

Initial Evaluation Findings:

Central Texas College Access and Persistence Programs

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May 31, 2012



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This report was prepared with funds provided from E3 Alliance and TG (OSP# 201102977-001) to the Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources at the University of Texas at Austin. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not represent the positions of the funding agencies or The University.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to thank Kristin Boyer and Jacob Fraire at TG; Hannah Gourgey and Susan Dawson at E3 Alliance; Lisa Fielder at College Forward; Barry Aidman at Breakthrough Austin; and Sandy Alcalá at Con Mi MADRE. This research would not be possible without their generous contributions of time, information, and access.

In addition, the authors thank the support staff at the Ray Marshall Center, Karen White, Susie Riley, and Alanna Burney for their assistance with this project.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Austin College Access Network (ACAN) was formed with the intent of broadening connections within and between college access and persistence programs in the region. The network includes a number of non-profit and higher education-based partners. Three community-based organizations in ACAN provide comprehensive college access services and continuing college persistence support — College Forward, Con Mi MADRE, and Breakthrough Austin. The Ray Marshall Center is conducting a multi-pronged evaluation for the Austin College Access Network (ACAN), focusing primarily on the three comprehensive service providers.

Building on a scan of definitions from the National College Access Network, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, TG, and others, the ACAN members collaborated on the development of the following terminology for the evaluation effort:

College Access is a focus on motivating and preparing middle/high school students and families to enter postsecondary education by addressing a range of academic, financial, social, and informational skills necessary to participate in college.

College Access Programs typically represent a range of goals and strategies customized for students based on their needs and interests. Program components commonly include regular meetings, test preparation, application assistance, financial aid assistance, counseling and mentoring, college visits, information on college readiness, academic advising, and tutoring.

College Persistence is a collection of behaviors and motivations students exhibit for continuing their education until completion of a degree, certificate, or other credential.

College Persistence Programs provide support to college students across a range of academic, financial, social, and informational needs to improve student engagement and completion. Persistence programs help students to address cultural and socio-economic barriers and needs, develop self-advocacy skills, and empower students to succeed.

The members of the Austin College Access Network incorporate a number of best practices in college access and persistence services: they have strong relationships with their students; they actively work to involve parents and maintain good communications with families; they partner with schools at the secondary and postsecondary level; they take

students to visit colleges; and they emphasize college readiness, including academic preparation, financial aid applications, and the transmission of “college knowledge” – the cultural and social norms of postsecondary education. The challenge for the ACAN organizations and the Central Texas region is how to expand and improve these services to get more students through college, as well as to identify approaches that work for a larger segment of students.

This report provides a process summary of the literature reviewed and the results of the service and demographic mapping conducted for this project. It draws on program documents and interviews with key leaders in ACAN member organizations to create profiles of three comprehensive college access and persistence programs in Central Texas, which are the focus of forthcoming outcome and impact analyses. The report’s conclusion highlights schools and target populations that are not being well-served by current college access and persistence efforts in the region. Recommendations for better targeting community resources and services at those identified gaps focus on best practices from the literature and lessons learned from ACAN member organizations.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing awareness in the United States that college access, persistence, and completion are essential to the nation's long-term economic health. President Obama has called for the U.S. to once again have the highest proportion of students graduating from college in the world by 2020. He has also urged that all Americans be prepared to enroll in at least one year of higher education or job training to better prepare for the 21st century economy ("*Education*", 2012). Organizations around the country have reached similar conclusions. In 2009 the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation set a goal that "80% of students graduate from high school prepared for college" (*College Ready*, p. 3), specifically focusing on helping low-income and minority students to reach that goal. The foundation estimates that currently only one-third of high school graduates are college-ready.

The Lumina Foundation's Big Goal 2025 is to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60%, from a 2010 estimate of approximately 38% (*A Stronger*, 2012, p. 2). The majority of occupational growth over the next decade is forecast to be in positions requiring some form of postsecondary credential (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Moreover, the returns to education are enormous, with lifetime earnings of individuals with a bachelor's degree almost \$1 million more than the earnings of individuals with a high school diploma (Carnevale et al., 2011, p.3).

Texas and the Austin region in particular have been focused on the college access and persistence challenge for a number of years. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) launched the state's *Closing the Gaps* strategic initiative in 2000. By 2015, the state hopes to increase college enrollment by 630,000 students annually and to increase completion by 210,000 graduates annually, over the 2000 baseline. Within each of those goals, the state established targets for specific strategies, pathways, and populations, including Black and Hispanic students – students from backgrounds with historically lower levels of participation in postsecondary education. In the first ten years of the initiative, Texas added 486,000 more college students – well above the pace needed to meet the participation goal. In that same time period, the state awarded 60,369 more associate and bachelor's degrees, reaching 176,604 - slightly above the 2010 target for the completion goal. The *Closing the Gaps* progress report noted, however, that the Hispanic participation rate was well below target in 2010. As a result, "another 230,917 Hispanic students must enroll in 2015 to meet that year's target, a 51.9% increase over fall 2010's enrollment" (2011, p. 13).

The Austin region has established its own college participation goals to improve its competitive advantage, in the Austin Chamber of Commerce's 20,010 by 2010 initiative and *The Plan for 2015*. By 2015, the Chamber and its partners aim to raise direct-to-college enrollment by local graduates to 70 percent and improve certificate or degree completion by 50 percent ("Plan", 2012). The Chamber spearheads a number of projects to support college enrollment growth, including organizing Financial Aid Saturdays and supporting the development and distribution of software for school counselors linking to information on each student's financial aid and Texas Common Application status. The Chamber has also been a primary funder of research on college transitions, particularly the annual Senior Survey conducted by the Ray Marshall Center's Central Texas Student Futures Project. Eleven school districts across Travis, Hays, Williamson, and Bastrop Counties are currently participating in the project. For the Class of 2010 high school graduates, the share enrolling directly in college for the Fall 2010 semester was 61% (*Initial*, 2011, p.1).

Complete College America highlights the core barrier to achieving these goals: "Just over half of students who start 4-year bachelor's degree programs full-time finish in six years, and fewer than three out of ten students who start at community colleges full-time graduate with an associate degree in three years" (*Completion*", 2012). Those students who enroll in college part-time are even less likely to graduate. The situation is no different in Texas, where Black and Hispanic students were less likely to persist and complete postsecondary programs based on six-year graduation rates from the Fall 2004 cohort, with just 52.3% and 64.8%, respectively, graduating by 2010 (p. 23-24).

One issue in improving college completion numbers is that too few students graduate from high school ready to succeed in college. The E3 Alliance, the P-16 Council for Central Texas, reports that "only about 43% of Central Texas graduates are shown to be 'college ready', or able to take college entry courses without any developmental (remedial) work,...based on scores from the TAKS, ACT, or SAT tests" (The Blueprint, 2009, p. 24). In Goal 3 of its Blueprint for Educational Change, E3 identifies a number of strategies for addressing this barrier, including efforts to "align and expand programs to simplify high school to college transitions and develop stronger articulation with higher education" (p. 27).

TG, a public non-profit focused on college access and financial aid services, has invested more than \$35 million since 2005 to support non-profits, colleges and universities in the implementation and growth of programs targeted at addressing college access and persistence barriers. Importantly, TG has also invested in research and program evaluations. TG funded research through the Ray Marshall Center's Student Futures Project

to identify multivariate factors in college enrollment and persistence, with separate analyses for first-generation and minority students. The evaluation reported here is an outgrowth of all those investments, presenting initial findings from an evaluation of community-based college access and persistence programs in Austin, Texas.

Central Texas College Access and Persistence Programs Evaluation

The Austin College Access Network (ACAN) includes a number of non-profit and higher education-based partners. Three community-based organizations in ACAN—College Forward, Con Mi MADRE, and Breakthrough Austin— provide comprehensive college access services and continuing college persistence support. TG has been a significant funder of efforts in the region, having supported ACAN and all three of the comprehensive service providers.

The Austin College Access Network pursued TG funding to support regional capacity building for college access and persistence programs. The group chose to focus on building research and evaluation capacity to measure regional outcomes and identify opportunities and issues in service delivery. The Ray Marshall Center is conducting the multi-pronged evaluation, which includes process, outcome, and impact analyses.

This report provides a process summary of the literature reviewed and the results of the service and demographic mapping conducted for this project. It draws on program documents and interviews with key leaders in ACAN member organizations to create profiles of three comprehensive college access and persistence programs in Central Texas. These programs are the focus of forthcoming outcome and impact analyses. The report's conclusion highlights schools and target populations that are not being well-served by current college access and persistence efforts in the region. Recommendations for better targeting community resources and services at those identified gaps focus on best practices from the literature and lessons learned from ACAN member organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON COLLEGE ACCESS AND PERSISTENCE

At the start of the evaluation, researchers with the Ray Marshall Center worked with ACAN members to standardize definitions of college access and persistence services across organizations. This served multiple purposes to improve communication between and coordination among members and to structure the evaluation's information gathering and analysis stages. Building on a scan of definitions from the National College Access Network, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, TG, and others, the ACAN members collaborated on the development of the following terminology:

College Access is a focus on motivating and preparing middle/high school students and families to enter postsecondary education by addressing a range of academic, financial, social, and informational skills necessary to participate in college.

College Access Programs typically represent a range of goals and strategies customized for students based on their needs and interests. Program components commonly include regular meetings, test preparation, application assistance, financial aid assistance, counseling and mentoring, college visits, information on college readiness, academic advising, and tutoring.

