

Fall 2020

## Newsletter- Fall 2020

Maria E. Luna-Duarte

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# NEIU EL CENTRO

***Fall 2020 NEWSLETTER***



# A Message from the Director



El Centro has much to celebrate in spite of the challenges we're all facing with the COVID-19 pandemic. In this issue of the Fall 2020 Newsletter, we highlight the many achievements of our students, faculty and staff. We'll also share where students can find out about NEIU's resources. Finally, we'll take a look at our impressive fall-to-fall retention rate.

One of our greatest achievements this summer was the Google CSSI Online program. For the second year in a row, NEIU El Centro has partnered with Google to teach our students key industry concepts and computer languages. This four-week intensive program introduced students to the fundamentals of computer programming using JavaScript. Students interacted daily with expert Google programmers and facilitators who gave them valuable insight into potential careers in computer science. We look forward to future partnerships with Google so that we can continue to offer computer science opportunities to our students.

In addition to the Google CSSI program, we were excited to receive a new group of cohort freshmen to our Summer Transition Program (STP). STP is designed to prepare first-year students for success at NEIU. For six weeks, from 9am to 3pm, Monday through Friday, students dedicated a big part of their summer to improving their English and math skills. You'll read all about each student's achievements from the perspective of their success coach, Natalie Valentin-Espiet, who is also an NEIU success story.

Congratulations to our team of students, faculty and staff. It's a pleasure to look back on our accomplishments as we embrace a new fall semester full of possibilities.

***This is Northeastern. We're in this together. Keep striving, stay focused, and we'll succeed together.***

Stay well and safe!  
Maria Luna-Duarte, Ph.D.

# Google Summer Program

For the second year in a row, the Google Computer Science Summer Institute program (Google CSSI-Online) was a huge success! From July 6 - 31, NEIU students dedicated themselves to this four-week intensive and interactive program, using JavaScript to learn the fundamentals of computer programming alongside expert Google programmers, NEIU faculty, staff and peer mentors.

CSSI-Online programs are inspired and independently run in partnership with Google by faculty on each host campus. The goal of CSSI-Online is to increase the number of women, first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented ethnic minority college students in the field of computer science.

Managing the Google CSSI-Online program was definitely a team effort. Google provided the lectures and practice materials while the following NEIU Computer Science faculty and students facilitated the curriculum: Dr. Manar Mohaisen, assistant professor; Akkady Tchaba, instructor; and CS majors Kathy Reyes Hernandez, Sergio Lopez-Ruiz, Amaan Yaseen and Juwan Smith. As director of El Centro, Dr. Maria Luna-Duarte recruited students and administered the program.

Students collaborated on group projects during the last week of the program, working either individually or as a team to create, design, and split the main project into tasks.

Each team created one of four fascinating projects:

- 1) a basketball game,
- 2) a maze game,
- 3) a spaceship game, and
- 4) an online test platform.



*"It was a complete joy to see how the participants worked as junior computer engineers to build the project from scratch. The nature and depth of their discussions were a clear manifestation of scientific maturity and collaborative spirit," said Professor Mohaisen.*

During the final presentation, students were celebrated by family and friends as well as by the President of NEIU (Dr. Gloria Gibson), Associate Provost (Dr. Francisco Gaytán), and the Chair of the Department of Computer Science (Dr. Marcelo Sztainberg). Their presence and encouraging words showed the importance of the program and the University's genuine concern for student success.

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# Google CSSI Class Of 2019

Chosen from the Google CSSI class of 2019 for their strong commitment and outstanding achievement in computer science, the El Centro peer mentors -- Kathy Reyes Hernandez, Sergio Lopez-Ruiz, and Amaan Yaseen -- had diverse experiences that led them to become computer science students.



## Kathy Reyes

Born in Mexico, the only child of immigrant parents, Kathy Reyes Hernandez will be the first in her immediate and extended family to earn a bachelor's degree.

Breaking barriers is not new to Kathy. In 2019, she was also the first and only female student to participate in the Google program at El Centro: "I was completely new to programming at the beginning of the program, but after two weeks of focused learning, my team created a website from scratch in only four days. This program helped me

build my knowledge of computer science by developing skills in HTML, Python, CSS, JavaScript, and Google App Engine and Data Store," Kathy said.

Even after it ended, the Google program gave Kathy the confidence to keep learning on her own. Moreover, the mentors she met in the program helped her deal with the doubts she felt being a new computer science student.

