What They Did on Their Summer Vacation

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 in you."

—Katie Castro, UO sophomore

It began with a UO professor casually entering an eighth-grade math classroom and inviting the students to engage in a game. Believe it or not, he told them, the game would introduce them to some of the principles of economics.

There was some fudging, some of the exaggerated eye-rolling that thirteen-year-olds don't make much effort to conceal. But the professor seemed like a friendly guy, like maybe your favorite uncle, dressed in jeans and sneakers (is this what an economist looks like)—okay, whatever. Why not? At the very least, it was a break from the usual routine.

The professor had brought along decks of playing cards and rolls of quarters. As he distributed the cards and coins, he explained the goal of the game: to make trades—based on the face value of the card—that would get you the most quarters. Within ten minutes, the students were waving their cards in the air, shouting at each other, wheeling and dealing in a frenzy of competitive spirit.

The professor explained that this is just what traders do on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. The students weren't entirely sure what that meant, but he had their attention.

The Natural Thing to Do

In fact, professor Bill Harbaugh was on a recruitment mission. He and fellow UO economist Bruce Blösgen had selected this school—Springfield Middle School—for a pilot project. Their idea was to launch a free one-week summer camp for bright students from low-income families who, 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.

Their program, called SAIL (Summer Academy to Inspire Learning), was—and is—designed to create a hands-on experience of what college life is like, with sessions conducted in real classrooms on the UO campus, with real UO professors, all of whom volunteer their time. The recruiting sessions are handpicked by their math teachers; they all show a spark of promise, maybe not the best grades, but clearly the capacity for achievement. Yet they all lack, to one degree or another, a support system that encourages them to pursue their academic potential.

"No way am I going to be able to do that," said Sara Eilenstein, a UO freshman and SAIL graduate, thinking back to what she thought about college in middle school. "I'm not smart enough."

Yet Eilenstein—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 m özellikle:

"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 track 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 Kari 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.

'No Way Am I Going to Be Able to Do That'

Eighth-grade students are prime candidates for this kind of intervention, says Blösgen, 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 make those choices in the first place. The students who attend the SAIL
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 of 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 Blonsky, 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 and do emerge: parents or siblings abusive, 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 tenuous 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 Eileenstine, 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, Eileenstine has found ways to build meaningful off-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. While this gave him a ready-made social connection, it also meant he had to spend sixteen to eighteen hours a 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 Harbaugh 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 of college.
of SAIL. Katie and Anthony were actually in the same advanced eighth-grade math class in Springfield Middle School when they heard the original SAIL pitch, even though Anthony was in seventh grade.

‘Really Nervous’

Katie didn’t want to participate in the SAIL program that first summer, preferring to spend her time at cheerleading camp and softball practice. But her parents insisted that she go. And so she went, reluctantly.

She was “really nervous,” she recalled. She had never been on the UO campus. There would be “real professors,” and that seemed intimidating. But her reservations soon unraveled as she began to have fun.

SAIL doesn’t take place just in the classroom; it’s a full campus experience, which Katie recounts in great detail six years after the fact. In addition to the core economics class, where she learned about banking via role-playing, she and her SAIL peers visited the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (she had never been to an art museum). They toured the Pioneer Cemetery, gathering dates and names from the headstones to ponder what the data suggested about lifespans. They ate in a residence hall cafeteria, explored Knight Library, roamed the EMU. They heard a panel of professionals talk about what they studied that set them on their career paths, and “they told us how many times they switched their majors,” she recalled. This was an eye-opener: the fact that you could come to college and change your mind about the direction you might be headed.

When the time came to return the following year, she signed up without hesitation: this is where she wanted to be.

For second-year students, a new course was added: psychology. Katie and her cohort went to the neuroscience lab, put brainwave caps on their heads and headphones over their ears. In one ear, they heard music; in the other a story. Their challenge: to see how much they could retain of the story. Katie had no trouble tuning the music out to listen to the words (a useful skill for a college student, she says, when studying in the din of the EMU).

When she came back for a third year, physics had been added: an introduction to the principle of surface tension, i.e., the forces at work at the surface of, say, a soap bubble or drop of oil. To investigate this phenomenon, students peered through microscopes at everyday items, like mayonnaise, to discover an unseen world of constantly shifting molecules that group and regroup according to the laws of physics.

This was not the only hidden domain they got to discover. “This was one of the rare chances that these kids get to meet and interact with scientists,” said Raghu Parthasarathy, associate professor of physics, who led this original section on microscopy and now organizes a full week of classes that combines both physics and human physiology—see Science Week, p. 11. As with all professors associated with SAIL, Parthasarathy volunteers his time; because he’s a scientist with National Science Foundation funding, he was able to use some of his grant money to purchase the microscopes.

Nuts and Bolts

For the fourth and final year of SAIL, a journalism instructor led a creativity and storytelling camp, which invited students to explore writing as a form of self-expression—or, for those more visually oriented, scrapbooking as a mode of personal narrative. This unit also included a highly practical component: writing the college essay.

This points to another layer of SAIL, that contributes to the overall package of college-readiness: instruction in the nuts-and-bolts aspects of putting together a successful college application, as well as the finer points of financial aid and scholarship-seeking strategies.

SAIL Milestones

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.

2006 First SAIL economics camp
2007 Psychology added for second-year students
2008 Physics added for third-year students
2009 Journalism added for fourth-year students
2010 Students recruited from Bethel Middle School and Willamette High School as well as Springfield Middle School and Springfield High School
2011 Biology added for third-year students; international studies added for incoming first-year students

Taken together, SAIL’s programmatic elements are designed to add up to a positive, affirming experience that imparts a sense of confidence and possibility. Yet, according to SAIL students, the real secret to the program’s success won’t be found on the week’s agenda—it resides in the person of SAILS two founders, Blonigen and Harbaugh.

They not only oversee program development and provide hands-on instruction during the summer SAIL week, but they also personally stay in touch with students throughout the year, taking them to lunch and advising them one-on-one.

“They create a real sense of belonging,” said Katie Castro.

What if?

To what extent is SAIL a success? The fact that two-thirds of the first two classes of SAIL graduates are now in college (in addition to the seven at the UO, fourteen others are enrolled at institutions across the state Oregon State University, George Fox University, Lane Community College and Linn Benton Community College) suggests the program has attained its goal of seeing students on the college-bound track.

But Blonigen and Harbaugh, as economists, are naturally inclined to seek verifiable results and are interested, both professionally and personally, in answering the “what if” question: What if these students had not been exposed to SAIL? Would they have made their way to college anyway?

The standard approach to answering such questions would be to use a control group of similar students who were not part of SAIL. In fact, this opportunity has now presented itself—though not in a way that Blonigen and Harbaugh consider ideal.

As of 2011, SAIL now draws twice as many applicants as the program can accommodate, which is both good news and bad. Good, because there will now be an equal number of comparable students who both attend and don’t attend SAIL, and the progress of the two groups can be monitored on simultaneous tracks. But also not so good, because Blonigen and Harbaugh would rather not turn any students away.

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.”