At-a-Glance

The Academic Readiness and College Access (AR&CA) program was created in order to meet the Dallas ISD needs for increased student participation and performance on the SAT and ACT college entrance exams, support for students in preparing for college entrance exams, and parental involvement in the college admissions and financial aid process.

The three AR&CA providers selected for the 2011-12 school year were Academic Success Program (ASP), Education is Freedom (EIF), and The Princeton Review (TPR). The providers employed college advisors to provide services on each campus. Advisors were expected to work directly with 100 percent of seniors in order to complete college, financial aid, and scholarship applications. Advisors were also expected to serve 70 percent of students in grades nine through 11.

The program goals of the provider contracts were that: 90 percent of graduating seniors would be accepted into college or technical school, 80 percent of graduating seniors would be awarded a scholarship or financial aid, at least 80 percent of seniors would complete and submit an ApplyTexas college application, at least 80 percent of seniors would submit three college applications (including one two-year and one four-year), at least 50 percent of seniors would complete and submit a FAFSA application, at least 80 percent of seniors would submit a college scholarship application, at least 80 percent of seniors would take an ACT or SAT exam, and 50 percent of students would enroll in college upon graduation. Title I 2011-12 program cost requested for this component was $2,300,000.

Program Staff Interview

Advisors focused on helping seniors complete college, FAFSA/TASFA, and scholarship applications; registering students for the SAT and ACT; and holding parent workshops to provide information about the college application process and financial aid options. Advisors mainly helped ninth through 11th grade students with test preparation, life skills, and college preparation. All three providers provided test preparation but did so in different capacities. They reportedly did not provide formal professional development training to district staff but did provide information to counselors on an informal basis.

Program staff worked with administrative staff, counselors, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) teachers, and English teachers. The relationships between program and campus staff were reportedly positive and collaborative. Some advisors did report conflict between themselves and counseling staff.

The three providers did not have much contact. All advisors reported that there was competition between the three providers but feelings were mixed regarding whether the competition was good or not.

The main obstacles preventing first generation and low income students from applying to colleges and universities were that students lacked information and did not understand their options, undocumented students were afraid of deportation, parents wanted their children to stay at home and help take care of the family, and there existed a culture that education was not important. The common reasons why these students were not accepted into college were students’ grade point average, test scores, weak writing skills, and lack of community service work and advanced placement classes. To address these obstacles, advisors educated students and parents about applying to colleges and applying for financial aid, they mentored students and attempted to increase their awareness of how their work as underclassmen would affect their chances of getting into a good school after they graduated, and they provided different types of test preparation.

Program staff reported, and the evaluator agreed, that it was unreasonable to hold advisors accountable for meeting the stated program goals on their campuses when the work of all staff on each campus would be necessary to reach the goals. It was interesting to note that none of the AR&CA goals for the 2011-12 school year targeted ninth through 11th grade students. If the program was to focus on all grade levels then this should be reflected in program goals. The most common barriers to achieving program goals were time constraints due to the large numbers of students included in the scope of the program; lack of student motivation to submit applications, write essays, and study for SAT and ACT exams; student academic preparation prior to their senior year; difficulties involved with depending on students to self report their acceptances and award offers; and getting financial information from parents for the FAFSA/TASFA.

Student Records and Academic Performance

During the 2011-12 school year, EIF served 21 Dallas ISD campuses and 9,786 students, ASP provided
services to 1,392 students across three campuses, and TPR had only one advisor serving four campuses and 900 students. Most campus advisors reported serving mostly seniors.

Any academic differences between students being served by each provider were most likely due to campus differences and not provider differences. It was also possible that students receiving more assistance did better, regardless of the specific provider. Program students were slightly more likely to attend school regularly than were non-program students. Program students scored higher than non-program students on all TAKS exams and all but one of the STAAR exams (geometry). Program students had slightly higher grade point averages (GPAs) than did non-program students (83% compared with 80%, respectively).

**Individualized Assistance**

The majority of students coming in for individualized assistance were receiving help with college searches and college applications. Over 50 percent of ASP and EIF students also came in for financial aid assistance. Over 50 percent of TPR students received assistance with the SAT and ACT process and financial aid assistance.

Advisors tracked the colleges to which students applied and were accepted. It was expected that there would be some issues with data integrity because the providers had to hand enter their data and also had to depend on students to share information with them regarding acceptances and enrollment. The average number of college applications per student was around three for ASP and EIF and close to five for TPR. There were more applications and acceptances into four-year colleges/universities than two-year colleges.

College advisors helped 253 Dallas ISD students complete a TASFA application. Program students were more likely to have submitted a complete FAFSA application than were non-program students. Program students had lower SAT and ACT scores than non-program students. While the TAKS and STAAR were districtwide exams, the SAT and ACT were not required exams. The population of students taking the exams was much smaller and it was likely that only the higher performing, non-program students took the two exams leading to the differences in scores. TPR students scored higher on the SAT than those students served by the other two providers. This finding was not surprising given that TPR was the only provider with a formal SAT preparation course.

ASP had the highest number of financial aid applications submitted on average and ASP and TPR students applied for a larger variety of financial assistance types. Of those who were offered monetary awards, almost 52 percent of ASP students, 100 percent of EIF students, and 50 percent of TPR students received institutional grants and scholarships or private scholarships. ASP and TPR had the highest monetary award totals for all years of college. EIF students had higher average offers for the first year of school.

**Monthly Group Services**

The majority of student sessions focused on seniors. Most sessions focused on college applications, FAFSA and TASFA applications, and college visits both to schools and from school representatives. TPR held test preparation sessions for groups of students during the school day. EIF and ASP did not offer formalized test preparation sessions but had testing materials students could use. EIF advisors reported that they also provided district test preparation workshop information to students and encouraged them to attend these sessions. ASP and EIF spent the majority of their time on applications (college and financial aid) and college services (70% and 67%, respectively). TPR spent the majority of time on test preparation workshops (68%).

**Parent Services**

College advisors provided college application workshops, financial aid workshops, testing workshops, and presentations about college preparation for parents. In general, ASP held more parent sessions with fewer parents in attendance, while EIF and TPR held fewer sessions but had more parents in attendance.

**Recommendations**

There were ten recommendations based on the results of the 2011-12 evaluation: evaluate the scope of the program and determine whether narrowing the scope would be appropriate; decrease the number of students served to allow advisors to better determine the individual needs to students and what post-graduation plan would work best for each; define post-secondary education expectations including determining whether technical schools are included in program goals for institutional applications and acceptances; work towards better collaboration between advisors and campus counselors; evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of competition between providers and determine whether a team approach would better serve student needs; and review the tools to measure program success and determine whether they are appropriate given the academic readiness and college access needs of students; align program workscope and provider contracts; ensure that all program components also have a corresponding outcome goal; review national, state and district data to determine the appropriateness of outcome percentages; change the wording of contract outcomes to better reflect the actual work of providers.
For more information, see EA12-521-2, which can be found at http://www.dallasisd.org/Page/15252.