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Program readies Rock River Valley students for college

Rock Valley partners with Rockford and Harlem districts to reduce need for remedial classes.

**By Cathy Bayer
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ROCKFORD — As students begin classes this fall at Rock Valley College, about half of the freshman class will likely enroll in remedial math because they're not prepared for college-level math.

That achievement gap is a problem Rock Valley has seen for years, said Susan Busenbark, dean of academic development and instructional support.

"There is a disconnect between what the high school teacher is required to do to get (students) to graduation and getting them college-ready," she said.

Rock Valley has begun a partnership to align curriculum to common core standards and work with the Rockford and Harlem school districts to better prepare students for that transition between high school and college.

Instructors and teachers have met for months, starting in 2010, to discuss curriculum, education standards and how to bridge that gap through a college readiness alliance.

Rock Valley also piloted a three-week summer bridge program, which wrapped up Thursday. Students in math and English have met from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays.

The goal is to move students who are on track for remedial courses into college-ready status and prepare students for what happens after graduation, whether it's classes at Rock Valley or elsewhere. The idea is based on a plan between Elgin Community College and the Elgin public schools.

The courses are each team-taught by a Rock Valley professor and Rockford School District teacher. Most students in the program, offered to high school students who took the Accuplacer, a college placement test, are juniors.

RVC officials sent letters to about 500 students in May, based on their test scores and likelihood they'd qualify for a remedial course. Busenbark said she initially thought the college would have a long waiting list, but only about 20 students enrolled in the program, and about five regularly attended classes. She hopes more students enroll in the program's second year.

The program is free for students; grant funding covered the cost of instructor salaries, supplies and books, and the Rockford district paid its staff salaries.

Busenbark said she hopes students will return to classes in August with more confidence. Devin Joiner, an incoming senior at Guilford High School, said the extra work has increased his confidence in writing and typing.

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He initially wasn't looking forward to the program, he said, because he thought the group would "read, read, read all the time." While students do read, much of the time is dedicated to writing and discussions, too.

"I'm glad my mom told me to do it," he said.

Mickey Swart is head of the English department at Guilford and taught the English summer bridge program with Jennifer Roloff Welch, instructor of composition and literature at Rock Valley.

The small class sizes offer students plenty of one-on-one attention, and also help students feel more comfortable and open up during their lessons.

"I feel like I've made three new friends," Swart said.