

Closing the Gaps: **The Relevance of AVID's Postsecondary System to the Current Needs of American Higher Education**

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The College Completion Crisis

The percentage of high school graduates enrolling in college is increasing for all racial and income groups (NASH & Education Trust, 2009); however, these gains in college *access* rates are not being matched by gains in college *success* rates (Hunt & Carruthers, 2004). The United States has one of the highest college-going rates in the world, yet its college-completion rate (both 2-year and 4-year) rank near the bottom half of all industrialized nations (College Board, 2008a; National Governors Association, 2008). Only 35% of America's college students graduate with a bachelor's degree in four years and just over half (52%) graduate within six years (College Board, 2009). For students who attend college part-time, the completion rate is even lower: Less than 25% graduate within eight years (Complete College America, 2011). Viewing America's current college-completion rates from an international perspective, the United States has dropped from number two in the world to number 12, and is in the process of dropping further (Complete College America, 2010). If this trend continues, the current generation of college-age Americans will be the first in U.S. history to be less educated than its parents (CCSSE, 2010).

Following World War II, graduation from high school became a national expectation. Today, the expectation is that all young people should continue their formal education after high school in order to be assimilated into the American workforce and accommodate the current economic challenges facing the nation (College Board, 2008b; McCabe, 2000). Our "knowledge-based economy" now requires six out of every ten jobs to be filled by someone who has completed at least some type of postsecondary education (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003). In today's unforgiving labor market, college students must complete in order to compete; if they withdraw from college without completing a credential or degree, their prospects for finding gainful employment will be seriously jeopardized (Collins, 2009). Moreover, among those students who withdraw from college, 3 of 10 them leave with loan debt (Johnson et al., 2009). Thus, students who don't complete college pay a double penalty: They incur immediate debt and, at the same time, they forfeit subsequent income (and other benefits) associated with attainment of a postsecondary credential.

The National Importance of Improving College Completion Rates

College graduation is increasingly becoming "a critical, if not *the* critical measure of both student and institutional success" (American Council on Education, 2010, p. 2). An educated citizenry has always been critical to the success of a nation, but in today's global economy, it's even more critical (College Board, 2008b). When students withdraw from college, the nation loses a significant future contributor to its economy, loses tax revenue generated by its citizenry, and loses additional funds related to failed loan repayments—because students who withdraw from college are 5-10 times more likely to default on their college loans than college graduates (Gladieu & Perna, 2005; Volkwein & Cabrera, 1998). Furthermore, current college-withdrawal rates are increasing the risk that domestic jobs will be exported to other countries; American employers now report that there not enough domestic workers available with the skills needed to meet their current employment needs (CCSSE, 2010). The resulting is a "yawning skills gap caused by too few trained workers for more high-skill jobs than ever. Incomes shrink. And America falls further behind" (Complete College America, 2011, p. 3).

Failure to close this college-completion gap will have grave implications for our unemployment rate, our citizens' dependence on public services, and the socioeconomic stability of our country (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998; Vernez & Mizell, 2001). "Educational attainment and college completion matter—for the prospects of individual students and for the future viability of both the U.S. economy and the American democracy" (CCSSE, 2010, p. 3). A nation with more college graduates benefits economically by accruing larger tax revenues and incurs fewer costs associated with poverty, unemployment, and crime (College Board, 2007; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005).

In a capitalistic economy, human capital is as important for long-term economic stability as is free enterprise and an entrepreneurial spirit (Hanushek, et al., 2008). America's future prospects for economic recovery will rest largely on the quality of the human resources it develops, and its national productivity

will hinge heavily on the educational attainment of its citizenry. “It is an illusion to believe that if a society is making money, it is creating wealth. Real wealth is created when societies invest in the future, including investing in the human capital of a productive people” (College Board, 2008b, p. 36). Simply stated, the United States cannot compete in a global economy without the human resources to do so. A strong educational system that effectively transports citizens through its educational pipeline to completion of postsecondary credentials serves to infuse the nation’s economy with a steady stream of human capital, which reaps fiscal benefits for both the individual and the nation (Shulock & Moore, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Thus, AVID’s postsecondary efforts to promote the collegiate success of underserved student populations is not just the educationally effective and altruistic thing to do; it’s also the economically effective and patriotic thing to do.

