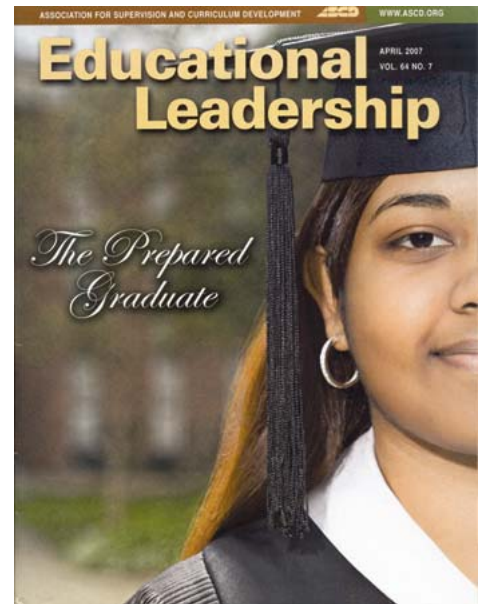


AVIDly Seeking Success

Jim Nelson

Giving students the skills they need for college requires more than opening the doors to college-prep classes.



Ramona High School in Riverside, California, had a problem. Only 10 of its 325 graduates in 1988 enrolled in a four-year university. This was surprising, given that Ramona was an upper-middle-class school with a predominately white student body. Fewer than 10 percent of students received assistance under the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, and English language learners made up only 5 percent of the student population.

At the time, Ramona only offered one advanced placement (AP) class to 25 students, and only 17 percent of seniors completed the requirements that qualified them for admission to California's public university system. Teachers wondered why so few graduates went on to four-year universities. Clearly, students needed additional guidance when it came to navigating the courses that would prepare them for college.

Skills Students Need

Some prerequisites for college-prep courses are obvious. To succeed in algebra, for example, students must have a solid grasp of such math skills as arithmetic and problem solving. Rigorous high school English and history courses require students to have skills in reading comprehension and composition.

- But many of the most important prerequisites for college-preparatory work aren't listed in any course description, and teachers and guidance counselors may not even be consciously aware of them. College admissions officers, however, look for applicants who have completed courses that rely on these skill sets, which students will need both in college and the workplace. These skills include
- *Organization and study habits.* Rigorous college-prep courses involve a lot of homework and exams. Students have to keep track of deadlines and assignments and retain information over the long term.
- *Effective questioning and active learning.* The ability to ask probing questions is important in learning complex subjects, especially subjects where there isn't one right answer. Students must be active, critical thinkers, not passive receivers of teacher-imparted truth.
- *Class participation.* Quality teacher-student interaction is key to mastering difficult subjects. Students who do not speak up may have misunderstandings that teachers cannot correct because they aren't aware of them. Active participation is also important to the collaborative work that is a hallmark of many college-prep classes.
- *Ability to synthesize information.* Good college-prep courses don't rely on one source of information but on many sources that often present things in vastly different ways. Students must be able to pull this information together and use it in a new way.

Meeting the Challenge

Many schools like Ramona want to extend the opportunity to take rigorous courses to students who don't fit the traditional college-prep profile or have college on their radar screen. They recognize that these courses are necessary if students are to achieve college and career success. These schools need a way to help ensure that nontraditional college-prep students are prepared for college-level work. For Ramona High, the answer to this problem was Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID).

In 1980, Mary Catherine Swanson started AVID in one classroom at Clairmont High School in San Diego. She had a simple goal: ensuring that her students were prepared for college when they graduated. Today, AVID serves nearly 200,000 students in more than 2,700 middle and high schools in 39 states.

AVID helps students, especially those in the academic middle, prepare for college. AVID teachers and counselors select students with desire and potential who may not yet have the requisite skills for college. These students often come from families who don't necessarily expect their children to go on to postsecondary education. When students sign up for the program, they agree to take rigorous classes and set college as their goal. AVID gives them strategies to succeed in tough courses and supports them throughout middle and high school.

In-Class Approaches

It is not enough to let nontraditional college-prep students into rigorous classes that are being taught in the same old way. To do so would be to doom these students to failure or, at best, a superficial understanding instead of subject mastery. AVID encourages teachers to make content more accessible to students who may lack the background of the traditional college-prep population.

