CULTURE OF SUCCESS

PUENTE PROJECT SENDS MINORITY STUDENTS TO COLLEGE

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Photo by Daniel Thielen — Santa Cruz Sentinel

Cabrillo College sophomore Lorena Rocha of Watsonville works in the Puente Lab on campus Monday.

Mentors help provide bridge

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Paper mortar board cutouts with the name of a successful Puente Project student who transferred from Cabrillo College to a four-year institution fill the door of the program’s coordinator Michelle Foguet-Mendoza.

PUENTE PROJECT

What: Meet with a minority Cabrillo student off-campus, a 10-hour time commitment each semester.
Who: Professionals, especially in the nursing, criminal justice and engineering fields.
To apply: Call 831-479-0541 or email m.foguet@cabrillo.edu.

Puente counselor is to increase the number of minority students attending universities.

Around 80 Cabrillo students participate each year, receiving not only counseling and mentoring, but also English instruction. The program currently is seeking mentors, she said.

“If we look at the data, the number of Latinos in the workforce is disproportionate with the number with higher education,” she said. “It’s trying to bridge that gap.”

The program is at 58 community colleges and 36 high schools across the state, and its 25th year at Cabrillo. Any minority student can apply, but most are Latinos, since the program includes a writing class on Latino culture. According to Frank Garcia, executive director, around 23 percent of Puente students transfer within six years, compared to 20 percent for Latinos and 47 percent for the general population.

Garcia was one of five children in a Watsonville migrant worker family, said he barely graduated high school in 1969 with a 1.5 GPA, but went on to get a Stanford graduate degree. He was the first in his family to get a high school degree.

What it takes, he said, is determination.

Puente’s formula of English classes, counseling and mentoring creates a support network for students, showing that success is possible, he said.

“The counselors are saying you can do it, the instructors and then you have your friends and peers saying you can do it,” Garcia said. “And then they all begin to believe.”

Puente Project participant Andy Acosta works in the programs lab at Cabrillo College on Monday.

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So that transfers into what many in the literature call a ‘college-going culture’ and that’s what we really trying to do. Securio Escoto, an 18-year Puente mentor, said mentors introduce students to the professional world.

Escoto was the youngest of seven children in a migrant worker family, and went on to become a Live Oak principal and Cabrillo dean.

As a mentor, he doesn’t always know his impact, but that’s true for all educators, he said.

“It’s like building a brick house,” said Escoto. “If everybody contributes a brick, then the probability of achieving the goal is greater.”

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