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College Persistence Programs provide support to college students across a range of academic, financial, social, and informational needs to improve student engagement and completion. Persistence programs help students to address cultural and socio-economic barriers and needs, develop self-advocacy skills, and empower students to succeed.

With these definitions in mind, the review of the literature proceeded along multiple lines of inquiry. The following discussion examines the literature on college access and persistence barriers and solutions in four key skills: academic, financial, social, and informational. Lessons learned and best practices recommendations were culled from the research on these topics and used as a benchmark for examining the Austin college access and persistence program environment.

Barriers to College Access and Persistence

The research literature identifies a number of barriers to access and completion, including lack of academic preparation, lack of study skills, poor social or other non-academic connections to the college, lack of family support, and the lack of “college knowledge” - the steps, processes, and timing of activities required to enroll in college and succeed (Conley, 2005; Vargas, 2004; Nagaoka, et al., 2009; Horn and Ramos, n.d.).

A study of college access and persistence efforts in Indiana added to a growing body of research that “although financial issues generally play the largest role in decisions to enter a college or university, primarily non-academic factors play a particularly significant role in student decisions to stay in school” (Spradlin et. al, 2010a, p. 1). Non-academic factors include: financial factors such as non-tuition expenses and the consequences of part-time employment; psychological factors such as feeling out of place on campus and lack of family support/additional family responsibilities; and institutional factors such as the availability of strategies to increase retention at targeted groups of students. For example, mentoring appears to have a larger retention benefit for African-American students than others. Other strategies include transition programs, learning communities, faculty/student interactions, and advising. The researchers with the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy noted that “up to 75 percent of all dropout decisions are non-academic in nature” (Spradlin et al., 2010b, p. vii).

Researchers with the *St. Louis College Access Pipeline Project* identified systematic barriers to college access, including a lack of sufficient support services for low-income students, uneven distribution of college access services, and unreliable and inconsistent data (*Beyond, 2009, p. 5*). Similar barriers exist in Central Texas, despite significant investments and a relatively strong network of programming at the institutional and community levels. One of the purposes of the Austin College Access Network is to increase community awareness of college access and persistence programs in the region. The Austin region is also fortunate to draw upon the high quality of education data systems in Texas, including the Central Texas Student Futures Project database, to track student outcomes and pathways over time. This initial evaluation report will synthesize the literature and current standing of the Austin’s college access and persistence efforts and identify opportunities to improve the distribution of college access and persistence services.

Improving College Access and Persistence

In the 2011 *Closing the Gaps Progress Report*, the THECB notes that “one way to boost enrollments to meet participation targets is to increase persistence rates, particularly after the first and second years of enrollment” (p.11). As a report by Lumina emphasizes, “most communities offer a wealth of college access and success-related supports through schools, higher education institutions, and community-based programs. Yet program providers and students often lack a comprehensive knowledge of the variety and depth of college-related programs available in their areas” (Dougherty, et al., 2009, p. 11). Despite significant investments by the state and other funders, too few students are connecting with the college access and persistence services they need.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has outlined numerous strategies for closing the gaps in participation and success. Particularly relevant to the focus of the ACAN evaluation are:

- Ensure that students receive the high school courses needed to succeed in higher education and the workforce
- Ensure that all students and their parents understand the benefits of higher education and what is necessary to prepare academically and financially for college
- Focus on efforts to make college and university enrollment and graduation reflect the population of Texas
- Make partnerships and collaborations between the business community and higher education institutions as part of the culture of these organizations. (*Closing the Gaps* p. 9-10, 12-13). The state’s failure to identify community-based organizations as key collaborators was a significant oversight. Community-based organizations have the established relationships with students that research shows make a difference long-term in college participation and completion.

The research literature has documented a number of characteristics of successful college access and persistence programs. “Participation in pre-college outreach programs is significantly and positively linked with college access and persistence for low-income students” (Jager-Hyman, 2004, p. 8). Programs that begin working with students early, those that coordinate with other school reform efforts, and that provide financial aid and mentorship are often more successful than programs that do not contain these elements. Programs may be primarily school-led (in or by secondary as well as postsecondary

institutions) or delivered by non-profit, community-based organizations. Both types of programs emphasize similar elements, though school-based programs may reach a larger portion of the target population. Strong relationships between program staff, students, and their parents are consistently identified as a key characteristic of strong programs. Other key components include transfer of college knowledge – how and when to apply, what tests to take, study skills and academic readiness, financial aid knowledge, getting students accustomed to college life, and building self-confidence.

In a study of GEAR UP and Upward Bound programs, Gullatt and Jan (2003) identify three common types of pre-collegiate academic development programming: informational outreach, career-based outreach, and academic support (p. 16). The study examined ten “practices identified by researchers as key components of successful academic development programs: high standards for program students and staff, personalized attention for students, adult role models, peer support, k-12/program integration, strategically timed interventions, long-term investment in students, school/social bridge for students, scholarship assistance, and evaluation designs that contribute results to interventions” (Gullatt and Jan, 2003, p. 10-11).

New Approaches to Improving College Access, Persistence, and Success examines three postsecondary opportunity programs, programs satisfying three conditions: having dedicated funds available only to students enrolled in the program to provide full or partial financial assistance for postsecondary education expenses; being need-based or a combination of need- and merit-based, or universally accessible; and providing or facilitating non-monetary benefits or leveraging other programs providing these benefits, including at least one of the following: pre-collegiate support services, college knowledge, guaranteed enrollment at a postsecondary institution, or college support services (Vaade et al., 2010, p. 6). The authors recommend that even successful programs “should consistently reflect on their current practices as well as what changes can be made to strengthen their programs; increase efficiency and avoid redundancy by leveraging existing services and agencies when appropriate, and consider innovative models” (Vaade et al., 2010, p. 17).

In a study of Missouri’s college access pipeline, Jones and Palazzo (2009) identify several policy recommendations, including the need to make college costs more transparent and to market college attendance directly to under-represented students (p. 29). The message about early engagement with students was also noted in research on college access efforts in St. Louis. Program staff there suggested that “college access programs should have a perspective that extends from grade 6 through the successful completion of a postsecondary program and that programs should expand parent

involvement efforts” (p. 26). The development of individual relationships with students is also frequently cited as critical to persistence.

In the Austin region and across the state of Texas resources and research investments have been dedicated to understanding and addressing barriers in college access, persistence, and completion. This background is particularly important for understanding the context of the ACAN evaluation. It should be noted that the ACAN member organizations that are a feature of this evaluation are particularly data-driven, with published program evaluations and other research to support continuous improvement.

A 2006 study for The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, funded by TG, presents findings from a series of focus groups held with first-generation college students at multiple sites across Texas. *Straight from the Source: What Works for First-Generation College Students* details “three crucial steps along the pipeline to college where support was most helpful in making a successful transition from high school: raising aspirations for college; navigating the college admissions process; and easing the initial transition to college” (Engle, et al., 2006, p. 5). The students reported that “pre-college services and programs can ease the transition from high school to college by focusing on: preparing students academically for college; acclimating students to the college environment; involving parents in the college-going process; helping students manage the financial aspects of college; and developing personal relationships with students” (Engle et al, 2006, p. 39-40).

In *Unbundling Youth, Family, And Community Involvement In College Access: On The Ground In Austin, Texas*, researchers with the University of Notre Dame, The University of Texas at Austin, and the Central Texas Sustainability Indicators Project identified “the roles that social support, family engagement, and the community at-large play in postsecondary access, while also considering economic and academic factors” (Langenkamp, et al., 2009, p. 2). The research drew together four sources of data: a high school senior survey conducted in the Austin Independent School District; parent and student focus groups; and interviews with school and district administrators, principals, and teacher focus groups. The next phase of the research presented an overview to college access “assets” in the region, including in-depth interviews with 17 of the 21 most active college access programs. The authors conclude that “one-on-one mentoring with students might be the most effective way to guide first generation college-going students towards postsecondary attendance” (Lagenkamp, et al., p. 73). As such, better connections are needed between the schools and the organizations that can provide mentoring and other services. There is also a need to capitalize on existing innovations in the region, including starting programs earlier, involving

parents, and addressing academic and social factors in access and persistence. The report also highlights the Youth Services Map¹ developed by the local non-profit organization Ready by 21, whose mission is to support all youth to be ready for college, work, and life by age 21.² The map “seeks to provide a web-based tool to identify and address gaps and overlaps in services and support for youth, especially on high school aged youth and including college readiness services” (Lagenkamp et al., 2009,p. 75-76). This Youth Services Map provides an important foundation for the introduction to the Austin region described in the next chapter of this report.

The Central Texas Student Futures Project³ has tracked the college aspirations, enrollment, persistence, and completion activities of regional high school graduates since 2006. The 11 school districts represent approximately 85% of seniors in the four Central Texas counties that are covered by this research: Bastrop, Hays, Travis, and Williamson. The research includes annual surveys of high school seniors on their family backgrounds, high school activities, and future plans and preparations. Student outcomes such as college enrollment and persistence and employment in Texas are tracked at the high school, district, and regional level. The Student Futures Project research has also included multivariate analysis of factors associated with successful college enrollment and persistence outcomes. Analysis of the 2008-2009 high school graduation cohorts indicates that “As was true for all graduates, taking at least one advanced math course beyond Algebra II, taking more than one AP/IB course, or completing the FAFSA increased the likelihood of attending a 4-year college for Hispanic, low-income and first-generation high school graduates, while graduating in the bottom half of the class or planning to pay for college by working reduced their chances of 4-year enrollment. In addition, meeting with their counselors for help with college applications and essays significantly increased the chances of 4-year enrollment for these three student groups but not for graduates in general” (Cumpton, et al., 2012, p. x).

