College preparedness program put to the test at City College
by Mariko Lamb

According to the San Diego Community College District, many high school students who enter their first year of college are not prepared to meet the demands and expectations of the rigorous college-level coursework.

In response to that alarming assertion, San Diego City College (SDCC), San Diego high schools and other stakeholders including the Foundation for California Community Colleges, Jobs for the Future and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation are teaming up to provide students with the tools necessary to succeed in their first year of college through an Early College High School Collaboration (ECHS) program.

The ECHS program focuses on developing college readiness and reducing remediation by partnering high school and college faculty, aligning curriculums to focus on college readiness skills, offering summer programs for 10th and 11th graders to reinforce key cognitive strategies and offering accelerated math, English and business courses for high school students.

In the spring of 2009, SDCC professors Gavin Brown and Chris Baron launched the program, offering 37 area high school students the opportunity to earn one college credit through an English 12 course. The self-paced course focuses on reading, writing and critical thinking skills designed to raise students’ proficiency and college readiness skills, and help them achieve higher test scores in the required California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) and standardized college entrance tests like the SAT.

The professors use Pearson MySkillsLab, a user-friendly online learning platform, as the core curriculum for the course. Students enrolled in English 12 begin the course by taking a series of pre-diagnostic tests to determine areas of skill strengths and weaknesses, work through an individualized study plan customized exclusively to improve their skill weaknesses then end the course by taking a series of post-diagnostic tests to determine the students’ levels of retention.

Baron said one of the clearest benefits of the program is the initial diagnostic that provides an immediate and clear understanding of students’ individual knowledge base and needs.

“MySkillsLab enables us to target our teaching from Day One of the term, delivering exactly the help that each student requires,” he said. “MySkillsLab has helped some basic-skills students to re-enter a regular course of study, and we are seeing high school students who were at risk of failure able to pass the CAHSEE.”
San Diego High School’s School of LEADS enrolled all 10th-grade English students in the English 12 course for two years. The students would spend one class period per week at City College and half of one class period in their regular English class using the MySkillsLab to practice writing skills, said LEADS English teacher Fane Wazny, who works with Baron on the joint curriculum.

“We saw the potential of the classes as preparing students for the writing conventions and writing applications parts of the CAHSEE,” she said. “The class was used as a supplement to and reinforcement of the California language arts standards and reading and writing strategies taught in our 10th grade curriculum.”

Her students have made improvements in test scores since using the program. She said of 99 students who took the CAHSEE, 78 percent of them passed the language-arts portion and 48 percent of them scored either proficient or advanced — quite an improvement over two years ago when the teachers used other teaching methods.

In addition to quantifiable results, Wazny has noted other ways her students have benefited from the course.

“By coming on City’s campus, they feel like college students. Most of the students take the course very seriously, and their behavior tends to be very mature and cooperative,” she said. “The coursework is rigorous, and the students begin to understand the challenges of a college-level course. However, most rise to the occasion and are very proud of their accomplishments.”

MySkillsLab is also used in courses by San Diego City College students themselves to reduce the need for remediation of college courses, support English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students in their courses, or prepare non-English majors for other certifications or tests.

Results from individual pre- and post-diagnostic tests have proven to be a success with 100 percent retention by the first 37 students enrolled in 2009 and a 92 percent retention rate by the second wave of 281 students who were enrolled in 2010.

The first wave of high school students who first utilized the program two years ago in San Diego have only begun entering colleges this year, testing the advantage of the ECHS program in preparing high school students for their first year of college.