

El Paso's College Readiness Initiative: Cooperation at Work

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In El Paso, Texas, the public institutions of higher education have joined with area school districts to create the El Paso College Readiness Initiative. Through a great deal of coordination and cooperation among the participating institutions, high school faculty, students, and parents are introduced to the placement test used by the city's community college and university, students are tested, and interventions are provided to the students. The purpose of this initiative is to reinforce the idea of college attendance among high school juniors and seniors and to help them avoid developmental status when they do decide to matriculate.

El Paso, Texas, sits at the juncture of three states and two nations and is home to over half a million people. When combined with the population of El Paso's sister city, Juarez, Mexico, the population jumps to over two million individuals residing in this border community. The population of El Paso County is predominantly Latino/a at 81.7% (U.S. Census, 2003). The U.S. Census Bureau ranks El Paso as the second poorest metropolitan area in the nation with 28.8% of its citizens living in poverty. El Paso County ranks as the third poorest county in the nation at 29.2%, tying with Bronx County, NY (Najera, 2006).

The El Paso region is served by two public institutions of higher education: The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and El Paso Community College (EPCC). Under the former Carnegie system, UTEP held the designation doctoral/research intensive institution (Carnegie, 2000) and served over 19,000 students in Fall 2006 (UTEP, 2007). It is also a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) with 72.5% of the Fall 2006 population self-identifying

as Latino/a (UTEP, 2007). EPCC served nearly 25,000 students in Fall 2004 on five different campuses. In 2003, EPCC was identified as the fastest growing community college in the nation for institutions with a population over 10,000 (Gibbs, 2005); over 84% of the student body is Latino/a.

Both institutions admit a large percentage of students each year who require developmental education. At EPCC, over 98% of all entering students place into at least one developmental education course while at UTEP, approximately 66% of all entering students require at least one developmental education course (THECB, 2004a).

In November 2005, Dennis Brown, Vice-President for Instruction at EPCC, and Richard Jarvis, UTEP's Provost, shared these numbers with the superintendents of the area's twelve school districts. The developmental education numbers generated a great deal of consternation as the majority of UTEP and EPCC students come from the El Paso region. Before the meeting was over, the College Readiness Consortium was created. The mission of this consortium of institutions of higher education and school districts is to reduce the number of El Paso area high school graduates who enter college requiring developmental education.

In order to ensure that the mission of the consortium was met, the lead administrators at UTEP and EPCC reorganized what had been the joint Developmental Education Task Force into the College Readiness Initiative (CRI) Committee. The charge to the new group was to have a plan in place for Spring 2006 that would test area high school seniors for college readiness, provide interventions in those areas where the seniors had not tested college ready, and retest them before graduation.

The test used by both UTEP and EPCC is the College Board's ACCUPLACER. The ACCUPLACER is used to determine college readiness under the Texas Success Initiative (THECB, 2004b). Both institutions also use the ACCUPLACER to determine course placement in reading, writing, and math.

The initial meetings of the College Readiness Initiative

(CRI) Committee, in December of 2005, were attended by representatives from UTEP and EPCC as well as representatives from both Ysleta and Socorro Independent School Districts, which constitute two of the three largest independent school districts (ISDs) in El Paso. El Paso Independent School District, the largest El Paso ISD, opted to wait until Fall 2006 to join the initiative. The represented departments from UTEP and EPCC included Admissions, Testing, Advising, Tutoring, Developmental English, Developmental Math, the Registrars' Offices, and Financial Aid.

KEY ELEMENTS

At the first meetings, four critical elements were decided upon for the Spring 2006 semester. First, a subcommittee was assigned to create an ACCUPLACER Orientation program. The committee felt that many students do not prepare for the ACCUPLACER or do not try their best on the test because they do not understand its importance to their future in higher education. The ACCUPLACER Orientation program was to be ready by the middle of January.

Second, an ACCUPLACER Interventions sub-committee was formed. The purpose of this group was to help identify the ways in which UTEP and EPCC could provide support to the area ISDs in creating interventions for their students who did not score at college level on all three sections of the ACCUPLACER. The sub-committee members felt strongly that the ISDs did not need the higher education personnel telling the secondary teachers how to teach their students to prepare for the ACCUPLACER. The sub-committee did want to share its expertise concerning the content material covered by the ACCUPLACER and in the developmental education courses that students would have to take at UTEP and EPCC if they didn't retest and earn a higher score.

