

Government & Politics

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In California, an Unusual Partnership Expands the College Track

San Diego State U. guarantees admission to students of a large school district that made its courses more rigorous

By SARA HEBEL

San Diego

The group of high-school seniors gathered at a San Diego State University open house do not need much introduction to the campus. They have had their sights set on it since seventh grade.

That's when many of the students, who have been admitted to this fall's freshman class, began their participation in a college-preparation program that links the university with nearby Sweetwater Union High School District.

San Diego State's president, Stephen L. Weber, tells the seniors he remembers speaking to them when they were younger, and many sported mouths full of braces. "Welcome to San Diego State," he says. "We've been waiting for you."

Under a partnership formed eight years ago, the university has guaranteed a spot in its freshman class to all Sweetwater students who complete college-preparatory course work, maintain a grade-point average of at least a 3.0, and meet proficiency standards for university-level work. The school district, as its end of the bargain, established more-rigorous requirements in mathematics and language arts, and a college-preparatory track became the norm for more students.

Through the partnership, known as Compact for Success, San Diego State has sought to improve college readiness on a broader scale than that of many traditional university-based outreach programs. Rather than try to help certain students from a handful of schools, as many programs do, the university is trying to improve preparation across California's largest secondary-school district.

Sweetwater enrolls more than 41,000 students in grades seven through 12. University administrators want to turn its schools, where more than seven in 10 students are Hispanic, into feeder programs that can help the university diversify its student body while building closer ties to local communities with growing minority populations.

San Diego State leaders view the Compact — and another program in which the university runs an elementary, middle, and high school within the San Diego Unified School District — as efforts that fulfill the institution's mission as a regionally oriented public university. (See article, Page A18.) The programs, Mr. Weber says, allow the institution to apply its knowledge, research, and resources to pragmatic strategies to help disadvantaged local schools and their urban communities improve education.

Both university and Sweetwater-district officials are hoping the Compact for Success will sharply raise the school system's college-going rate. More than two in five of its students qualify for the federal government's free or reduced-price meals. More than one-quarter speak English as a second language, and many would be the first in their families to attend college.

"It's the population that's going to inherit San Diego," Mr. Weber says of the ethnic mix found in Sweetwater schools. "And we want its leaders to be alumni of San Diego State."

The Compact's record of success at broadly improving the proportion of Sweetwater students who earn college degrees will be clearer in several years. But the approach — with its promise of improving college preparation and fostering closer ties between public institutions and the local populations they serve — has been cited as a model to watch.

Promising Results

The Sweetwater graduates who will enroll at San Diego State this fall are only the second class to enter the university as part of the Compact, which began in 1999. Last fall, 203 Sweetwater students enrolled at San Diego State having met all of the program's requirements. Eleven of those students left the university, but the rest have said they plan to return for their sophomore year. It is too soon to know whether Compact participants will post high college-graduation rates, an ultimate goal, but the program has had other promising outcomes so far.

At Sweetwater's 13 senior high schools, students are now taking more than three times as many Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate tests per year than they did when the program began, and more students are receiving scores high enough to receive credit at San Diego State. The proportion of Sweetwater graduates who enrolled in four-year institutions went up to 23 percent last year, as the first class of Compact participants entered college, from 17 percent the year before.

At San Diego State, the total number of Sweetwater students who enrolled as freshmen last fall was nearly twice the number of district students who enrolled in 1999. Even more, a total of 770, have stated their intent to enroll this fall. In addition, greater proportions of Sweetwater students are arriving on campus without needing remedial help to do college-level work.

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems has projected that California will experience a drop of \$2,475 in per-capita income by 2020 — the greatest decline of any state — if it does not raise, across ethnic groups, the proportion of its students who earn a bachelor's degree. The Campaign for College Opportunity, a nonprofit group that wants to expand access to higher education in California, has cited the Compact partnership as a model for improving the state's degree-completion rates by raising the aspirations and preparation of large groups of students.

Stubborn Preparation Gaps

Improving college preparation on a large scale has long been a goal of the California State University system as a whole — and one that it is still striving to reach. In 1996 the trustees of the 23-campus system, which includes San Diego State, set a target of reducing the proportion of first-time freshmen who need remedial help in English and math to 10 percent or less by this fall. So far, the system is far short of that mark: last fall about 37 percent of freshmen needed extra math instruction, and 45 percent needed help with English.

