

# Improving Developmental College Counseling Programs

Utilizing the Advancement  
Via Individual Determination  
(AVID) to Motivate  
At-Risk Students



**DR. KEVIN L. ENSOR**, has more than 20 years of experience as a college counselor and is currently employed by the Baltimore County Public School System (MD), working with students at Hereford High School. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree from Towson University (MD), master's degrees in educational administration and guidance and counseling from Loyola College (MD), and his doctoral degree in Developmental Psychology from the University of Maryland at College Park.

**AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is a nationally recognized program that was created in San Diego, CA in 1980, and is designed to give high school students who ordinarily would not participate in rigorous, academic, college-preparatory classes the opportunity and support necessary to succeed in these higher-level classes. AVID promotes student success in rigorous college prep curriculum, and can be a valuable asset to a college counseling program.**

The Baltimore County Public School System piloted the AVID program in several schools for the 2004-05 academic year. Hereford High School (MD) was not a part of the original pilot program, but John Bereska, Hereford principal, realized the value and benefits of AVID and was able to offer the program as an elective for ninth graders during the 2006-07 academic year. Since the initial year, the program has grown to include all four grade levels (9-12) and a total of 87 students are currently enrolled. As a result of participation in this program, all of the students currently enrolled are planning to take the most rigorous academic coursework available to them.

### **Student Profile**

While student selection may vary from school to school, the intent of AVID is to include students who tend to be in the middle of the pack, have demonstrated academic potential, and would be receptive to a supportive academic environment. At Hereford High School, the program targets students who are in the 2.0-3.5 GPA range, and who are willing to pursue more rigorous academic courses. Teacher recommendations are a vital part of the selection process, so teachers are encouraged to nominate those who demonstrate academic promise but may be held back by one or more barriers. Some of these barriers may be due to the student's minority status, socioeconomic factors, familial issues, and/or a poor family history of college attendance. The students must commit to a full year of AVID, which is typically combined with an academic class that meets on alternating days throughout the year. Hereford High School offers a block schedule in which most of the courses are semesterized, but there are some academic classes and electives that alternate throughout the year. Standardized test scores are

not a major factor, but teachers and counselors are instructed to look for students whose stanine scores in language arts are average (or low if the student is a second language learner) and whose math scores are average or above. While quantitative data are reviewed as a part of the selection process, the most important selection factor is the student's willingness to continually pursue a more rigorous program and an eagerness to pursue attendance at a four-year college or university.

### **Program Implementation**

All of the teachers and counselors at Hereford High School who are selected to work with AVID students are trained at a summer institute in Atlanta, GA. During this intense training program, participants learn the basic principles of AVID and are taught strategies and techniques for helping average kids excel.

The freshmen and sophomore students who are enrolled in the AVID program are simultaneously scheduled to take an honors English class on a rotating basis with the AVID tutorial class throughout the entire year. The original group of AVID students are now juniors and have been scheduled to take Advanced Placement English 11 along with the AVID tutorial class. Every other day the AVID students meet for one full period to learn notetaking, test-taking and organizational skills. AVID teachers and counselors who have learned the program essentials provide staff development opportunities to others who have not been trained. AVID teachers and counselors stay with the students for four years and support them as an academic coach for all of their classes.

The AVID curriculum focuses on writing and critical reading and the use of the Socratic Method and is emphasized by teachers across the curriculum. Using the WIC-R approach

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(Writing, Reading, Inquiry, and Collaboration) AVID emphasizes active learning, communication skills, critical thinking, and an in-depth analysis of material- strategies that are crucial for college admission and academic success.

#### Role of the Counselor

Counselors become an integral member of the AVID team and need to take the lead role in preparing students for the college admission process. At Hereford High School, there is a full-time college counselor who works with all of AVID students. This arrangement provides the counselor an opportunity to implement a developmental college program at the secondary level, and allows multiple group and individual sessions with the AVID students. By helping the students and parents become aware of the competitive nature of college admission, counselors can increase the awareness of the process and help reduce some of the anxiety and tension that inevitably results throughout the four years of college preparatory work. To help alleviate the stress for parents and students, this counselor designed a developmental college counseling program for the AVID participants. The sequence of events is listed below:

#### GRADE 9

- **Four-year Plans:** One of the most beneficial services counselors can provide to college-bound ninth-grade students is framework to help them visualize their path to success. A four-year plan can present the student with a basic structure that includes all graduation requirements along with a suggested sequence of academic courses based on ability scores, grade reports and teacher recommendations. As a college counselor, meeting with students early in their high school career not only helps to identify their strengths and

weaknesses, but allows an opportunity to find out what their interests are and to discuss the importance of how they relate to course selection and ultimately, choice of college major and occupation. It is important to include parents in this phase of the college planning process and have them monitor their student's progress, stress levels, etc.

