



# 2014 AHE COMPENDIUM

Fall 2014

University of Houston-Downtown



The story of **the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD)** is part of a compendium which contains case studies of six colleges and universities from across the United States that implemented AVID for Higher Education (AHE). Whether implemented as a First-Year Seminar course or integrated with an existing tutoring or mentoring program, AHE is making a positive difference in student learning. *Read more . . .*

# UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON- DOWNTOWN

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Dr. Chris Birchak**, Dean of University College; Professor of English

**Dr. Greg Dement**, Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence

**Dr. Mari Nicholson-Preuss**, Director of the Honors Program

**Dr. Gene Preuss**, Special Assistant to the President; Associate Professor of History

**Dr. Bill Waller**, Associate Dean of University College, First Year Experience; Professor of Mathematical Sciences

**Aracely Garcia**, AVID student mentor/tutor

**Julie Ibarra-Flores**, AVID student mentor/tutor

**Michellee Gutierrez**, AVID student mentor/tutor

## CAMPUS PROFILE & INFORMATION

**Type of Institution:** Public, 4-year university

**Total Enrollment:** 13,757 students

### Student Population:

- Undergraduates, age 24 or below: 51%
- Underrepresented minority: 64%
- Federal aid recipients: 47%
- Pell-eligible first-time student: 65%

**AHE System:** Student Success Initiative (SSI)

**AHE Campus Timeline:** 4th year (began in 2010)

**Source(s) of Funding:** Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB); Institutional; Title V Grant

**Professional Development—Administrators, Faculty, Staff, Tutors:** 349

**Summer Institute Attendance:** 3 years

## DEVELOPING THE PLAN FOR FRESHMEN

The University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) was, in 2010, one of the pilot institutions participating in AVID for Higher Education (AHE). The UHD team developed a “Freshman Retention and Graduation Plan” which served as a focal document in seeking institutional support for a coordinated and robust first-year experience. Aligned with the institution’s strategic plan and honed in additional workshops and institutes, the plan became a guide for collaborative transformation and for use in budget negotiations. A multi-pronged, yet silo-based group of existing initiatives in support of freshmen students evolved into a more cohesive and responsive program to foster university-wide attention on entering new students. Many of the items on the original plan were fulfilled, including more than doubling the number of student advisors and appointing an Associate Dean of First-Year Experience. Additionally, the 2014 implementation of the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence enhanced opportunities for professional development. Membership in AHE reinforced the university’s efforts to build a viable framework for student success.

## EXPANDING THE INFLUENCE OF AVID

Challenges in implementing AVID/AHE included financial exigencies, university perceptions of secondary educational initiatives, and the schedules and existing commitments of team members. Public universities in Texas and elsewhere have faced severe budget cutbacks. Thus, programs within institutions are vying for limited resources. Aligning selected AVID components with existing programs or establishing internal partnerships has helped the university to leverage available resources. Initially, some resistance to AVID/AHE arose because AVID originated in the secondary rather than postsecondary education system. Visiting consultants who spoke the language of higher education and whose presentations and articles were research-based tended to alleviate concerns of faculty, administrators and staff. Getting the institutional team together on a regular basis to discuss AVID-specific issues remains challenging, as each member balances several leadership roles. Yet, they interact frequently to address student learning and success as a university-wide commitment, which expands the influence of AVID.

Being a commuter campus within a large metropolitan city complicates UHD's attempts to foster closer ties within the student population and also between students and faculty. Typically, students are balancing family, work, and school commitments. Therefore, they spend little time on campus except when they are in the classroom. This university faces challenges in providing collaborative learning experiences, which increase student success; out-of-class activities that foster team building and leadership skills; and faculty/student interactions. Nevertheless, AVID strategies are assisting in creating a sense of community as students transition into and within the university. Moreover, these interactions have the potential to increase interest in learning inside and outside of the classroom.

University College, one of five colleges on campus, coordinates AHE for the institution. Major components of University College include:

- 1) two degree programs (Bachelor of Science with a major in Interdisciplinary Studies and the Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences with a major in Applied Administration);
- 2) Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence;
- 3) Talent Search;
- 4) Upward Bound;
- 5) Project STAR (Student Transition and Retention): Title V; and
- 6) Learning Connection which houses Supplemental Instruction, the AVID Center, and the Honors Program.