Third, an ACCUPLACER Assessment sub-committee started work on the fundamentals of getting several thousand students tested on their home campuses. Bussing students to UTEP and

EPCC to take the test was not an option. EPCC was already testing in the high schools for dual credit purposes, but it did not have the resources to test all seniors at all high schools in Ysleta Independent School District (YISD) and Socorro Independent School District (SISD). Issues concerning test security, computer availability, costs, proctors, valid IDs, and score reporting to the students came under discussion as policies and procedures were determined.

The fourth subcommittee worked on the technological issues associated with the program. The registrars at both institutions along with technology specialists from both institutions as well as the ISDs made up this sub-committee. They discussed how student applications would be handled, how the score uploads would be transmitted to UTEP and EPCC, and how FERPA issues would be dealt with.

IMPLEMENTATION

By the time the middle of January rolled around, a tentative sequence of events and implementations plans had been developed. YISD and SISD agreed to share the ACCUPLACER Orientation PowerPoint presentation that had been created by UTEP and EPCC with all seniors. All of the participants agreed that high school seniors who took the ACCUPLACER that spring would complete the joint UTEP/EPCC Admissions Application. UTEP and EPCC would cover the cost of the initial tests; the ISDs would determine how the retests would be paid for – whether the ISDs, the campuses, or the students would pay. UTEP would test students in YISD while EPCC would test the students in SISD. Both institutions would help interested ISDs become their own ACCUPLACER test sites. Campuses would have all seniors retested by May. All tests scores would be reported to UTEP and EPCC by the end of May.

Personnel from UTEP's Tutoring and Learning Center and EPCC's Title V Student Success Program worked on putting together the ACCUPLACER Orientation PowerPoint

presentation. A training session for SISD and YISD was conducted in late January at EPCC. The districts sent curriculum directors, teachers, data specialists, and counselors.

Before the workshop date, however, the participants were encouraged to take the ACCUPLACER themselves. The offer elicited some concern as to how well they would do, so score anonymity was offered to all test takers. The purpose of having the district personnel take the ACCUPLACER was to help them get a feel for the manner in which the ACCUPLACER tests, the type of language that it uses, and the manner in which questions are asked. The participants were also encouraged to deliberately answer some questions incorrectly so that they could see how the test branched to easier questions and then worked up to harder questions. Personally experiencing the test format turned out to be very informative and eye opening for the district personnel.

The workshop walked the participants through the ACCUPLACER test using a PowerPoint presentation. The creators of the presentation tried to include every bit of information that they could think of in relation to the ACCUPLACER: its computer adaptive format, sections of the test, skills covered, score ranges, acceptable forms of identification, uses of the ACCUPLACER (Texas Success Initiative and placement), the developmental education programs at both EPCC and UTEP, reasons for doing well on the test (to save tuition and time), sample questions, web sites to help the students prepare for the ACCUPLACER, reducing test anxiety, and test taking techniques. As no one expected the ISD personnel to become ACCUPLACER experts after one training session, a script that detailed the information on each slide was also electronically provided to the representatives.

The ISD representatives were encouraged to look at the presentation and then to determine how much of the information needed to be shared with each of the populations with whom they were encouraged to share the presentation. Students might need one emphasis while parents might need a different approach.

Administrators and staff also needed to become very familiar with all of the information. The districts were encouraged to cut and paste and rearrange the PowerPoint slides to create a presentation that would work best with the populations that they know best and work with on a daily basis. A one-page handout of web sites was shared that gave students opportunities to take practice ACCUPLACER tests and to work on areas of weakness.

Even though EPCC and UTEP offered to cover the costs of the first ACCUPLACER sitting, neither institution had sufficient financial reserves to provide proctors for all of the test sittings at the various high schools. The ISDs stepped up and found the personnel to act as proctors. EPCC and UTEP staff provided proctor training.

In order to ensure that EPCC and UTEP abided by FERPA provisions, the decision was made that the ACCUPLACER test scores would belong to the ISDs and the test scores would be shared with the students by ISD personnel. In addition, as the semester progressed, all of the districts created a form that the students signed releasing their scores to both EPCC and UTEP. EPCC and UTEP also created materials to help the students interpret what their scores meant in terms of placement.

While test security was of great concern to all the participants, so was the secure electronic transfer of test scores to EPCC and UTEP. The districts were provided instructions on how to upload their test score reports to a dedicated server at EPCC. The computer tech at EPCC was then to download the scores to EPCC's student information system and forward the data to UTEP.

Concerning interventions, everyone agreed that they would be left up to individual campuses. Each school would determine if interventions would even be offered during this first round of CRI. In addition, each school would decide if interventions were mandatory or not, when they would be offered (before school, after school, during the day), how long the intervention would last (hours, days, or weeks), and at what point in the semester they would be offered (immediately after the test results were

reported, later in the semester, throughout the remaining days of the semester, or right before the retest).

