Bridges to Careers
for Low-Skilled Adults

A Program Development Guide

WATSONVILLE DIGITAL BRIDGE ACADEMY

Lead Organization:	Cabrillo Community College, Watsonville, California
Partners:	Santa Cruz County Human Resource Agency, Watsonville High School, alternative and continuation schools, drug and alcohol treatment programs, Santa Cruz County Probation, Children's Mental Health Departments
Key Features:	■ Accelerated semester prepares individuals with multiple barriers for college-level educational programs in fields requiring the use of digital technologies
	■ Students earn degree credits while enrolled in Digital Bridge program
	■ Effective use of cohorts

The Watsonville Digital Bridge Academy prepares multiple-barrier individuals for success in knowledge-based careers in computer information systems, engineering technology, nursing, radiology, criminal justice, or other allied health fields that require postsecondary education, the ability to work in teams, and the capacity for ongoing learning. The Digital Bridge addresses the divide between the need of the area's high-technology industry for qualified workers and the low-skilled residents in nearby communities. The program prepares its participants to enter college and ultimately graduate with a degree or a certificate in fields requiring the use of digital technologies, or to transfer to a four-year college if the student so wishes. Most participants are limited-English-speaking Latinos, and 65 percent are first-generation Americans.

Program Design

The Digital Bridge recruits students through the Santa Cruz County Human Resource Agency, comprehensive high schools (Watsonville High School), alternative and continuation schools, Cabrillo College's basic skills classes, drug and alcohol treatment programs, Santa Cruz County Probation department, and Children's Mental Health Departments. Also, many students learn about the program by word of mouth. Because the goal is for students to continue into a degree or certificate program, the main criteria

for entering the program is a ninth-grade reading level in English, which is the minimum starting level for a student to successfully complete the program.

Students proceed through the program in cohorts of 24 to 29. The curriculum is broken into components so it can be customized and localized for use at other colleges. There are three main components: 1) Light the Fire Within, 2) Academic Acceleration Semester, and 3) Internships.

Light the Fire Within is a two-week immersion program to help these students with no role models or previous expectation of going to college and little understanding of knowledge-based careers to learn new behaviors, become aware of their potential, and be motivated to learn. This component meets for 40 hours a week and uses discovery exercises and a self-managing team environment.

The Academic Acceleration Semester (the Bridge Semester) is a 13-week series of five courses to bring students to college-level academic performance and accustom them to a full-time workload. Students earn 16.5 AA degree-level credits toward a college degree or certification. The students meet in class four days a week and in a study group on the fifth day. The courses are interdisciplinary and offered by three divisions within the college that cover computer information systems, reading, movement, and

career counseling departments. Most classes include project-based learning. The faculty designed the curriculum for the semester so that content from different classes follows a logical sequence and may be introduced in one class, used in another, and reinforced in a third. In addition, to help students manage their workloads, all assignment due dates are coordinated. During this semester students take a project course, which begins with a primary research project on a social justice issue and culminates with a public presentation. The social justice issue serves as an important motivator for these students, because the topics they choose frequently relate to their own personal experiences.

After the Academic Acceleration Semester, students continue into college-level certificate or degree programs at Cabrillo College. While enrolled in a degree program, they also continue with their cohort in a one-and-a-half- credit seminar that covers topics like leadership versus management, creating the conditions for self-managing work teams, leadership and sustainability, managing change, and consulting skills.

Students have internships while enrolled in classes in their second semester at the college. These internships are within the college itself, where the interns recruit for the academy, do office work, provide peer mentoring, support service referrals, and help arrange other internship opportunities. The plan is for these interns to continue with other internships in governmental agencies, community-based organizations, and educational institutions, and then move on to externships in the private sector.

Staffing

The program has eight faculty members who also teach other Cabrillo classes. One benefit of faculty who also teach outside the Digital Bridge is they are able to evaluate Bridge students in the same way they evaluate other students. The Digital Bridge has one full-time faculty member.

Program Development

Cabrillo College spent 19 months researching and developing this program, interviewing 125 experts who work with high-risk populations. It piloted the curriculum in five 40-hour sessions.

Funding

The program is funded by grants from the National Science Foundation, the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, and the James Irvine Foundation.

Outcomes

Piloting of the Digital Bridge Academy's two-week Light the Fire Within curriculum began in June 2002 and continued through the summer of 2003. The first cohort began in the fall of 2003. To date, 90 students have completed the Watsonville Bridge, 83 percent on average have successfully completed the accelerated Bridge Semester, and 94 percent of them are still in college.

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