The co-liaisons are Dr. Chris Birchak, Dean of University College and a professor of English, and Dr. Bill Waller, University College Associate Dean for First-Year Experience and a mathematical sciences professor. The AVID site team members include faculty as well as administrators and professional staff representing both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.

### DEVELOPING THE AVID COHORT

In the planning year (2010), several experienced AHE consultants guided university personnel in preparing for welcoming the first AVID cohort on campus in Fall

2011. First, the AVID site team—composed of UHD faculty, administrators, and professional staff—addressed the collaboration of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs through a professional development session on increasing the effectiveness of Freshman Orientation. The prior partnerships between these two units, the expertise of the AVID consultants, and the high quality of the session materials led to a rich environment for discussion and planning. With each passing year, UHD personnel appreciated the option to customize the standard AVID workshops to meet the institution's needs.

For the AVID cohort, UHD identified sections of an existing one-credit-hour College Success Program (CSP) course that was optional for freshmen. Originally, it introduced entering freshmen to baccalaureate study, and the expectations of the university were for students to develop strategies to achieve personal and academic success. These included motivation, study skills, time management, and test anxiety. Additional topics covered were: a.) university resources, policies, and procedures; b.) developing intellectual skills through active learning; c.) balancing curricular and co-curricular activities; and d.) educational and professional goal-setting. AVID professional development sessions led to a redesign of the designated CSP sections as well as to workshops for student tutors.

A two-year evaluation of 15 institutions of higher education was conducted in 2013 by the Gibson Consulting Group, Inc., as contracted by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to examine AVID program effectiveness. Among the findings, AHE students at UHD demonstrated the greatest success.

- **12%** more likely to persist from Fall 2012 to Spring 2013
- Overall cumulative GPAs were significantly higher over Fall 2011, Spring 2012, and Fall 2012 semesters (i.e., **.74 GPA units higher** than comparison group)
- Higher Fall 2012 GPAs (**.50 units higher** than comparison group)
- Statistically faster credit accumulation rates at **+18%**

Beginning in Fall 2014, UHD will require a three-credit-hour Freshman Seminar as part of the core curriculum, thus eliminating the one-credit-hour CSP course that was optional. UHD personnel participated in an AHE train-the-trainer workshop in preparation for leading a four-part professional development series for the faculty teaching these seminars. The workshop enabled the modeling of best practices and provided a repository of pedagogical resources to guide colleagues in teaching strategies. These strategies were used to enhance the learning in these content-based seminars which supported student engagement and success.

### OFFERING PEER MENTORING & TUTORING

In Spring 2012, UHD implemented an innovative student mentor/tutor program as part of its institutional commitment to AHE. Designed to complement and expand upon the services offered by an existing Supplemental Instruction program, the AVID mentors/tutors focused on promoting student success using WICOR<sup>1</sup> strategies. Student mentors/tutors kept regular office hours at a designated AVID campus office called the Learning Connection and offered one-on-one assistance in areas such as time management, goal setting, Cornell Notes, and reading for comprehension. Many of the students leveraging these services were enrolled in AHE-infused core classes or involved in University College's student success programs. Since its inception, the AVID mentor/tutor program has evolved to serve the needs of students both inside and outside the classroom. The creativity and flexibility of the students who have served as mentor/tutors has been an essential part of the program's success.

Aracely Garcia was the first student mentor/tutor recruited to the program. As the senior mentor/tutor, she has played a key role in shaping how the program serves her peers. Aracely explains,

*"At first, the idea of being part of a completely new program seemed a bit overwhelming, but as I became more comfortable using the AVID strategies as a student, my job as a tutor made more sense. By applying these skills in my own classes, it became much easier to teach these strategies to the students I was helping. Every training session that we've had has increased my confidence and belief that AVID offers the*

*essentials necessary for being a successful student from start to finish. For three years as an AVID mentor, I've watched our program and our responsibilities expand. I feel that we've really made a difference."*

Beginning in Fall 2012, the roles of mentors and tutors expanded beyond the Learning Center to a small number of classes in an effort to provide more content-specific assistance and to increase student awareness of the program. Mentors/tutors attended each class session, regularly made short presentations on study skills, assisted with collaborative classroom activities, and facilitated after-class content review sessions using the Socratic model. Unlike a student supplemental instructor, the role of the AVID mentor/tutor was designed to be more proactive in terms of student success skills as well as content mastery. In addition, these mentors/tutors have assisted with survey-level history and student-success courses.

