

# **The Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Program: Providing Cultural Capital and College Access to Low-Income Students**

*Philip Evan Bernhardt*

## **Abstract**

This field report investigates how the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, a college-readiness system targeting populations traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education, provides students with consistent academic support while enrolled in a rigorous course of study. The report also addresses strategies AVID utilizes to engage students and families in the college preparation process as well as the various ways successful AVID programs foster a strong sense of community within schools. As a way to closely examine the depth and breadth of this well-regarded precollegiate program from a number of perspectives, four distinct but interrelated lenses are utilized. First, AVID is introduced to orient readers to its purpose, scope, and significance. Second, a brief review of research related to college access documents the barriers low-income students frequently face in the pursuit of higher education. This data further situates both the relevance and importance of the program. Third, a discussion of cultural capital draws attention to the multiple challenges low-income students encounter in school and documents the program's methods for facilitating both intellectual and affective growth. This analysis highlights how AVID's structure and philosophical orientation encourage and support the development of meaningful relationships among teachers, school staff, and program participants and their families. The article concludes by considering potential challenges administrators and teachers may confront when implementing AVID and offering practical recommendations that could benefit ALL students and their families.

Key Words: AVID, Advancement Via Individual Determination program, cultural capital, college access, low-income students, readiness, postsecondary education, engagement, barriers, supportive relationships, parents, family

## Introduction

A number of years ago a colleague and I received administrative support to establish the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program in the high school where we taught. AVID, which began at Claremont High School in San Diego, California, is a nationally recognized in-school academic support program targeting student populations historically underrepresented in four-year colleges and universities. The primary goal of the AVID program is to “motivate and prepare underachieving students from underrepresented linguistic and ethnic minority groups or low-income students of any ethnicity to perform well in high school and to seek a college education” (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Linitz, 1996, p. 14). Since the program began in 1980, AVID has extended its reach into approximately 4,800 schools in 48 states, the District of Columbia, and 16 countries/territories and serves more than 425,000 students in grades 4–12 (AVID, 2012). During the summer of 2012, more than 22,000 educators from 44 states as well as Australia, Canada, Europe, Virgin Islands, and U.S. Department of Defense schools took part in AVID professional development training. Discussing the program’s significance, New York University Professor of Education Pedro Noguera noted,

AVID creates a classroom environment where kids are encouraged to take learning seriously, and, secondly, to see themselves as scholars. I’d like to expand that notion beyond school, after school, at home. AVID also creates an environment for peer support, and for kids, that’s everything. If you can create an intellectual environment and peer support, it can have long-term effects. (Gira, 2004, p. 3)

While AVID’s central focus is on providing consistent academic support to students while enrolled in a rigorous course of study, it also serves important social purposes that embed the program within the broader school community.

AVID students are usually recommended for the program by one or more of their teachers and/or their parents. Typically, these students are then asked to interview with the school’s AVID coordinator and teachers to ensure there is a good fit and that the students are interested in and committed to the program’s mission and purpose. While students can technically enter the program at any grade level, it is most beneficial if they become involved in middle school or as they enter high school. Serving as an elective in both middle and high school,

AVID creates opportunities for students to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which their schools function, develop strong relationships with their AVID classmates, become more involved in extracurricular activities, interact with individuals from a variety of professional fields, and learn specifics about the college application, financial aid, and enrollment processes. Additionally, schools with successful AVID models work hard to foster a strong sense of community by not only providing consistent opportunities for students to interact and connect with guidance counselors, career specialists, and other relevant school staff, but also by reaching out to AVID families to encourage them to become actively involved in supporting the program's mission.

There is also a longstanding emphasis within AVID's philosophy to build meaningful partnerships with local businesses and community-based organizations interested in offering mentoring support. The AVID program is not just focused on what happens between teacher and student; rather, its aim is to create a community of stakeholders genuinely committed to increasing the number of students who enroll and persist in four-year colleges as well as creating engaging, motivational learning environments that consistently support academic and affective development and the creation of dynamic relationships.

Serving as both an AVID teacher and the program's co-coordinator in a large, diverse high school, I was charged with a variety of challenging responsibilities. The most difficult of these tasks was asking teachers to genuinely consider whether our school was providing the necessary resources and opportunities for ALL students to enroll and succeed in a rigorous course of study and adequately prepare for college. Early efforts to engage teachers in meaningful conversations related to college readiness and AVID's core set of philosophies were not met with broad public support. Discussions about the process and criteria used to recommend students to classes resulted in the most heated debates among staff members. While I knew these discussions would be sensitive due to the potential to surface deeply held beliefs and attitudes related to learning, ability grouping, and equity, at times, the contentious environment it created isolated both the program and the individuals tasked with its administration.