Other researchers have examined two local college access and persistence programs involved in the ACAN evaluation. The study of Breakthrough Austin focuses on high school graduation and college enrollment for the 2002-2004 sixth grade cohorts, while the study of College Forward looks at the program’s 2005-2008 high school graduation cohorts. Researchers Malerba and Caplovitz (2011) found that participation in Breakthrough had a significant impact on future outcomes. “Breakthrough students were 3.5 times more likely

¹ Available at: <http://www.y-sm-austin.org/>

² More information at: <http://www.readyby21austin.org/about.html>

³ More information at: <http://centexstudentfutures.org>

to graduate from high school, rather than drop out, in comparison to other students from the same 6th grade campuses...[and] 1.98 times more likely to enroll in college, rather than not be enrolled” (p. 4). The report goes on to conclude that “Breakthrough participation has its greatest impact on the college enrollment rates of students who met 6th grade academic standards in middle school but who were not enrolled in a magnet program” (p. 31).

The Price of Persistence: Barriers to Postsecondary Success for Low-Income and First-Generation Students presents findings from a case study of College Forward participants. Two sets of overarching barriers were identified: paying for college and staying in college. The “staying in college barriers represent a set of additional challenges students may face in working towards a bachelor’s degree. These range from gaps in high school academic preparedness and the peripheral skills needed for college coursework to the difficulty of connecting to campus – making friends, getting involved, and receiving appropriate professional support” (Horn and Ramos, p. 17-18). Significantly, most respondents identified at least one of these barriers as a factor in their own persistence in higher education.

INTRODUCTION TO AUSTIN AND THE AUSTIN COLLEGE ACCESS NETWORK

Central Texas

The 2010 American Community Survey provides demographic and economic information that is useful for comparing counties in the Central Texas region, and understanding the different contexts in which college access and persistence programs in ACAN operate. Bastrop and Travis counties have similar shares of children in poverty. Bastrop County has the lowest median family income. Approximately two-fifths of the adult residents in Hays, Travis, and Williamson counties have bachelor's degrees or higher, while only 18% of Bastrop County residents have the same level of education. Williamson County has the lowest share of Hispanic residents, which represent about one-third of residents in the other three counties.

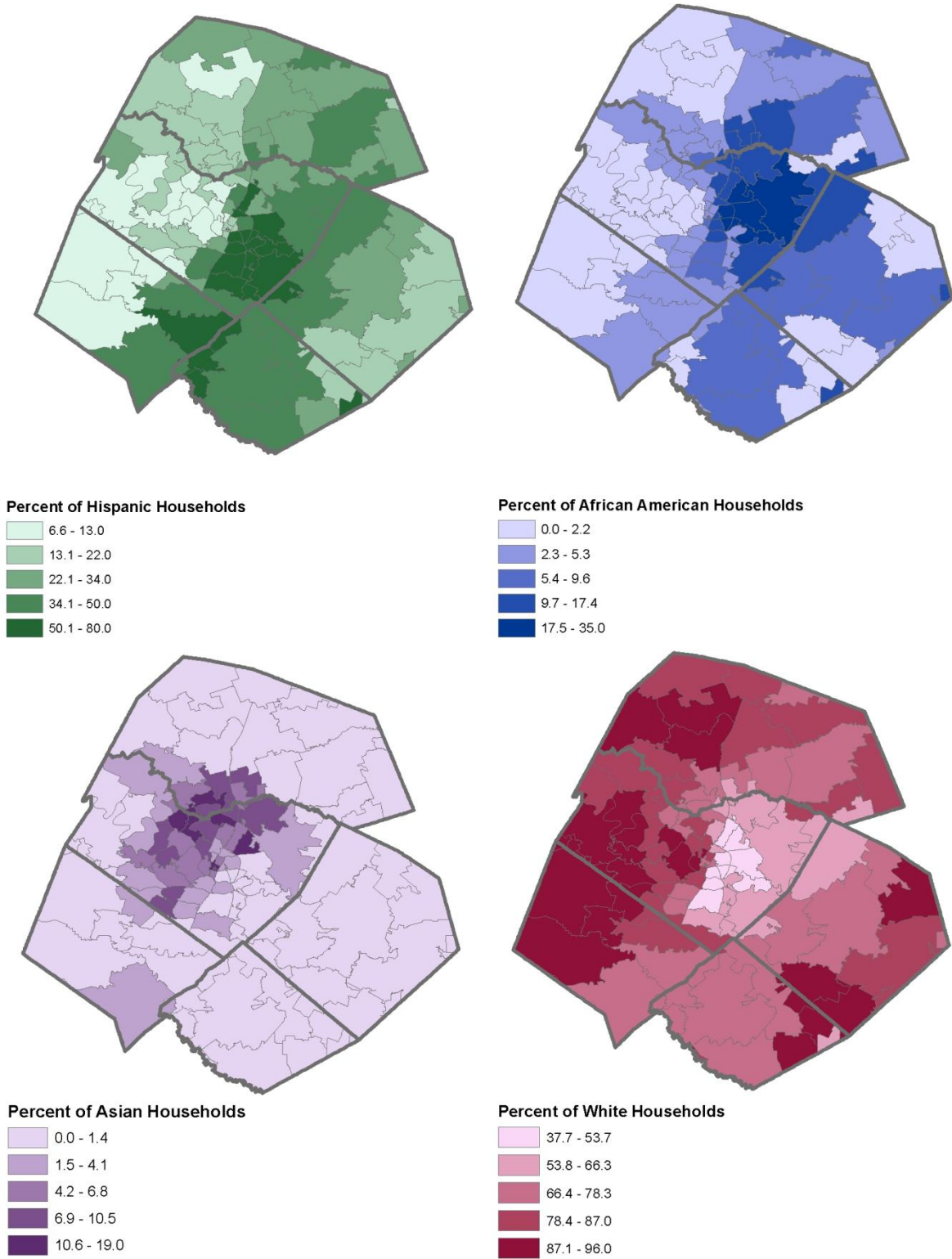
Table 1. Comparison of Central Texas Counties

	Bastrop County	Hays County	Travis County	Williamson County
Median Family Income	\$59,478	\$71,995	\$66,406	\$74,197
Percent of Children Under 18 Living in Poverty	28.4%	8.5%	25.5%	11.2%
Hispanic Population	32.4%	35.4%	33.6%	23.3%
Population with Bachelor's Degree or Higher (age 25+)	17.9%	38.5%	43.1%	36.7%

Source: American Community Survey, 2010.

The distribution of these characteristics across Central Texas is not uniform. For example, the ethnic and racial composition of neighborhoods varies greatly within each county. Figure 1 shows that some zip codes have higher shares of specific racial and ethnic households.

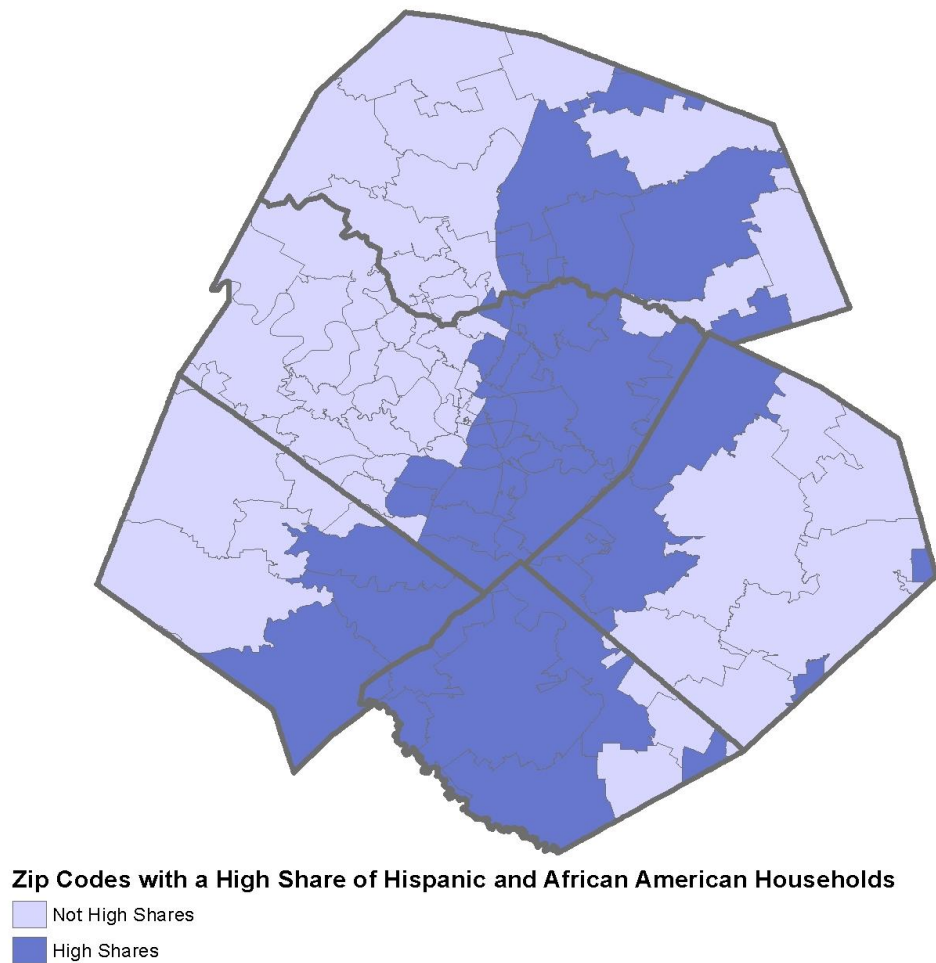
Figure 1. Demographic Characteristics of Central Texas Households, by Zip Code



Source: Census, 2010.

