first graduates from Valley Academy, the highly touted and well-funded pre-college program at Valley High School. And she'll be armed not only with a diploma, but with an aura of confidence to take with her to a college she wouldn't otherwise have dreamed of attending.

The academy's main goal — powered by a \$750,000 grant from the General Electric Foundation four years ago — was to double the number of Valley graduates who go to college.

Duran had already planned to do that.

But she hadn't planned to work so hard, she said.

Duran said she applied to Valley Academy in hopes of gaining an advantage over other college-bound students.

GRADUATIONS

Years of hitting the books will pay off for thousands of Albuquerque Public Schools students when they graduate this week and next. Here's a schedule of the graduation ceremonies.

Ceremonies for Albuquerque high schools will be at University Arena:

- Manzano: today, 4 p.m.
- Sandia: today, 8 p.m.
- Eldorado: Friday, 4 p.m.
- West Mesa: Friday, 8 p.m.
- Rio Grande: Saturday, 9:30 a.m.
- Albuquerque: Saturday, 1 p.m.
- Highland: Saturday, 4:30 p.m.

- La Cueva: Sunday, 1:30 p.m.
- Del Norte: Monday, 4 p.m.
- Cibola: Tuesday, 4 p.m.
- Valley: Tuesday, 8 p.m.

Graduation ceremonies for alternative high schools will be at the University of New Mexico Continuing Education Conference Center:

- New Futures: Monday, 5:30 p.m.
- Freedom: Monday, 7:30 p.m.
- Youth Development Inc. Stay-in-School program: Wednesday, 2 p.m.
- Evening School: May 27, 5:30 p.m.
- School on Wheels: May 27, 7:30 p.m.

She did.

The academy's Touchstones seminars, for instance — in which students read and discuss ideas in philosophy, science, the humanities and every other field — improved her communications skills.

"Before, I was really shy," Duran said. "Through Touchstones, I've been able to communicate my ideas to other people. It doesn't seem like much, but that's how I got to interact with more

people."

She said she also gained confidence because teachers and "everyone else" had an "extra expectation" of Valley Academy students.

And then, students were required to participate in some type of community service each year. Duran's efforts included playing trumpet in a band that visited elementary and middle schools and helping with a canned food drive for the needy.

Each year, she's been in honors English and honors math courses. This year, she took advanced placement calculus. Doing well on advanced placement tests earns students college credit.

Duran said she's convinced the academy has done a good job of making a difference for her and other students, especially for such a new program.

"There are new things that can be implemented to make it better, but I think they did pretty well with our whole class," she said.

The most obvious proof of her own success is that Duran will go to Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, Calif., to major in biology.

"Without the academy, I wouldn't have applied to an out-of-state college," she said. "I probably would have stayed at UNM. But the counselor I had was really supportive. She pushed really hard and said, 'Reach as high as you can.'"

Duran will graduate with a 4.13 grade-point average.

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