

OPINION

What can we do to help low-income kids graduate from college?

Richard Whitmire , Opinion contributor Published 7:00 a.m. ET Aug. 16, 2019

Getting kids to college is only a starting point. Helping them complete a degree program is the end goal. AVID has its priorities straight.

For the first time it seems possible that we're figuring out how to accomplish an agonizingly elusive goal: ensuring that low-income students not just enter college but complete college.

The latest evidence emerged this week when Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a national college readiness nonprofit found in many high-poverty schools, released its college success numbers. AVID, which works with [teachers](#) to guide low-income, minority students into [college-prep](#) pathways — and give them the tools to succeed — was able to track its 82,807 alumni from three graduating classes.

Bottom line: 42% of its alumni earned four-year degrees, compared with 11% of similar students. That's striking, considering the students AVID targets: So-so students who at some point, in some class or on some test, showed a glimmer of college potential.

This data from AVID has wide implications

Those positive results from AVID add to other evidence that we are on the verge of a breakthrough on solving a problem that has plagued both K-12 schools and colleges for years: While we have



been moderately successful at luring [more low-income students into college](#), we've done [an abysmal job](#) at making sure they walk away with a degree.

What AVID achieved is strikingly similar to other efforts aimed at the same goal. The big charter school networks that serve the same type of students are now seeing the fruits of their determined pushes to boost their college success rates. The rates for their alumni range from 25% to 50% higher than expected, depending on the network.

It is probably no coincidence that the college success numbers — boosting rates by a range between two and four times beyond what would be predicted — are roughly the same with both the charters and AVID. That's what happens when students get the right preparation and the right college guidance.

Also optimistic: Many universities, acknowledging their past failures in letting so many fragile students drift away, are [doubling down on their efforts](#) to turn that around, both admitting more low-income students and tracking them through college to ensure they don't drop out.

Also encouraging: More universities have agreed to [ramp up their acceptances](#) of community college graduates, perhaps the nation's biggest reservoir of low-income students. For years, those students enrolled in community colleges aspiring to win four-year degrees, but few ever made it.

Yet more [encouraging data](#) is coming from the fast-growing number of independent college counseling groups dedicated to providing data-driven advice to students in high-poverty high schools that can't afford it. Groups such as the [College Advising Corps](#), originally [modeled after Teach for America](#), steer [thousands of students](#) into colleges where they are more likely to earn degrees.

The AVID news is particularly hopeful because the program — [now in 7,000 schools serving 2 million students](#) annually — operates in traditional high schools serving some of the nation's poorest neighborhoods. In the past, those have proved to be our most vulnerable students.

Riverside is an example of the program's success

[Paid for by a mix](#) of federal, state and local money, combined with corporate and philanthropic funds, AVID is stronger in some schools than others. One of the most vigorous programs is found in

California's Riverside Unified district, where Scott Lockman oversees a program that includes 640 of the 2,100 students there. Of those, 85% are Hispanic and nearly 90% qualify for subsidized lunches.

Here's what AVID looks like during the daily elective courses for seniors there:

- ▶ Monday — AVID tutors scrub student binders to check on the quality of their note-taking. Also, guest speakers, including AVID alumni in college or in the workplace, give talks.
- ▶ Tuesdays and Thursdays — the backbone days of AVID — students get small-group attention from tutors, depending on which course is proving to be the most difficult.
- ▶ Wednesdays and Fridays are college focused, ranging from SAT prep to filling out application and financing forms.

Before AVID, not that many students from this district in California's Inland Empire went to college, especially four-year colleges. That changed. "We're pushing our students toward four-year colleges," said Lockman. "Last year, we had 150 seniors in the AVID program, and only nine had not gotten accepted to a four-year college."

Sandy Husk, who [oversees AVID nationally](#), says the key to boosting college success rates lies in energizing both teachers and students: "Not only are students getting academic support, but they're getting a positive sense of believing in themselves, giving them optimistic visions about how to do better in life."

Given the dismal history we've endured of seeing so many low-income students fail to earn college degrees, it may be hard to believe a breakthrough is at hand. But it's happening.

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