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Cabrillo prep program expands

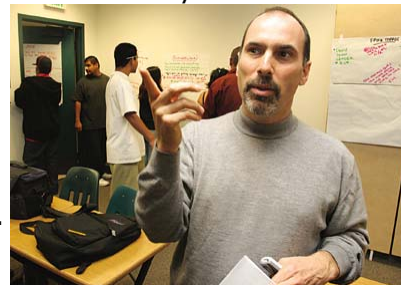
BY AMANDA SCHOENBERG



After three years spent transitioning under-prepared students into Cabrillo College classes, Digital Bridge Academy director Diego Navarro is expanding the model.

With retention rates ranging between 82 percent and 100 percent for each Digital Bridge program at Cabrillo, Navarro appears to have hit upon a successful formula — one now being tried across the state.

This summer, Navarro trained 15 faculty members at six state community colleges in the Digital Bridge approach and will train more next summer. The first phase of the program was also added as a pilot program at three colleges.



Since 2003, Digital Bridge has helped more than 150 students mire college-level classes after a semester of intense preparation. Last week the Hewlett Foundation awarded funding to expand the program at Cabrillo and Navarro is at work on another grant application that would expand science preparation for students in the program.

City Council members got a taste of the Digital Bridge Academy approach with a presentation Tuesday exploring the program's success. About 95 percent of students joining the program are low-income and Latino, about 75 percent with English as a second language backgrounds.

Although most were not exposed to the sciences in high school and are unprepared for college-level work, the majority are now successful Cabrillo students, Navarro said.

"I think everybody is looking at you as a model," Mayor Antonio Rivas told Navarro at the meeting.

A former computer-industry executive who attended community college before studying at Harvard Business School, Navarro spent more than a year interviewing experts and exploring corporate research techniques to assess the needs of under-served young people. Instead of adding outside counseling for low-performers, Navarro created a "curriculum-based persistence model" combining academic skills with professional knowledge. Students learn new behaviors for success, with internships to model training.

Navarro said he is not surprised by how unprepared some students are for college, adding that when he graduated from high school in 1975, he wasn't ready either. Changing students' and parents' mindsets to value continuing education is an essential part of the equation, he said.

"We have to look at our society, families falling apart, poverty, violence," he said. "It's not just schools."

Digital Bridge Academy begins with a two-week foundation course that teaches students to communicate effectively, understand their strengths and limitations and be more effective students, Navarro said.

"When they come out of that, they're on fire," Navarro said.

For student Erika Torres, the foundation class was a way to learn about herself as well. Telling her "life story" to other students was also an eye-opening experience, she said.

Torres joined the program despite misgivings about having been out of high school for five years and having a toddler at home. But her success so far has surprised her, Torres said.

"I was really afraid to come back to school," she said. "But I'm doing a lot better than I thought I would. You just need to work hard."

After joining Digital Bridge, Torres wants to earn enough credits at Cabrillo to transfer to a four-year college, she said. Navarro said that is not uncommon; most students

enter the program unaware of career options, but emerge looking toward a B.A., he said.

After the foundation course, students take integrated courses in applied science, information technology, literacy and career planning that feed into a central course. This semester, students picked up skills in Microsoft Word and Excel, then used their knowledge to craft survey questions for a course focusing on social justice.

Former Marine Corps Cpl. Juan Alvarez, 21, who returned from his third tour of duty in Iraq in April, said his participation in the Digital Bridge Academy is giving him some of the tools he needs to pursue a career in law enforcement. It is also a way for him to ease back into student life after five years in the military, he said.

"It's like a stepping stone for me," he said.

Once students apply to Cabrillo College, the only requirement for entry into the Digital Bridges program is a ninth-grade reading level in English. For more information, call 477-5164.



Photos by Tarmo Hannula

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