

A VILLAGE WITHOUT BORDERS

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A VILLAGE

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UMOJA PROGRAMS LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

WITHOUT BORDERS

San Diego is America's largest border town. As such, border issues significantly impact the lives of many San Diegans. Borders are intended to separate the homeland from the borderland. And, in many instances, they distinguish "us" from "them."

For thousands of African-American San Diegans who live in disadvantaged neighborhoods or whose lives have been distinguished by race, class, or ethnicity, educational services exist behind a formidable border. The psychological and cultural borders that surround our educational institutions throughout this country often stand taller than any physical international border.

The San Diego Community College District (SDCCD) has implemented programs designed to help African-American students overcome these psychological and cultural obstacles.

Two institutions within the SDCCD—San Diego City College and San Diego Continuing Education—have worked with students, African-Americans among them, raised under trying circumstances and know that as savvy and adept as people are in certain scenarios,

these same people can be just as fearful and intimidated in others, particularly in formal learning environments. All students are afraid of failure, of being disrespected, embarrassed, or lacking in knowledge. For many—even those living a mere block from campus—crossing the cultural border of an educational institution is more difficult and frightening than crossing the border into another country.

Border Crossings

Among our African-American population, males in particular, we see only a brave few who dare journey across the border into our educational institutions.

Nationally, African-American male students receiving associate degrees are outnumbered by their female counterparts by more than two to one—the highest gender imbalance

for any race. This gap widened significantly between 1990–1991 and 2005–2006 (Schmidt 2008).

Overall, compared with all racial or ethnic groups in higher education, African-American males also have the lowest achievement rate for receiving degrees (*Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* 2006).

The statistics are astonishing, and higher education administrators and faculty are very aware of this achievement gap. The challenge for educational institutions is to develop programs that support students crossing these psychological and cultural borders so all students can be academically successful, regardless of race or gender.

Umoja Unity

"Umoja" is a Kiswahili word that means "unity." Unity of educational efforts is exactly what is needed, and educators must work with the help of best practices from the many African-American student success programs.

In general, Umoja programs, such as those created in Southern California recently, aim to establish social networks and resources dedicated to enhancing the cultural and educational experiences of African-Americans. The

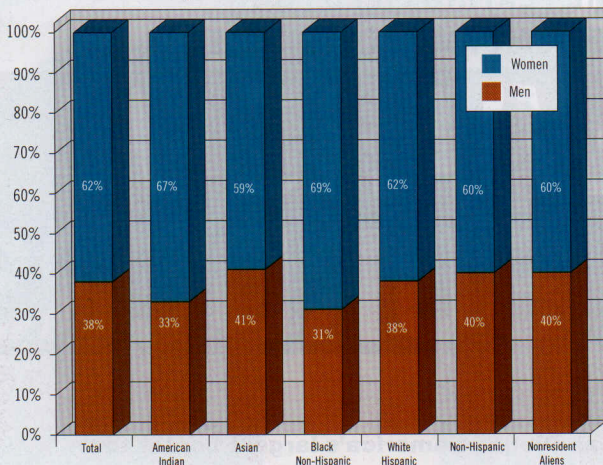
mission of Umoja is founded upon the belief that when the voices and histories of students are openly recognized, new opportunities for self-efficacy emerge. Although developed to support African-Americans specifically, Umoja approaches can be used to the benefit of all students.

Digging a Foundation

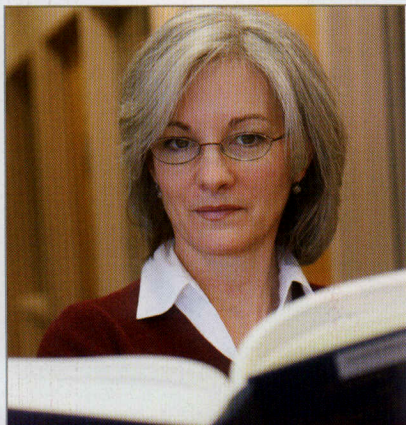
The Umoja approach is grounded in considerable empirical research. Notable among this research is the pioneering work of Dr. Uri Treisman, professor of mathematics and public affairs at the University of Texas, Austin. Treisman studied the dramatic differences in student success rates among African-Americans and Asian-Americans enrolled in first-year calculus classes during 1975-1976.