Few teachers within the school demonstrated interest in engaging in meaningful dialogue about which students had an advantage in gaining access to advanced-level courses, teachers' course recommendation decisions, how much involvement students should have in the course selection process, and which students were hurt most by the course placement policies and practices that were in place. In fact, there seemed to be little interest in publicly investigating how the course recommendation process in our school disadvantaged certain students while privileging others. This lack of concern had consequences for

how some students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, experienced school and prepared for life after graduation.

Looking around the school, it was not difficult to identify many talented students who seemed to have little encouragement to enroll in advanced-level courses. Consequently, a majority of these students lost out on opportunities to academically prepare themselves for college. Considering this reality in the context of empirical research delineating the relationship between enrollment in advanced courses and college attendance, it was hard not to be concerned (see Adelman, 1999; Kelley-Kemple, Proger, & Roderick, 2011; King, 1996; Saavedra, 2011). Additionally, the fact that low-income students are traditionally underrepresented in classes considered part of a college preparation course of study (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kelly, 2008; Mickelson & Everett, 2008; Oakes, 1985) suggests this normative pattern not only requires attention, but a critical analysis. Summarizing the consequences of this common dynamic, Mickelson and Heath (1999) concluded, "Tracking creates a discriminatory cycle of restricted educational opportunities for minorities that leads to diminished school achievement that exacerbates racial/ethnic and social class differences in minority and majority school outcomes" (p. 570). Over the last 25 years, an extensive body of sociological and educational research has drawn attention to the inequities associated with curricular tracking. Low-income students, however, are still highly underrepresented in courses considered part of a high quality, rigorous academic curriculum.

What follows is a close examination of the various ways AVID supports the academic and social development of students traditionally underrepresented in higher education, engages students and families in the college preparation process, and fosters a strong sense of community within schools. The report is divided into four distinct but interrelated parts. First, a brief analysis of relevant research related to college access documents the barriers low-income students frequently face in the pursuit of higher education. Second, a discussion of cultural capital within an educational context situates the various challenges students from low-income backgrounds commonly experience in school. Next, four practical examples highlight the various ways AVID provides students with access to highly valued forms of cultural capital and helps build community within the school by encouraging the development of meaningful relationships among teachers, school staff, and program participants and their families. The article concludes by considering the potential challenges administrators and teachers may confront when implementing the AVID curriculum and offering recommendations for the future.

It is important to establish that while I genuinely believe a degree from a four-year institution of higher education provides distinct economic, social,

political, and cultural advantages, I also acknowledge there are many other paths high school students can take to fulfill their dreams, desires, or needs. Additionally, I would not support nor advocate an educational policy mandating college for everyone. I do, however, believe that all students, regardless of background, need full access to the information and the types of academic and social experiences necessary to make informed decisions about life after high school.

It is also necessary to remind readers that the following discussion is situated within one particular discourse related to college readiness; thus, it is not meant to serve as a singular truth or a rigid set of prescriptions to be forced upon schools or teachers. Rather, it is my hope that the ideas presented will have the power to spark meaningful conversations about our role as educators, how we care for our students, and how we provide meaningful opportunities and spaces for students to become whoever they wish to be.

## **Contextualizing the Issue**

Although current figures on college enrollment among low-income students suggest tremendous improvements have been made during the past 30 years, college participation rates for this demographic group falls well behind those of their middle- and upper-class peers (Haycock, 2006). In almost every year between 1972 and 2008, the immediate college enrollment rates of students from low-income families trailed the rates of those from high-income families by at least 20 percentage points (NCES, 2010). In 2008, the percentage of high school completers who were enrolled in two- or four-year colleges during the October immediately following high school completion included 81% of those from families in the highest income group, 63% from middle-income families, but below 52% for those in the lowest income group (NCES, 2010). Additionally, fewer than 9% of students growing up in low-income families earns a bachelor's degree by age 24 (Haycock, 2006). Commenting on this pattern, Stanford University Sociology Professor Sean F. Reardon argues, "We have moved from a society in the 1950s and 1960s, in which race was more consequential than family income, to one today in which family income appears more determinative of educational success than race" (quoted in Tavernise, 2012, p. 1). Clearly there is a need to take a closer examination of the patterns and structures underlying these academic outcomes.