One of the primary goals of ACAN organizations is to increase access for students who might otherwise not be able to successfully transition to college. Using shares of specific racial and ethnic household characteristics, a broad band of zip codes across the Central Texas area can be identified as being in potentially high need for such college access services. Figure 2 shows this broad corridor of zip codes with relatively large shares of Hispanic (greater than 33%) or African American (greater than 10%) households. Large shares of these households in each zip code serve as a proxy for factors associated with reduced likelihood of college access, including parental educational level and economic disadvantage, information not available at the zip code level at the time of this report.

Figure 2. Potential High Need for College Access Services based on Ethnic and Racial Characteristics, by Zip Code



Source: Census, 2010.

Findings on College Enrollment and Persistence in Central Texas

Since 2005, the Student Futures Project has followed the outcomes and postsecondary pathways of Central Texas high school graduates. Initial student postsecondary enrollment findings in the studied cohorts (2006 through 2010) include the percent of students enrolled in postsecondary education in the fall following graduation, the types of colleges high school graduates enroll in, and their location.⁴ The majority (~60%) of high school graduates in Central Texas enroll in a college or university in the fall following graduation.⁵ Initial postsecondary enrollment rates vary by school district, racial/ethnic characteristics, gender, and income status. Eanes ISD enrolls more than 80% of their high school graduates while several outlying districts, including Del Valle, Bastrop, San Marcos, and Manor ISDs enroll fewer than 50% of their high school graduates. A greater share of Asian students (~80%) enroll in the fall following graduation compared to shares of White (~70%), Black (~55%), and Hispanic (~45%) students. Greater shares of female students (~65%) enroll in the fall following graduation compared to male students (~55%). Students who participated in the free or reduced lunch program during their senior year enroll at much lower rates (~40%) than their non-low-income counterparts (~70%). These demographic-based differences in college enrollment rates concern stakeholders as the Central Texas area continues to see growth in populations whose graduates traditionally transition to college at lower rates.

Central Texas high school graduates enroll in 4-year colleges or universities at higher rates (~40%) than at 2-year colleges (~20%), whereas Texas as a whole enrolls a larger share of high school graduates in 2-year colleges compared to 4-year colleges and universities. Differences in the shares of populations of interest transitioning to 4-year colleges or universities parallel those outlined above in the transition to postsecondary education, with a greater share of Asian students (~60%) enrolling in a 4-year college compared to shares of

⁴ Note that findings described in this section are summarized across multiple cohorts of students and differing groups of school districts; therefore, percentages provided are approximate. Detailed reports on each cohort can be found on the project website: www.centexstudentfutures.org.

⁵ Postsecondary enrollment rates calculated using National Student Clearinghouse data. Published high school-to-college transitions by THECB, the data source used by most districts prior to the start of the SFP, lacks out-of-state colleges and, until 2008, excluded enrollment outcomes of students who chose to not report their Social Security Number (SSN) to their school district.

White (~50%), Black (~30%), and Hispanic (~20%) students. Greater shares of female students (~40%) enroll in a 4-year college as compared to male students (~35%). While roughly 50% of students who did not participate in the free and reduced lunch program their senior year enroll in a 4-year college, only about 20% of those who did participate enroll in a 4-year college. These factors associated with differential enrollment at 4-year universities do not apply to enrollment at a 2-year college, where, regardless of student characteristic, the enrollment rate is roughly 20% for Central Texas graduates.

The majority of students from the region who do transition to postsecondary education in any given year attend one of five local colleges within 100 miles of Austin: a third of those who enroll do so at Austin Community College, while the rest enroll in roughly equal shares at the University of Texas at Austin, Texas State University-San Marcos, University of Texas at San Antonio, and Texas A&M University. Roughly 10% of Central Texas graduates enroll out-of-state, though out-of-state enrollment rates vary greatly by district, with approximately 30% of Eanes ISD students enrolling out-of-state and most other districts enrolling fewer than 5% of their high school graduates out-of-state.

The share of students who persist in their postsecondary studies from one semester to the next steadily declines over time. Roughly 80% of students who succeeded in enrolling in college within a year of graduating high school persisted in their college studies to the following fall, though these rates also vary by district, racial/ethnic characteristics, gender, income status, and type of initial college of enrollment. Greater shares of Asian students (~90%) persisted one year through college compared to Black (~70%), Hispanic (~75%) and White (~85%) students. Female students persisted at a higher rate (~85%) than male students (~80%). A lesser share of students who participated in the free and reduced lunch program persisted (~70%) compared to students who did not participate (~85%). A greater share of students whose initial college type was a 4-year college persisted (~90%) compared to students whose initial college type was a 2-year college (~70%).

College Access Programs in Central Texas

Most of the high schools in the Central Texas region offer at least one school-led college access program, though the number of students targeted and the intensity of engagement vary widely. In Austin ISD, Project ADVANCE⁶ places a facilitator on each Austin ISD campus to assist parents and students with selecting a college or university, understanding admissions requirements, and financial aid applications, including FAFSA and scholarships. Project ADVANCE includes annual field trips to local college campuses, FAFSA/financial aid workshops, and participation in college and career fairs. Other districts offer their own college preparation programs, including COOL Week in Leander ISD. Many campuses across the region have high school-based Go Centers or College & Career Centers that connect with large numbers of students, particularly students already planning to go to college. Most importantly, all of the high schools in the region participate in Austin Community College's (ACC's) *College Connections*⁷ program. This effort is intended to provide seniors with an opportunity to enroll and attend classes at ACC by providing all application, advising, and other enrollment activities at the high school. Virtually all high school seniors in the Central Texas region received an admissions acceptance letter to ACC with their high school diplomas as a result of this program (Ingram, 2008).

The Austin region also has a number of organizations providing college readiness, college access, and college persistence services beyond the direct efforts of local school districts and institutions of higher education. In 2008, many of those organizations came together to form the Austin College Access Network. The community-based members represent a range of approaches targeted at a variety of students, including comprehensive programs like College Forward, Breakthrough Austin, and Con Mi MADRE; financial aid programs like the Hispanic Scholarship Consortium; college readiness programs like Austin Partners in Education; school-based efforts like KIPP Austin; and E3 Alliance, the Central Texas regional P-16 council. The variety of organizations and approaches demonstrates the intensity of focus the Central Texas region has on improving college access and persistence.

The Austin College Access Network (ACAN) was formed with the intent of broadening connections within and between college access and persistence programs in the region. The organizations in Austin realized that the competition for funding dollars was hampering opportunities for collaboration that might enhance program reach and services in the region. The partnership has been productive, with the development of a guide for

⁶ More information at: <http://archive.austinisd.org/academics/sss/advance/>

⁷ More information at: <http://www.austincc.edu/collegeconnection/>

counselors and advisers working with undocumented students; last dollar scholarship opportunities for students; and increased awareness between and among organizations and institutes of higher education on regional college access and persistence efforts. In *Proceedings of The Completion Challenge: Helping Students in Higher Education*, forum participants from ACAN identified multiple recommendations for improving regional efforts, including early interventions, improved communication between community-based organizations and institutes of higher education, individualized counseling, equipping students to become their own self-advocates, and increased financial aid counseling and support (2011, p. 17-19).

It is important to note that these organizations are often working on the same high school campuses and have even been known to have common participants. Most high schools have a number of community-based and non-profit providers, mentors, and other efforts with college access components on campus. The small size of most of these efforts, however, indicates that even on campuses with multiple programs, a large share of students who could benefit from college access services are not being engaged. The 2011 senior survey respondents included less than 1% participating in Breakthrough Austin or Con Mi MADRE, and 5% participating in College Forward. Federally-supported programs like AVID, Talent Search/TRIO, and Upward Bound worked with another 4% of respondents. One interesting finding from the Student Futures Project annual survey of high school seniors is that students often do not recognize their interaction with a program – just 15% of seniors overall in the 2011 senior survey indicated they had participated in ACC’s College Connections program, which reaches out to every senior in the region. The top benefits highlighted by students for participation in any college access program were that “they helped me apply to college; they explained the financial aid process to me; and they encouraged me to attend school regularly” (Davis and Cumpton, 2012, p. C-1.4).

PROFILES OF COMPREHENSIVE COLLEGE ACCESS AND PERSISTENCE PROGRAMS IN AUSTIN, TX

Three members of the Austin College Access Network provide comprehensive college access and persistence services to students from across the region. These organizations – College Forward, Con Mi MADRE, and Breakthrough Austin – are the focus of the forthcoming outcome and impact evaluations. In this chapter, a profile of each organization is presented, including college access and persistence services, target population, recent growth, and future plans. Because each organization is pursuing a different scope and model for college access and persistence, the evaluation treats each organization separately rather than provide a comparison of organizations.