The Potential of AVID’s Postsecondary System for Closing the College Completion Gap

The foregoing research findings and national reports strongly suggest that America’s college completion rates need to increase significantly and swiftly. AVID’s Postsecondary System has the potential to fill the following gaps in the quality of American undergraduate education that are currently contributing to its low college-completion rates.

1. The gap in college completion rates between *low-income and high-income* students, and between *white students and students of color*.
2. The gap between the number of students who *intend to transfer from 2-Year to 4-year colleges* and number who *actually do*.
3. The gap in collaboration between *schools and colleges/universities*.
4. AVID’s postsecondary system can help close the gap between the quality of *graduate-school preparation* of college faculty and the quality of their *professional performance as undergraduate teachers and advisors*.
5. The gap between higher education’s emphasis on student acquisition of *discipline-specific content* and the need for students to develop *cross-disciplinary, lifelong learning skills*.
6. The gap between the current (and urgent) need for higher education to make *transformative change* to meet the needs of today’s growing number of first-generation students, and the reality that postsecondary institutions are notoriously *slow to change*.

The remainder of this manuscript is devoted to making the case and providing a research-base for AVID’s potential to close each of these six gaps.

1. AVID’s Postsecondary System can help narrow the gap in college completion rates between *low-income and high-income students, and between white students and students of color*.

The greatest growth in America’s future high school graduates will be among two groups who have not had historically high rates of college completion: low-income students and students of color (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2008). Despite the fact that over 90% of low-income students aspire to achieve a college degree—a dramatic increase since the late 1980s (AD Council, 2006), poor students and students of color struggle the most to graduate from college (Complete College America, 2011). The college degree-attainment gap between white students and students of color is actually wider today than it was in 1975; for low-income and high-income students, the gap has doubled (Engle & Lynch, 2009). “It is no longer enough to be concerned only about *whether* low-income and first-generation students go to college. We also must be concerned about *where and how* they go to college—and the experiences they have once enrolled—to ensure that this population can stay there through the completion of a degree” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 5).

Low-Income Students

The education achievement gap between students from rich and poor families is much more pronounced in the United States than in other economically developed nations. “Given the enormous economic impact on educational achievement, this is one of the best indicators of equal opportunity in a society, and one on which the United States fares poorly” (McKinsey & Company, 2009, p. 9). Failure to close this gap will have serious effects on the employment prospects of low-income, first-generation college students (Collins, 2009). In addition, the children of these students will be adversely affected as well because they, too, are less likely to become college graduates and reap the economic and personal benefits of college degree (Cuseo, Fecas, & Thompson, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Since the children of students who withdraw from college are themselves less likely to complete college (and high school), the negative consequences of college attrition among underserved students has a magnified “trickle-down effect” that becomes intergenerational in scope (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Kojuku & Nunez, 1998).

Attrition of first-generation and low-income college students not only penalizes them on a personal and familial level, it also penalizes America on a national level. In the current fiscal climate, America can no longer afford an educational system that perpetuates preexisting inequalities and foments social and economic unrest. The recurrent economic losses America incurs as result of the wide gap in college completion between its majority and minority students (and the overall gap in college completion between its citizens and citizens of other nations) are substantially larger than the losses incurred by the current recession. “Put differently, the persistence of these educational achievement gaps imposes on the United States the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession” (McKinsey & Company, 2009, p. 6). By failing to repair its leaking educational pipeline, America runs the risk of flooding its primary path to enduring economic recovery. On the other hand, if the United States can close the educational achievement gap between low- and high-income students and between ethnic minority and majority students, it is estimated that the nation’s Gross Domestic Product will increase by at least 400 billion dollars (Hooker & Brand, 2009).

