

Practices with Promise

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The Campaign for
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Digital Bridge Academy

Submitted by Cabrillo College

Historically under-represented students – primarily Latino/a, African American, and most recently South East Asian – have poor retention and completion rates in attempting college. There are a multitude of factors that contribute to this problem, including poverty, family background, and trauma. Because of this, a great deal of time and effort has been expended in creating programs within the academic context that will better support these students in terms of access, retention, and completion. These programs, serving student populations that are often recognized as unsuccessful in school, generally focus on counseling and supporting students outside of the classroom, such as EOPS and MESA. However, not as much curricular or pedagogical attention has been paid to the personal landscape of these students and how their lives collide with academic expectations for which they are not prepared.

The Digital Bridge Academy (DBA) at Cabrillo College has revisited the ways in which these students approach education and has examined their educational experiences and belief systems. One of the key components addressed for these students in the

“I think I made the right choice to join the Academy. The first two weeks in the Academy really changed my perspective of life and how I see things, it really changed me for the better. I really recommend this course to anyone that wants to improve themselves because in this academy they push you to be a better person. I just hope that I can be someone big. My dreams are to become a successful person with a great job and have a happy family. I hope I can reach that dream thanks to this academy.”

DAVID ZAMORA, SPRING 2007

Digital Bridge Academy, but not necessarily addressed in the literature as a factor of risk, is the lack of community these students experience within the college classroom. After a great deal of effort, time, and data collection, both qualitative and quantitative, the founder of DBA created a classroom and curriculum-based practice that brings the knowledge of successful behaviors and communications skills into the classroom itself, building upon a sense of community where students learn to work together and support each other, the key component of education that has been so lacking in their prior interactions in academia.

The DBA is a program that offers at-risk students a chance to reclaim a positive learning experience through community building in an accelerated, integrated learning environment. The program begins with a two week foundation course that invests students in their learning and education, and assists in forming the depth of connection between students needed to withstand their fears of going to school. The two week foundation course is then followed by a one semester, intensive cohort experience where students examine their previous experiences with education, communication styles, and other personal and interpersonal skills while taking a total of six courses that prepare them for a variety of careers (i.e. Computer Information Systems, Engineering, Business, Management, Allied Health majors, lab technician careers, Criminal Justice, Teaching, and other high-wage or high-demand fields). The courses are focused on acceleration not remediation, and each class is completely integrated with common learning objectives with assignments focused on a community-based social justice primary research project. After the DBA semester, students are expected to take a full course load working toward their major, and can opt to participate in further DBA seminars or internships, but they are no longer required to stay together as a cohort.

Through this highly structured approach, students are able to reevaluate their past educational experiences and examine what they want from their education. Based on a strong initial foundational class that invests students in their learning, students are ready to learn and to move forward academically. In DBA, students build strong relationships with each other and faculty through intensive immersion-style accelerated courses while becoming successful at completing a full-time college course load. Students work intensively together as a cohort, they focus on understanding their own and others learning and communications styles, as well as learning ways to work together in teams.

DBA has already shown a high degree of success in working with disadvantaged students who are not ready for college work. The program is thorough in its efforts to collect outcome data on persistence and completion rates, including demographic components, and evaluations of the program from students, program staff, and an external evaluator. Initial expectations anticipated a high attrition rate with DBA students; however, an external program evaluation found that on average 75% completed the accelerated Bridge Semester successfully with a grade of C or better. In addition, this 75% completed the semester with 12+ units (full-time). Among those who had taken some college courses before entering the Academy, the mean grade point average improved from 1.61 prior to the Academy experience to 3.02 after. Students reported

strong increases in motivation and self-efficacy, and rated the program very highly, in many cases calling it “life changing.”

The Digital Bridge Academy and its practices were originally designed with wide-spread replication as a future goal. Currently three institutions, in addition to Cabrillo College, participate in the DBA curriculum. Due to the depth and breadth of research involved in developing the DBA, there is a deeper understanding of the needs of at-risk students and the faculty members who work with them. This understanding adds to the quality of the program, for both curriculum and delivery, and quality is assured at participating institutions throughout the State through the replication process developed for the program. Wider adoption is being encouraged by a range of funding entities and by the interests of different campuses in the success rates of students who have participated in DBA

Key Features:

- Emphasis on successful behaviors and communication skills
 - Cohort and learning community in a structured program
 - Strong orientation program
- Focus on acceleration, rather than remediation