

## The Promise of Postsecondary AVID

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It is clear from the literature, including scientific studies and educational philosophy, that across the nation our colleges and our college students are struggling. Frustrated and believing they have failed, students, many of whom have great potential, are leaving college in record numbers. Institutions are frustrated as well, implementing “piecemeal” solutions when true systemic organizational change is what is called for—change that calls into question some of the most deeply held beliefs of traditional academic culture. The central dilemma—how to create thinking, engaged students—is extremely complex and difficult. This is the question that taunts educators; the “magic” that appeared to occur as a natural outcome in the classroom of the Nineteenth Century university isn’t happening at all—even, according to Derek Bok (2006), in our most elite colleges. Drawing the distinction between retention (where most efforts have been directed) and academic achievement, and redirecting institutional brainpower and resources toward teaching students to become “intentional” and engaged learners as well as good critical thinkers, is the key.

AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is a non-profit organization that, for more than thirty years, has been successful in developing marginal high school students—those with potential, but who are unlikely to either graduate from high school or go to college—into successful, confident college students. The mission of AVID is to **close the achievement gap by preparing all students for college readiness and success in a global society**. Although AVID serves all students, it focuses on the least served students—those in the academic middle. The program places academically average students in advanced classes and provides them with academic support, leveling the playing field for minority and low-income students without a college-going tradition in their families. In addition, AVID focuses on collaborative learning and student engagement, developing students affectively as well as cognitively, believing that one cannot be separated from the other. According to a 1998 study issued by the U. S. Department of Education, over 90% of AVID’s graduates attend college and 89% of those students are still in college after 2 years (Talley and Martinez, 1998). In a 2001 study in which two cohorts of AVID graduates were tracked following college enrollment, Guthrie found that almost 85% of Cohort 1 and 70% of Cohort 2 were on track to graduate in four or five years (p. 51). Additionally, AVID students complete four-year college entrance requirements at nearly three times the rate of high school graduates across the country.

AVID was established in 1980 by Mary Catherine Swanson, an Advanced Placement English teacher at Clairemont High School in San Diego, California. Swanson recruited 32 low-income, ethnically diverse students in the academic middle and enrolled them in a college preparatory sequence and an AVID elective class. The AVID class included development of study skills, tutoring in collaborative study groups, and a curriculum focused on writing for learning in a discipline. From the first class of 32 students, AVID has grown until today it has been adopted by over 4,500 elementary, middle and high schools, and serves more than 350,000 students each year across the United States and beyond. Talley and Martinez (1998) describe AVID as an “untracking” program that assists the academic achievement of low-income African-American and Latino students. A study conducted in 1998 found that Latino AVID graduates are going on to four-year colleges at two times the national average; African American graduates are going on at 1.5 times the national average (Mehan, et al., 1999).

The success experienced by AVID schools and students is largely based on the model developed for high schools and the training provided for secondary teachers. The centerpiece to the AVID curriculum is WICOR (Writing to Learn, Inquiry, Collaboration, Organization and Reading). In a daily AVID Elective class, trained instructors teach students specific inquiry-based strategies designed for them to apply in rigorous classes, such as Advanced Placement courses. They learn to work together, to read critically, and to write fluently. A tutoring program, structured around students learning to ask and collaboratively answer their own questions (rather than tutors giving answers or reviewing content) is an integral part of the AVID system. As students become “intentional” learners, their academic self-concepts improve and they become increasingly responsible, engaged learners. AVID’s record of success demonstrates that, as Swanson says, “students can learn challenging material if the right types of support are provided; and, more specifically, that low-performing students do better when they are given accelerated learning opportunities rather than remedial material.” Furthermore, she states that “good preparation is more than rigorous course work, but is also teaching the learned behaviors of being active learners and critical thinkers.” She emphasizes that “educators’ responsibilities do not end with an open door. Not only do we teach them college-prep material,” but we have to teach them how to learn like college students.

Since its inception, AVID has had a strong connection to the postsecondary world. In fact, college instructors collaborated with Mary Catherine Swanson in writing the original AVID elective curriculum, and many of AVID Center’s staff developers serve as adjunct instructors at two- and four-year colleges. In addition, AVID sites and districts work closely with postsecondary institutions to secure

college tutors for AVID elective classes. In 2008, AVID began exploring the possibility of adapting the AVID model to the postsecondary arena with the hope of achieving the same results for college students as it has for creating college-ready high school graduates. The strategies that are at the heart of the AVID school model are fundamental—while they may have been designed for high school students, they are universal in their potential application. The skills taught are the same skills that college students need. So AVID Postsecondary is taking what has worked so well at the secondary level and adapting it at the postsecondary level—not imposing a high school program in a collegiate environment. A pilot project, which included two community colleges, a private college, and a state university, provided insight and design foundations for the AVID postsecondary effort.