College Forward

College Forward⁸ is a non-profit college access program that provides free college access services to motivated, economically disadvantaged Central Texas students. The program's goal is to give students the highest possible chance of long-term success by mentoring them carefully through the process of their initial decisions about college choices through the attainment of a baccalaureate degree. College Forward defines success as participants graduating from a four-year college or university with a bachelor's degree.

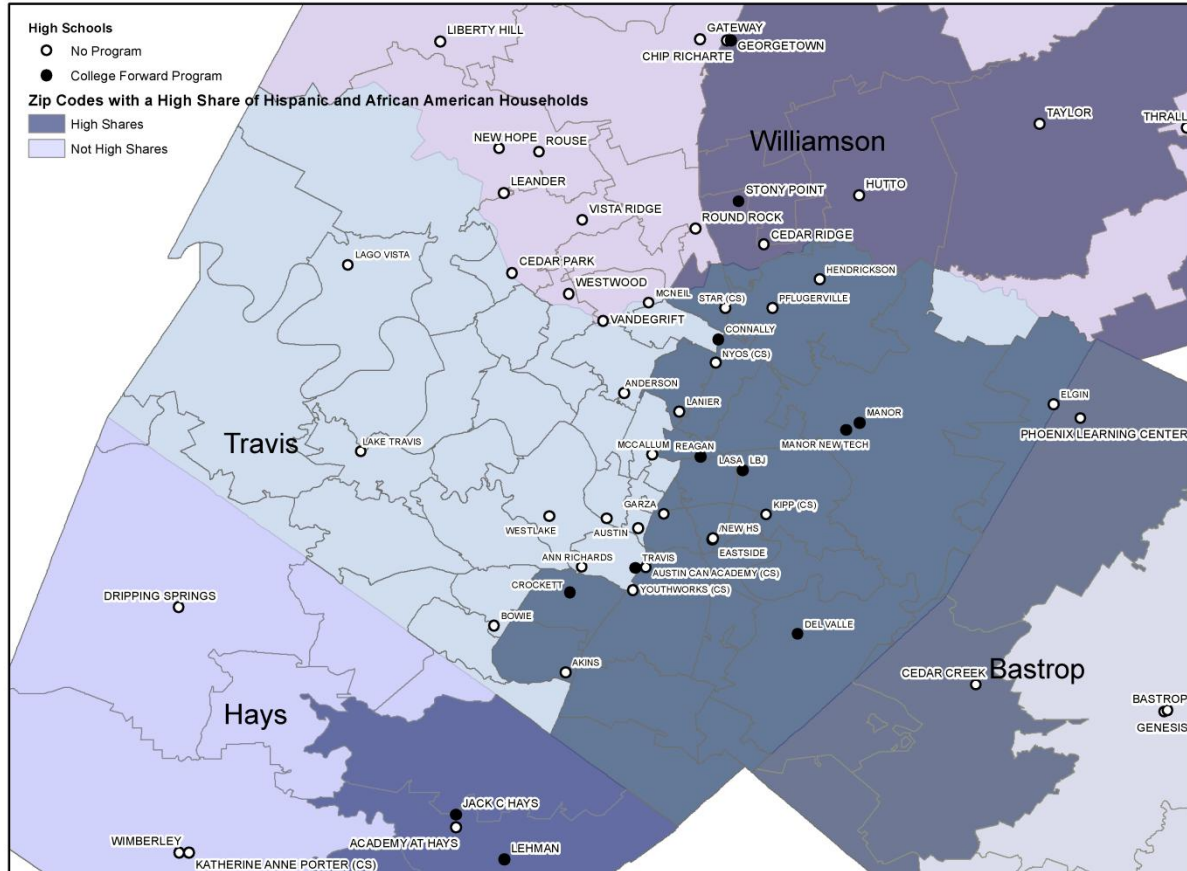
Target population

College Forward selects its participants from junior students attending selected high schools in the Austin area who want to earn four-year college degrees, are in the top 60% of their high school class, and either qualify for the National School Lunch Program or would be the first in their families to graduate from college. Applicants must complete a questionnaire, a personal interview, short essay, two recommendations, and signed parent consent forms. The program serves students at the following Central Texas high schools: Connally, Crockett, Del Valle, Georgetown, Jack C. Hays, Lehman, Lyndon B Johnson, Manor, Reagan, Stony Point, Travis, and Manor New Tech. These schools are along the four-county corridor identified as likely being in need of college access services, as shown in Figure 3. College Forward also serves students at two high schools in the Greater Houston area. College Forward enrolls approximately 600 juniors each September and October in the Austin area. The two-year retention rate is approximately 80%; roughly 90% stay with the

⁸ Source: <http://www.collegeforward.org/> and interviews with College Forward staff.

program in the senior year and approximately 90% of those remain involved as college freshmen.

Figure 3. College Forward High Schools and Potentially High Need Areas, by Zip Code



Sources: College Forward and Census, 2010.

College Access Services

Each College Forward participant receives about 420 hours of college preparatory coaching during the last two years of high school. Accepted participants are required to attend after-school classes twice a week (or the equivalent: 4 hours per week), and perform 40 total hours of community service during their junior and senior year (20 hours each year). These after-school classes focus on college exploration, ACT/SAT test preparation, applying to college, and information on financial aid and college persistence strategies. They also must meet additional milestones their coach sets for them, such as registering for and taking the ACT and SAT both years; seniors must apply for six colleges and universities by October 31st. Additionally, participants are encouraged to enroll in academically rigorous coursework, such as AP, IB, and dual credit programs. College Forward also

facilitates local and statewide college tours. Colleges all over Texas have partnered with the organization to support summer road trips. College Forward takes about 400 students each summer to visit at least three to four colleges, with a range of large/small and public/private campuses to expose students to the differences and get them thinking about what they really want.

College Forward works to help a whole family work through the transition of having a member in college. Parents participate in education days on college campuses as well as parent coffees and other activities throughout the year. Classes are offered in English and Spanish and focus on how the parents can support their children in the college-going process.

College Forward also works closely with the high school campuses. When the program comes to a campus, the counselors' workload increases dramatically. Each student in College Forward takes four college entrance exams, applies to six colleges, applies for scholarship opportunities, and requests fee waivers for various application process charges. College Forward staff meet with principals and counselors throughout the year to maintain good relationships.

College Persistence Services

Each College Forward participant receives about 80 hours of coaching over four or five years of college. Participants accepted into college attend summer bridge programs to help facilitate the transition to postsecondary life. College Forward also provides specific persistence supports to college-going participants, including housing, registration, and financial planning support. Participants renewing their financial aid and who need advocacy and intervention with their college financial aid office may rely on College Forward to help them. College persistence coaches are assigned to universities and are expected to be on campus once a month (or at least twice a semester). The coach notifies participants that he/she will be at a local coffee shop or other central spot and is then available for students to come by with questions/updates/FAFSA support/anything else.

Campus-based College Forward groups may meet together every six weeks or so during the fall and spring semesters. Services include mentoring (typically tech-based through Facebook and text messaging), tutoring, and community service activities. The program is a formal student group at four area universities and has strong mentoring programs/informal student groups at eight-ten other universities across the state. Upperclassmen College Forward student mentors apply to become mentors for incoming freshmen. They are assigned 2-6 students and expected to contact them two to three times

per month and get together with the student once a month. College Forward works to link participants at a college from multiple participant cohorts, including through networking events and reunions.

While students are in school, College Forward encourages them to seek work-study or career-field employment/internships. This year, the program implemented a requirement that each coach identify two internship opportunities per month. The items are collected in a central database and shared with students by email alert. Staff noted that as students graduate, they find that the transition to “life” can be emotional. College Forward works to help students prepare for the change. Students approaching graduation can expect to receive help with career development including help in resume writing and interview workshops, as well as job hunting guidance and connections to career resources. College Forward staff also help students with graduate school exams and applications. One interesting note is that because most of the coaching staff are AmeriCorps members, the coaches often have little more job or graduate school experience than the students they are advising.

Program Structure

College Forward uses full-time AmeriCorps college graduates on 11 month assignments to serve as coaches to its program participants. College coaches work with students in the High School Program and college persistence coaches support students enrolled in the Persistence Program throughout their college experience. Between 20-25% of AmeriCorps members sign up for a 2nd year with the program, becoming mentors for the incoming crop of coaches.

Recent Growth and Future Plans

In the last three years, College Forward has grown dramatically. It started in 2004 with 30 students. In 2009, there were 885. In 2012, there are 2735, including a new 300 student program in two high schools in Houston. By 2015, College Forward expects to have 12,243 active students. The program is now shifting its primary focus from college access to college completion. As such, it has no plans to expand the number of high schools it works with in the Central Texas region.

