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Remedial plus

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While most two-year institutions struggle with the high costs and low passing rates of remedial courses, administrators in one Chicago community college believe they've found a way to double pass rates.

"This is the most exciting project, in all my years in higher education, that I've ever collaborated on," said Daley College President Jose Aybar. "The results have been startling across disciplines."

Aybar said Daley's new supplemental remedial program, "Comprehensive Academic Support and Help to Return on Investment," (CASH-to-ROI), led to dramatic improvement in student success. CASH-to-ROI isn't meant to replace remedial courses but to supplement them with group study sessions, which some Daley students were required to attend during the spring 2011 semester. Students in the CASH-to-ROI program are divided into groups of 7 to 10, with each group assigned a part-time staff member as a "tutor-facilitator" to lead discussions. They meet eight times over the course of the semester, reading through the course material written by Aybar, Vice President Keith McCoy, and members of the faculty.

Between 80 and 90 percent of students participating in the program, who were enrolled in remedial math, English, and reading comprehension courses, received passing grades. That's compared to the 40 percent pass rate of Daley College students who did not participate. Those numbers have caught the attention of administrators in citywide community college system, who say they're working on analyzing the data and looking into the possibility of emulating it systemwide.

The program, developed by Aybar, McCoy, and members of the college's faculty, is based on two major principles: allowing students to learn in groups, and integrating all three major subject areas – math, English, and reading comprehension – into the exercises seamlessly.

Aybar says bringing the students together is the most important part of CASH-to-ROI. Most of Daley's students are from low-income families – they are not only ill-prepared academically, but facing the stress of freshman year with little support. "When they go back home, they may have dysfunctional relationships [with family members] that may actually ask the question, 'Why are you going to college?'" he said.

Study groups help students connect, create a peer-support network, and foster teamwork and open discussion, he said. In CASH-to-ROI, the students connect through mandatory group study sessions and work on extra course material. That course material is the most unusual part of the program – it's a multi-chapter science fiction adventure story featuring exercises and discussion questions.

"Suppose you wanted to use an Anikan spy shuttle to return to Earth. You know that one light year is equivalent to six trillion miles. You also discover that the shuttle can travel one-fourth light year per Earth week," begins one question. "How long would it take you and your team to reach Earth in the shuttle, if the team is located two and one-half light years from earth?"

The next question asks students to debate the merits of using the spy shuttle to return to Earth, assuming that the ship's life support and supplies can sustain the crew for only five weeks. Another question asks each student to pick a sentence from the chapter and identify its subject, verb, and predicate. McCoy said the story format was chosen because it allows students to see how reading comprehension, English, and math skills are linked together in practical contexts.

"Even in math, one of the challenges we have is applications and word problems," he said. "When you get

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past the remedial courses ... they're very applications-driven."

The science fiction genre was chosen, he said, so the exercises wouldn't favor students from any particular background. The fictional universe created by the faculty and staff of Daley College is equally mystifying to all students, requiring all of them to work through the unfamiliar situations together.

Aybar said he's planning to expand the program with computer-assisted instruction and additional advising for students in the fall. Although it's still in the planning stages, Aybar said the new computer-assisted material would not replace the role of the part-time tutors currently leading the study sessions, and would not cut into the time students spend discussing the material in-person. The new component would simply add five hours of coursework outside the classroom, he said.

CASH-to-ROI's fans don't include leaders from the faculty union. Perry Buckley, head of the Cook County College Teachers' Union, said he's always concerned about academic programs that are designed by administrators, which he believes could hurt academic departments' ability to make decisions on their own. "What we teach, how we teach, where we teach -- those things used to be up to the departments," Buckley said. "Now a lot of those decisions are being made by administrators."

CASH-to-ROI has a grading mandate that some faculty members see as intrusive. If a remedial student is enrolled in the program, 15 percent of his or her grade for that course is determined by participation in CASH-to-ROI's study groups. "Some faculty feel it's a constraint on their grading," said Tom Kodgegiou, a physics teacher at Daley and an active member of the Cook County College Teachers' Union.

Kodgegiou said the 15 percent participation grade isn't unusually generous, and he has seen teachers give students "anywhere between 0 and 20 percent" for class participation (which the 15 percent replaces). But he would like to see more faculty involvement in making those decisions, which would improve the program's chances of long-term success, he said.

"In principle, additional tutoring is not a bad thing -- it should help students," he said. "It's all about implementation."

— **Derek Quizon**