The AVID sections of the CSP course focused proactively on entering freshmen, including conditionally admitted students. Using the AVID seminar model and suggested content, students enrolled in the course used WICOR strategies to develop good study habits and learn about the university's academic resources. For three semesters, Julie Ibarra-Flores served as the designated mentor/tutor for an AVID section of the CSP course. She observes,

*"As a mentor, I was able to share my own experiences as a first-generation college student. Many students were surprised to learn that high school and college life would be very different, which is why I made it my mission to provide these students with the information that I wish I would have been given before I started on my college journey. A lot of these students still contact me whenever they have a question or need help because they know that I will lead them in the right direction. We taught the students how to ask the right kinds of questions and where to find the resources that could help them if they needed help with classes or were feeling overwhelmed."*

Within the University College, the mentors/tutors have embraced the opportunity to participate in a number of other student success initiatives. Mentors/tutors helped facilitate the “Gator Guides”<sup>2</sup> peer communicators collaboration between the Student Transition and Retention (STAR) Program: Title V, and the First Year Honor Society. The mentors/tutors assisted with training the peer communicators and prepared the Learning-and-Study-Strategies-Inventory-based (LASSI-based) workshops that the Gator Guides promoted. Workshops on both LASSI and AVID skills will be available on the YouTube website as well as in face-to-face formats. Thus, UHD students have the opportunity to acquire the set of skills and habits—including resiliency—that will prepare them for the global economy.

### **ASSISTING ENTERING FRESHMEN**

Additionally, each summer the mentors/tutors have assisted with the Freshman Summer Success Program and Freshman Convocation, including the common reader program. Many of the students who interact with mentors/tutors during the summer programs seek out assistance from the same mentors/tutors throughout the school year. The regular training provided by AHE consultants in areas such as Socratic questioning has increased the mentors’/tutors’ confidence and ability to make use of AVID strategies in a variety of settings, ranging from helping a student select classes to facilitating a group study session. For Michellee Gutierrez, AVID training has provided a unique opportunity for pre-professional development as an education major. She notes,

*“I think that my experience with AVID, especially the tutoring workshops, has helped me prepare for my student teaching. I can see myself using AVID strategies, such as quick writes, in my own classroom. I also feel like I’ve gotten a head start in professional development by becoming more familiar with Costa’s Levels of Questions and learning how to use the different types of questions with students to help them access what they know and put into words what they need to know.”*

Given the small size of the program, much of its character is derived from the students employed as trained mentors/tutors. One of the mentor’s/tutor’s ongoing projects has been the creation of short, informative films focused on student success topics. The lighthearted films have showcased key AVID strategies along with the creative talents of the mentors/tutors. For example, “Note Taking Bad”<sup>3</sup> provides an overview of the Cornell note-taking process through a parody of the popular television series *Breaking Bad*. Mentors/tutors post the videos to the UHD AVID Facebook page to promote their services, upcoming workshops, and opportunities for students to become more involved on campus.

The AVID mentor/tutor program continues to evolve as an independent and complementary peer-led resource. It has proven adaptable to the needs of specific courses and other student-success initiatives within University College. The program also serves as a resource for students needing one-on-one and small group instruction in student success skills.

### **MOTIVATING STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM**

AHE provides faculty with a wealth of evidence-based strategies that can be used to engage students in the classroom. The key to harnessing the power of all these strategies is to focus on their adaptation to specific disciplines. The greatest value derived from the onsite AHE workshops and training is the interactive demonstration of strategies as applied to a specific discipline. Moreover, opportunities during AVID training to collaborate with other faculty members in adapting the strategies are crucial. Dr. Greg Dement, director of the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence, explains that “attempting to implement all the methods that AVID promotes can become overwhelming. Thus, it is important to take advantage of opportunities during AVID sessions to dialogue about the best approaches for a given discipline or format.”

A constant concern and frustration for faculty is student motivation. Faculty often ponder how it is possible to overcome apathy or cynicism and get students engaged in learning, or possibly even *excited* about their education. Thus, one of the strengths of AVID faculty development is that it aligns with

research on motivation. According to research, motivation depends upon four key factors: 1) the content and learning activities must be purposeful and meaningful; 2) students must have autonomy and control of their learning; 3) students must be given the opportunity to develop mastery and competence; and 4) the learning environment must be respectful and inclusive. The WICOR model for student engagement and the AVID strategies naturally incorporate these four key factors. The AVID methodology automatically integrates best practices into providing student motivation.