Con Mi MADRE (Mothers And Daughters Raising Expectations)

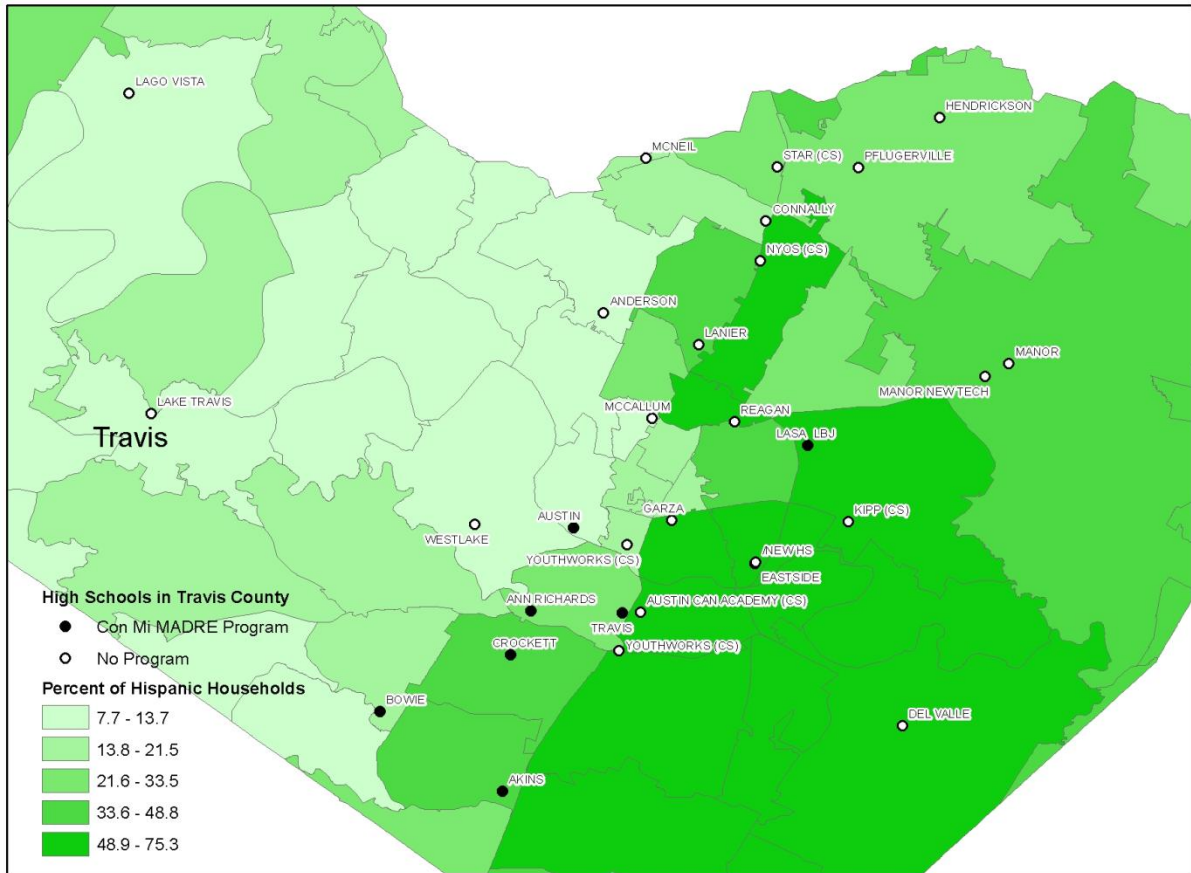
Con Mi MADRE's⁹ vision is to increase the representation of Hispanic girls in higher education through education and social support services to girls and their mothers. Con Mi MADRE provides activities for girls and their mothers that are designed to keep the girls on track to graduate, support their ability to maintain good grades, help them plan and apply for college, and provide the mother/daughter team with activities to create a strong relationship. Con Mi MADRE is truly focused on reaching the girls utilizing a holistic model and creating an attitudinal shift towards higher education in Hispanic families. The mother-daughter relationship has to be strong to give the girl the belief that she can leave home, go to school, and not be seen as selfish. They educate the mom on how to support the girls and be active participants in their education – they give the mom a voice she might not have had to this point. Con Mi MADRE defines success as having students graduate from high school, enroll in postsecondary education, and complete their education goals.

Target Population

Con Mi MADRE offers open enrollment for all eligible Hispanic girls in the greater Austin area. Eligible program participants are Hispanic females with GPAs of 2.5 or higher who are recommended by a school teacher, counselor or parent. Both student and mother must commit to participate in the program. Con Mi MADRE selects and enrolls the majority of its participants during the spring semester of 5th grade year. They currently provide services at Ann Richards, Bailey, Bedichek, Covington, Fulmore, O.Henry, Paredes, and Small middle schools and Akins, Austin, Bowie, Crockett, LASA, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Travis high schools, all located within Austin ISD. The program launched a pilot project at Pflugerville ISD's Connally High School in 2011. Figure 4 indicates the high schools Con Mi MADRE serves along with information on the share of Hispanic households by zip code.

⁹ Source: <http://conmiMADRE.org/> and interviews with Con Mi MADRE staff.

Figure 4. Con Mi MADRE High Schools and the Percent of Hispanic Households in Travis County



Sources: Con Mi MADRE and Census, 2010.

The program currently serves about 750 girls – the maximum that current funding and staffing levels can support. The entering class of sixth graders generally has 100-130 students. Students occasionally join at later grade levels if there is an opening or when the program enters a new school. Con Mi MADRE participants that remain with the program through their senior year have a 100% high school graduation rate.

College Access Services

Participants receive programming that includes educational conferences and campus workshops focusing on peer pressure, self-esteem, study skills, and college readiness. Con Mi MADRE also provides on-site campus meetings, leadership development, individual counseling and individualized college advising. Participants and their mothers may participate in college campus visits, parent support groups, assistance

with the college application process and financial assistance and college scholarships. Con Mi MADRE also strongly encourages participants to engage in volunteer service.

Con Mi MADRE operates four college access programs¹⁰:

1. Middle School Programming designed to help middle school girls maintain academic success, build self-esteem, and encourage the dream of higher education.
2. High School Programming to prepare girls to apply for and enter college.
3. Parent Development Programming to develop strong connections between home, school, and community that reduce barriers to student achievement.
4. Healthy Living Program- an integrated approach to addressing physical and behavioral health barriers that limit academic achievement and pursuit of higher education.

Con Mi MADRE participants also go to community events, such as the bilingual college and career fair sponsored and coordinated by the program. During the summer, Con Mi MADRE hosts a Summer Leadership Summit, college visits, college academies for rising seniors, and two fitness and wellness camps, as well as a Parent Engagement Series that reaches out to fathers.

Campus meetings were described by program staff as the heart of the program. In middle school, campus meetings are held two times a month for about 45 minutes each. In high school, meetings are held once a month for 45 minutes each. Meeting structure depends on the school; some will only allow girls to be pulled out of elective courses, while others ask that the pull-out time rotate throughout the girls' schedule. Con Mi MADRE staff work with principals and other school administrators to help them understand the proactive Con Mi MADRE model. Con Mi MADRE's staff truly know the girls and develop strong relationships that encourage the girls to open up more freely than they might with school personnel.

Students continue in the program as long as they meet the program's good standing criteria. If a student changes schools the student may still participate in the program, regardless of services provided to that school. Transportation is the biggest barrier students face to participation and attendance at meetings is the biggest challenge for working mothers. The program estimates 40% of girls would not be able to participate if services

¹⁰ Source: <http://conmiMADRE.org/>

were moved to after school. Alternate transportation difficulties, the need to work or babysit younger siblings, and competition from other school activities are all issues.

In addition to the campus program there are approximately five half-day Saturday conferences for girls and their moms throughout the year. This year Saturday conferences have moved from UT's School of Social Work building to Austin ISD campuses or to community based venues, largely because the university has stopped virtually all free parking around campus on the weekends. This is a big loss; for many of the girls and their parents, the conferences were a first opportunity to be on a college campus and sit in a college classroom. Moms especially benefited from the exposure and being able to picture their daughters in that setting. The college visits that girls and their mother take part in during high school are an essential aspect to the program and help moms prepare for the transition ahead.

Con Mi MADRE also offers some programming on weeknights, such as healthy living events and college academies. Approximately 7-10 college academies are held each year. The college academies keep the girls focused and help to overcome some of the "senioritis" many experience. Con Mi MADRE encourages girls to write essays during the summer before their senior year, working with the UT writing center. Essays can then be tweaked and modified when girls need them for college applications and scholarships. The program has learned that girls who wait until the spring really struggle to complete application essays. Con Mi MADRE encourages the girls to develop the habit of dealing with the hard stuff first. College applications and exams are targeted for completion by Thanksgiving of a girl's senior year; during the spring semester the focus shifts to financial aid.

The first five to ten minutes of every campus meeting includes a healthy living activity. One primary component of the Healthy Living program is the pregnancy prevention effort. Statewide more than half of Hispanic girls become pregnant during their teen years; for girls in the Con Mi MADRE program that rate is just 0.03%. They use the power of visualization – the girls see themselves as college students, not teen moms. Healthy Living also includes units on substance abuse, exercise, healthy eating, and running/walking groups.

College Persistence Services

Alumni programming and college persistence services are also areas of growth for Con Mi MADRE. Austin area students and alumni meet with Con Mi MADRE twice a year to network through ***Hermanas Unidas*** (United Sisters) and share knowledge, connections, and experiences. Local alumni, girls attending college out of town, and their mothers attend Con

Mi MADRE's ***Bienvenidas a Casa*** (Welcome Home) workshops in June and December. Discussions include: paying for college, finding scholarships for currently enrolled students, how moving into an apartment will affect the family budget, and how parents can support their daughter through her college years. Girls can also keep connected through Con Mi MADRE's social media tools such as the website, Facebook page, Twitter account, and webinars. A recent webinar focused on interview techniques and let girls compare role-playing vignettes.

The organization is also currently piloting a collaboration with College Forward to provide college persistence services to twenty-four Con Mi MADRE alumni in college. College Forward provides each student with college persistence support at their college campus. In 2012-13 Con Mi MADRE will have a College Persistence Specialist on staff to oversee the College Persistence programming. This staff person will also implement programming every summer for rising college freshmen on how to successfully transition from a high school to a college student. During this ***Pasos2College Institute*** (Steps to College) students will learn skills on how to persist through their college years.