Increasing education levels and closing longstanding gaps between groups isn’t just important to our economic competitiveness. It also contributes to other things we hold dear as a nation, including democratic participation, social cohesion, strong families, and healthy behavior. America cannot afford to fail to develop the talents of young people from low-income and minority families. It’s not good for our economy. And it’s not good for our democracy (Engle & Lynch, 2009, pp. 1 & 3).

Thus, promoting the educational attainment of our nation’s citizens, particularly citizens from underrepresented groups, is more than a noble social justice goal; it’s also a vital economic and democratic goal.

Students of Color

Nearly 40% of students from *majority* ethnic and racial groups fail to graduate from college within six years after their initial enrollment, and the success rate for *minority* students is even worse—approximately 60% do not complete a degree within six years after matriculation (Education Trust, 2010). Among white students seeking a baccalaureate degree, 60% graduate within six years after college entry; in contrast, only 38% of Native American, 40% of African American, and 49% of Hispanic students do so (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2010). Among America’s young adults (25-34 years of age), almost 50% of whites have earned an associate degree or higher, compared to less than 30% of African Americans and less than 20% of Hispanics (College Board, 2011). If this trend continues, America’s aging, well-educated white population will approach retirement and be replaced by a growing number of younger minority citizens with lower levels of educational attainment (College Board, 2008b, p. 7).

A dual focus on student access to college and student success in college is critical to achieving significant increases in the number of America’s college students (NASH & Education Trust, 2009). AVID’s secondary and postsecondary systems combine to take this dual focus and the latter’s essential features are strikingly consistent with practices that research has shown to be most effective for promoting the persistence of low-income, first-generation students, namely: (1) a structured first-year college experience, (b) an emphasis on academic support, (c) an active and intrusive approach to

advising, (d) a plan that requires student commitment to the program, and (e) a strong presence on campus that includes involvement of influential campus leaders (Muraskin, 1997).

For low-income, first-generation college students whose less-privileged backgrounds often have not shown them the way to succeed (e.g., failed to supply them with the prerequisite academic competencies, cultural capital or “college knowledge”), AVID’s postsecondary system is well positioned to supply these students with the strategies, skills, and support they need to succeed.

2. AVID’s Postsecondary System can help close the gap between the number of students who *intend to transfer from 2-Year to 4-year colleges* and the number who *actually do*.

Almost 60% of community college students report that they intend to obtain an associate degree and more than half of them intend to transfer to a 4-year college or university (CCSSE, 2008); however, the percentage of students that actually do transfer ranges from 8% to 25% (Pusser & Levin, 2009). Thus, the reality is that large numbers of students aspire to transfer from community colleges, but only a fraction of them take the steps necessary to do so (Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008).

Low-income students and students of color students have equally high aspirations for transfer and completion of the baccalaureate degree as do more affluent white students (Center for the Study of Community Colleges, 1985; London, 1996); however, their 2- to 4-year college transfer rates are disturbingly lower (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Rendon & Garza, 1995). For example, at public 2-year institutions, more than 60% of low-income, first-generation students plan to earn a bachelor’s degree; however, only 14% of these students transfer to 4-year institutions and only 5% earned a bachelor’s degree within six years (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Facilitating the transfer of rates of low-income, first-generation students has profound implications for their socioeconomic advancement. Students who successfully transfer from 2- to 4-year institutions and complete their baccalaureate degree achieve comparable economic benefits as students who start and finish at 4-year colleges; for example, they earn roughly equivalent salaries and report similar levels of job satisfaction (Pascarella, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Moreover, significant decline in the unemployment rates of African American and Hispanic students often do not become evident until they attain a baccalaureate degree. In a study conducted by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (cited in Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), it was discovered that the unemployment rate of whites dropped progressively with increasingly higher levels of education; however, among African Americans and Hispanics, an inverse relationship between level of education and unemployment is less likely to emerge until the baccalaureate level of education is achieved. Thus, people of color derive greater relative occupational benefits from a bachelor’s degree than do whites. Their attainment of a 4-year degree also has positive impact on the educational attainment of their children—even after controlling for such factors as family income and family size (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).□

The consistently low level of transfer and baccalaureate-degree completion for students entering higher at community college students has led to national calls for significant change in the mission and culture of community colleges (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). As Rendon and Garza (1996) note: “While community colleges have sought to find their niche in postsecondary education by concentrating on career-based education to prepare students to enter the job market, many educators are concerned that higher expectations should be set for students of color, particularly since minorities occupy few privileged positions in society in which undergraduate degree are necessary” (p. 290).

