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Memo: IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

To apply for a spot at the middle college run through Canada College and the Sequoia Union High School District, call (650) 306-3120.

A PLACE TO FIT IN MIDDLE COLLEGES INSPIRE BORED BUT BRIGHT STUDENTS
LISA FERNANDEZ, Mercury News

One spiky-haired student is a goof-off who let his studies slide. Another teen suffered a series of family tragedies and felt lost in a huge high school. A few others got teased on campus because they are gay. And just about everyone felt out of place at high school, where bonding with peppy cheerleaders and popular jocks just wasn't their thing. But these formerly uninspired outsiders have found a home at an innovative program known as "middle college," run through a Peninsula community college and a Redwood City high school district. It's the latest venture of its kind to open in the Bay Area.

The concept of middle college, a place where high schoolers take courses on college campuses, reflects the increasing popularity of alternative educational opportunities nationwide. The first middle college began almost 30 years ago in New York. Today there are 23 middle college programs registered with a national consortium, but there are many other unofficial programs, too, from Flint, Mich., to Nashville.

In the Bay Area, there are middle colleges from Contra Costa to Oakland to San Mateo to San Jose. Their basic goal: Stop the bright-but-bored students from getting depressed, doing poorly and dropping out of high school. "We're really looking for the misfits," said Mille Clough, a counselor at the Bay Area's newest middle college, Canada Middle College in Redwood City. The school, a partnership of the Sequoia Union High School District and Canada College, has 30 students and is graduating its first class of 14 seniors next month. Most of them are going on to four-year universities. The average graduation rate among Bay Area middle colleges is between 80 and 95 percent -- impressive results, considering that most of these students were at risk of dropping out of school, said Michael Wilson, who teaches at Foothill Middle College High School in Los Altos Hills and is part

of an informal middle college consortium.

Other middle colleges in the Bay Area are located at San Mateo College, Evergreen and San Jose City colleges in San Jose, Contra Costa College, Merritt College in Oakland, and De Anza College in Cupertino -- the oldest of the region's middle colleges, started in 1989.

Anson Stahl, 18, said he would have been a Menlo-Atherton High School dropout if it hadn't been for middle college. "I was a complete slacker," he said. He said he slipped from a 3.6 grade-point average to 2.0 in one semester because he found school "too routine." He's bumped his grades up slightly at the community college campus and is excited about getting a "jump-start" on life. Seven of the 14 seniors recently received awards for getting a 3.3 grade-point-average. Three of those students are taking full college course loads and also made it to the high school district dean's list.

Choice of courses

Aside from taking required English and social studies high school classes, middle college students enjoy the smorgasbord of Canada's courses, including Web design, astronomy and salsa dancing -- all of which earn them college credits.

Socially, the teens say they prefer hanging out with older students and don't mind missing homecoming parades and high school football games, even though they are welcome to return to their home campuses. Instead, they often frequent college beach parties or discuss politics at coffee shops.

The common theme heard from most middle college students is that they love their small classes and are thrilled to be away from the high school scene, where peers can be petty and teachers are swamped with work. Middle college teachers echo these sentiments. Jen Petroelje and Mitch Roman, both from Woodside High School, said they prefer teaching 30 students to their former class loads five times as large. "I know these kids a lot better," Roman said. "It's really mellow up here. You can stop and talk to kids for 20 minutes."

A familial setting is exactly what Cynthia Dwyer said she needed for her self-esteem. The 17-year-old East Palo Alto resident, who used to attend Woodside High School, describes herself a year ago as a "problem" student. She was failing most of her classes. She felt like an outsider, even though she had friends and was well-liked. "There was just a deep emptiness," she said.

She is part Samoan, part Irish, and has difficulty connecting to either side of her family. That's why she's always looked outside her home to find security. And when school wasn't providing that for her, either, she began to feel emotionally unbalanced. She jumped at the chance to give middle college a try. Now she's getting A's and B's and enjoying her classes in salsa and Western civilization. She's also realizing that it's fine to be different. "I see that maybe it's OK not to fit in, that it's cool to be unique," she said.

To get into the program on the Canada campus, high school students must be entering their junior or senior year and have at least a 2.0 grade-point average.

For next year, Petroelje and Roman are planning to target students they think probably will succeed in the college environment, since half the 60 original students couldn't take the rigorous college course load and the freedoms of college life and were sent back to their home high schools or other alternative programs.

Back to the prom

Even though most middle college students say they are thrilled to be away from regular high schools, Diana Mitchell, 17, of San Carlos couldn't resist going back to her prom last weekend at Carlmont High. She said she left the Belmont campus because she hated the cliques. But Diana still wanted to see her old friends, some of whom she described as "the freaks," and flaunt her backless silver dress. But the prom turned out to be a big disappointment. "I wished I hadn't gone," said the senior, who is bound for the University of California-Davis. "Everyone was lifting other people's skirts up. It reminded me why I hate high school dances."

Illustration:Photos (2)

PHOTO: EUGENE H. LOUIE -- MERCURY NEWS

Peter Maynes, 17, is one of 30 students at Canada Middle College in Redwood City. He said he disliked high school but is thriving in his new academic environment, a partnership of the Sequoia Union High School District and Canada College.

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PHOTO: EUGENE H. LOUIE -- MERCURY NEWS

Canada Middle College students Brendan McElligott, left, Lauren Garcia and Mary Reite talk with American literature teacher Jen Petroelje.

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