This Fall semester, Kathy will take on another leadership role as a Peer Leader for the Computer Science Department at NEIU. As a computer science major with a minor in psychology, Kathy hopes to encourage students to collaborate, sharing ideas and experiences while reinforcing programming concepts.

## Sergio Lopez-Ruiz

"First things first: it's been an honor to be a part of the Google summer program for two years in a row at NEIU El Centro. My college journey would not have been the same had I not participated. The program is not only informative and

collaborative, but it creates a community among participants that even afterward keeps everyone connected. Even during these unprecedented times, Google and Northeastern found a way to virtually give participants that same experience," explained Sergio Lopez-Ruiz.

When Sergio graduated from Curie Metropolitan High School in 2019, he had no experience in the computer science field. Beginning the Google program, Sergio felt really nervous, worried that he wouldn't be able to keep up with the material and his peers. He quickly discovered that wasn't the case. By the end of the month, Sergio's team had created a functioning website. Sergio says, "No matter how much experience you do or don't have, NEIU instructors and the Google team have set up a challenging curriculum that can still be followed by anyone."

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## Google CSSI Class Of 2019



**Amaan Yaseen** feels very fortunate to have been selected for the Google CSSI summer program in 2019 and 2020. He enjoyed every minute of it and made some great friends along the way. His college experience would not have been the same if he hadn't participated in the program.

This past summer, Amaan was given the opportunity to participate in the Google program as a peer mentor. He met some interesting people and learned a lot about computer science, including how to code in JavaScript. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, the program had to be held virtually. However, Amaan believes that Northeastern and Google did a great job of making sure that each student got the attention they needed. The program was also more challenging this year as it focused more on real-life skills.

“Being a peer mentor was a great experience as I got to see the amazing projects students were able to build using what they had learned in just one week. As a peer mentor, I also learned how faculty plans the curriculum and all the work that goes into making the program. It is great to see that Google is changing up the curriculum to keep things new and challenging. In order to be successful in this program, I would advise future students to be themselves and ask as many questions as possible,” said Amaan.

***Congratulations to the students, faculty and staff who dedicated their time and energy in order to make Google CSSI 2020 a success!***



Computer Science  
Summer Institute

# SUMMER TRANSITION PROGRAM

## Summer Transition Program

Congratulations to our students who participated in the Summer Transition Program (STP). For six weeks, from 9am to 3pm, Monday through Friday, our students showed up ready to learn. STP is designed to prepare first-year students for success at NEIU.

Just a few benefits students receive by participating in STP:

- ✓ A FREE 3-credit hour college course
- ✓ Increased confidence in their English and math abilities
- ✓ Savings up to \$4,000 on tuition and fees by placing out of developmental courses
- ✓ Fun activities to connect with other students and prepare them for college life

During STP, **Natalie Valentin-Espiet** had the opportunity to coach our students: Gabriela Villa, Marlyn Beltran, Brandon Alcantara, Katherine Suarez, and Carlos Gonzalez. As the STP Success Coach, Natalie joined the students as they attended workshops to help them successfully transition into college life. "Because I spent so much time with them, I saw the students shine in their own unique ways," said Natalie. Listed below, Natalie shares with us each student's unique story.