AVID practices that have effectively promoted high school students’ access to and readiness for college appear to be equally and directly applicable to promoting community college students’ access to and readiness for *transfer* to 4-year colleges. For instance, just as AVID’s high school elective course helps students prepare for college, AVID Postsecondary’s first-year seminar can serve the same purpose, helping 2-year college students to prepare for transfer by guiding their selection of appropriate (transferable) courses, facilitating their long-term educational planning (e.g., choice of major), and assisting them with the intricacies of the 4-year college application process. Also, AVID’s long-standing practice of connecting college peer tutors with high school students for the purpose of increasing their academic success and college-going aspirations may be replicated at the community college level by connecting peer mentors at 4-year colleges with 2-year college students for the purpose of elevating their transfer aspirations and transfer readiness.

3. AVID's Postsecondary System can help bridge the gap in collaboration between *schools and colleges/universities*.

The present reality is that far too many students falter at various stages along the “educational pipeline” from middle and high school through college (Savitz-Romer, Jager-Hyman, & Coles, 2009, p. 5). In 1983, the U.S. Department of Education released a landmark report, *A Nation at Risk*, which revealed that increasing numbers of our nation's youth were underachieving academically and imperiling both their own future and the future of the nation. In a follow-up report issued 25 years later by the U.S. Department of Education, *A Nation Accountable*, these concerns were reiterated with even greater urgency:

If we were ‘at risk’ in 1983, we are at even greater risk now. The rising demands of our global economy, together with demographic shifts, require that we educate more students to higher levels than ever before. Yet our education system is not keeping pace with these growing demands. Of 20 children born in 1983, six did not graduate from high school on time in 2001. Of the 14 who did, 10 started college that fall, but only five earned a bachelor's degree by spring 2007. We simply cannot return to the “ostrich approach” and stick our heads in the sand while grave problems threaten our education system, our civic society, and our economic prosperity. We must consider structural reforms that go well beyond current efforts, as today's students require a better education than ever before to be successful (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 1).

In another classic report, *One Third of a Nation*, seven major challenges to our educational system were identified; one of those challenges was for our educational leaders to cooperate across all sectors of education—from preschool through graduate school (American Council on Education & Education Commission of the States, 1988). Unfortunately, postsecondary education has not met this challenge. Even scholars from within the postsecondary sector continue to chastise universities for operating as if they were an “isolated island” and for sitting “alone atop the educational pyramid” while condescendingly blaming the K-12 sector for its failure to prepare students for college-level work (Pew Higher Education Roundtable, 1993). According to Derek Bok, president emeritus of Harvard University: “Very few [postsecondary] institutions have given much encouragement to faculty interested in improving the schools. What we have done instead is simply to relegate all of the work on schools to the faculty of education, then to stuff the faculty of education down at the bottom of the campus hierarchy and ignore it. I think it would be easier to argue that we are part of the problem than it would be to argue that we are part of the solution” (1992, p. 19).

Large numbers of college-bound students are unprepared for the rigors of college coursework; for example, 36% of White students, and 62% of Hispanic and American students entering college require developmental education (Education Trust, 2009). Despite these clear and consistent gaps in academic preparation, only a small percentage of postsecondary institutions regularly share information with high schools about what incoming first-year students should be able to know and do when they begin college (AACU, 2002). Such a segmented, “silo”-like approach to promoting student across the P-16 system disjoins segments of America's educational pipeline that must be in place and interface to form a seamless system. Disjointed segments disrupt the pipeline's unity and fluidity, creating “leaks” in the flow of student progression from our schools to and through our colleges and universities.

