

Adult Bridge Program puts DePaul bachelor's degree in reach

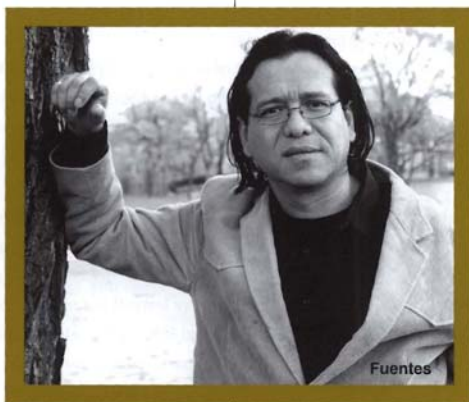
Guatemala native Oscar Fuentes' first class at Truman College in 1986 was English as a second language. Knowing he needed skills to succeed, he went on to earn an associate degree in computer science in 1993.

Shortly after graduating, however, Fuentes realized his true calling had more to do with his volunteer work leading church youth groups than with the computer work he did in college. He jumped at a job in social services, a field he's been in ever since.

In 1998, Fuentes returned to Truman, this time as a student in the DePaul Adult Bridge Program. His goal was a bachelor's degree in social work, and last June he accomplished it at SNL. He's now an SNL graduate student. His project: developing the first Central American museum in the United States, which he hopes to open within five years. He currently supervises an education program at an interim housing facility in Humboldt Park, helping to train residents, mostly battered women, in the computer and general office skills they need to get jobs. "It combines both my social service and computer backgrounds," he says.

Fuentes credits the Bridge program, a partnership between the City Colleges of Chicago and DePaul, with helping him make the transition to university life and helping him realize his full educational potential.

"As an immigrant, I was unsure if the university would help me out, but it was right here at the community college. The great thing was having someone here who understood my education needs—and that was Anghesom Atsbaha," Fuentes says.



Now director of the Bridge program, Atsbaha was Fuentes' advisor. Atsbaha gave Fuentes support and direction at Truman and DePaul from the time Fuentes was recruited until he graduated with a DePaul degree. At SNL, Fuentes' professional advisor was Marisa Alicea, the new dean of SNL (See story, p. 1).

Intensive counseling and administrative support are among several features that make the Bridge program a transition to DePaul rather than a transfer, Atsbaha notes. "Advising is the heart of the program. It keeps the students focused on their goals."

In addition, Bridge students receive DePaul credit for Bridge classes offered at the City Colleges, which are team-taught by faculty from both institutions and attended by students from both the City Colleges and DePaul. "The classes were tougher, but they really helped me understand what I needed to do to succeed at DePaul," says Fuentes, who became an SNL student in 1999.

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Currently, Bridge classes are available for any interested adult student at Wright and Truman Colleges. Harold Washington and Malcolm X Colleges are planning to join the program in the fall. Also, the Adult Bridge program will evolve into a formal dual-admission program this fall, with students enrolling at both the City Colleges and DePaul simultaneously.

The Bridge approach is geared to meet the needs of adult learners. Even when Fuentes took a few years off to start a family, Atsbaha kept in touch. He welcomed Fuentes back in 2006 to complete the three courses he needed to graduate—and encouraged Fuentes to go on to graduate school.

"The idea is to provide all the support from administration, faculty and fellow students to build their own learning plan and follow it through before and after they make the transition," Atsbaha says. The program focuses on helping those with significant financial and cultural barriers to overcome. Some attend City Colleges because they cannot afford to start at DePaul, but their skills are solid. "The Truman and DePaul students achieve about equally academically," he adds.

Marvin Lindsey also found the support and stimulation he needed to get his B.A. in the Bridge program. As part of his recovery from a substance use disorder, he began classes at Harold Washington College in 1991. He then moved to the Bridge program at Truman and completed his bachelor's degree at DePaul, followed by a master's degree in 2000 from the University of Illinois Jane Addams College of Social Work. He now is a policy analyst for a trade group representing providers of mental health care and substance use treatment.

Along the way, he served as a field investigator for a study of Chicago neighborhoods conducted by Harvard University and earned his drug counseling certification. "It was just expected that I would do more. My professors would ask, 'Where are you going to graduate school, Marvin?' DePaul gave me the confidence to pursue my education."

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— Atsbaha

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