RESULTS

For a program that had only eight weeks to come together from the day the charge was given until the first ACCUPLACER Orientation training session took place, CRI had a very successful first semester in Spring 2006. While only two ISDs initially agreed to participate in the program, by the end of semester an additional four rural ISDs (Anthony, Canutillo, Fabens, and San Elizario) had asked to participate. By May 2006, 3,543 seniors in El Paso County had taken the ACCUPLACER test before high school graduation. While not all of the districts had time to implement interventions, all of the districts had the opportunity to assess how well their students did on the ACCUPLACER and this led to a renewed commitment to create interventions for the 2006-2007 school year for their students. In many instances, ISDs agreed to start testing their juniors so that students would know at an earlier date where their potential academic problems were and work more effectively with the existing curriculum and with innovative interventions to retest as seniors and leave high school potentially having passed all levels of the ACCUPLACER.

ISSUES

As with any new venture, especially one that bridges so many secondary and higher education institutions and that includes so many different individuals, numerous issues developed that had to be addressed. Communication issues created the most difficulty. The rapid growth of the program compounded the communication problems. Communication difficulties and rapid growth made accurate and timely assessment of the program challenging.

The entire College Readiness Initiative is premised upon the cooperative goodwill of all of the participants. While the goodwill was ample, the variety of administrative organizations for each institution made the transfer of information from the campuses

back to the districts and vice versa very cumbersome. Reporting lines were often unclear, so descriptions of interventions and information on the duration, location, types of, and participation in the interventions arrived intermittently to the committees in charge of documenting the efforts undertaken that first semester. Follow up attempts to determine what activities each district promoted, along with when, where, and how they happened, were often unsuccessful because while the districts knew who the campus contact individuals were, this information was not always shared with the colleges in a timely fashion. While individual ISDs knew how their students had done on the ACCUPLACER, the transference of that data to UTEP and EPCC was not easy and the lack of an initial consistent delivery format for that information made initial assessment harrowing, tedious, and hard. Everyone probably would have been better served if a clear communication plan had been established at the beginning with specific individuals identified within each district and at each campus for the dissemination of CRI information.

LESSONS TO DATE

However, by the end of the Spring 2006 academic year, all participants in the College Readiness Initiative agreed that not only were the students benefiting from the opportunity to practice with the ACCUPLACER, but so were the districts. As communication lines became better defined and as mutual expectations were formalized, the working relationships between those in secondary education and those in higher education became stronger, more open, and more supportive. As the teachers at the campus level came to realize that the faculty and staff from UTEP and EPCC were not coming to them pointing fingers and laying blame, but coming in an attitude of cooperation and support, attitudes of distrust and suspicion tumbled. The success of CRI has spread throughout the county and in the 2006-2007 school year, nine ISDs participated including El Paso Independent School District, the city's largest district. That year 9,809 students took the initial

ACCUPLACER exam. At this point in time, for the 2007-2008 academic year, all but one of the El Paso County school districts has not only agreed in principle to the goals of CRI, but they have also actively committed to testing their students, providing interventions, retesting, and sharing their results with both EPCC and UTEP.

It should be noted that working within the area ISDs was only stage one of the College Readiness Initiative. As part of the plan for building trust with the ISDs, UTEP and EPCC felt it was important that they, too, demonstrate their willingness to change their ways and create interventions to help students who, at high school graduation, still had not tested college ready. EPCC created an intensive developmental education summer bridge program, while UTEP offered a math review program during new student orientation to all incoming freshmen who still had a developmental math placement.

Both institutions have also been redesigning their developmental education programs and working to provide alternative methods for clearing developmental status rather than through the traditional sixteen-week course. The philosophy of developmental education has changed from one of waiting until the students arrive on campus and then helping them learn the skills that they need for college success to one of assuming that they leave high school having been taught the skills needed for college success and that they may just need a refresher or two in order to demonstrate their college readiness.

The benefits of the College Readiness Initiative are almost too numerous to count. Perhaps the most satisfying result of the work of the last two years has been the creation and strengthening of lines of communication with secondary educators in the El Paso region. Those of us in higher education have learned of the many difficulties and obstacles that secondary educators face as they prepare their students for life after graduation. Likewise, the secondary educators have learned of the academic challenges that face their students as they pass the state mandated high school graduation exam. We have all been enriched by the

interaction that the College Readiness Initiative required of us. Our institutions have benefitted, our students have benefitted, and our region has benefited by our willingness to join in support of student learning.

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