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## LOS MEDANOS COLLEGE'S UNIQUE MATH PROGRAM BOOSTS STUDENTS' PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS

Article that appeared in the Contra Costa Times 2/16/2014 By Paul Burgarino pburgarino@bayareanewsgroup.com

PITTSBURG -- If several semesters of remedial algebra courses are holding students back or forcing them to drop out -- especially if they're not relevant to their future careers -- why not give them a quicker alternative?

That was the epiphany, or "stu-piphany" as she calls it, that Los Medanos College professor Myra Snell came to while trying to make algebra more bearable for students in 2009. Despite all her work to bring relevance to her algebra students, only 17 percent finished the series of classes.

"I was devastated. I went back and kept thinking what would it take to get the needle moved," said Snell, a 22-year professor at the Pittsburg campus.

The idea became simple: Shorten the process.

Snell created Path2Stats, a one-semester course that streamlines multiple semesters of algebra classes into a single class that focuses heavily on statistics. The course has no prerequisite, and the goal is to engage the students and get them to use critical thinking to analyze data, communicate with each other and work in teams, Snell said.

"Math does not have to be the burial ground for students' dreams of a college degree and the opportunities that come with it," Snell said.

So far, the program has been a success. In the five years since it started, Los Medanos student completion of transferable math has been three times higher than the traditional curriculum, officials said. Other schools around the state that use the program have seen the students who complete a transferable math class climb almost sixfold.

That's a big reason why Snell's class was recently chosen as one of 24 finalists selected for an award from the American Association of Community Colleges. Los Medanos was the lone California school picked as a finalist for the Awards of Excellence, which recognizes innovation and promising practices at the community college level.

Winners will be named April 7 at the association's convention in Washington, D.C.

"Myra's just an amazing professor. She's been at the forefront in seeing that we were losing the majority of those



Los Medanos College mathematics professor Myra Snell, explains a math problem during a math class in Pittsburg, Calif., on Thursday, Feb. 13, 2014. Snell created an innovative solution to streamline the learning and success rates for students in their mathematics studies. (Dan Rosenstrauch/Bay Area News Group)

students by requiring all these layers," said Katie Hern, who cofounded the California Acceleration Project with Snell.

That project has helped bring the class to 20 other community colleges in the state. Hern, an English professor at Chabot College, and Los Medanos president Bob Kratochvil nominated Snell for the award, which is recognizing faculty innovation for the first time.

"Myra's work has helped make great progress in student completion of transferable math and helped accelerate learning," Kratochvil said.

Most students do not plan on going into math-intensive fields and need to just satisfy lower division requirements in statistics. But, based on placement testing, students can wind up with one to four semesters of algebra. Snell, who worked on addressing achievement-gap issues before becoming a professor, points out the algebra levels particularly affect minority students, as more than half of African-American and Latino students are placed three or more levels below college math.

A national study by the Community College Research Center found that 90 percent of students who begin below college math disappear before completing the college-level course. Hern says that Path2Stats is a solution to those hurdles.

The Path2Stats difference is clear to Los Medanos student Elizabeth Chavez. Chavez, 19, of Antioch, says she didn't care for her algebra class last semester and "didn't learn."

"I pretty much just sat in the back and was on Facebook," she said.

But in class Thursday, Chavez worked with fellow student Yvette Castanada, 28, of Oakley, by discussing approaches to solving a hypothetical question about the mean and median salaries for the New York Yankees' payroll given a few pieces of information.

"There's a lot of interaction in the class, where we share how we got answers," Castanada said.

In addition to her work at Los Medanos, Snell speaks nationally on remediation reform and served as a key adviser to Colorado's redesign of its mathematics curriculum. She also worked as a curriculum writer for the Carnegie Foundation's Statway initiative.

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