Numerous researchers have documented the relationship between enrollment in high-track classes and college readiness and attendance. Many low-income students face multiple challenges that make it difficult to adequately prepare for and gain access to college. These factors include, but are

not limited to, an inability to secure financial aid, a lack of support in the application process, and insufficient academic preparation. Conducting research for the U.S. Department of Education, Adelman (1999) found that academic preparation is the most significant predictor of college success, and enrollment in a rigorous curriculum in high school prepares students with the knowledge, skills, experiences, and academic mindset that institutions of higher education expect. Kelly (2008) found only a small proportion of students enrolled in low-track classes transition into college preparatory classes during high school and remain enrolled. Consequently, students entering high school in low-track classes are likely to also finish in low-track classes and to be academically unprepared for the expectations and rigor of college.

Studies conducted by a number of researchers, including Kelley-Kemple et al. (2011), King (1996), and Saavedra (2011), identify that enrollment in advanced-level classes improves the likelihood of attending college. Unfortunately, low-income students are traditionally underrepresented in classes considered part of a college preparation course of study (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kelly, 2008; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992) and are less likely to be programmed into a rigorous college preparation sequence (Haycock, 2006; Oakes, 1985). Moreover, many urban and rural schools serving low-income populations do not offer the courses students need to be competitive in the college admissions process, and if they offer the classes, they are likely to be taught by unqualified teachers (Haycock, 2006). This imbalance, or what Darling-Hammond (2010) refers to as the “opportunity gap” present in many schools, can be described as “the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources—expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources—that support learning at home and school” (p. 28). Writing about this gap 18 years earlier, Wheelock (1992) posited:

In many districts course enrollment patterns inside individual schools replicate this pattern—with poor, African-American, Latino, and students who are recent immigrants largely absent from courses that offer access to the higher-level knowledge needed for education success and broadened life opportunities. (p. 9)

In addition to a rigorous course of study, low-income students are more likely to attend college if they are connected to a school-based social network that not only supports academic development (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005), but also explicitly provides information about issues directly related to postsecondary education. A lack of exposure to and understanding of these particular issues serves as a major barrier for low-income students (Wimberly & Noeth,

2004). Both McDonough (1997) and Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) found that low-income students benefit from guidance in selecting classes, developing career and college aspirations, and completing the college application process. To further illuminate the significance of providing students from low-income backgrounds with a strong network of academic and social support, it is useful to consider the power, utility, and significance of cultural capital within a school context.

## School Spaces

When students enter school they are immediately situated into a complex system of stratification influencing academic, social, and emotional experiences. This educational hierarchy, which purposely separates students from one another, historically disadvantages those students from low-income populations (Apple, 1995, 2004). However, economics cannot solely be relied on to explain the disparities in educational attainment among students from different social classes. Bourdieu (1986) suggests “school success is better explained by the amount and type of cultural capital inherited from the family milieu than by measures of talent and achievement” (as cited in Swartz, 1998, pp. 76–77). Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1986) work, Lareau and Weininger (2003) articulate a useful definition of cultural capital. “Any given ‘competence’ functions as cultural capital if it enables appropriation ‘of the cultural heritage’ of a society, but is unequally distributed among its members, thereby engendering the possibility of ‘exclusive advantages’” (p. 579). From this perspective, culture is understood as a resource that confers both status and power. Culture, then, can be thought of as “a form of capital with specific laws of accumulation, exchange, and exercise” (Swartz, 1998, p. 8).

To better understand the implications of cultural capital within an educational context, it is helpful to specifically consider Bourdieu’s (1986) conception of cultural capital in its *embodied* state. This particular form of cultural capital, which differs from *institutional* and *objectified* states, is both consciously acquired and implicitly inherited through a process of socialization to certain cultural practices, norms, expectations, and assumptions. While this process of socialization takes place within the family unit, it also frequently occurs in hierarchal institutions like the school and workplace. Cultural capital in its embodied state is not easily or quickly transferrable; rather, it is acquired over time as it influences an individual’s way of thinking and acting. Accumulating cultural capital in its embodied state “requires ‘pedagogical action’: the investment of time by parents, other family members, or hired professionals to sensitize the child to cultural dispositions” (Swartz, 1998, p. 76). Hence, those students

without strong foundations of academic, social, and emotional support, both inside and outside of school, are at a disadvantage.

