



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Luis Carillo works with fellow student and Bridge Academy intern Martin Ruiz on campus Monday.

Cabrillo's innovative program bridges education gaps

By **DONNA JONES**
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WATSONVILLE — Luis Carillo's first semester at Cabrillo College was a disaster. He was unprepared, took the wrong classes and ended up with bad grades.

But he didn't give up.

Instead, Carillo, the son of immigrant farmworkers with limited education, signed up for Digital Bridge Academy, an innovative Cabrillo College program designed to give struggling students a better chance at success.

Today, the 20-year-old Watsonville High School graduate is a straight-A student, planning on transferring to a four-year college and on a career working with troubled youth.

"[Digital Bridge] helps you get more focused and confident," said Carillo.

His success through the program is not unusual. Since its founding five years ago, Digital Bridge has exceeded expectations. Attrition among the at-risk students the program was designed to serve was expected to be high. Instead, 75 percent have finished the one-semester program with a C or better average in their classes. For those previously enrolled in college, grades have gone up, and they are completing more credits.

Its success is getting noticed. Recently, the Campaign for College Opportunity, a coalition of business, education and labor leaders, ranked it as one of 15 model programs statewide.

The 15 "Practices with Promise," chosen from among 120 submissions, include outreach efforts by the University of California and California State University systems, counseling and mentoring programs at high schools and colleges and academic tutoring.

Digital Bridge, which now serves about 50 students a year in Watsonville, is slated to expand to the Aptos campus next fall and grow to 350 students annually.



Luis Carillo, a 20-year-old Cabrillo College student at the Watsonville campus, is interning with the Watsonville Digital Bridge Academy — the same program that turned his life around as a young student coming from a background of farmworkers.

"I am one of the luckiest teachers in the country," said Diego Navarro, creator and director of Digital Bridge. "I get to watch these students transform before my eyes."

He said he's seen students who didn't finish high school, even some who never started, students from poor families and with limited English backgrounds tackling college courses with success.

Navarro, whose resume includes community organizing and a business degree from Harvard, dropped out of the high-tech industry to launch the program, and he said he drew on the skills he learned in the corporate world to build it.

The program starts with a two-week crash course designed to help students understand and get over past barriers to success.

From there, students take a semester's worth of

college-level classes built around research into a social justice issues, such as the effect of poverty on education.

"Just in time" learning pairs the skills they need, such as word processing and building spreadsheets, with their work on the research projects, Navarro said.

"They learn all their computing skills. They learn to read and write," he said. "But the focus on social justice community-based research, that's the part that lights the fire inside them. It's education that's relevant to their lives."

For information about Digital Bridge Academy, visit www.cabrillo.edu. For information about other model programs, visit www.collegecampaign.org.

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