

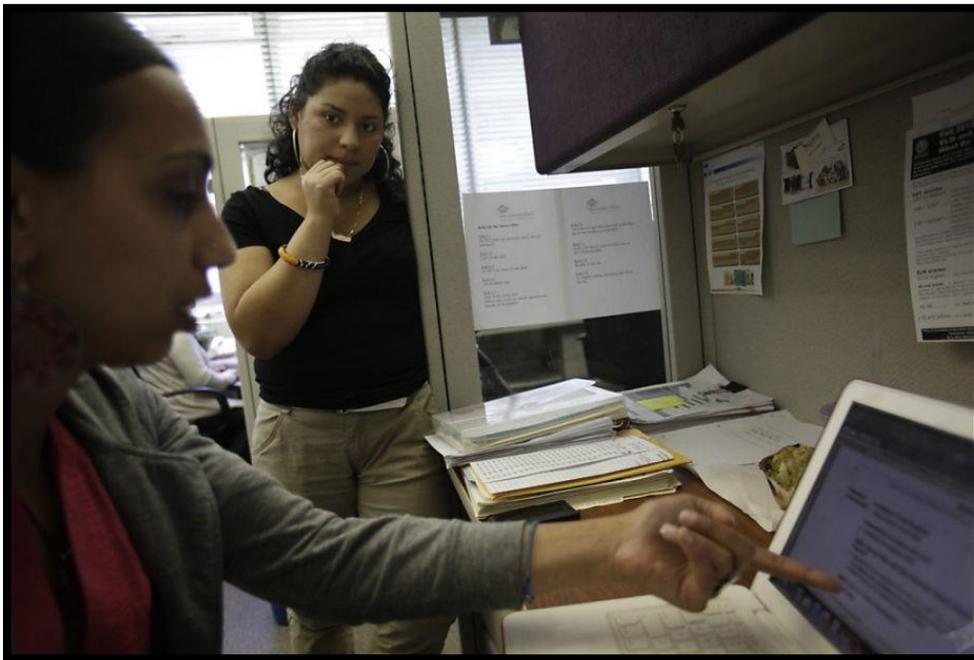
SFGATE

Public campuses mimic private university experience

HIGHER EDUCATION

By **Nanette Asimov**

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San Francisco State University graduate Sammie Ramirez (right) gets feedback from Rama Kased (left), project coordinator Metro Health Academy, Department of Health Education, SFSU/CCSF Partnership, on her resume at San Francisco State University on Thursday, June 14, 2012 in San Francisco, Calif.

Consider two very different college experiences:

In one, freshmen at costly private schools sweep into a circle of like-minded students, benefit from the attention of professors who know them by name, and rely on advisers to guide them through school.

The second is largely the opposite - and typical of sink-or-swim public campuses where students can waste semesters taking electives that don't lead to graduation, search in vain for someone invested in their success, and quit, usually by their second year, costing taxpayers millions.

Now, faculty members from [San Francisco State University](#) and [City College of San Francisco](#) have found a way to mimic the private university experience at public campuses for little extra cost to the schools, and it appears to be working.

"People are really astounded," said Professor [Mary Beth Love](#) of San Francisco State, co-chair of the Metro Academies Initiative, as the 4-year-old experiment is called. "We're outstripping the university's performance."

Reaching crucial 3rd year

Love means that 82 percent of freshmen who joined Metro reached the critical third year of college, compared with 64 percent of those who didn't participate, according to a study at San Francisco State. It also compared the progress of the nonparticipants most similar to Metro students: mainly nonwhite, low income, and the first in their family to attend college. Just 61 percent made it to junior year.

"The first two years are a very leaky part of the pipe," Love said.

Metro, offered at San Francisco State and City College, is supposed to patch the leaks by carefully orchestrating students' freshman and sophomore years to give them a firm foundation for the rest of college. It's something that low-income students, who are the ideal candidates for Metro, especially need if their parents haven't been to college and don't know how to help, or if their high school lacked the counselors and rigorous academics necessary to prepare them for college.

Taking courses as a group

Each campus has two Metro Academies: one for health majors, the other focused on child development, with 50 to 140 students each. A third Metro opens this fall at San Francisco State for students interested in science, technology, engineering and math. Metro students on each campus take required courses as a group, with reserved placement. They get tutoring from math majors and access to counselors - borrowed at low cost from San Francisco State's graduate counseling program.

Metro students take four courses each semester - including two outside of the program. Their Metro courses satisfy general education requirements, but are infused with the academic theme of the program.

4 essential skills

More to the point, Love said, Metro professors explicitly teach four skills in every class that traditional instructors often ignore, assuming - incorrectly - that most students have them mastered: critical thinking, clear writing, quantitative reasoning and effective speaking.

"They can't imagine that a young person never wrote a paper," Love said. "That they're sitting there ashamed and afraid, feeling that everyone else knows how to write a paper." Metro instructors also confer monthly, making sure their courses play well off each other. They also talk about their students.

"We'll put up the list of students and go through it: Is anyone misfiring? Anyone know what's happening with Luis? And someone always knows," said Professor Vicki Legion of City College, who co-chairs Metro with Love. "There's a huge amount of social support." The team - including program coordinator Rama Kased and Savita Malik, director of curriculum and faculty development - believe they have hit on a proverbial magic bullet that not only helps more students succeed, but also saves significant money wasted on dropouts.

Challenging journey

The story of Sammie Ramirez, 22, may be proof of Metro's value.

No bookie would have placed odds on a diploma for the girl from the poor side of San Rafael. Her father, Hector Ramirez of Honduras, has been unemployed for four years. Her mother, [Milagro Ramirez](#) of El Salvador, cleans houses. Her younger sister dropped out of [Santa Rosa Junior College](#). So did her boyfriend.

Sammie Ramirez almost dropped out, too.

In 2007, she enrolled at City College and found herself in an unfamiliar, even hostile new world.

"I failed my English class. I got behind on the course work. I hated my teacher," she said of a particularly intimidating academician who insisted her students focus fully on what she taught.

"I wasn't used to it," Ramirez said. "I felt good that I was in school, but I didn't have a plan."

Meanwhile, the Metro team was hunting for students to enroll in the [Metro Health Academy](#), set to premiere on both campuses in fall 2008. They distributed flyers at Huckleberry Teen Health in San Rafael, where Ramirez worked.

"The first day of class, it was, 'Guys, get to know each other. Meet your teachers. And we'll make sure you succeed,' " Ramirez said. The team helped her register and made sure each class was transferable to a four-year university.

"I still struggled," she said. "What made the difference is that they held my hand. It's not a red carpet treatment as much as what all schools should be."

Ramirez transferred to San Francisco State in 2010, majoring in social work. Last month, her mother cried as she watched her daughter become the first in the family to earn a degree.

Metro's two years of counseling, tutoring, program coordination and faculty development cost \$860 per student at City College and \$659 at San Francisco State, where the providers are based, says a study from researchers [Jane Wellman](#), a college cost expert in Washington, D.C., and [Robert Johnstone](#) of the nonprofit [RP Group](#) in Berkeley.

Savings outweigh costs

Yet "Metro's modest extra costs are far outweighed by the cost savings realized from reducing the waste currently resulting from very large attrition rates," say the researchers, who calculate that San Francisco State saves \$15,297 for every student who completes the program.

The Campaign for [College Opportunity](#), an advocacy group in Sacramento, is also pleased with Metro.

"What we like is that it truly does rethink the first two years of a student's college experience without an infusion of new resources," said spokeswoman Audrey Dow.

"They've figured out how to improve success for low-income, first-generation students on their campus."

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