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NewsArticles

Cabrillo program helps bridge gap to college

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OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Unique curriculum works at accelerated rate

Felicitas Lopez never saw herself as college material.

"I was a single mom with four kids," the 28-year-old Watsonville resident said. "I hadn't even gone to school past the eighth grade. English was my second language and I couldn't read or write that well."

Today, however, Lopez has a very different attitude about herself and her potential, having recently completed the Watsonville Digital Bridges Academy at Cabrillo College, an empowering, accelerated-learning program that prepares students like Lopez for college-level courses in just one semester.

"The academy changed my life completely," Lopez said. "It taught me to believe in myself and showed me all of the things that I could be. Now I'm taking my general education classes and working toward becoming a registered nurse. I know I can make it."

Her story is exactly what Diego "James" Navarro, academy director, had in mind when he first created the innovative program two years ago.

"I wanted a program that helped people to bridge the gap into college, particularly at-risk young people, who were not tracked for college," Navarro said. "I also wanted to help them gain the skills they needed, not only to get jobs, but high-paying, high-demand jobs. The goal was to reclaim the lives of underrepresented, forgotten youth."

Navarro, a 25-year high-tech industry veteran who attended community college before going on to earn his master's degree from Harvard University's school of business, used his experience as an industrial researcher for Hewlett Packard to develop the academy's unique curriculum.

After interviewing more than 125 experts in education and working with young adults, he conducted several pilot programs to see which approaches worked and which didn't.

"I quickly realized that the first thing I had to do was figure out how to motivate - or light the fire - in these students to get them interested and excited in learning and hope in their futures," he said.

In that spirit, the academy features an intensive three-week foundation course that aims to excite the



students, teaching them about their personal learning style while bolstering self-esteem. Students also learn executive skills training and nonviolent communication techniques.

The remaining 13 to 14 weeks are based around an intensive integrated curriculum of English, computer science, applied and conceptual science, management classes and movement, such as Yoga.

From the results of his first two classes, it seems Navarro has created a recipe for success.

"I've been amazed with the success we've had," he said. "In our first class of 32 students in the fall of 2003 - most of which qualified as high-risk - we had 83 percent successfully complete the semester. The next semester, we had 79 percent successful completion rate. When you have an educational program that is relevant to students and they're yearning for success, they do it."

Funding for Digital Bridges comes entirely from sources outside of Cabrillo College, including the National Science Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation and the David and Lucille Packard Foundation.

"Watsonville is the first place to be doing anything like this, but I believe that 10 years from now you'll be seeing this model operating at community colleges across the country," Navarro said.

The program is open to anyone ages 18 and older who can demonstrate - at minimum - a ninth-grade reading level in English and has the ability to attend the academy full-time.

"You don't have to have a high school diploma or your GED," Navarro said. "You just have to come and register as a Cabrillo College student, fill out an application with us and obtain a Reading 205 placement, which means you've been assessed to read at the appropriate level."

The academy accepts 29 students each semester and still has open slots for the fall semester, which begins Aug. 30. Financial assistance is available for students who qualify.

"For low-income students, the fee is \$6 per semester and includes health care coverage," Navarro said. "For those who don't qualify, it's \$18 per unit. A regular full-time semester schedule equals 12 units, but with the academy, students earn 19.5 units; that's almost 20 units toward their (associate's) degree. It's a lot of work - hard work - but it's worth it."

Lopez encouraged others to take advantage of the opportunities the academy has to offer.

"You won't regret it," Lopez said. "I wish others could see what's out there for them - all of the help that's available - rather than just feel stuck in one job or one life. It's our choice, though. It's up to us to want to make a change. I'd tell others to just do it."

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Those interested in learning more about the Watsonville Digital Bridge Academy are encouraged to attend an informational forum on Monday at 4 p.m. at the Cabrillo College Watsonville Center, Room 4350. For additional information, call 477-5164 or visit Room 4212 at the Cabrillo Watsonville Center, located at 318 Union St.