Before moving on, it is pertinent to briefly highlight two strands of thinking situating the ideas presented so far. First, my present understanding of cultural capital is shaped by the following: cultural capital is influenced by dominant cultural values, norms, and beliefs; cultural capital provides various social, political, economic, and academic advantages to certain members of society; and cultural capital is unequally distributed to members of society. Second, cultural capital is everywhere; it has no clearly defined boundaries, its central characteristics are dependent on context, and it cannot be measured, counted, or tightly packaged to be consistently recognizable or identifiable. Hence, what constitutes cultural capital or describing one's access to its various forms is socially constructed, influenced by context, affected by power, and shaped by the continuously shifting meanings which underlie social discourse.

To better situate AVID as a form of cultural capital, it is useful to address the different ways the program provides consistent support to students enrolled in an academically rigorous course of study, creates opportunities for program participants and their families to engage in the college preparation process, and facilitates the development of a broad network of support mechanisms, both inside and outside the classroom, to assist students and their families in the pursuit of higher education. Because family plays such an integral role in students' academic successes and chances for college attainment, it makes sense to begin the following discussion by addressing the various ways AVID reaches out to families in an effort to get them directly involved with AVID's mission.

## **AVID as a Form of Cultural Capital**

### **Fostering Meaningful Connections With Families**

Although AVID is a school-based program that draws on the support and involvement of school personnel, family involvement is a primary goal. For the typical AVID student, the kinds of information, knowledge, understandings, and experiences necessary to prepare for and successfully gain admission into a postsecondary institution are often absent at home. Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka (2011) suggest that parents of first-generation college-goers may have limited ability to support their children in making critical college decisions beyond encouraging them to value education and strive for a college degree. Researching the involvement of low socioeconomic status African American parents in the college choice process, Smith (2009) found that while there is a high level of involvement towards high school completion within these families, shifting expectations from high school to postsecondary completion requires

coordinated efforts to help parents access and understand the college preparation process as early as middle school. Because typical AVID students lack a strong college-going tradition within their families, there are large knowledge and understanding gaps that need to be addressed.

For example, take into consideration the issue of selecting academic courses. Investigating how a system of tracking functions within a school and with what effects, Rosenbaum (1976) concluded parents are often at the mercy of difficult-to-navigate structures and school norms, and as a result, do not exert much influence on placements. In her landmark study on tracking, Oakes (1985) found that the “locus of control of track decisions” in the 25 middle and high schools in which she conducted research resided with counselors and teachers together; in 22 of the 25 schools, parents did not play a role in academic placement decisions (p. 57). While Kelly (2004) found that only a small number of parents directly intervene in course placement, other research suggests that parents, particularly those with higher levels of education and higher income levels, commonly play a larger role in their child’s education than those with lesser schooling and economic resources (Gamoran, 1992; Lareau, 2003; McNeal, 1999; Useem, 1991, 1992). Hence, successful AVID programs reach out to parents and guardians to provide them with cultural capital that will empower them to support their child’s academic endeavors and create a college going culture in their home, in addition to delivering basic information on college readiness and preparation. The two following examples demonstrate AVID strategies for building meaningful relationships with students’ families.

First, throughout the school year, successful AVID programs organize workshops to educate parents and guardians about student success in middle and high school, college readiness, and postsecondary enrollment. These workshops provide a unique forum for family members to ask questions, engage in discussion, and meet other parents with students participating in AVID. These meetings also provide opportunities to learn about, for example, financial aid procedures, course taking, extracurricular activities, and how to create an enriching educational environment at home.

Although the AVID site coordinator is usually charged with arranging these gatherings, they typically involve other teachers, administrators, counselors, and other school staff directly involved with the program. The inclusion of school personnel provides a valuable opportunity for parents and guardians to meet and talk with many of the adults playing an integral role in the lives of their children, while also creating a sense of community and connection within both the program and the school. Other than back-to-school nights at the beginning of the academic year, it is rare that teachers and school staff get consistent opportunities to meet with family members to learn about students’

lives outside the classroom. This interaction, which also creates a setting for school personnel to learn more about their students lives outside of school, can provide valuable insights about how to more effectively respond to students' learning needs and nurture their strengths and interests. These workshops serve as one way AVID reaches out to parents in a concerted effort to create a functional community aimed at consistently supporting students' academic and affective development.