Treisman found that students' study habits, and not cultural differences, were the most important variables in student success rates. While African-

**Associate Degrees Conferred
By Gender, by Racial and Ethnic Group**



Source: Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2006



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American students tended to study in isolation, Chinese-American students formed study groups and included discussions of calculus into their daily routines. Treisman found that when African-American students adopted these collaborative practices, the result was measurably higher achievement levels (Fullilove and Treisman 1990). This collaborative approach has since been replicated and proved successful at a number of institutions across the nation and remains an important component of the Umoja model.

Dr. Vincent Tinto of Syracuse University concurs that student support networks are key to academic success. Among the elements Tinto identifies as necessary, support is one of the most effective, since it leads to student retention.

Beyond classroom instruction, such features as study groups, mentoring, tutoring, counseling, and other interactive exercises are key contributors to success. This is especially true for students who might otherwise find themselves isolated or marginalized in educational institutions. Another key element, according to Tinto, is involvement—the process by which students become engaged participants in learning through communities or other formats designed to promote active engagement (Tinto 2000). Again, the Umoja model incorporates these critical support structures.

When the California Umoja movement was initiated in October 2006, a steering committee representing 23 California community colleges agreed to a unified statewide program. The work pulled together the best practices, materials, and experiences of the 15 state programs dedicated to improving African-American student success.

Building a Village

California's Umoja program is driven by the creation of Umoja Villages—local, campus-based communities of learners and learner supporters. Within these villages, African-American students know they have access to the cultural, social, academic, and spiritual support

necessary to be successful.

The Umoja Village intentionally cultivates student relationships within the broader institution. There are several Umoja student requirements, including engagement in the Village and other Umoja-sponsored activities.

The two general academic models for Umoja programs are the Learning Community Model and the Cohort Model. Under the Learning Community Model,

students take two or more linked courses that share a common African cultural theme (or themes). Under the Cohort Model, students remain a peer group, but also take courses within the general population, returning to the Village for support and study groups. These two models are not meant to be mutually exclusive, and several colleges have developed a blended hybrid of the two.



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A requirement of both is that all students take foundational guidance and personal growth courses during the first year. The courses are designed to address factors known to impede academic success for African-American students. Topics cover a variety of areas, including basic study skills, mentoring and role modeling, appreciation of the African legacy, and African culture and spiritual connections. During these classes, students' personal voices and histories are acknowledged, validated, and celebrated. Students are encouraged to succeed in an environment where teacher perceptions are positive and student expectations are high. The approach empowers students to develop a better understanding of the African-American experience.

San Diego City College

The African-American achievement gap sparked the genesis of the Umoja/Transfer Success Program (TSP) at San

“The Umoja Village intentionally cultivates student relationships within the broader institution.”

Diego City College (SDCC) in the fall of 2007. Under SDCC's Umoja program, students complete a series of developmental math, English, and guidance courses with subject matter designed to prepare them for transfer and to enhance the communities in which they live. Umoja/TSP uses a learning community model, where curricula and cultural themes are deliberately linked, yielding opportunities for cross-learning and deeper understanding of course materials. Students enrolled in SDCC's Umoja program are encouraged to develop supportive peer relationships, along with effective, cooperative

relationships with faculty members. Throughout the community, faculty and students interchange in their responsibilities, each employing the role of teacher and student. With an understanding that each student carries with him a unique background, each is invited to use and to teach personal experiences through discussion, journaling, and classroom presentations.

In the fall of 2007, Umoja/TSP students persisted at nearly 75 percent compared with 60 percent of the general student population. Additionally, roughly 84 percent of students enrolled in the Umoja/TSP developmental English course successfully completed the program, compared with 60 percent of the general student population and 46 percent of African-American students in comparable courses at SDCC.