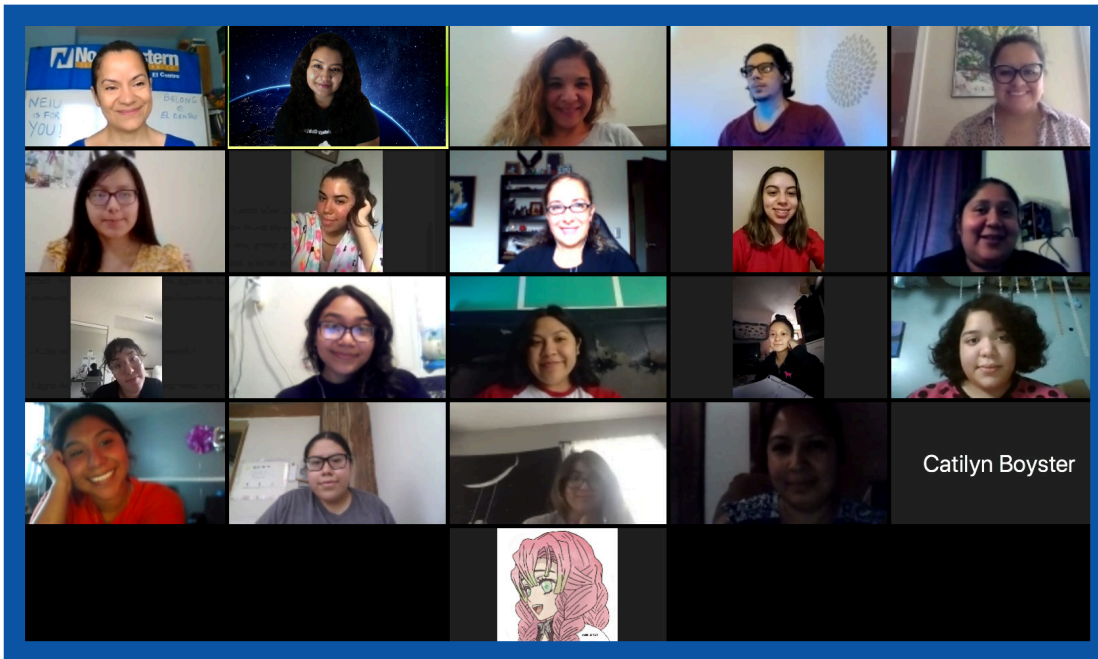
**Gabriela Villa**, a model student, was always punctual and good at communication. Her sense of responsibility was so strong that, during the closing program, Prof. Velazquez, the math workshop facilitator, recognized her for always being on top of her assignments. Her communication skills, punctuality, and responsibility are all the markings of an excellent student and gifted future educator.

**Marlyn Beltran** stood out as a future leader. Although quiet at times, she frequently helped bring the cohort together, focusing their attention on their final time capsule project. During math workshops, she showed strong participation, often answering Prof. Velazquez's questions. Her leadership was largely responsible for getting the group to work collaboratively.

**Brandon Alcantara**, though often camera-shy, was very kind and polite, frequently thanking workshop leaders and appreciating his workshop experience. This is important because kindness is sometimes overlooked but goes a long way in forming the long-term relationships students will need to succeed in the future.

**Katherine Suarez**, was memorable for her resilience. Despite having personal issues that interfered with her STP experience, she managed to thrive during the program. She found ways to manage her time and fulfill her responsibilities while taking her first college-level academic course. This resilience will help her accomplish her goals even in the face of adversity.

And, finally, **Carlos Gonzalez**, stood out for his positive attitude and willingness to be open and vulnerable when necessary. Though he struggled with shyness, it was not evident during the workshops. Because he was so easygoing, he was often the first to contribute to the discussion. Carlos's willingness to push himself out of his comfort zone will help him forge connections with others and allow him to thrive in both academic and professional settings.



## EL CENTRO SCHOLARS COHORT 2020

Our 2020 El Centro Scholars cohort is off to a great start! We have 46 new freshmen joining us this fall. They are actively attending classes and participating online in El Centro's Success Workshops.



**Natalie Valentin-Espiet** is also a Northeastern Student Success Story. Not only has she served as the El Centro STP Success Coach, but she has already earned a bachelor's degree in English. Natalie is well on her way to earning a master's degree from NEIU to pursue her dream of teaching English at the high school level.

Natalie believes "the role of a teacher is not only to educate but also to help students reach their goals. STP gave me the chance to practice taking on that more supportive role. Being the Success Coach of the El Centro cohort has helped reaffirm my decision to be an educator. I wish STP students success and happiness."

## Fall-to-Fall Retention Rate

We are very happy that El Centro's Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 retention rate for first-time, full-time freshmen is **68.4%**, which is slightly higher than the general admit rate.



## Student Success & Retention Workshops

El Centro continues its tradition of offering weekly Success Workshops for our freshman cohort on Thursdays. New this year - workshops on Tuesdays for our continuing students. The workshops provide a safe space for students to connect with their support team and learn about their resources, including Financial Aid, Scholarships, and Counseling Services. Building a community with our students is an essential part of El Centro's mission.

## NEIU Student Resources

NEIU offers students many support services, including an Emergency Fund, Food Pantry, Health Services, Tutoring, and Advising. Click [here](#) to learn more about NEIU's student resources.

## El Centro wants to hear from You!

Do you have a story you'd like to share? Email your suggestions to [m-crespo1@neiu.edu](mailto:m-crespo1@neiu.edu). The El Centro Newsletter is written and edited by **Mimi Crespo** and designed by **Ken Oliva**.