- **College Counseling 101:** When you first begin to specialize in college counseling, it can be surprising to find the number of seniors who are unaware of how grade point averages are calculated, differences between unweighted and weighted GPA and class ranks, etc. In addition, there seems to be a complete lack of awareness of the many factors that are utilized by college admission counselors. During one of the early AVID tutorial sessions, it can be helpful to present a classroom guidance lesson that details the basic terminology, transcript information and examples of how to calculate weighted and unweighted GPAs. A sample of a senior transcript is shown to the class so the students can see all the information displayed on a final transcript.
- **Mock Admission Committee:** During a classroom guidance session AVID students are given mock transcripts of three very different student profiles. They divide into groups of three-to-four students to discuss the applicants and provide a rationale for accepting, waitlisting and denying one student from the group. At the end of class, one of the students is appointed the "Director of Admission" and reports to the class the reasons for their decisions and how difficult it was to make those final choices. It is always interesting to hear discussions amongst the groups regarding their priorities in choosing students and how accurately it reflects "real world" decision making at the collegiate level.

- **College Visits:** Each year several day trips to colleges are arranged. After presenting a classroom guidance lesson, which emphasizes the importance of researching colleges extensively, the students visit local schools and attend an information session followed by a campus tour. These trips provide students with an opportunity to hear from admission counselors specifics about admission requirements, scholarship opportunities, campus life, etc. Last year students visited Maryland schools including McDaniel College, Stevenson University, Towson University, and the University of Maryland at College Park. All of these schools were very accommodating to the students, and in several cases, the students were offered a free lunch in one of the student dining halls.

## GRADE 10

- **College and Career Preparation:** The primary focus in the sophomore year is to expose the AVID students to college and career awareness programs. All the students take the PSAT in the fall, and when the results are returned, a classroom guidance session is planned to interpret the test results and to emphasize the importance of interests, aptitudes and values and how all three components relate closely to career and life satisfaction. The Baltimore County Public School system is able to access the Kuder Career Planning System through a unique partnership with the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) system. Students are taken to the computer lab in the library to complete the entire Kuder Career Assessment. The results are discussed with the students in individual counseling sessions later in the semester.
- **Revision of Four-year Plans and Registration for Junior Classes:** Early in the second semester, AVID sophomores begin to plan their junior schedule. Individual advising sessions are conducted with each student to discuss college and career plans, and continuing the sequence of all academic courses. In keeping with AVID policy, students are required to schedule more rigorous courses each year. Parents are invited to attend these individual sessions to provide important input regarding the student's adjustment to the more rigorous courses for the current year, and to prepare students and parents for the increased time commitment for the more challenging junior year coursework.

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In addition to the increased academic rigor, AVID students are also exposed to a variety of college admission preparation activities during tutorial sessions. Classroom guidance presentations are conducted on the application process, searching for colleges and preparing for college interviews.

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- **College Visits:** In the fall sophomores and juniors took an overnight college visit to Washington, D.C. and Virginia. The students were able to attend information sessions and campus tours at Georgetown University, American University, George Mason University, the University of Virginia, and James Madison University. In addition to the information sessions and tours, students were able to sit in on student panel discussions to learn about campus life and the challenges of making the adjustment from home to college. All the colleges and universities were welcoming and accommodating.

## GRADE 11

- **Academic Placement:** At Hereford High School, the junior year AVID experience is very intense academically. All students are required to take Advanced Placement English 11 on alternating days with the AVID tutorial sessions in addition to higher level mathematics, science, social studies, and world language courses. It is important for counselors to monitor each student's academic progress early in the semester and to become aware of adjustment problems and/or teacher concerns.

