Bridging the Gap from High School to College

By Henry DeVries

Something few parents of teens are aware of is that the percentage of freshmen who complete college within six years after their high school graduation is estimated at less than 25 percent, based on an 18-month study by the U.S. Department of Education. According to the federal research, the trajectory for academic success in college is established long before students arrive as freshmen.

A decade of opinion surveys reveals that three out of four high school students want a college education. They want to go to college and most understand the benefits of a college degree.

Talk to high schoolers and you see they “get it” when it comes to higher education. They realize that the world is changing rapidly. They know more and more jobs require education beyond high school. They understand that college graduates have more jobs to choose from and that groups like the U.S. Census Bureau calculate, on average, that someone with a bachelor’s degree earns 62 percent more than someone with only a high school diploma.

Nonetheless, the majority of high schoolers are unprepared for the multiple demands of college work and the level of responsibility studying away from home can be.

In an effort to bridge the gap from high school to college, UC San Diego Extension offers Academic Connections, a summer residential immersion program that gives high school students a taste of the real college experience in a safe and supervised environment. Eligible students participate in a non-stop, three-week summer program held on the UC San Diego campus, enrolled in classes that mirror the university experience, ranging from engineering to theatre production.

Bring It On

While boot camp might be too strong a term, little time is wasted at Academic Connections. A typical day starts with breakfast at 7:00 a.m., lectures from 9:00 a.m. until lunch, workshops and labs until 3:30 p.m., an afternoon activity, dinner, and social activities from 7:30 p.m. until lights out at 11:00 p.m.

The message is clear. College will not be like the classes you experienced in high school. College is a fulltime job, a community of learning and a wonderful mix of social and intellectual experiences. Academic Connections instructors, typically UC San Diego doctoral students, tell it like it is.

“It has never been more important to spark the imagination of our students, expose them to big ideas and give them the tools they will need to be successful in a world we can’t even imagine,” says the Registrar of UC San Diego Extension, Ed Abeyta, the director of Academic Connections. “These grad students convey their enthusiasm for learning and their commitment to education.”

Via a combination of lectures, labs, study halls, discussion roundtables and guest speakers, the students get a taste of what college will be like. Courses are selected to represent some of the cutting edge fields of research UC San Diego has to offer in physical and social sciences, engineering, and arts and humanities.

High school students, entering grades 10-12, must have a 3.3 grade point average (GPA) overall and a teacher or counselor recommendation. The program costs $3450 per student. Since its inception in 2001, Academic Connections has graduated over 2000 students.

Thanks to community partners, about 10 percent of students receive scholarships, which allows an opportunity for talented students who can benefit from the program but cannot afford to participate without financial assistance.

A key partner has been Reality Changers, founded by Christopher Yanov, who graduated from the UC San Diego in 1999 with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Spanish Literature. During the past seven years, Reality Changers’ 100 current students and 50 program graduates have earned over $3,000,000 in scholarships, thanks to the mentoring, tutoring and door opening opportunities Yanov and his team have provided.

In 2001 Reality Changers was able to send two students to Academic Connections. Through the years the numbers have steadily grown and in 2008 an estimated 40 students from Reality Changers will attend.

Three other program partners who sponsor students are The Preuss School, Aquatic Adventures and Child Abuse Prevention Foundation.

UC San Diego’s The Preuss School is a middle and high school dedicated to providing a single-track, college preparatory education for motivated low-income students who will become the first in their families to graduate from college. Virtually all graduates head off to a four-year or two-year college, from UC Berkeley and UC San Diego to MIT and Harvard. Aquatic Adventures provides educational programs that connect underserved youth to science, inspires environmental action and increases exposure to marine habitats.

The Child Abuse Prevention Foundation is best known for raising $12 million to build the A.B. and Jessie Polinsky Children’s Center, the County’s emergency shelter for abused and neglected children. During 2008 they will sponsor foster children to attend Academic Connections. ■