Amsterdam students get taste of college life

By Michael Goot

ALBANY — For students used to having physical education class in small gyms, the SEFCU arena was quite a sight.

"Wow, this is big!" said 13-year-old Wayne Samuel of Amsterdam, an eighth-grader at the Wilbur H. Lynch Literacy Academy. "This college is amazing."

Samuel was taking pictures and video with his iPhone for his friend who couldn’t come on the field trip Wednesday, which was designed to give students a taste of college life.

The trip was organized by the Amsterdam middle school staff, many of whom are University at Albany alumni, including Acting Principal Helen Stuetzel, according to Lynch English teacher Danyelle Barrett.

"We wanted our students to be able to visualize themselves on a college campus," Barrett said.

For many of these students, they would be the first in their family to attend college.

Students seemed impressed with the athletics facilities, including the football field.

"It's cool because I like sports," said 13-year-old Kayleigh Cooper.

Keith Peifer, a graduate assistant in the athletics department, pointed out that in addition to housing the men's and women's basketball teams, the SEFCU arena also hosts speakers, including former President Bill Clinton, hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons and retired basketball star Magic Johnson.

"There's a lot of big names and a lot of popular people that come to speak to our students," he said.

Peifer also showed off the football field and the men's locker room — complete with a television.

"I never left the locker room for an hour after practice because of the big-screen TV," he said.

Students also got to see a lecture hall, campus center, science library, dining hall and a dorm. In addition to the tour, the youths received insights into college from students and faculty.

Kadeem Howell, a graduate student in African studies who runs cross country, said time management is key. Wednesday morning he had practice at 7 a.m. and no parents were around telling him he had to wake up.

"You've got to dig deep and want to do it because it's not easy," he said.

He said he also had to get used to large classes in college, although now they are smaller at the graduate school level. However, there is a lot of reading and writing. "I get cramps in my hand," he said. "Reading and writing are definitely the most important skills."

Senior Taylor Luke of New Jersey told the students that it's important to set aside a certain amount of time every night to do their homework. Beth Skrobela, director of communications at the School of Education, agreed that students have to learn time management skills, especially with the temptation of being around friends. "These students don't yet understand the freedom that comes with going to college," she said.

Robert Bangert-Drowns, dean of the School of Education, told the students that UAlbany is a diverse campus with students from around the United States and from more than 80 countries.

He added that students who haven’t done well academically at this point still have a chance to redeem themselves in high school. This is the time to get on track, he said.

"You want to come to college. We want you to come to the University at Albany. You have to demonstrate you can do the work," he said.

More than 200 eighth-grade students are visiting the campus this week. Some visited on Wednesday and the others will come on Friday.

Bangert-Drowns said afterward that nearly every student’s hand went up when he asked how many people want to go to college.

"You can see the enthusiasm," Bangert-Drowns said.
Samuel said he would like to attend UAlbany and study biology with the hope of becoming a doctor.

"I'm really good at science and I really enjoy it," he said.