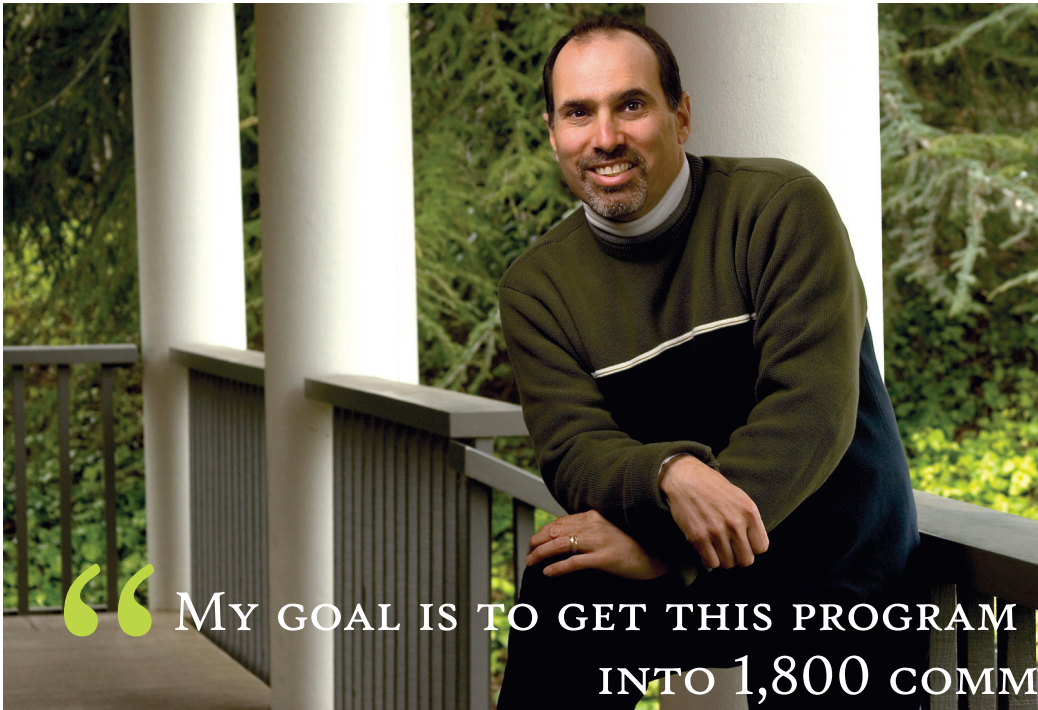


# Bridging the Success Gap

*Innovative program serves at-risk young people*



“MY GOAL IS TO GET THIS PROGRAM INTO 1,800 COMMUNITY COLLEGES.”

Six years ago, **Diego (“James”) Navarro (MBA ’89)** completed what he calls “a 25-year apprenticeship,” though others might call it a successful career in the high-tech industry. But for Navarro, it was only training for the work he’s doing now as the founder and director of the Digital Bridge Academy, an accelerated education program that helps at-risk young adults prepare for community college and for careers in professional fields.

Located at Cabrillo College’s Watsonville, California, campus, the Digital Bridge Academy is an innovative program designed to “bridge the gap” in education for young adults who are typically not encouraged to aim for college. “They come from tough backgrounds, from abusive homes, from poverty, from gang violence, from migrant families,” says Navarro, who is also an instructor. “What we’re doing is providing a place for students to

become the people they never knew they could become.”

Navarro knows firsthand some of the challenges his students face. The Pomona, California, native went to a high school where the Bloods and the Crips gangs were prevalent. His experiences there, and later a six-month trip to Mexico where he witnessed the impact of extreme poverty, inspired him to work for social change.

An Antioch College graduate who worked as a community organizer in the late 1970s, Navarro then ran a software company prior to attending HBS. “I needed to acquire business skills so that I could foster social change at a more powerful level,” he says.

After HBS, Navarro worked at Hewlett-Packard, where he designed computer systems. Later, he moved to a small high-tech start-up, where he repositioned the company to product development. After he “retired” in

2000, he turned his attention to planning the Digital Bridge Academy. Navarro explains that he didn’t so much leave his career but start on his longtime dream. “I was coming back home,” he says.

Navarro launched the program with private foundation support after spending a year researching the concept and piloting a model. It soon attracted support from the National Science Foundation as well. The result is an accelerated — rather than remedial — curriculum that Navarro says effectively “lights a fire” in students.

The program, which serves up to thirty predominantly Latino students, challenges them to handle college-level work and to build self-esteem, and teaches them nonviolent communication. Students study computers, science, English, business concepts, and even yoga.

With a program completion rate of over 80 percent, Navarro has received

funding to begin the next phase: replication. “My goal is to get this program into 1,800 community colleges nationwide,” he says. He’s getting help from the HBS Association of Northern California’s Community Partners program to draw up a business plan to do just that. And he hopes to hire an HBS alum to manage the expansion.

The students come in hardened and jaded, but they leave softened and focused on their potential. “We’ve saved lives, not from certain death, though that might be true for some of these kids. They feel reclaimed,” Navarro continues, “and it makes me feel hopeful.”

— MARGIE KELLEY

#### TELL US YOUR STORY

Have you changed careers, or do you know an HBS alum who has? We’d like to hear from you. Write us at [bulletin@hbs.edu](mailto:bulletin@hbs.edu).