Program Structure

Con Mi MADRE launched in 2007 and formally became an independent non-profit organization in 2008. Prior to that, it had operated as The Junior League of Austin's Hispanic Mother-Daughter Program since 1992. Con Mi MADRE works to appeal to business leaders and other stakeholders on the basis of building the future workforce. Texas needs an educated, bilingual workforce to succeed in the 21st century. Con Mi MADRE builds on the belief that investments in females have the biggest impact on the community.

Con Mi MADRE continues to leverage a strong collaboration with The Junior League of Austin. The League helps with conferences, provides speakers, ongoing funding, and volunteer support. Other partners in Con Mi MADRE's conference programming include Planned Parenthood, Safe Place, Lifeworks and other local non-profits. The UT School of Social Work is another strong collaboration for Con Mi MADRE. Through the arrangement, Con Mi MADRE utilizes UT office space, UT Human Resources, and UT benefits package and opportunities for Con Mi MADRE employees. Since the Executive Director and the Development Director are both actively engaged in fundraising activities, these two individuals are employees of the Austin Community Foundation which serves as Con Mi MADRE's financial administrator.

The director of Con Mi MADRE summed up the experience of many non-profits – it is hard to be strategic when your funding changes year to year. The organization is pursuing more multi-year grant opportunities as one solution to this problem. It is also seeking to grow individual donors and generate more support for specific functions. The renewed emphasis on defined programming, such as the Healthy Living Initiative and the Summer Healthy Living camps, has generated some funding support from funders like the Aetna Foundation and the St. David’s Foundation.

Each June Con Mi MADRE evaluates the schools they are working with. They look at the support they receive, how easy it is to work with the school staff and faculty, and other factors. Efficient operations require that Con Mi MADRE staff time is used wisely to facilitate programming during the school day. If a school’s leadership does not support school-day interventions, then Con Mi MADRE notifies girls and their parents to let them know that even though meetings would no longer be held on campus the girls were still an active part of the program and can continue to benefit from all other outside of school time activities.

Recent Growth and Future Plans

Con Mi MADRE served about 600 girls when it launched as a separate organization in 2007 and today serves about 750. Campus meetings were identified as the most challenging element in scaling up the program. Meetings are resource intensive, requiring significant staff time, mileage, and scheduling. The program is currently testing a club model at Connally High School, with a teacher sponsor leading meetings based on the provided Con Mi MADRE curriculum. This model will also be tested in KIPP Austin in the 2012-2013 school year. Con Mi MADRE is particularly interested in whether students will bond as well with a teacher as they do with an advocate from outside the school. Con Mi MADRE would like to test another service delivery model by partnering with other non-profits serving the Hispanic community. In this model, girls and their parents might both attend programming at a community center such as El Buen Samaritano – perhaps Con Mi MADRE club model can be available for the students while their mothers’ are in ESL classes.

Over time Con Mi MADRE has gone from being simply a school year program, to one that offers year-round Healthy Living programming and Summer Leadership Institutes. Another line of program expansion includes programming for seniors: college academies, college visits, and advising/mentoring. The Senior Advising program connects girls with a young professional, preferably along the girl’s career interests. The effort relies primarily on

technology for communication rather than in-person interactions. The advisor’s job is to keep the girl on the ball, aware of deadlines, and then help to sustain the relationship through college.

The organization has shifted its near-term capacity building focus internally, towards the development of more programming options. Con Mi MADRE is exploring financial literacy curricula. They have found that families will save for mortgages and college, but they don’t trust banking institutions and few will ever speak with a financial planner. For 2012-13, Con Mi MADRE will develop a culturally relevant bilingual curriculum that serves cross-population – middle school through adulthood. Con Mi MADRE is also exploring Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) that would allow students to show that they are saving and contributing to their own education/future. Staff encourage families who are having a quinceñera (15th birthday) party for their daughter to put cards in the invitations asking for donations to the girl’s college fund instead of a gift.

Other future efforts focus on defining and refining Con Mi MADRE’s college persistence services. One thing that sets Con Mi MADRE apart from other college access and persistence programs is the 10-12 year commitment that the program makes to each girl. The staff feels that to be true to their mission, they have to help girls succeed in college and earn a credential.

Breakthrough Austin

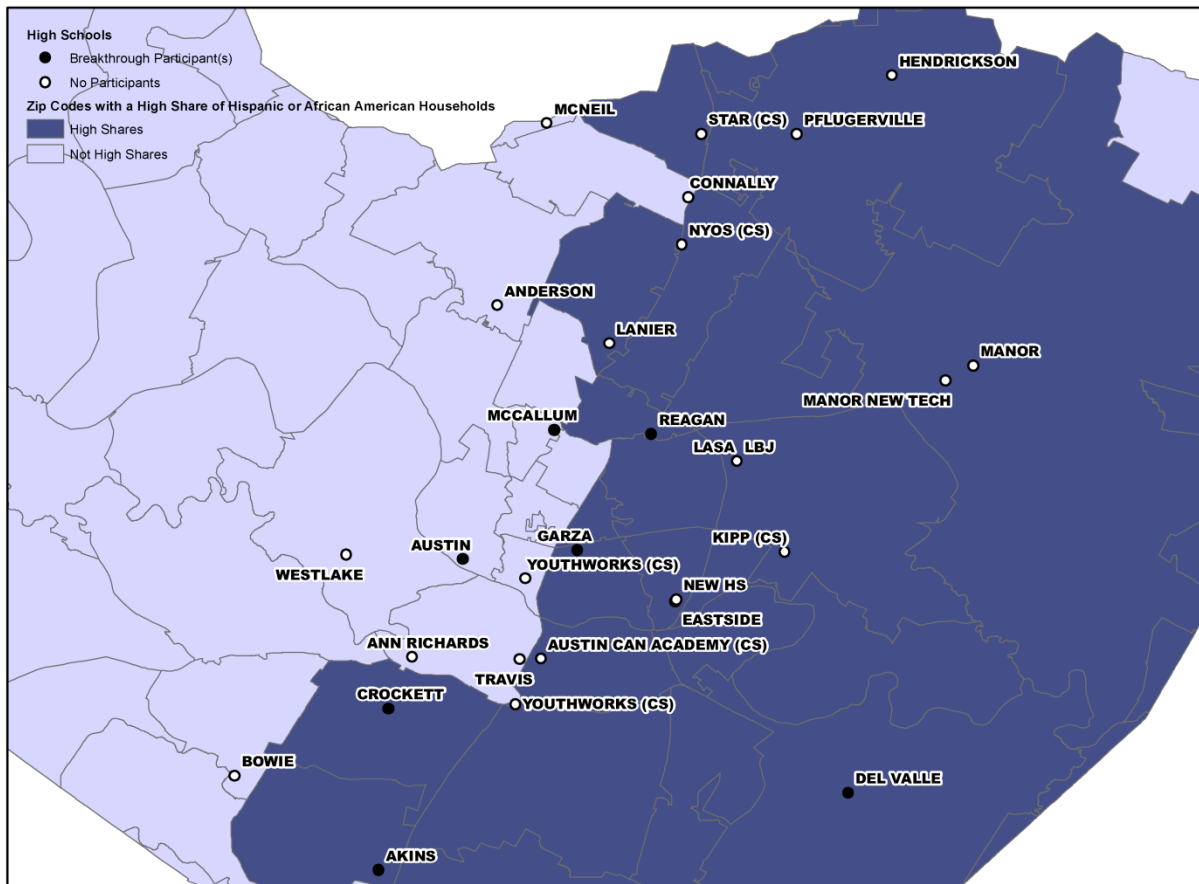
Breakthrough Austin¹¹ is built on the philosophy that there are no quick fixes and that early, long-lasting interventions can make the difference between dropping out of high school or going to college. Breakthrough describes its program as data-driven and relationship-based. It combines individualized case management, rigorous programming, a “do whatever it takes” philosophy, and performance management to address low-income students’ unique academic needs and personal circumstances as they work to become the first in their families to go to college. The program’s overall goal is to create first-generation college graduates. Breakthrough defines success by the number of students it helps who graduate from high school and go to and graduate from college who would not otherwise have had the opportunity.

¹¹ Source: <http://www.breakthroughaustin.org/> and interviews with Breakthrough Austin staff.

Target population

Breakthrough focuses on first-generation college students who, prior to entry into the program, received mostly A's and B's in school, and who received passing scores on the TAKS exams. In 2011, the program served nearly 500 students in grades six through twelve. The program typically enrolls 60 Austin ISD students each year as rising 7th graders. More than 90% of Breakthrough students who enroll in the program as 6th graders and stay in Central Texas remain engaged with Breakthrough throughout high school. Student tracking is then carried forward for 12 years. The program doubled its intake enrollment size in 2011 by expanding to serve an additional 60 students in Manor ISD each year as rising 6th graders. Because of student mobility, Breakthrough serves students in secondary schools throughout Central Texas, including public, private and charters. They also serve more than 40 sets of siblings. The public or charter high schools of students participating in Breakthrough in 2010 can be seen in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Breakthrough Participants and Potentially High Need Areas, by Zip Code



Sources: Breakthrough Austin and Census, 2010.