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College counseling topics including essay writing, completing applications and financial aid are covered during AVID tutorial sessions. Students are shown sample essays and applications and are given an opportunity to critique them before hearing comments from the selection committee. Following the critique session, students are given an opportunity to begin writing their own essays for the specific colleges to which they plan to apply and can have their peers edit them before the instructor and the counselor review the essays.

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- **Classroom Guidance:** In addition to the increased academic rigor, AVID students are also exposed to a variety of college admission preparation activities during tutorial sessions. Classroom guidance presentations are conducted on the application process, searching for colleges and preparing for college interviews.
- **Mock Interviews:** During the spring semester of the junior year, a day is scheduled when each AVID student has an opportunity to conduct an interview with an admission counselor from a local college or university. Students prepare an academic and activities resume and obtain a copy of their transcript to present to an admission counselor. The admission counselors conduct a 20-25 minute interview for each student and provides them with an evaluation sheet at the end of the interview.
- **Individual counseling session:** During the spring semester, all the AVID students and their parents arrange individual counseling sessions to meet to discuss potential colleges, standardized testing timetables and application options. This is an excellent counseling opportunity to gather data from each student regarding college visits, community service participation and other types of extracurricular activity. In addition, the senior year schedule options can be reviewed and discussed.

## GRADE 12

- **Applying to Colleges:** Early in the senior year, AVID students are encouraged to arrange conferences with their counselors to discuss their list of schools to which they plan to apply and the application timelines. Students are instructed to ask teachers and others for letters of recommendation and are familiarized with the transcript request process.
- **Classroom Guidance:** College counseling topics including essay writing, completing applications and financial aid are covered during AVID tutorial sessions. Students are shown sample essays and applications and are given an opportunity to critique them before hearing comments from the selection committee. Following the critique session, students are given an opportunity to begin writing their own essays for the specific colleges to which they plan to apply and can have their peers edit them before the instructor and the counselor review the essays.
- **Evening Seminars for Parents:** It is important to get AVID parents involved in all aspects of their students' college admission plans. While there are some parents who become over-involved and assume too much of the student's responsibility, most parents need a basic structure to follow. Hereford holds an evening session for parents of se-

nors entitled “College Planning for High School Seniors” which provides parents with an extensive overview of the college planning process. In October, the college planning seminar is followed by a financial aid awareness presentation that details all the information about federal, state, and local sources of funding. In December, a FAFSA workshop is conducted for all who need help completing the federal financial aid worksheets.

- **College Acceptances, Deferrals, Waitlists and Denials:** Another advantage of working with students in the AVID program surfaces around the time colleges and universities make their decisions. By working with students and parents individually, it’s easier to counsel them more effectively about the criteria they should consider before choosing a college. Unless the student has applied and committed to a school under the Early Decision admission option, the spring semester is busy with helping students communicate with admission committees about sending additional information to be considered for review, likelihood of future acceptance, financial aid implications, etc.

#### Reaction to the AVID Program

Comments and reactions from students and parents regarding the AVID program and the developmental approach to college counseling have been overwhelmingly positive. Students appreciate the amount of time spent in the AVID tutorial sessions preparing for the college admission process, and parents are especially appreciative of the time spent investigating and analyzing college choices, admission options and financial aid. The AVID staff at Hereford High School, led by English teacher Julia Kurlander, has done a commendable job of involving parents in group presentations and providing the students with fun activities as well as academic enrichment opportunities.

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Additionally, teachers in all academic areas have noticed an improvement in academic performance by AVID students. Having been exposed to specific instruction in notetaking and study skills, the students tend to be more organized and focused on classroom instruction. Overall, there has been a significant improvement in the GPAs (1.25 pts.) of the students who have been with the program for more than a year.

#### Future Directions

Based on the success of AVID, the program will continue next year at Hereford High School. During the 2009-10 academic year there will be an AVID section at each grade level. AVID students who are seniors should benefit significantly from the developmental approach to increasing academic rigor and college counseling. As the college counseling process steadily becomes more complex, it is certainly in the best interest of our stakeholders—students and parents—to offer a comprehensive college preparatory program that is proactive and addresses the needs of a heretofore neglected student population. One of Hereford’s junior students who has been participating in AVID since ninth grade summed it up best by saying “AVID has given me the confidence I need to pursue acceptance to a four-year college or university. I really never thought I was good enough before.” There is no better endorsement for a program that is desperately needed in all school systems, regardless of racial, ethnic or socioeconomic circumstances.