

## CA programs win federal grants for college and career readiness

By Kimberly Beltran

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Students in the state's far northern reaches are graduating better prepared for college, thanks to a federally-funded program designed to help them succeed there.

College Options, administered by University of California-Davis staff, got a huge boost this month when director Lianne Richelieu-Boren was notified that her program is one of nine California programs to receive another federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

College Options will receive \$12.6 million over seven years to continue the work of helping students in Shasta and Siskiyou counties prepare for and succeed in college, whether it be a two-year community college or a four-year university.

The grant program, which doled out \$177 million to 66 programs nationwide, is aimed at reducing the staggering number of high school graduates who find themselves unable to successfully complete college course work without some form of remediation.

In August, annual scores released by ACT – a college prep testing system similar to the SAT – found that only about 25 percent of 2011 high school graduates nationwide met college readiness benchmarks in English composition, college algebra, introductory social science and biology.

The issue has drawn the attention of President Barak Obama who has attempted to leverage state participation in developing college and career readiness standards with funding from the federal stimulus package as well as the Race to the Top competition.

Development of the standards is also expected to become a major component of the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act.

In the meantime, individual programs such as College Options help meet the needs of today's students by working with local school districts to align middle- and high school curriculum with home state college entrance requirements, and by providing academic counseling and a host of other services.

Because of the grant, Richelieu-Boren can now increase her staff of 14 and expand services to include middle- and high schools in Tehama, Trinity and Modoc counties. Students in Glenn, Del Norte and Butte counties could benefit from some of the program's services as well, she said.

"We're just very, very fortunate to receive this grant," the program director said. "This money allows us to...double our people on the ground – the people in the trenches, so to speak."

Those "people in the trenches" are mostly counselors who, under terms of the grant, follow a cohort of students from seventh grade through graduation, advising, mentoring and keeping them focused on the goal: To successfully complete high school ready to tackle college-level courses.

"Our transfer rate from community college to four year schools has been really low," Richelieu-Boren said. "Seventy-five percent of our kids required remediation in English and it was 85 percent in math."

"We've worked to ramp up the curriculum," she continued, noting that her team, as part of a regional higher education task force, has seen positive change start to happen. One of those changes is teaching first-year algebra in north state middle schools. Numerous studies have shown that algebra proficiency by the end of eighth grade leads to higher proficiency – and test scores – in high school math, and, in turn, successful college completion rates, Richelieu-Boren said.

This push goes along with aligning and toughening up secondary education curriculum to meet UC and CSU standards so that a student does not need remedial education once he or she gets to college.

The College Options program has shown progress since it was founded in 2003 under a smaller federal grant program, according to statistics provided by Richelieu-Boren.

In the 21 high schools served in Shasta and Siskiyou counties, data shows that since 2003:

- Student enrollment in post-secondary education has increased 33 percent

- Student eligibility for attendance at universities or state colleges increased by 12 percent or more at 14 high schools covered under the program
- Completions of Federal Applications For Student Assistance increased 27 percent
- Completions of college applications increased 58 percent
- The number of clients served by the College Options Center in Redding increased 67 percent

While a key component of the grant program is that it serve the state's poorest children (50 percent of a funded school population must qualify for free- or reduced-price lunches) all students of schools served by the College Options program benefit from its services, which include tutoring programs, college and career assessment, parent education and financial aid and career workshops.

"No matter who comes in our door, we serve everyone – free," said Richelieu-Boren, a Shasta High School graduate who earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from UC Davis and a master's degree in counseling from CSU Sacramento.

She noted that while student tracking begins in middle school, the program also strives to begin the college discussion as early as kindergarten.

"We're serving as sort of a surrogate for first-generation, college-bound kids," she said. "While the main focus is making sure students are academically prepared [for college], we want them familiar with the idea of college from kindergarten on."