Harvard Professor Teaching Course at Miami-Dade College

By Ari Odzer

Class offered at Miami-Dade College allows students to take a computer programming class with a top HArvard professor (Published Wednesday, May 13, 2015)
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It's a Friday night in downtown Miami. A DJ is playing thumping electronica, young adults are milling around, but it's not the latest night spot. It's an all-night computer programming cram session called the CS50 Hackathon at the Miami-Dade College Idea Center.

"Tonight is all about focusing on you and your work and the projects you've accomplished this semester," says the man in the black sweater and blue jeans to the crowd of students.

You never see Harvard University professor David Malan dressed any other way. You also usually see him in Cambridge, not Miami, teaching one of the most popular classes at Harvard, CS50, an accelerated introduction to computer coding. So what draws Malan to Miami-Dade College, two institutions of higher learning not usually mentioned in the same breath?

"This is entirely attributable to our friends at LaunchCode.org and Miami-Dade College who adopted CS50's curriculum as a vehicle via which they've been getting students from 0 to 60, so to speak," explained Malan.

Here's how it works at Miami-Dade College: the students in the CS50 class met two nights a week this semester to watch Malan's lecture from Harvard on-line. After the lecture, MDC teaching assistants helped students with any questions they had. Malan also flew down several times to work the students first-hand. Just like the class at Harvard, most of the students here have no prior coding expertise.

"It's funny because I come from a background that has nothing to do with computers and when I took this course I fell in love with it so fast," said Danny Cabrera, a Miami-Dade student.

Malan says that's a common reaction.

"At the end of the semester, even though most students who take CS50, both in Cambridge and here in Miami have no prior programming experience, the goal of the course is to get them to a finish line at which they are empowered to build their own software for any number of platforms," he said.

That's what the Hackathon is about, finishing their software projects for the semester, whether they're new mobile apps or web sites or other ideas. You might think of this night and the course in general as speed dating, but in the end, instead of finding romance, the students find jobs in computer programming.

"And we can get them actually employed as working computer professionals, it's amazing, it blew our mind, when we first started placing people that had done nothing but CS50 curriculum, it was amazing," said Jim McKelvey, the founder of the non-profit LaunchCode.org.

Jim McKelvey says he started LaunchCode to fill the nation's tech talent gap, and Malan's CS50, he says, is the perfect vehicle to take these students to programming careers.

"You feel the G's but you don't pass out, it's a very fast-moving class and it's world class education, but David's never dumbed-down the curriculum, there's no CS50

lite, the standards are the same as they use in Cambridge and the results speak for themselves," McKelvey said.

LaunchCode works with more than a hundred corporate partners, and promises students who do well in CS50 that it will find them programming jobs.

"It's gonna be an amazing opportunity and I'm very excited about it," said Maria Zegarra, one of the 50 Miami-Dade Students in the class.

"We've had people take just this class and go from Trader Joe's stock boy to working at an advertising firm as a programmer," said McKelvey. "That's heart warming."

Starting next month, anyone in South Florida, not just Miami-Dade College students, can take CS50 on line through LaunchCode.org. You don't need perfect SAT scores to get this taste of Harvard.

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