

Developmental Education: Catch the Next College Access Ascender Program

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What We Studied

Texas is taking a multipronged approach to improving developmental education delivery and increasing student success rates by aggressively pursuing programmatic, research, and instructional strategies that will boost college completion and help reach labor market goals. Texas higher education has committed itself to providing improved and more efficient avenues to success for academically underprepared students through the Texas Success Initiative system, which is more nuanced in its advising, placement, and curricular interventions than previous models. Similarly, Texas has also taken on the considerable challenge of addressing reform efforts that promote the transition of students assessed at basic skill levels from high school completions through postsecondary training and education, with an emphasis on programs that support academic and workforce success.

The study significantly contributes to our understanding of postsecondary success for a variety of reasons.

- First, while bachelor's degree completion is being increasingly emphasized, increasing numbers of students are beginning postsecondary at a community college and failing to make the transition to a four-year institution.
- Second, developmental education appears to be a promising approach to increasing positive postsecondary outcomes, but little rigorous research exists on developmental education in Texas, particularly with nontraditional students within the Texas context.
- Third, while some research exists on the Puente program in California (Rendón, 2002; Moreno, 2002), there is no longitudinal research on implementing the Ascender program in Texas. Results here provide some clarification in understanding the strengths and weakness of programs to better prepare students for college work and college success so students can successfully transfer to a university and complete a bachelor's degree.

Catch the Next, Inc. (CTN), established in 2009, is a national college readiness and completion organization empowering students to catch college and career dreams. The program combines holistic student services and a comprehensive academic pathway that ensures student and institutional success. CTN empowers Latino and other underrepresented students to catch their college and career dreams. The CTN program, known as *Ascender*, expedites transition into credit-bearing courses, targeting at-risk students entering community college, including Latino and first-time college-goers. Texas state higher education policy is now shifting towards large-scale adoption of a corequisite model.

In 2017, House Bill 2223, passed the 85th Texas Legislature, Regular Session to accelerate underprepared students' persistence and successful completions in Texas higher education. HB 2223 requires that a percentage of

underprepared students enrolled in developmental education be reported as enrolled in a *corequisite model*¹. This model which allows the student to enroll in the entry-level college course but requires co-enrollment in a developmental education course/intervention is designed to support the student's successful completion of college-level coursework. The Ascender program, in the form of Integrated Reading and Writing, has been implemented since 2012.

This study investigates the Ascender programs emphasis on wrap-around services that include academic, emotional-social, and community supports for Latino and other under-served community college students. The Ascender program contains an asset-based curriculum approach that focuses on strengths. It views diversity in thought, culture, and traits as positive assets. The Ascender program focuses on "literacy-based approach across disciplines," which highlights literature and culture reflective of the demographics of the classroom in all classes.

How We Analyzed the Data

First the treatment sample was matched to a characteristically similar control group of students using propensity score matching, we then ran a series of regressions to estimate the effect of taking an Ascender course on a range of academic outcome variables. The sample in each regression model included, 4,246 students, which represents each student in the treatment group matched with one control group student. We ran logistic regressions for binary outcomes (B.A. degree, transfer) and ordinary least squares regressions for continuous outcomes (e.g., GPA, average loans accumulated) applying the propensity scores as weights, allowing us to estimate the effect of the Ascender course on our outcomes of interest.

This approach mirrors the design of recent work employing similar data to investigate course/credit completion for community college students taking developmental education courses (Schudde & Keisler, 2019). Such a strategy effectively "controls for the predictors of placement into treatment twice (once in the initial propensity score model and again in the model predicting the outcome)," (p. 6). Finally, for the purpose of comparing effect sizes and the influence of matching, each regression model was also estimated without propensity weights and thus included the full sample (n = 110,566).

What We Discovered

In this study we sought to measure the impact of the CTN Ascender program on a diverse set of student higher education outcomes. Overall, we can point to findings suggesting that this model is successful for students within the Texas community colleges systems where implementation has occurred. Although more years of data might be able to clarify some mixed findings in the areas of persistence and transfer, we see a strong effect for Ascender-takers in terms of a decreased financial burden and an increased likelihood of certificate attainment. Further, our findings indicate effects of this particular program on degree completion, a positive trend that could continue as some of the larger student cohorts observed (2016, 2017) move closer to culmination of their degree requirements.

Earned Certificates: Ascender students have greater odds of obtaining a Bachelor's level certificate and a higher rate of obtaining any higher education certificate. As one of the clearest findings from this analysis, our results show that exposure to the treatment (Ascender course) increases the average student's odds of obtaining a Bachelor's certificate by 1.24 (p<.001).

¹ Corequisite --An instructional strategy whereby undergraduate students are co-enrolled or concurrently enrolled in a developmental education course/intervention or Non-Course Competency Based Options (NCBO) and the entry-level freshman course/intervention of the same subject matter within the same semester. The developmental component provides support aligned directly with the learning outcomes, instruction, and assessment of the entry-level freshman course/intervention, and makes necessary adjustments as needed in order to advance students' success in the entry-level freshman course/intervention (THECB, FAQs HB 2223 Implementation).

Grants and Scholarship Funding: Ascender-takers on average are awarded a greater amount of scholarships and grants compared with their counterparts in the regular developmental education control group. To be specific, our analysis demonstrates that the treatment group receives approximately \$978 more in this type of financial award compared to those in the control group ($p < .001$). This represents nearly 30 percent of the total amount of grant/scholarship aid awarded on average per student annually in Texas (THECB, 2017), and likely provides an advantage in terms of cost to degree completion and workforce options upon graduation.

Student Loan Debt: Since Ascender-takers receive more in scholarship/grant money, it would make sense to assume that these same students would need to take out less in the form of student loans. This is in fact the case according to our results. Students in the Ascender treatment group accumulated on average one-third the amount of any type of student loan compared to matched students in the control group. Our results suggest that exposure to the treatment is associated with around \$210 less in loan accumulation for Ascender students, and indicates what is likely a lower overall financial burden for students in the treatment group ($p < .001$).

One important note for a few of the results, with more years of data and an increased span of time to complete a transfer or degree attainment we might expect to see more variation in transfers and degree attainment and therefore a clearer trend in the effects of the treatment on this important outcome.

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