Second, in many AVID programs, parents or guardians are required to sign a written contract indicating that they will fully support their student's pursuit of higher education. Typically, this document outlines a commitment to help sustain student engagement and give encouragement, support AVID requirements (such as taking multiple advanced-level classes and participating in extracurricular activities), and become intimately involved in the college preparation process. This agreement serves as reminder to parents and guardians of their responsibility to actively support their children in the pursuit of postsecondary opportunities. Additionally, while there is no cost for students to be involved in AVID, this agreement creates a more formal connection between home and school by asking AVID parents and guardians to take a dedicated interest in their child's education by learning as much as they can about what is required for a high school diploma, what classes are important for college, the steps necessary to prepare for the college application process, and how to support intellectual and affective growth. During the school year, many AVID programs hold open houses as a way to directly connect to parents and provide opportunities for them to learn about the college readiness process. The AVID program pushes hard to create a stable bridge between the home and the classroom in an effort to get families more involved.

### **Developing a Web of Relationships**

Highlighting the role of cultural capital in the creation of inequity, Amanda Lewis (2006) dismisses schools as the great equalizers and views them as places that provide access and privilege for some and discomfort, constraint, and discontent for others. "Capital creates options, choices, and increased chances for good schooling" (Lewis, 2006, p. 169), and those who have it and know how to use it are at a distinct advantage. Cultural capital is a central part of the schooling experience and "provides students who have it with multiple benefits" (Lewis, 2006, p. 171). Following this logic, it is critical for schools—which Apple (2004) argues enhance the ideological dominance of certain classes, certain knowledge, and certain assumptions—to help students (especially those from lower income families) negotiate the daily expectations, experiences, and realities of school. Hence, a central tenet of the AVID curriculum is to provide

students with a strong understanding about the various ways schools function and operate. Additionally, the curriculum provides many opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships with teachers, administrators, and other school officials. This interaction enables students to develop a strong network of school-based support and a clearer understanding of school norms. In doing this, AVID helps students develop a web of relationships within the school to help foster connection, purpose, and consistent encouragement.

The AVID curriculum exposes students, many of whom will likely be the first in their family to attend college, to the types of experiences, knowledge, and language useful for navigating complex school bureaucracies and learning how schools function on a daily basis. To help accomplish this, students are taught to self-advocate, encouraged to take responsibility for their education, and exposed to various strategies for effectively collaborating and interacting with teachers, administrators, counselors, and other school personnel.

In their review of the AVID program, Stanton-Salazar, Vasquez, and Mehan (1995) found AVID students were successful because they had access to school-valued cultural knowledge and were able to establish meaningful relationships with school personnel who were both capable and committed to providing academic and social support. This support, however, was “much more than giving students the fish they need to survive; it is teaching them how to fish, whatever waters they are in” (Stanton-Salazar et al., 1995, p. 30). In their evaluation of the AVID program in San Diego Public Schools, Mehan, Hubbard, Lintz, and Villanueva (1994) reported that the success of AVID students was a direct result of teachers socializing students to both explicit and implicit institutional practices. Similarly, in an examination of the educational aspirations and anticipations among four groups of high school seniors, Lozano, Watt, and Huerta (2009) found AVID provided students with access to beneficial social and cultural capital that may have otherwise not been available to them.

More recently, Mendiola, Watt, and Huerta (2010) identified important components of the AVID program—such as Cornell note-taking, time management, organization, individual determination, group collaboration, and oral presentation skills—positively influenced the postsecondary educational progress of Mexican American college students who had participated in AVID. These particular skills, it can be argued, are not always explicitly taught in school; however, they are, in one form or another, forms of cultural capital that provide educational advantage to those individuals who develop them and understand how and when they are to be utilized.