Cornell Notes. Getting students to take notes is only half the battle; they have to take good notes that will help them learn in class and prepare for exams. Cornell Notes prompt students to record and then ask questions about class material, promoting active learning and increasing student

understanding. Students take notes on the right-hand side of a page that has been divided into two columns, and they ask summary questions on the left-hand side. They then write a summary of the notes on the page on the bottom fourth of the paper.

Peer tutoring. Matching students new to college-prep courses with more advanced students benefits both students. The newer students get help and encouragement that go beyond explaining math problems and discussing essay topics, and the more experienced college-prep students deepen their knowledge by teaching.

Socratic seminars. In a Socratic seminar, participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas through thoughtful dialogue, rather than by memorizing bits of information. Students develop the higher-level critical-thinking skills they will need to succeed in college-prep classes. AVID students might discuss whether there should be limitations on freedom of speech and whether video games can be instruments of learning as well as entertainment. They may discuss readings in literature, history, science, math, health, or philosophy or works of art or music. A good seminar text raises important questions for which there are no right or wrong answers.

Confidence builders. Many classroom techniques can help students overcome their fear of speaking up. For example, students who are afraid of voicing their opinions about a story's central conflict may feel more comfortable taking on a character's persona and revealing their thoughts that way.

Out-of-Class Approaches

Out-of-class approaches may take the form of after-school programs or electives offered during the regular school day. AVID students take an elective class in which they learn such skills as organization, inquiry, expository writing, and collaboration. For example, to help students build organizational skills, teachers teach units on time management and check students' binders to see that key materials are there and are organized sensibly.

College students trained in AVID methods and requirements—often members of the community who have succeeded in getting to college—serve as tutors and role models. They give support and feedback on content mastery, thinking skills, writing, and questioning.

Enrichment activities also provide students with role models and real-world applications of their learning. These activities include talking with professionals who come to class to discuss their jobs or writing to colleges and asking for enrollment information.

Starting Early

Realizing that college preparation shouldn't begin in high school, AVID has a middle school program that instills a college-going mentality in students and prepares them for the transition to high school. Middle school preparation is especially important because all AVID students are expected to master algebra in 8th grade, enabling them to take calculus in 12th grade.

AVID teachers try to make middle school coursework relevant to young adolescents by guiding them to ask themselves how their classes will help them get to college. Students learn that every effort, every success, as well as every setback, is a step on the path to college. As in the high school program, tutors provide support and serve as role models.

When they start the program early, AVID students form a cadre of peers who encourage one another not to drop a difficult class, give up, or lose sight of the goal. Together with the tutors and teachers, these peer groups become like a family, providing strong social support for students engaged in difficult work.

AVID also has an elementary program for grades 4–6. This helps districts lay the foundation and introduce students to AVID fundamentals at an early age.

Ramona's Success

Ramona High School started offering one class of AVID in 1989. Content-area teachers were also trained in AVID strategies and used them in their courses. Since that time, dramatic changes have occurred. The student population is now 30 percent white, 60 percent Hispanic, 8 percent black, and 2 percent other races. The number of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch has climbed from 9 percent to 61 percent, and the number of English language learners has increased from 5 percent to 16 percent. The number of AP classes has also grown to 16 classes serving 379 students, a vast improvement over the enrollment of only 25 students in one AP class in 1988.

Today, Ramona's 17 AVID classes serve 542 students, 26 percent of the student body. All AVID seniors from the class of 2005 were accepted at a four-year college or university, and 98.7 percent of these students planned to attend. The increase in the number of AVID elective courses and the schoolwide use of AVID strategies, as well as the implementation of AVID at the middle school 10 years ago, has helped to create a college-going culture that permeates the entire campus.

Success-Prep for All

It was once thought that raising standards would harm student achievement, dooming kids to failure and damaging their self-esteem, eventually leading to more dropouts and less education. Why force students who don't have what it takes into classes they can't hope to pass, or, worse yet, water the classes down until they're no preparation for college at all?

But as educators have begun extending college-prep opportunities to more students and providing support along the way, something remarkable has happened. Students are rising to the challenges laid before them, often achieving at higher rates than they did in the remedial and general education tracks.

Educators don't necessarily have to expect that all students will attend college. However, preparing all students to meet a college-prep standard should be the job of all schools. In fact, the skills needed for college prep might be better described as "success prep"—necessary for anyone who wants a stable, fulfilling career.

Jim Nelson is Executive Director of AVID Center, 5120 Shoreham Place, Ste. 120, San Diego, CA; www.avidonline.org.

Copyright © 2007 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development