Six years ago, two UO economists launched a summer camp for low-income teens to help them get on track for college. Now seven of those summer students are attending the UO.

By Lisa Raleigh

“"You don’t feel you’re good enough to go to college, until you see people make an investment ... her first year in order to make ends meet—even though she was living at home and did not have housing expenses.

Summer students are launched a summer camp for low-income families that, despite their smarts, were unlikely to enter high school thinking of college—not just because of economic pressures, but because a variety of personal circumstances also conspired to make college seem out of reach.

The students who attend the SAIL camp are kids, said Harbaugh, "who by and large would not have gone to college.

‘No Way Am I Going to Be Able to Do That!’

Eight grade students are prime candidates for this kind of intervention, says Blonigen, because they will soon have critical decisions to make about college prep courses. Without guidance, he said, ‘they don’t know the implications of the choices they make in high school.’

But it’s not just about making good choices. It’s about realizing you’re entitled to do that," said Sara Eilenstine, a UO freshman and SAIL graduate, thinking back to what she thought about college in middle school. "I’m not smart enough."

Yet Eilenstine—who was getting Cs and Ds before enrolling in SAIL and went on to become an A-student—is now majoring in Spanish at the UO, saving funds for a year of study abroad in Chile and making plans to go to law school. Because she had a chance to work with some younger SAIL students, she now sees that she was not alone in her misgivings.

"They think like I did," she said of the students she’s mentored as a “camp counselor” during the most recent summer session. "College is not going to be possible.”

Distractions, Even Dangers

There are many reasons SAIL students have this mindset. For starters, Springfield Middle School feeds into Springfield High School, where the graduation rate does not inspire: only 58 percent of students graduate in four years. Only 17 percent go on to a four-year college. In other words, the vast majority in any given class will not be on a path toward college, perhaps far from it.

At home, there’s often a similar disconnect: in many cases, no one in the family has ever gone to college; sometimes one or both parents have not finished high school. And then there’s the cost of higher education. Springfield Middle School was selected because 75 percent of the students qualify for free lunches, a reliable indicator of limited family resources.

"Money is definitely one thing that really kept me from thinking about college," said Katie Castro, a sophomore who was in the very first SAIL cohort. She was able to put together a suite of scholarships and loans that made it possible for her to enroll at the UO, yet still had to work fifteen to twenty hours per week at the Holiday Inn during her first year in order to make ends meet—even though she was living at home and did not have housing expenses.
Science Week: Physics and Human Physiology

Here's a sample of the range, sophistication and flat-out fun of just one of the several tracks offered during the one-week SAIL camp. Below is last summer’s physics and human physiology program for students entering their junior year. Led by faculty members Raghu Parthasarathy (physics) and Andy Karduna (human physiology), the week also features several other professors providing demonstrations in their area of expertise, plus one-of-a-kind segments, like a visit to the cadaver lab and the physics and physiology of rock-climbing.

MONDAY
10:00–10:50 a.m. Introduction to physics and human physiology Assistant Professor Raghu Parthasarathy and Andy Karduna

TUESDAY
10:00–10:50 a.m. Physics and falling Assistant Professor Eric Cerwin
11:00 a.m.–noon Human physiology: Gait analysis Associate Professor Li-Shan Cheu
Lunch
1:00–2:15 p.m. Student research at the UO: exploring research going on at the UO with undergraduates and graduate students
2:15–3:00 p.m. Demo show: energy and waves Ben Whitlock, student (Plus a short talk by Raghu Parthasarathy)

WEDNESDAY
10:00–10:50 a.m. Campus tour SAIL coordinator Lara Fernandez, SAIL coordinator
11:00 a.m.–noon Physics and climbing: Climbing the rock wall at the UO gym GTFs Nick Davis and Mike Taormina
Lunch
1:00–2:30 p.m. Physics and climbing: Climbing the rock wall at the UO gym GTFs Nick Davis, Matt Jennettta, Mike Taormina
2:30–3:00 p.m. Physiology and physiology: Muscle activity Associate Professor Andy Karduna

THURSDAY
10:00–11:00 a.m. Anatomy labs: Cadavers Associate Professor Bill Harbaugh 11:00 a.m.–noon Human physiology: Respiratory lab Assistant Professor Andy Lovering Noon–1:00 p.m. Lunch 1:00–2:00 p.m. Evaluations, T-shirts 2:00–3:00 p.m. Admissions and financial aid information

FRIDAY
10:00 a.m.–noon Undergraduate physiology lab Noon–1:00 p.m. Lunch 1:00–2:00 p.m. Evaluations, T-shirts 2:00–3:00 p.m. Admissions and financial aid information

Top: All of these SAIL students (class of 2011) have gone on to college. Left to right: Photo Udo, Kehna Rodaly, Sara Eldenstine, Steven Earley and Anthony Castro. Earley is enrolled at Oregon State University; the others are in their first year at the UO. Several warm SAIL students are expected to enroll at the UO this fall.

Above: Anthony Castro, his sister Katie and Nicole Jones.

The SAIL Seven

In 2010, the first SAIL graduate, Katie Castro, enrolled at the UO. She was followed in 2011 by six more students, including her brother.