Higher education needs to step down from its high horse and stop operating as if it were a “lone ranger” working independent of “lower” education. Universities must move from pointing fingers at, to holding hands with the schools, working with them to promote the educational advancement of America's students. If postsecondary educational reform efforts aimed at promoting college success rates are not approached in this symbiotic and systemic fashion, they will remain as they always have been: disjointed and dysfunctional.

AVID Postsecondary System's emphasis on promoting college access and readiness by forging collaborative relationships with local high schools (and strengthening existing relationships) can help insert needed conduits into the educational pipeline running from pre-college to college education. Building on the success of AVID's precollege system, which for more than 30 years has effectively supported and promoted students' college access (Mehan, et al., 1996; Slavin & Calderon, 2001), AVID's postsecondary system extends its support system to promote students' college success by building needed bridges between our schools and universities.

4. AVID's postsecondary system can help close the gap between the quality of *graduate-school preparation* of college faculty and the quality of their *professional performance as undergraduate teachers and advisors*.

The gap between the educational preparation and the subsequent professional responsibilities of college faculty was well articulated by the Association of American Colleges in a classic report on the status of undergraduate education in America:

The tradition in higher education is to award the [Ph.D] degree and then turn the students loose to become teachers without training in teaching or, equally as ridiculous, to send [graduate] students off without degrees, with unfinished research and incomplete dissertations hanging over their heads while they wrestle with the responsibilities of learning how to teach. During the long years of work toward the doctoral degree, the candidate is rarely, if ever, introduced to any of the ingredients that makes up the art, the science, and the special responsibilities of teaching. Yet the major career option for most holders of the Ph.D. degree is full-time teaching in a college or university (1985, p. 35).

This observation is strikingly congruent with a more concise (and caustic) conclusion reached a decade earlier by a national study group on higher education: "It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the present disjunction between the emphasis in graduate training and the work done by most college teachers is a formula for occupational schizophrenia" (Group for Human Development in Higher Education, 1974, p.30).

Research on university programs offered to prepare graduate students for college instruction consistently shows that: (a) participation in these program are optional rather than required; (b) only a minority of graduate students participate; (c) the programs typically consist of a short series of separate workshops that are not integrated into a coherent or systematic curriculum; and (d) they are delivered with little to no involvement of learning/teaching scholars or senior members of the graduate faculty (Gardiner, 1994).

The poor preparation of faculty for undergraduate teaching in general, and the teaching of underprepared and underrepresented students in particular, is compounded by the paucity of instructional development opportunities for faculty once they enter the professoriate. Drawing on data gathered from national surveys of postsecondary institutions and multiple visits to college campuses, Ernest Boyer (1987) observed that "such an obvious and important practice as setting aside a portion of the budget for faculty development is rare" (p. 134). Engle & Tinto (2008) argue that "institutions must provide professional development for faculty and staff to not only help them acquire a broader range of pedagogical skills, but also to learn how to effectively use those skills with at-risk populations" (p. 26).

Research on colleges that have received and implemented "Achieving the Dream" grant funding indicates that student-success programs funded by the grant have not focused centrally on involving faculty and improving teaching (Brock et al., 2007). Researchers are now raising serious concerns about whether the failure to involve faculty directly in the process of promoting student success and improving teaching effectiveness will dramatically reduce the intended impact of the Achieving the Dream initiative (Complete College America, 2010).

AVID Postsecondary System's emphasis on involving faculty in change efforts to promote student success and providing faculty with sustained professional development, which includes practical, research-based strategies for improving the effectiveness of college teaching (and academic advising), has the potential to bridge the gap between the quality of faculty's graduate-school preparation and the quality of their professional performance as undergraduate teachers and advisors.

5. AVID's Postsecondary System has the potential to reduce the gap between higher education's emphasis on student acquisition of *discipline-specific content* and the need for students to develop *cross-disciplinary, lifelong learning skills*.

