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The Information Technology Academy helps kids get a leg up in the tech world

Computer cadets

BY LIZ MERFELD AUGUST 23, 2012 2:00 PM

The discrimination of the future will not be based on race, but on education. Those without education will find no place in our highly sophisticated, technical society.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s words greet visitors to Erica Laughlin's office on the third floor of UW-Madison's Computer Sciences Building. Laughlin runs the Information Technology Academy (ITA), a four-year pre-college technology access and training program for "talented students of color and economically disadvantaged students" attending Madison public schools.

It's Wednesday morning at ITA's two-week summer camp. The program's back-to-school kickoff is under way. Thirty incoming high school freshmen, recruited last year in middle

school, congregate in the computer lab. Some face their iMac monitors with a focus that belies their young age; others nestle in groups, trading ideas. This is where they will gather every other Saturday for the next four years.

Laughlin looks in on this class of freshmen before crossing the hall to check on the sophomores, also engrossed in a project. Scattered around campus, ITA's upperclassmen work at internships. Laughlin oversees them all, as well as 16 instructors and support staff, while earning her Ph.D. in the area of multiracial adolescents and college students.

Approximately 80% of students who enroll in the academy finish all four years; 100% of students who complete the program graduate from high school; 99% are accepted to post-secondary institutions (Harvard and Stanford among them); and 56% of ITA graduates have been accepted to UW-Madison (and are awarded full scholarships for their participation).

One such student is 17-year-old Jose Navarro, a rising senior in the program from West High School. Having just clocked out of his shift at the UW DoIT (Division of Information Technology) Center, Navarro discusses his journey here. He spent his early childhood in the Dominican Republic, where he was born, and in Mexico, his mother's home. When Navarro was 5, his father was hired as a food science/horticulture research scientist by UW-Madison, and the family emigrated.

Navarro says he's always been aware of the need to earn scholarships to attend college, the way his older brother did. "I saw my brother bust his butt all through high school," he recalls, to earn his way through UW's Business School. As an eighth-grader at Hamilton Middle School, Navarro applied to ITA by writing an essay, collecting recommendations and attending interviews.

Navarro describes a typical Saturday at ITA: At 9 a.m., students report to the computer lab, where they are taught basic programs like Photoshop, PowerPoint and Excel, in addition to "some fun ones" like music editing software Sony ACID and movie editing software Adobe Premiere Pro.

"Sometimes being in front of a computer for four hours straight is kind of hard," he confesses. "Especially at 9 a.m. You're, like, still asleep."

A highlight for him has been learning "how to fix my stuff." Students learn to troubleshoot hardware issues, a skill most adults can't put on their resumes.

Instructors even show students how to use everyday tools like Gmail and the Internet, since their access to computers up to this point isn't a given.

Following labs, students attend classes in leadership, organizational skills and ACT prep or college prep, depending on their year. Over lunch, they chat with mentors about school and life. A two-hour study period follows to allow them to catch up on schoolwork, "which is really helpful, because usually I leave my homework until Sunday night," Navarro says sheepishly. The day ends with a guest speaker or a community service project.

The program has evolved quite a bit since it started in 2000. Funding for ITA comes from the Madison Metropolitan School District, the state and other private and corporate sponsors. It's doubled the number of students it can serve (enrollment this fall is 113, with an almost equal number of males and females), and there's now even a biennial spring break study trip to Silicon Valley.

To measure its own success, ITA examines quantitative measures: students' GPA progress through school, technology test scores and certifications earned, learning style inventories, and feedback surveys. But Laughlin notes that "much of our program evaluation must also be done qualitatively, as we look at the person and family holistically and not just as a statistic. In some cases, it may be about

being a lifeline to a child and being a major factor in helping them to resist negative influences.”

With roughly two-thirds of ITA students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, one factor in evaluating a student’s success might include the ITA catered lunch “being their only meal that Saturday, or a safe haven while the rest of their world is confusing and chaotic to them. You would have to know their story to understand that we count them as a success.”

As for Navarro, he plans to attend UW-Madison to become a dentist, a career he set his sights on as a child. And just when his maturity seems almost beyond belief, a little bit of teenager sneaks out in his explanation: “Probably because I used to have crooked teeth.”

For more info on the program, see ita.wisc.edu, or call 608-265-3145. A blog about what’s going on at summer camp is at itaupdates.blogspot.com.

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