The AVID curriculum directly addresses terminology such as grade point average, SAT, ACT, FAFSA, class change form, drop/add, AP/IB, and honor society. Strategies for organizing class notebooks, note taking, and tracking

grades and assignments become part of everyday routines. Additionally, AVID students are taught about the different academic paths they can select within each subject and what academic and social services the school provides. AVID teachers regularly meet with students to confer about course enrollment, discuss options for after graduation, and talk about the long term value and importance of education. In a multiple-case study of the retention behaviors of AVID students in eight high schools located in Texas and California, Watt, Johnson, Huerta, Mendiola, and Alkan (2008) noted that while structural issues such as course-taking and scheduling were challenging, AVID students had the proper support and scaffolding to navigate these barriers. For many low-income students, many of these concepts, processes, and procedures are unfamiliar. However, for those from middle- and upper-class households these ideas are often taught, discussed, explained, and reiterated at home and in conversations with peers. Developing a more informed understanding about how schools operate provides advantage, status, and access to numerous resources that are important for school success and college attainment.

### **Concerted Cultivation**

Lareau (2003) argues concerted cultivation is a critical factor in determining whether or not students will enter school with those forms of cultural capital necessary for success. This process of cultivation, common among many middle- and upper-class parents, actively fosters the types of “talents, skills, ideas, and opinions” (p. 238) that bestow an understanding of how to develop relationships and that influence students’ academic outcomes and social opportunities. This capital, Swartz (1998) asserts, “returns dividends in school, rewarding those with large amounts of incorporated cultural capital and penalizing those without” (p. 76). In this light, those students raised by parents who embrace concerted cultivation enter school at a clear advantage and will likely have more opportunities to access those forms of cultural capital most valued by education institutions and to experience academic success. As a way to combat the disadvantages many low-income students encounter in school, AVID teachers often take on a role aligned with Lareau’s vision of concerted cultivation. This requires teachers to engage with students on a personal level to learn about the challenges they face inside and outside of school, provide academic, social, and emotional support, and do more than is traditionally expected of teachers.

In her study of class, race, and family life, Lareau (2003) found that upper-middle-class parents directly taught their children to be persistent and assertive in putting pressure on those in positions of power in school to accommodate their academic and social needs. Conversely, working class and poor parents

expected teachers and administrators to take a leadership role and do what is best for their child with little to no involvement from home. Hence, AVID teachers serve as mentors and strive to develop strong relationships with students, assist with course planning and placement, provide consistent academic support, and create a classroom environment conducive to both social and emotional growth. This approach also includes AVID teachers taking an active role in helping students navigate the college application and financial aid process and thoughtfully prepare for life after high school graduation.

In a study of first-generation college-going seniors enrolled in AVID, Watt et al. (2008) found those students enrolled in this program felt nurtured, supported, and had numerous opportunities to develop personal bonds with the AVID teachers. Additionally, AVID created a family-like atmosphere that positively influenced student morale, self-esteem, and determination. This study also revealed that high school seniors received the majority of their information about the college application and enrollment process from their AVID teachers. AVID teachers, they argued, make a difference in both the short and long term trajectories of their students (Watt et al., 2008). Mendiola et al. (2010) reported AVID students were able to form strong relationships and bonds with their AVID classmates; they concluded this consistent interaction positively influenced students' educational experiences in both high school and college. The students participating in the study also reported feeling tremendous support and guidance from AVID teachers and believed they were academically prepared for college as a result of participating in the program.

### **The Shaping of Identity**

Henry Giroux (1983) argues cultural capital functions as a system of representations carrying meanings and ideas that directly influence how students think about and experience school. This conceptualization of cultural capital as both material and symbolic brings two important points to the forefront of this discussion. First, from this perspective, it can be suggested that, over time, cultural capital shapes how students view themselves. Thus, the formation of social groups, enrollment in certain classes, the capacity to build relationships with teachers, and even participation in afterschool activities are influenced by one's access to cultural capital. Second, those students without exposure to highly valued forms cultural capital are not often placed in classroom environments where they have opportunities to learn about the long-term importance of education. Consequently, they are not provided with the experiences or guidance necessary to prepare for postsecondary education.

To address these two specific concerns, AVID students are exposed to lessons, texts, films, and speakers focused on self-advocacy, the importance of

college, and the variety of professional opportunities available after high school. Additionally, students in the program are enrolled in an AVID elective class which meets with the same frequency as other academic classes. This helps AVID students establish a tight bond with goal-oriented peers and to develop beneficial academic dispositions. Mendiola et al. (2010) found AVID students formed meaningful relationships and bonds with other AVID students. These connections, they argued, positively influenced students' academic and social experiences in both high school and college. Likewise, Watt et al. (2008) concluded the family-like atmosphere of AVID was important to the development of students' morale, self-esteem, and determination.