ANTHONY CASTRO
Mathematics and economics
KATIE CASTRO
Pre-education
SARA ELDENSTINE
Spanish, pre-law
NOELLE JONES
History
KEKDA ROBBY
Computer science
PHEBE UDÓ
Sociology
ASHLEY ZINKGRAF
Pre-nursing

Perhaps the biggest obstacle, though, is trouble at home. The middle-school math teachers have some sense of their students’ home lives, and in many cases that’s why particular students are selected—because an array of family distractions, even dangers, contribute to their underperformance and lack of confidence in their future.

But the depth of the dysfunction is sometimes not revealed until later, as Blonigen, Harbaugh and SAIL coordinator Lara Fernandez get to know the students and gain their trust. Over the four years of the program, the details can do emerge: parents or siblings abusing alcohol, dealing meth, carrying weapons, suffering from mental illness, going to prison or inflicting physical violence or sexual abuse on each other. In one case, a student was couch-surfing, moving from home to home every two weeks or so, because he had nowhere else to sleep.

“The SAIL program can be a safe haven where students connect with wonderful, caring adults who are excited to help students grow,” said Fernandez. “Our students tell us, after spending summers with us, they feel campus is a welcoming place to be.”

The Cultural Divide

Completing the SAIL program and enrolling at the UO doesn’t mean, however, that family challenges go away. That’s because most former SAIL students continue to live at home while they attend the university, unable to afford on-campus housing. But whether their family situation is tumultuous or not, living at home can at the very least be an impediment to fully integrating into the college experience.

“Culturally, it can be hard for them to fit,” said Harbaugh, who hopes that SAIL funding will one day extend to supporting residence-hall expenses. Yet there can be an unexpected upside to encountering the cultural divide.

Sara Eldenstine, the aspiring law student, is living at home with her recently divorced mother (who is also working toward her bachelor’s degree via an online university), but even though she doesn’t live in the residence halls, Eldenstine has found ways to build meaningful on-campus connections through study groups—which she has found to be a revelation.

“It’s such a cultural shock,” she said, contrasting her study-group experience with the lack of peer support in high school. “People are actually there to help each other. Everyone is so nice. We’re all here for the same reason.”

Katie Castro’s younger brother Anthony, also a SAIL graduate and now a UO student, has a different kind of support system: the Oregon Marching Band. In his first term at the UO last fall, Anthony, a snare drummer, accompanied the football team to all of its games, plus the Rose Bowl in January. But while this gave him a readily-made social connection, it also meant he put in sixteen to eighteen hours per week in practice time, in addition to the travel time for games—all piled on top of a nearly superhuman self-imposed course of study in mathematics and economics.

Turbo Charge

Castro hopes to finish his degree in two or three years. Technically, he entered the UO as a junior, thanks to the many advanced classes he completed in high school, and he’s now on a fast track to complete all his major requirements in his first year. During winter term, he was taking 21 credits—four math courses and an economics class.

The economics class had 160 students, by far the largest class he had ever attended. (Classes for math majors typically have twenty to thirty students.) This was perhaps one of the biggest adjustments to campus culture—entering a class full of students he didn’t know, after years of knowing nearly everyone in every class. So how did he adapt?

“I sat in the front row,” he said. “Well, of course.

In truth, Anthony Castro is the kind of student with the drive, ambition and raw aptitude who probably would have gone to college, no matter what. Indeed, he already had college in his sights when Bill Blonigen visited that middle school math class. “I always thought I would stay in school as long as possible,” he recalled, and true to that impulse, he is already looking beyond his undergraduate studies to a possible Ph.D. in math.

For Anthony, then, SAIL was a kind of turbo charge. “It was a way to get the best out of myself,” he said. In general, “it’s a lot about finding out what you want to do.”

For his sister Katie, however, it was a window into a world she had scarcely dared to imagine.

The Castro siblings are a year apart; both commute to campus from Springfield, where they live with their parents and their younger sister Shanna, who last summer completed her first year.
Since its inception in 2006, the SAIL program has expanded beyond economics to feature several academic subjects. In addition, recruitment has expanded to include all area schools, especially Bethel Middle School and Willamette High School in Eugene. At these two schools, as with Springfield Middle School and Springfield High School, a high percentage of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

SAIL Milestones

First SAIL economics camp
Psychology added for second-year students
Physics added for third-year students
Journalism added for fourth-year students
Students recruited from Bethel Middle School and Willamette High School as well as Springfield Middle School and Springfield High School
Biology added for third-year students; international studies added for incoming first-year students

The desire to know more, the fear that if one doesn’t have the answers, there are none, the anxiety will continue until they are found.

And the answer is: You are never too old to learn anything from anyone.

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As it stands, they now choose from the applicant pool by randomly picking the following year’s SAIL participants, thereby creating a randomly selected control group. It will take four years for these two groups to finish high school and go on to college—or not.

No matter the result of their analysis, though, the desired impact remains the same.

“I hope we’ve taught our SAIL students that they can go on to a life of learning,” said Harbaugh, acknowledging that lifelong learning goes both ways.

“The volunteer faculty members keep telling me they’re always learning something from these students,” he said. And his own net gain? “This program is not part of my job description, but it’s one of the most rewarding parts of my job.”