Allison G. Jones, Cal State's assistant vice chancellor for academic affairs, says the university is trying to make a bigger difference in college readiness. Student preparation has not yet improved much since system officials helped create an Early Assessment Program that, since 2004, has allowed high-school juniors to learn whether they are ready for college work by answering optional questions on the state's standardized tests. But he says the university is doing more to help students improve, like developing a course to help high-school seniors learn expository reading and writing, a key area of deficiency, and training 2,000 English teachers to use it.

Mr. Jones says he hopes that the course, and other new programs, will help reduce the system's remedial rolls more rapidly, by as early as this fall.

To make significant improvements in college preparation nationwide, universities need to do more to communicate their specific expectations to nearby schools, says David T. Conley, director of the Center for Educational Policy Research, at the University of Oregon. To spell out the skills that they want incoming

freshmen to have, he says, universities might, for example, encourage their faculty members to work with high-school teachers to jointly develop essays and other work samples that would serve as models of college-level work.

Building an Academic Culture

Changes are beginning to occur at places like Granger Junior High School, located on the south side of San Diego County, in National City. There, only 9 percent of adults 25 and older hold a bachelor's degree, well below the national average of 24.4 percent. The per-capita income was \$11,582 in 1999, the latest available, about half the national average in that year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Susan Mitchell, the school's principal, says many eighth graders used to take subjects like "concept math" that made it difficult for them to ever get on college-preparatory paths. Now she insists that they all enroll in algebra.

The Compact program and the tougher curriculum it demands give her students a "fighting chance," she says, and the opportunity to change the academic culture of their community.

Josue Hernandez, an eighth grader, says his mom, an immigrant from Mexico, has always told him to strive for a better life. For Josue, that means getting good grades and a college education so that he can earn enough to buy a house.

The Compact for Success program, he says, has helped him prepare for college by letting him know what courses he should take. His mother, who did not attend college, has not known how to advise him on those decisions. Without the Compact program, Josue says, "I would be kind of lost."

But even with programs like Compact, it will still be difficult to transform National City into a college-going community, says Christopher Gonzalez, another eighth grader at Granger. He and his classmates say they live among many high-school dropouts, and they describe their streets as places filled with fighting, cussing, and drugs. Even Christopher, who works on community-gardening projects to try to help clean up his neighborhood, confesses that he doesn't always find some parts of school that exciting.

"I don't know if you guys like to read, but I don't," he tells a room full of adults. Just giving students better guidance and enrolling them in tougher courses won't ensure broad changes in his classmates' interest in learning or in their academic success, he says. "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

Mr. Weber, the San Diego State president, acknowledges that there are obstacles to making a partnership like the Compact program work and to replicating it elsewhere.

As the Sweetwater agreement took shape, Mr. Weber says, some of the district's guidance counselors opposed adding more-rigorous course requirements, fearing many students would fail. After the Compact program was announced, Mr. Weber says, other superintendents wanted him to guarantee their students a spot at San Diego State, too. But he says that most of them stopped calling once he explained that, as part of any deal, the schools would have to make significant curricular changes.

In other ways, including financially, Mr. Weber says establishing more partnerships like the one with Sweetwater would be feasible. San Diego State spends only about \$200,000 per year on the Compact program. That pays the salary of a full-time counselor for Compact participants who enroll at San Diego State, and for outreach to the district's schools. A separate, private foundation has raised about \$500,000 in scholarship funds for each class of Compact participants.

Adjusting to College

Many San Diego State freshmen from the Sweetwater district are enthusiastic about Compact for Success and how it has helped them. At the campus open house this spring, they tell the high-school seniors that adjusting to college can be hard but that a counselor designated for Compact students has helped. She guides them in selecting courses and provides around-the-clock advice. And now, as these students

approach their sophomore year, they say they have grown comfortable here.

Gabriella Campos, who is majoring in business, says the Compact program gave her clear benchmarks that helped her chart her path to San Diego State. Neither of her parents went to college.

She feels at home at the university, she says, particularly when she's hanging out at the campus Starbucks. Employees know her drink — a venti-size, upside-down, caramel macchiato with soy milk — and after studying there, she earned a C or better on all of her finals.

"I love that place," she says.

Many of the high-school seniors and their parents at the spring open house said that participating in the Compact program had eased their concerns about going to college and the application process.

The guarantee of admission gives students confidence that if they work hard, they will be rewarded, says Martha Flores, whose daughter Lisette is planning to enroll at San Diego State in the fall. "It releases some of the stress."

That is especially true as competition for spots in San Diego State's freshman class has grown. This spring, the university received more than 46,000 applications, a record, for a freshman class of about 5,000 next fall.

"We have a lot of people wanting to get in," Mr. Weber told the Sweetwater graduates, "but we want you."

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