Thus, the AVID curriculum provides opportunities for students to connect with an academically focused peer group, develop meaningful relationships, and develop a positive academic identity. This program, according to Mehan et al. (1994), helps to create a classroom environment where students can develop confidence and take academic risks; provides students with specific instruction in test-taking skills and the college application process; facilitates opportunities for students to create public markers of group identity (e.g., the AVID notebook, public presentations, a newspaper highlighting accomplishments); utilizes cooperative study/tutoring groups; and provides AVID students with many opportunities to visit colleges/universities.

Many low-income students slowly progress through school without a tangible understanding of the ultimate purpose of schooling or the impact education has on future social and economic mobility (Spring, 2007). As a result, many children's identities are shaped by daily struggles rather than by long-term aspirations and a well-built understanding of the choices available to them after high school. For many low-income children, because they come from families who operate with a sense of constraint and accept the actions of people in charge (Lareau, 2003), they are at a disadvantage. Consequently, they are placed in academic courses that do not provide a deep understanding of higher education, how one gets there, or how to plan for it. Martinez and Klopott (2005) argue that two important ways AVID promotes the success of low-income and minority students in terms of achievement and increased enrollment in postsecondary education is by providing a personalized learning environment specifically focused on individual needs and by creating opportunities for students to develop meaningful social networks and relationships.

"One of the best predictors of whether a child will graduate from college is whether or not his or her parents are college graduates" (Lewis, 2006, p. 8). A defining characteristic of AVID is that many of the students enrolled will be one of the first in their family to attend college. This focus on life after high school is a fundamental component of the AVID curriculum because it provides students with identity development oriented toward the future.

## Looking Toward the Future

### Potential Challenges

Three particular issues related to the possible challenges schools may encounter when trying to adopt and implement the AVID program deserve thoughtful consideration. First, allocating and increasing funds to develop AVID programs will enable schools to address the academic and social needs of those populations historically underrepresented in postsecondary education. During difficult economic times, however, it is common for the resources supporting AVID and other similar programs to be cut from district and school budgets. Therefore, it is important for teachers, administrators, and other school officials to consider how to incorporate the AVID mission into each school's goals, expose teachers to core AVID philosophies, and develop a school culture that embodies a concern for equitable educational practices.

Second, there needs to be a shift in attitude regarding student achievement. Past studies indicate that many Americans believe responsibility for their accomplishments and success primarily rests on individual efforts (Lareau, 2003). However, this conclusion deserves critical inquiry because it diminishes the socialization process that every child undergoes once they enter school. In addition, the capitalistic idea that those who work the hardest will eventually benefit has little credibility in the context of cultural capital.

Schools are not politically, socially, or economically neutral places. When children from lower income families enter into these spaces unprepared to deal with unanticipated expectations, unfair assumptions, and marginalizing norms, it places them at a clear disadvantage. This situation leads to both social and academic stratification, quietly aids in the establishment of institutionalized academic barriers, and exemplifies how schools provide opportunity and success for some but serve as a mechanism of constraint for others.

Finally, there are many schools implementing curriculums and academic programs aimed at closing the gaps between low-income students and their middle- and upper-class peers. These particular examples need to serve as both symbolic and concrete representations of reform. When AVID was initially founded in 1980 by Mary Swanson (1980), she was responding to the reality she dealt with everyday in her classroom. Her mission to provide a curriculum that provides students with direct access to highly valued knowledge, skills, and resources dramatically changed the lives of thousands of children.

The AVID program can serve as a model for schools that wish to empower students born into socioeconomic circumstances that make consistent academic success less likely. AVID serves those students who would otherwise fall through the cracks and continue to wander from grade to grade and class to

class without a well grounded understanding of why they are in school. “Children arrive at school with different socially acquired resources and generally leave with differentiated rewards” (Lewis, 2006, p. 5). In an effort to address this dilemma, the AVID curriculum teaches students how to access and utilize cultural capital so that they will have the knowledge to negotiate the day-to-day challenges of school life, succeed in an academically rigorous course of study, and prepare for college. As a result, students become keenly aware of social and academic opportunities both inside and outside of school, gravitate towards a more successful peer group, and gain a broader perspective regarding the importance of education. While AVID is not the only approach to accomplish this, it serves as both a philosophical and practical model to positively influence the academic and social lives of students traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

### **Recommendations for the Future**

This discussion leaves a number of unanswered questions about the purpose, significance, and role of AVID within school communities. For example, how can all students and their families benefit from the program’s curricular approach and philosophical commitments? Would all students benefit from the types of support mechanisms the AVID program provides? How can information about college readiness be effectively disseminated to all families, regardless of background, so they can take an active part in the college preparation process? With these questions in mind, a number of final recommendations are suggested below.

