



Cabrillo's James Navarro and the Digital Bridge Academy

By **Debbie Friedman**

The Digital Bridge Academy has been up and running for only five semesters at Cabrillo College. While many new programs consider this to be a time of trial and error, the Digital Bridge Academy has proven so successful that it is already being considered for replication at 18 other Bay Area community colleges.

The Digital Bridge Academy is based at Cabrillo's Watsonville campus and has served 125 students to date.

Under the direction of Academy Director Diego "James" Navarro and Chair of Cabrillo's Computer Science Department Susan Nerton, the Academy helps students transition to college and prepare for high-paying, meaningful careers.

The only requirements for entrance into the program are a willingness to learn, be at least 18 years of age, have basic ninth grade reading skills, have a commitment to attend the first semester full time, and a desire to be successful in college.

"I've got the greatest job in the world. I'm able to help transform lives in two weeks," Navarro said.

The program has very specific objectives and goals, but Navarro consistently refers to the first two weeks as a critical time to "light the fire" for the students. Once the fire is lit and the students are motivated, the challenging program begins.

It certainly appears that Navarro himself is part of this motivation for the students. Navarro started off at a community college and holds a Master's degree from Harvard University's School of Business.

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He spent 25 years working in the high tech field and exudes confidence that his students can accomplish their individual goals.

The Fast Track to Success

Navarro had been working at Hewlett Packard and was interested in areas of innovation. He utilized those ideas to create a model for the Bridge Academy that promoted accelerated learning instead of remediation for underperforming students.

Navarro took the idea for the program to Cabrillo College in 1999. The idea was to take high-risk students that were not college bound and move them quickly to high-level academic success — ready to move forward into graduate study.

With initial grant support from the Packard Foundation and the James Irvine Foundation, the program was up and running. Navarro remembers asking a reluctant Nerton for her support. Five minutes into his presentation, Nerton was sold.

Cabrillo is now fully committed to the program and is funding the Academy with a tenured track faculty position, which Navarro currently holds. Here's how the program works for students — after a two to three week motivational period, the core program lasts approximately 13 weeks and is divided into three main components: education, support services, and work preparation and experience.

The curriculum includes English, computer science and management. Students also learn non-violent communication skills, self esteem building and movement with classes such as yoga. Students are required to juggle all aspects of the program and their lives to give them the real experience most students have with multiple classes and responsibilities.

Specific to the education component, a team of students chooses a topic and does an in-depth study, which includes defining the problem, surveys, analysis of data and finally conclusions including recommendations based on very specific criteria.

Navarro points out that this level of work is typically not done until most students reach graduate school. The overall concept is for the students to become an expert on the issue they study.

On Dec. 13, this semester's class of 17 students made presentations to an audience of over 100 at the Watsonville Cabrillo campus. The large crowd included Cabrillo College President Dr. Brian King, representatives from other colleges working to replicate the program, students from area high schools, various community-based organization representatives, and friends and families of the students presenting.

The Big Day

Replicating real world workplaces, Navarro has students make presentations using technology and aimed at engaging the audience. Speakers were dressed professionally, using power point software to display their data and presentation outlines. Each speaker was well practiced and knowledgeable. Some also drew on personal experience.

Wendy Morales says she suffered domestic violence and talked about her life story to support

data on the topic. Morales looked quite young, yet told the audience about being a mother to four children ages four, eight, nine and 11.

Morales said she "survived domestic violence," but not without experiencing pain, homelessness, drug use and a lack of resources. Morales offered a vision for a better future with her group's specific recommendations for prevention and support for victims of domestic violence. Rosalba Ramirez, a past Academy student, was in the audience. She was there to lend support and see the program grow. Ramirez is preparing to go to Monterey Peninsula College to pursue her goal to work in interior design.

"This program is a bridge to your path or dream," Ramirez said.

The Academy offers students a variety of "dreams" to pursue, including computer and information systems, engineering, business, management, allied health majors (nursing, radiology and dental hygiene) lab technician careers (biotechnology and marine science), criminal justice, teaching, and other high-wage or high-demand fields.

Graduation is not something that happens at the Digital Bridge Academy. Navarro said the greatest accomplishment for his students is when they move on independently toward their goals. The program is available to them as long as they need it, but for most, it is a "bridge" to larger goals.

Cabrillo to Offer Program to Teachers

This summer Cabrillo will sponsor a training for other schools looking to pilot the program. Oakland is slated to have the next academy become a reality, using Cabrillo's model and applying it in an urban setting with a large African-American population. The program is open to approximately 29 students each semester and financial assistance is available for students who qualify. ■

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