Dr. Gene Preuss, Associate Professor of History, describes the limited understanding university faculty may have about the way students are learning materials at the high school level, about what their high school courses expected of them, and about the types of assignments students are used to performing. He believes that this understanding is particularly important when considering that there is very little opportunity for aligning teaching expectations and methods among instructors at the college/university versus the public high school levels. He observes that AVID helps to bridge this gap by smoothing the transition from secondary to postsecondary education.

First, it provides ideas about motivating students, using pedagogically-sound theories and practices, in ways that are already familiar to students. From a student's perspective, one of the challenges faced when transitioning to college/university is the difference in teaching methods on university campuses versus those in high school. In secondary classrooms, teachers provide varied learning activities and lessons as well as numerous opportunities to assess student work. At the college and university level, a different approach usually exists. Many subjects are still taught by lecture, and tests and assignments are reduced in number. Thus, when students come to college/university, they may have far fewer opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities, and they may be expected to complete unfamiliar types of assignments.

As university faculty become more experienced with the materials students are exposed to in high school and how they learn and are taught, alignment between secondary and postsecondary education evolves. Often the assumption is that students should bring a concept or technique they "should have learned in high school"

to the university classroom. This imagined portability of knowledge and skills may be based on inaccurate assumptions. Through AVID training, university faculty get better insight into what they can reasonably expect from entering freshmen. Therefore, faculty can craft more successful classroom and learning environments. Dr. Preuss suggests that one of the important issues is that college/university faculty are, for the most part, trained to be content specialists rather than teachers. He says,

*"We are professional historians, mathematicians, literature specialists, and psychologists; nevertheless, we don't necessarily understand the latest research on how students learn, the most effective teaching techniques, nor the best ways of assessing learning. AVID helps faculty members learn new ways of teaching that foster increased learning."*

## SUPPORTING THE LOOP OF IMPROVEMENT

Dr. Bill Waller, Professor of Mathematical Sciences, elaborates on mastery and competence. He notes that another positive aspect of the AVID strategies is they support the ongoing loop of improvement—people get better at things through practice, feedback, and reflection. This is an important lesson for students to internalize, and AVID strategies provide an opportunities to reinforce that lesson in very concrete ways. In his own words, Dr. Waller explains his experiences with AVID:

*"The last thing I want to say about AVID faculty development relates to the emphasis on having faculty actively model the strategies as part of the training. Sometimes faculty chafe a bit at this part of the training, because it's time consuming and some faculty feel a written or verbal description of an activity should suffice for experienced teachers."*

*My strong advice is to be patient and take advantage of the opportunity—it really is very important to have practiced the strategies before taking them into the classroom. First, this gives you a much better sense of which strategies you may want to try to implement and what benefits or complications to expect. There is no way a written description can convey the power of*

*many of these strategies. And speaking from experience, you are going to need practice implementing many of the strategies—the first time you try one may be chaotic in the best of circumstances. But as I mentioned earlier, you will get better at it—through practice, feedback, and reflection!”*

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>**WICOR** - **W**riting, **I**nquiry, **C**ollaboration, **O**rganization, and **R**eading

<sup>2</sup>**Gator Guides** - Name is derived from UHD’s location . . . “we are situated along the banks of Buffalo Bayou in the midst of downtown Houston, so the University of Houston-Downtown highlights its resident ‘Gators.’”

<sup>3</sup>“Note Taking Bad” video clip:

<http://thecuriousnarragator.wordpress.com/2014/02/07/on-cornell-note-taking-breaking-bad-spoof/>

### **Noteworthy Facts & Information about UHD**

- One of the three public four-year institutions in the greater Houston metropolitan area which serves a majority-minority population.
- One of four freestanding, self-administered institutions within the University of Houston System.
- More than 61% of students receive some form of need-based, federal financial aid.
- Demographics: 42% Hispanic; 26% African American; 19% Anglo; and 10% Asian/Pacific Islander
- Enrollment has increased from 9,704 in 2000-2001 to 13,757 students in Fall 2013, representing an increase of 42%, which is a growth rate highest among the three local four-year public universities (University of Houston, Texas Southern University, and UHD)
- Size of the annual graduating class increased by 92.3% (from 1,280 in 2000–01 to 2,462 in 2012–13)
- Mainly a transfer institution: Approximately 1,000 to 1,200 freshman enter annually.
- Approximately two-thirds of the college enrollment are first-generation college students.