

Attention yields retention at Summer Bridge Program

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PLAINVIEW—When Sierra Rojas needed help, Wayland Baptist University's Summer Bridge Program gave the freshman from Amarillo what she needed—personal attention with the long-term goal of retention.

"My senior year, I lost a whole year because my teacher left, and we didn't do anything," Rojas said of her academic deficiency in algebra going into Wayland. "Coming to the Summer Bridge Program has really helped me to review and refresh my brain. If I had not done the program, I would have been lost in algebra."

David Natividad, Title V grant project director, said the program is designed for incoming students like Rojas, who need help to get started in their college studies, so that they don't become frustrated and abandon their goal of getting a diploma.

Experiences designed to enhance success

Rojas was one of 17 incoming freshmen invited to dedicate three weeks of their summer to getting a head start on their studies.

Accepting their invitations to be in the first Summer Bridge Program class, these students moved into dorms early and began an intense schedule of classes. Their efforts resulted in some course credit and lots of experiences designed to help them succeed at Wayland.

Pedro Silguero, a freshman football player from Harlingen, took the same

challenge to ensure he's academically—as well as athletically—fit for his time at Wayland.

"The instruction and tutorials are helping us and getting us prepared for when actual college starts," Silguero said, comparing it to preseason football drills.

"It's tough, but if you are really into it like I am, it will be easier because you are limiting all the distractions and all the things like that. It will help us pull through."

A boot camp for college life

Natividad explained the Summer Bridge Program is meant to help students required to take developmental classes due to low levels on placement tests.

"We have noticed that when it comes to retention issues, the students don't have credits because the developmental classes do not count, and that is very discouraging," he said.

"One of the reasons they do not return is because they work so hard for a year and have very little credit. We are trying to help these students."

Rosemary Peggram, director of Student Success at Wayland, said the Title V grant-funded program is kind of like a mini semester or boot camp.

"We set this up so that the routine would be somewhat like what they would find in a long semester," she explained.

"They have classes one right after the other in the morning. We get them up for breakfast, then class, and then lunch. Then, we have them come back for a study hall time and try to use that to finish homework or get ahead on assignments that are coming up or to get some help.

“They start to realize they need to fill their time with preparation for class and that just because class is over, they are not done. Then they have a little free time and then some activities. The fun things happen later in the day and into the evening, just like they might be in a regular semester.”

Ja’Lynn Velasquez, a freshman cheerleader, described the three-week program as “pretty intense” but added it has a significant impact on participants.

“They make sure you understand it,” Velasquez said. “It’s kind of like a one-on-one where everyone is helping.”

Providing a much-needed boost

Peggram explained instruction and tutoring sessions are designed to help participants review algebra concepts and improve writing skills. She noted many students missed their high school algebra year because of COVID and need assistance to get where they need to be for college.

That’s the kind of boost the Summer Bridge Program provides. Participants retest at the end of the program in hopes of improving their course placement.

“The goal is to raise the score enough to place out of one or two developmental courses and be able to enroll in a course that would count toward their degree,” Peggram said. “This saves time and tuition expense.”

Natividad explained that Title V grants are geared toward Hispanic-serving institutions like Wayland—universities where Hispanic students represent a significant percentage of the student body.

“What we are seeing across the board—and not just at Wayland—is that when it comes to retention, the ones who have the worst numbers are Hispanic students,” Natividad said. “For decades, we worked hard to raise

graduation from high school rates. For many years, only about 50 percent of Hispanics were graduating from high school. Now, they are graduating at the same rate as everyone else.

"The next thing was getting them into college. They were not going to college. Now, they are entering college at the same rate as everyone else. So now, we must get them to stay and get a degree."

"That is what we are working on. We are telling the students that we are doing this hoping that in four years we will be at their graduation. It is about retaining them. We will keep an eye on them for the next two years to see if they stay at Wayland and how they do. That will determine if this program is successful or not. The idea is retention."

But the focus of the Summer Bridge Program is not just retention of Hispanic students, he said.

In addition to taking math and writing developmental classes, program participants also enrolled in Best Achievement Strategies in College, a course required of all freshmen. Plus, they get opportunities to connect through on-campus relationships and organizations.

"Our assignments are getting them out into the campus, so they are finding where things are on campus and the other resources on campus, and meeting in different buildings," Peggram said.

"We are trying to connect them to the school so that they know there are a lot of people who are cheering for them and that there are going to be a lot of people who will be there to help them," Natividad said.

'Get them into a routine'

An added benefit has been the 17 participants bonded and can encourage each other as regular classes begin this week.

“Before school starts, they have this group they can call friends,” he said. “They are full in. When others are complaining about getting up early, they are going to be able to say I’ve been doing this for three weeks.

“We are trying to get them into a routine. It is similar to what their schedule looks like this fall. We’ve tried to mimic that schedule so that they are used to it. They will be used to getting up early and going to class.”

Wayland plans to extend Summer Bridge Program invitations each year under the Title V federal grant. While grant funding gets smaller each year, the university plans to expand the program.

“It grows to 45 students in Year 3,” Natividad said. “After getting two years under our belt, hopefully we will have a really good idea about how to do this.”

But what really matters to Natividad, Pegram and those teaching in the Summer Bridge Program is that students like Sierra Rojas, Pedro Silguero and Ja’Lynn Velasquez find success at Wayland.

“We want them to graduate,” Natividad said.