In the fall of 2008, Umoja/TSP piloted an accelerated developmental math course at SDCC in which

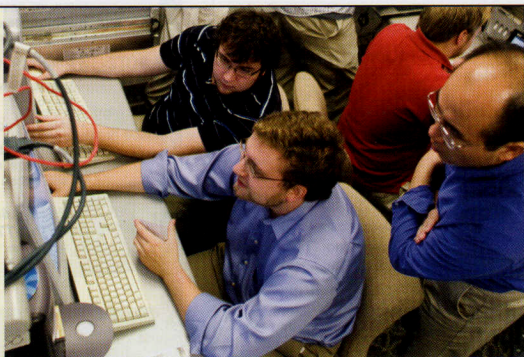
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curricula from math fundamentals and pre-algebra courses were integrated. Of the 21 students who completed the accelerated course, 17 students passed both the fundamentals and pre-algebra portions of the course; four students passed the math fundamentals portion of the course only. Essentially, 100 percent of the students enrolled in this pilot program passed their respective developmental math course, with 81 percent of students successfully completing both portions of the accelerated course. Comparatively, in the fall of 2006, only 30 percent of African-American students successfully completed any basic-skills math course at SDCC.

San Diego Continuing Education

Whereas SDCC's Umoja program is two years old, San Diego Continuing Education's Umoja program is just getting off the ground. San Diego Continuing Education is the nation's largest separately accredited Western Association of Schools and Colleges noncredit program. It serves more than 100,000 students each year through six campuses and more than 300 community and neighborhood sites. Continuing Education offers 25 career technical programs such as culinary arts, weld-

ing, auto technology, Certified Nursing Assistant, and computer technology. Basic skills instruction, English as a Second Language, GED, and high school completion programs are also available.

The effort was born when the California Alliance of African American Educators decided that a noncredit Umoja program was needed to support African-American male success. The program offers a foundational personal development course focused on African culture and studies, along with three pathways for student development: GED/High School completion, Career Technical Education, and College Preparation. Each of these pathways employs the Cohort Model, building upon the proven research of Treisman, Tinto, and others.

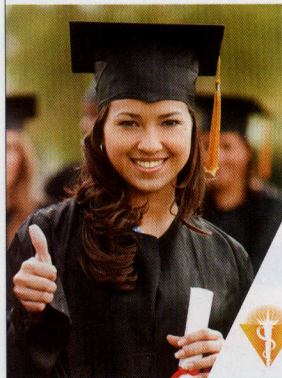
Wherever applicable, basic skills instruction is integrated into the curriculum, using the I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education Skills Training) model. I-BEST pairs basic skills education with workforce training or other instruction, combining instruction with students' lives and educational goals. Under I-BEST, students learn literacy/numeracy and workplace/college preparation skills (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges 2008). San Diego Continuing Education faculty believe that combining the

I-BEST program with the proven Umoja cohort model is the best approach for its students. Ultimately, the goal is to encourage those who are interested in the matriculation process to transfer to SDCC's for-credit Umoja program.

Due to long-standing cultural, economic, social, and political boundaries, the lack of male African-American student participation is one of education's most pressing challenges. Disenfranchised African-American male students, who in many cases have already been marginalized by previous educational experiences, require targeted efforts that empower them to succeed. Certainly, given the timing of what we are learning and creating through *Achieving the Dream* and other initiatives, our nation's community colleges are uniquely positioned to take the lead in this arena. In doing so, we will help many students, who otherwise would not dream of one day attending classes, cross the complex cultural border into our classrooms and succeed on their educational journey.

ANTHONY BEEBE is president of San Diego Continuing Education; Terrence Burgess is president of San Diego City College; Constance Carroll is chancellor of San Diego Community College District; and Erin Charlens is Umoja coordinator at San Diego City College.

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