A common criticism of the college curriculum is that it's dominated by content-dense and information-heavy courses that devote little time and attention to transferable learning skills and strategies (Cross, 1993; Bok, 2006). AVID's focus on the developing students' learning and thinking skills—writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization, and reading—that are transferable across the curriculum (and throughout life) effectively responds to this criticism and resonates with recommendations made by two highly-regarded

postsecondary reports: *The Student Learning Imperative* (ACPA, 1994) and *The New Learning Paradigm* (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Both of these national reports call for a major “paradigm shift” in undergraduate education—away from the traditional role of professors as content-driven lecturers—to professors as designers of learning experiences that promote the development of transferable skills. Development of cross-disciplinary, lifelong-learning skills is also a quintessential goal of general (liberal) education and a criterion often used to distinguish a college education from vocational training (Stark, & Lattuca 1997; Weingarten, 1993).

Lastly, AVID’s emphasis on transferable skills is also consistent with current calls for community colleges to integrate general education competencies into their vocational (occupational) programs (Grubb, 1999). Research indicates that graduates of such integrated programs have greater job mobility and better long-term employment prospects (College Board & National Commission on Community Colleges, 2008; Headden, 2009).

6. AVID’s Postsecondary System can narrow the gap between the current (and urgent) need for higher education to make *transformative change* to meet the needs of today’s growing number of first-generation students, and the reality that postsecondary institutions are notoriously *slow to change*.

It has been said that producing change in higher education is “harder than trying to move a graveyard” (Fife, 1982, p. xv). The founding president of the University of Chicago once proclaimed that “every advance in education is made over the dead bodies of 10,000 resisting professors” (Robert Hutchins, quoted in Seymour, 1988.) These anecdotal observations are supported by research indicating that relative to other types of organizations, postsecondary organizations are significantly slower to change and adapt to change—due in large part to the autonomy of its loosely connected organizational divisions and departments—which often operate as independent fiefdoms (Getz, Siegfried, & Anderson, 1997).

The value of adopting strategies for promoting student success that are intentionally designed to overcome the institutional inertia induced by isolated and insulated infrastructures is underscored by research on postsecondary campuses with higher-than-predicted graduation rates. One distinguishing feature of these campuses is their student-success initiatives involved use of “innovations [that] crossed traditional organizational boundaries and spread horizontally to different areas, which further increased the chances that many students would be touched by the effort” (Kuh, 2005, et al., p. 311).

AVID postsecondary system’s intentional structuring of campus teams comprised of individuals who traverse departmental and divisional boundaries serves to combat the “organizational anarchy” that typifies many postsecondary institutions. AVID’s emphasis on the creation of cross-functional, campus-wide teams may account for research findings at the secondary level indicating that the AVID system has a positive “ripple effect” across campus. For example, it has been found that students not involved in the AVID system start using AVID’s effective learning strategies, and teachers not involved in the system begin adopting its instructional practices (Guthrie & Guthrie, 2002; Watt, et al., 2006). The positive transfer of AVID’s impact across campus has been so commonly observed, it has come to be called the “AVID effect” (Mehan, et al., 1996).

Conclusion

In 2009, President Barack Obama set a goal for the U.S., stating that “by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world”, and calling for initiatives to ensure that an additional five million Americans complete degrees and certificates in the next decade (Brandon, 2009). One potentially promising initiative for meeting the president’s postsecondary challenge is captured in a recommendation made by researchers who identified pre-college programs with exceptional track records of success in promoting the educational achievement of low-income, first-generation students: “Extend the individualized and intensive support provided by pre-college programs to the college campus by extending the pre-college programs themselves, increasing coordination between existing pre-college and campus-based programs, and/or developing campus-based programs where they do not currently exist” (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006, p. 4).

AVID is one of these “pre-college programs”—with a long track record of effectiveness—that has now been extended to college campuses. For low-income, first-generation students whose less-privileged backgrounds lessen their prospects for college success, AVID’s postsecondary system can provide them

with the psychosocial support structures and transferrable learning skills they need to succeed in college and beyond.

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