

Cassidy: UC Berkeley's John Matsui helps propel science scholars

 mercurynews.com/2011/09/08/cassidy-uc-berkeley-john-matsui-helps-propel-science-scholars

September 8, 2011

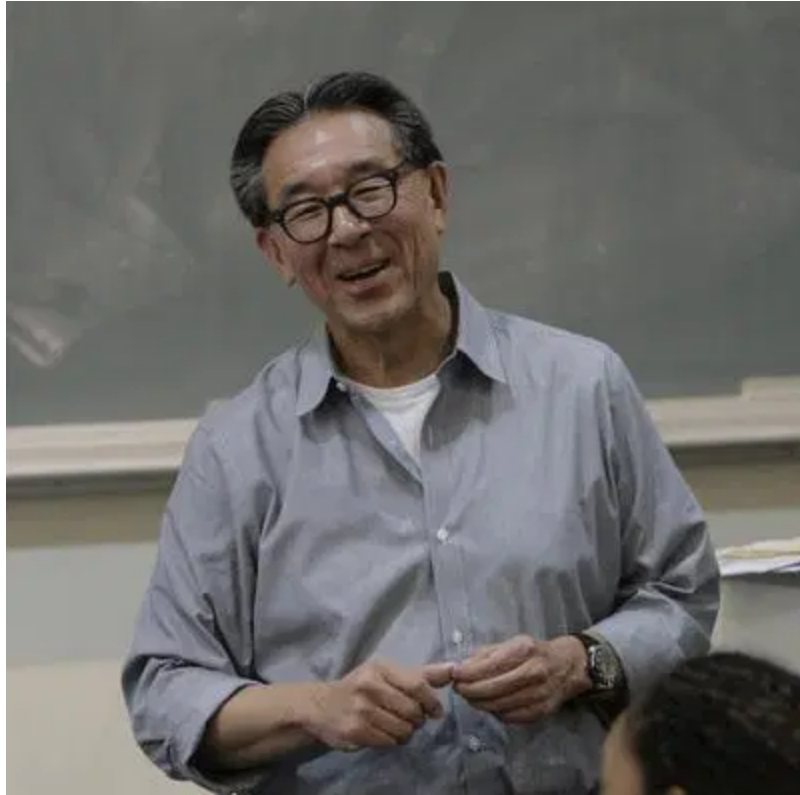
•



•









1 of 3

John Matsui lectures a freshman class at UC Berkeley in Berkeley on Sept. 7, 2011. Matsui is a co-founder of the Biology Scholars Program at UC Berkeley which promotes the success of students from economic and gender groups that are historically underrepresented in biology. The program offers mentoring tutoring designed for students to succeed in science at the college level. (Gary Reyes / Mercury News)

By [Mike Cassidy](#) | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: September 8, 2011 at 6:04 a.m. | UPDATED: August 13, 2016 at 2:26 p.m.

John Matsui is a big fan of the laudable programs that encourage low-income high school kids to go to college and pursue degrees in STEM, meaning science, technology, engineering and math.

That makes sense. Matsui is a biology professor at UC Berkeley. Science is his thing. The more the merrier.

But such programs, which I've written about recently, aren't the whole answer, he says. In fact, they might not be the answer at all if the students encouraged by them find themselves immediately overwhelmed by college and unable to stick with it.

"It's a huge issue," Matsui says. "All this hard work of getting into college and they just get blown out of the water, typically in their first semester, if not their first year."

No. That's not all Matsui has to say. He called me, in fact, to tell me about an initiative he helped start 19 years ago to keep kids in college. It's a program that Silicon Valley business leaders concerned about their future workforce might want to pay attention to. Especially when it comes to training scientists and innovators with diverse backgrounds — the kind of diverse backgrounds that lead to new solutions and different ways of looking at the world.

Matsui's Biology Scholars Program is aimed primarily at low-income students who are the first in their families to go to college. The program provides mentors and tutors for about 500 students in a given year. But more than that, it provides a community of other students who are in the same place. College was not a given for these kids. Wisdom concerning the expectations, the pace and the social culture of college was not passed down from siblings or parents.

“For some students, coming to Berkeley is like high school, because they’ve had Berkeley-level training in high school,” says Matsui, an assistant dean of biology and the scholar program’s director. “But the distance my students have to travel is a great distance, because mom and dad — maybe they finished grammar school. So how are they supposed to know all this?”

When Matsui compared the students in his program with other low-income students at Cal who were the first in their families to go to college, he found that those outside the program were twice as likely to end up on academic probation. And he found that over the course of six years, students in the Biology Scholars Program graduate at rates slightly higher than the 89 percent campuswide graduation rate at Cal.

The students in Matsui’s program didn’t necessarily see college in their future while growing up. Some held jobs in high school and hold them still to help support their families. Some grapple with family complications, including bankruptcy and foreclosure. Many are immigrants and children of immigrants — students from ethnic groups that are underrepresented on campus.

“I walk into a classroom of 200 to 500 people,” says Verence Bravo, 22, who’s starting her fifth year in Matsui’s program, and only a sprinkling of the students look like her. “It can be intimidating,” she adds, “especially as a freshman.”

If you haven’t been there, you might not get it. See, Bravo, who grew up in San Jose after her parents immigrated from Mexico, says she’s sometimes hesitant to ask questions when in a class surrounded by white and Asian students. She doesn’t want to sound stupid and feed twisted stereotypes that a Mexican-American student is an inferior student.

But Bravo found a haven at Berkeley, a safe place to ask questions, discuss big ideas and commiserate over college pressure. On the second floor of the Valley Life Sciences Building, the scholar program, known as BSP, has a room set aside (computer, printer, microwave, couch, etc.) where students can work, mingle and talk.

“You go into the BSP room and you see people speaking in different languages,” Bravo says. “And it’s beautiful.”

Bravo, an integrative biology major, plans to graduate in the spring. She’ll continue studying human health, perhaps by going on to medical school. Most students in Matsui’s program graduate with biology degrees, but some shift into other science or health fields, he says.

“My measure of success,” Matsui says, “is sending students out into the world — whether it be medical or graduate school or work — being independent problem-solvers and critical thinkers able to deal with the open endedness of life.”

And once they’re prepared to do that, who knows how far they will go?

