



NEWS

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El Camino College Receives \$4.34 Million in New Grants

Vivian Meza graduated from Narbonne High School in 2006 and attended El Camino College that same fall, enthusiastic and ready to fulfill her dreams to study astronomy. She was off and running her first semester, bringing in a 3.6 grade point average.

But by the second semester, all had changed and she found her grades slipping dramatically while juggling calculus and physics at the same time.

"My studies became really difficult, really fast," she said. "For that next year I kept taking classes and dropping them. I was going downhill and it was very frustrating. I finally decided to take some time off."

Vivian's struggle is common among many community college students across the state. According to a recently released report by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy, 70 percent of students seeking degrees at California's community colleges did not manage to attain them or transfer to four-year universities within six years. African American and Hispanic students had even lower success rates, the study reports.

The study also shows that students who earn at least 20 credits in the first year are more likely to meet their degree goals; those who pass college-level math and English within two years are also more successful toward earning a degree.

El Camino College recently announced two new grants totaling more than \$4.34 million awarded to college programs to better serve students like Vivian who could use a little help as they work toward fulfilling their academic dreams.

New funding includes a Title V (Hispanic Serving Institutions) grant geared toward increasing graduation rates. Funding includes \$637,207 for year one and \$650,000 per year for years two through five, for a total of \$3.24 million. A new TRIO Students Support Services grant for students in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) disciplines was also secured, providing \$220,000 over five years, for a total of \$1.1 million.

"These grants will enable the college to provide additional resources to the many students we serve and will strengthen our existing outstanding programs," said El Camino College President Thomas M. Fallo.

The Title V grant will directly impact numerous students in the South Bay community by helping to increase persistence, improve academic performance, and increase the graduation and transfer rates at the college. Programs will be initiated to help strengthen student readiness for the pursuit of the associate's degree, while also strengthening student learning and faculty teaching in pre-collegiate essential gateway courses such as reading, writing, and mathematics.

STEM grant funding will focus on helping ECC students work toward science, technology, engineering and math careers, building on the proven strategies of the Mathematics, Engineering, and Science Achievement (MESA) program, which has been operating at ECC since 1999. MESA has been remarkably successful in assisting first-generation and low-income students in pursuing careers in STEM fields.

Preparing a future workforce in these industries meets a specific need for local employers, including aerospace, refineries, utilities, and manufacturers, who have expressed concern over an aging workforce in these areas, with no one trained to replace them.

Vivian came back to El Camino College last fall. She was on the management track at a restaurant and earning a great salary, but she was drawn back to the classroom.

"There was room to advance at the restaurant job and school wasn't going too great for me, so thought I would focus on becoming a manager," she said. "But I really felt like wanted to go back to school. Working at a restaurant was not what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I really felt like my passion was in physics and astronomy.

"So I came back in fall 2009 and told myself that if I didn't pass these courses, this was going to be my last shot at college. I didn't want to waste any more time or money. That's when I also decided to join MESA."

Since joining MESA, Vivian has passed all of her classes, without dropping a single one.

"I think the big thing was that I realized it was impossible for me to do the work on my own," she said. "MESA provides the opportunity to work with different students who are in my field and in my classes. Also, students who have passed these classes already were able to steer me in the right direction. By working on the same problems with others, struggling together, and knowing I wasn't alone in this, well – that made all the difference."

Vivian attends MESA workshops and study groups, and is now a physics tutor – the same class she dropped years ago. She also plans to graduate from ECC in the spring and then transfer to UCLA, UC Berkeley, or UC Santa Barbara next fall. Graduate school will follow.

"El Camino College has great professors and they work with us – they want us to be prepared to transfer," Vivian said. "I know my studies will continue to be difficult, but I feel like now I am ready for it. I feel prepared and ready for the challenge, where before I wasn't.

"I am at the very beginning of my education. I don't really know where I will end up or what is out there for me as far as my career goes, but I am going to find out."

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