

Case Study: Aims Community College

SmartLab Helps Give At-Risk Students a Second Chance for Academic Success

Aims Community College transforms the lives of at-risk students. Aims operates a unique diploma program for students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. Working closely with the public school districts in its community, Aims offers students an alternative to dropping out. Instead they are given an opportunity to earn their degree, gain skill sets critical to future success, and become confident, lifelong learners.

An Innovative Program Benefiting the Whole Community

Aims launched its high school diploma program in 1998 in cooperation with the Centennial Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). The program began with only 10 students at Aims' Corporate Education Center in Greeley, Colorado. As the program quickly grew, Aims asked Creative Learning Systems to develop a SmartLab environment to enhance their students' learning experience. Aims' first SmartLab was installed in 2000 and serves as a core element of the program. Today, the Greeley program serves approximately 200 students, with a waiting list of over 500. Moreover, Aims has expanded the program to five locations serving thirteen school districts. As enrollment in each new location expands, Aims brings the

benefits of the SmartLab to these students as well. Students at Aims' Fort Lupton campus will be able to take advantage of a new SmartLab in fall 2005.



SmartLab Facilitator Guides Aims Students

An interesting aspect of Aims success is its relationship with the public school districts in its community. Although students attend Aims for their education, they are still technically enrolled in their public school. This allows the schools to capture state funding for these students – a portion of which is then paid to Aims. The school also avoids the drop out statistic they would otherwise record – an important benefit given current state and federal accountability standards. Indeed, the referring school is credited for the student's graduation, with diplomas issued either by the school or Centennial BOCES. The nature of this relationship has resulted in a strong partnership

between Aims and the local school districts – with students as the real winners.

The Aims program is self-paced and competency-based. Students are required to meet specific competency levels established through the ACT Work Keys exam. This assures that students attain proficiency in skills critical for workplace success. The program places particular importance on reading and math as well as 21st century skills such as applied technology, teamwork and effective communication; each representing an area enhanced through learning opportunities in the SmartLab.

**“I never imagined I'd be
going to college or
working with technology”**

Eric Padilla, Graduate

A New Opportunity for At-Risk Students

Students are referred to the Aims programs by their public high school. These students may come from special-education programs, or have behavioral, social, or substance-abuse problems. Or, they may be unable to attend a traditional school due to a variety of reasons such as work requirements or

pregnancy. Surprisingly, as many as 30% of students entering the Aims program are considered gifted and talented. Not surprisingly, such students often encounter the same difficulty fitting into the public school system as, for example, special-education students – and can struggle just as much.

The common element these students share is their lack of success in a traditional public school and their intent to drop out as a result. Marsha Harmon, Coordinator of Youth Programs at Aims, has noticed another common element as well. “Our students tend to be very opinionated”, observed Ms. Harmon. “They have strong views about what they want and need”. According to Ms. Harmon, this often plays a major role in their inability to fit in at school. In contrast, it helps explain why these same students can become so successful in a self-directed learning environment such as the SmartLab.

One such student is Eric Padilla. Having difficulty fitting into a traditional classroom environment, Eric had, in his words, “shut down”. He joined a gang, started drinking and skipping class, and was on the verge of dropping out. At first Eric felt overwhelmed in the SmartLab. He lacked confidence and had never worked with, nor been interested in, technology. Then Eric discovered computer graphics. Soon, he had moved past basic graphics software and was mastering advanced multimedia and animation applications. Eric had tasted academic success for the first time and was off and running. Today, Eric is concurrently pursuing his Associates

Degree in Graphic Design at Aims and a BA in Visual Effects and Motion Graphics at the Art Institute of Colorado. He has launched a line of clothing featuring his designs and, after graduating, intends to pursue a career in film effects production. Eric attributes his turnaround directly to the Aims program. “If it wasn’t for the SmartLab, I’d be dead or flipping chicken”, says Eric. “I had never imagined I’d be going to college or working with technology”.

“The SmartLab allows students to define their education, set and achieve goals”

Marsha Harmon

Coordinator of Youth Programs at Aims

While the ability for students to gain technology skills in the SmartLab is obvious, Ms. Harmon believes the benefits extend much further. “The SmartLab allows students to define their education, set and achieve goals”, said Ms. Harmon. For students to succeed in this self-paced program (and indeed, throughout life), they must take responsibility for their learning and their performance. This can be a major transition given the perceptions about school most students bring to the program. The SmartLab, with its student-centered, project-based approach to learning, places the monkey squarely on the back of students, while it allows them to direct their learning in areas of personal interest. The result can be transformative, both in terms of academic success and self-esteem.

Matt Hawkins, another recent graduate of the Aims program, put it this way, “The SmartLab was the best educational experience of my life. I have learned more in one semester here than in 3 years of high school. The program was not only helpful in understanding the basics of technology, but has also given me a brand new feel for the world. I feel smarter than ever!”

An Unqualified Success

Since its start in 1998, Aims has graduated over 1,500 students – all students who would have likely dropped out had they not had access to this program. The program has been so successful that the Aims graduation rate is approximately 95%. Incredibly, this represents a higher graduation rate than the districts from which these at-risk students originated. By any measure, the program has been an astounding success. For the students. For the local school districts. And for the community. Creative Learning Systems is proud to be playing such a critical role in helping these students on their road towards a bright future.



Aims Student Constructing Physical Simulation / Control Technology Project