#### ***Bring “AVID Strategies” to the Larger School Community so ALL Students Benefit***

Although AVID is an extremely important and successful program, in most schools where it exists, there are a limited number of students who can participate. This limit, however, is not due to an exclusive recruiting process or an elite attitude; rather, it can be attributed to challenges and constraints associated with budgeting, scheduling, staffing, and school space. With that said, one way to counter this issue is to make sure the core concepts that have historically defined the AVID program—such as its focus on organizational and study skills, enrichment and motivational activities, and college preparation—become more central to the overall student experience.

For example, most content area teachers just expect students to enter their classes with a clear understanding of how to be academically prepared, study for tests, and develop an effective system for taking notes. AVID teachers, however, explicitly teach these skills and operate under the assumption that these are lifelong capabilities that need to be taught and can always be further honed.

Likewise, AVID students have consistent opportunities throughout the school year and summer to learn about the various processes associated with the college admission process. Although providing this information is a responsibility that has been traditionally assigned to guidance counselors, these individuals, no matter how dedicated they are, just do not have the time to fully address all the questions, concerns, misconceptions, and needs of the large student loads they are typically assigned (Aydın, Bryan, & Duys, 2012).

Additionally, AVID is focused on the development of the whole child, whereas educators, particularly those at the high school level, are expected to spend the majority of their time teaching and transmitting content knowledge and understanding. While a strong emphasis on content is certainly important and central to the work of teachers, students are likely to improve their performance and be more engaged if more class time is spent on fostering study skills, building academic confidence, discussing postsecondary options and trajectories, and collaborating with professionals from the field to reinforce what is being taught and discussed in the classroom. All students would benefit from the types of support AVID provides; integrating a number of AVID's core strategies into a schoolwide plan of action would yield tremendous benefits for all students and teachers.

#### *Create a Climate of College Readiness for ALL Students*

While the primary goal of AVID is to increase the number of students who enroll in and persist in four-year colleges, this is not typically an explicit goal of most middle or high schools, especially those serving large populations of low-income and minority students. When a student enters AVID, college attainment becomes a central part of the discourse; it becomes part of the lexicon. Unfortunately, for many students, this narrative does not continue once they leave the AVID classroom. There is this assumption among many teachers that "others" are responsible for providing students with critical information about the college readiness and preparation process. However, if students, particularly those from lower income backgrounds, are not consistently engaged with this process during school hours, many are unlikely to receive it at home. One way to address this dilemma is to make college attainment a consistent message that all students are exposed to on a daily basis. Creating a school community that embodies a college-going culture may not, by itself, dramatically alter postsecondary matriculation rates; nonetheless, it is an immensely important part of disrupting current norms within the American education system.

#### *Provide Ongoing College Readiness Workshops for ALL Families*

Similar to the idea of providing all students with consistent access to the types of research-based pedagogical and college preparation strategies utilized

within the AVID curriculum, it makes sense for school-based AVID programs to work closely with career services staff, guidance counselors, and community organizations to expand their reach and engage family members of all the students within a school. Engaging family members of AVID students, particularly parents and guardians, is a core element of the program's philosophy, and over the years this approach has helped create strong connections between home life and the classroom. It would be beneficial if this strategy were implemented at the school level to promote the development of a college-going culture and increase parental involvement. Community is a dynamic that involves many moving parts. AVID's model of engaging families in an effort to build relationships with school staff, support achievement, and prepare students for postsecondary education starting as early as elementary or middle school are both attainable and admirable goals.

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Philip Evan Bernhardt was a secondary social studies teacher for eight years. Currently he is an assistant professor and department chair of Secondary Education at the Metropolitan State University of Denver. His research interests include college readiness and access, anti-oppressive education, mentoring preservice teachers, autobiographical inquiry, and the relationships between learning, equity, and school. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Philip Bernhardt, 1201 5th Street, Campus Box #21, Denver, CO 80204 or email [pbernhar@msudenver.edu](mailto:pbernhar@msudenver.edu)