Criteria for selection into Breakthrough include neither parent has graduated from college in the US; student earns good grades and passes TAKS exams; and student is not a significant discipline or attendance problem. Recruiting and selection have been refined over time to more specifically target potential participants. Staff also noted that recruiting efficiency has improved as they are getting more qualified applicants and enrolling them at higher rates. During the spring of 2012, more than two times the number of students applied for Breakthrough as there were spots available. Demonstrating the positive “ripple effects” of Breakthrough’s program, Manor ISD decided to automatically enroll all of the remaining students into their AVID program and launch a one-week summer enrichment institute for those students.

College Access Services

Breakthrough has a focus on helping students enter strong high schools to keep them on a college-preparatory track, their “High School Options” process. Breakthrough assists students as they prepare for, enroll in, and matriculate through college. The Breakthrough experience includes summer, Saturday and after-school programming and case management; the combination is the key to staying relevant to the students. Breakthrough provides year-round case management for their students, tracking attendance at Breakthrough events and maintaining case histories for each individual. Students attend intensive academic preparatory summer programs from the 6th/ 7th through the 11th grade. Other core services of Breakthrough include advocacy, after school tutoring and homework help, Saturday academic programs, test preparation help, mentoring, and college guidance and counseling.

Case management is the cornerstone of the Breakthrough program. Someone at Breakthrough knows each student and their family well enough to be able to advocate on their behalf. Every program staff member has about fifty students on their case load; they visit the student at least twice each six weeks to monitor progress and also contact parents frequently. Staff have access to parent connection portals in Austin ISD and Manor ISD records to monitor student grades and attendance and intervene quickly if there is a problem. Breakthrough focuses its work on root causes; it is the case manager’s job to know the child and set up an appropriate intervention – whether that is a connection to an academic coach, a social service referral, or other need. Intervention strategies are detailed in coaching contracts that are drawn between the student, the parent, the program staff, and the coach. While Breakthrough works to engage parents early to help them understand

that the organization is making a 6+ year commitment to their child, parent engagement is not necessarily a prerequisite for student involvement.

By the time students start 9th grade, they have completed an extra semester of schooling through Breakthrough's intensive summer programs, which are designed to stem the summer learning loss and create a community of college bound learners. The full-day six-week program is required for students from 6th/7th to 9th grade. Two week institutes are part of the summer program for rising 10th to 12th graders and those transitioning to college. A summer program for rising seniors targets the college application process. The Breakthrough summer program relies on students teaching students in activities that are academically engaging. The summer program for Austin-based participants is offered at UT, while students in Manor attend the program at one of Manor's high schools.

Frequent Saturday programming revolves around project-based activities. Middle school students participate in six Saturday activities throughout the year, while the 9th grade program has eight Saturday activities. All of the Saturday programming includes a new experience, an academic element, and a focus on community building/building connections to Breakthrough. The focus for 2011-2012 was on writing, and included students participating in a Slam Poetry event at a local bookstore.

After school, Breakthrough offers tutoring and homework help in their office every day as well as on AISD and Manor campuses once or twice a week. Mondays have evolved into application days, with students, mentors, and staff working on high school, college, and scholarship applications.

College Persistence Services

Breakthrough's college persistence services are evolving, but it has established standards of service. The persistence program is shifting from one that was more reactionary to one that reaches out to students and responds more proactively. They are trying to figure out how to "case manage" college students in a helpful way. Staff connect with students at least twice a semester, often through Facebook or texting. The program sends a care package to students each semester, and there is an annual reunion. Staff provide ongoing FAFSA support and help with transfer applications, and encouragement to keep them on track. The program does whatever it can to help students maintain scholarships, pay for books and other emergencies, handle family issues, and re-enroll in school following stop-outs. There is significant variability because each individual student's need is different. Because life intervenes and a student's journey through college is rarely

straight-forward, the long-term relationships that students build with Breakthrough are important in helping them persist in their studies.

Program Structure

In addition to creating more first generation college graduates, Breakthrough desires to help secondary schools create a stronger college-going culture. Schools are not setup around getting a student into college, but rather have gatekeepers – people who determine whether a specific student engages in a specific education service. Breakthrough tries to make the gate keeping non-random – they open doors for students rather than leave it to happenstance. Breakthrough believes that it is the frequency and intensity of student engagement that matters most in students’ outcomes. The case manager or advisor may change, but the kids develop a connection with the program, and its staff members. Each contact with a student begins with the emphasis “I’m with Breakthrough.” The program recently became an AmeriCorps partner, which has expanded the number of staff involved in service delivery.

Breakthrough has strong collaborations with Austin and Manor ISDs, St. Stephens and St. Andrews private schools, and UT-Austin, and describes itself as partner-dependent. The school districts help to recruit and serve students, provide data, use of facilities, and other supports. The private schools provide facilities for Saturday programming; opportunities for students to enroll on scholarship; student mentors; and teachers to contribute to summer curriculum development. UT-Austin provides summer facilities, including access to computer labs. Other partners include AmeriCorps, Communities in Schools, College Forward, and Teach for America, as well as individual donors and volunteers.

Recent Growth and Future Plans

Breakthrough’s first high school graduating class (in 2008) enrolled in the program in 2002 as rising 7th graders. That first class has spearheaded each phase of the program, including a growing focus on college persistence and completion efforts. As programming has been refined over time, they have backed-out the timeline for completing certain activities. The number and intensity of meetings/programming has grown dramatically over time. In the last three years, Breakthrough has grown in terms of the number of students served, the size of its fundraising efforts, and built programming along the pipeline. Breakthrough is now interested in making the model replicable/scalable.

While the move to 5th grade recruitment in Manor ISD has the potential to more positively impact the college going culture of the schools, the addition of another grade level of service adds to the overall cost of the program. However, the partnership with Manor ISD and the concentration of students in fewer schools lowers the overall cost per student per year. Adding a new cohort of students to the Manor ISD pipeline each year means that Breakthrough will double the number of students it serves over the next six years to more than 1000. Breakthrough is looking to grow its individual donors as well as scaling the operation to attract the interest of larger foundations and other funders. Breakthrough's two-year strategic plan outlines efforts to increase fund raising to \$2.1 million to position the organization for growth opportunities and to partner with other local school districts to replicate the model. Impediments to serving more students through Breakthrough include summer facility space, money, and data infrastructure.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The members of the Austin College Access Network address many of the best practices in college access and persistence services: they have strong relationships with their students; they actively work to involve parents and maintain good communications with families; they partner with schools at the secondary and postsecondary level; they take students to visit colleges; and they emphasize college readiness, including academic preparation, financial aid applications, and the transmission of “college knowledge” – the cultural and social norms of postsecondary education.

In *College Knowledge: What it Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready* (Conley, 2005), college access refers to a student’s ability to enter higher education and focuses on students who otherwise would not have been able to attend, due to financial, social, or academic obstacles. College access programs focus on students who are ready to successfully undertake entry-level college courses (college ready students) rather than students who merely meet the minimum entrance requirements. The three comprehensive programs in Austin share this focus on college ready students, with College Forward targeting students in the top 60% of their graduating class and both Breakthrough Austin and Con Mi MADRE dedicated to high academic achievement beginning in middle school. Other ACAN organizations dedicated to student college readiness include Austin Partners in Education (APIE) and KIPP Austin.

College readiness means more than just academic preparation, however. *College Access Now* in Seattle, Washington “focuses on the college readiness factors related to preparation, planning, and management of the college application process. Its staff and volunteers serve in the role of transmitting the social, cultural, financial, and logistical information necessary for being admitted to and succeeding in college” (“Why”, 2012). The ACAN members also appear to be addressing this element of college readiness. Program managers consistently noted their staff and volunteers’ role in building a solid relationship with students and progressing through an organized, systematic approach to college preparation and enrollment as keys to their success. These programs are, in the words of Engle et al. (2006), working to “get the message out to all students about college as early as possible; better prepare students for college; and provide more support for students once in college” (p.40-41).

While the analysis has a more state-level perspective, the findings and recommendations by Spradlin et al. (2010) in *Effective College Access, Persistence, and Completion Programs, and Strategies for Underrepresented Student Populations:*

Opportunities for Scaling Up are largely applicable to the Central Texas region. Among these:

- Financial aid tools are insufficient to college persistence for most students from underrepresented groups. For many students, particularly Black students, ‘fitting in’ on campus and feeling welcome were important factors in persistence (p. 33-34).
- However, “the non-tuition costs of college, including books, food, fees, and other items, severely impact the ability of underrepresented students to persist” (p. 34). Programs and institutions could do more to uncover these “hidden costs” of college and develop funding sources to help students meet those costs.
- A need for more and more targeted advising services for all freshmen and additionally for underrepresented groups at all levels. “Such services can help students navigate an unfamiliar and intimidating academic environment, and can boost their school performance through improved course guidance and selection” (p. 34).
- A call for more research in multiple areas, including “effects of dependents and other family responsibilities on the retention rates of underrepresented students.....and identify any potential remedies; and “identify which interventions best increase persistence among low-income and at-risk populations” (p. 35).

The current evaluation seeks to address the questions raised by Spradlin et al., within the context of Central Texas, adding to the growing research literature on the region. The ACAN members are independently addressing many of these recommendations for their participants. Each of the Austin organizations is still working to build out their college persistence service model. The organizations recognize, as echoed in the research literature, that students continue to face a range of obstacles when it comes to staying in college and completing their education goals. Perhaps most importantly, the strong relationships that programs build with students pre-college continue to be important in helping students to succeed in college.

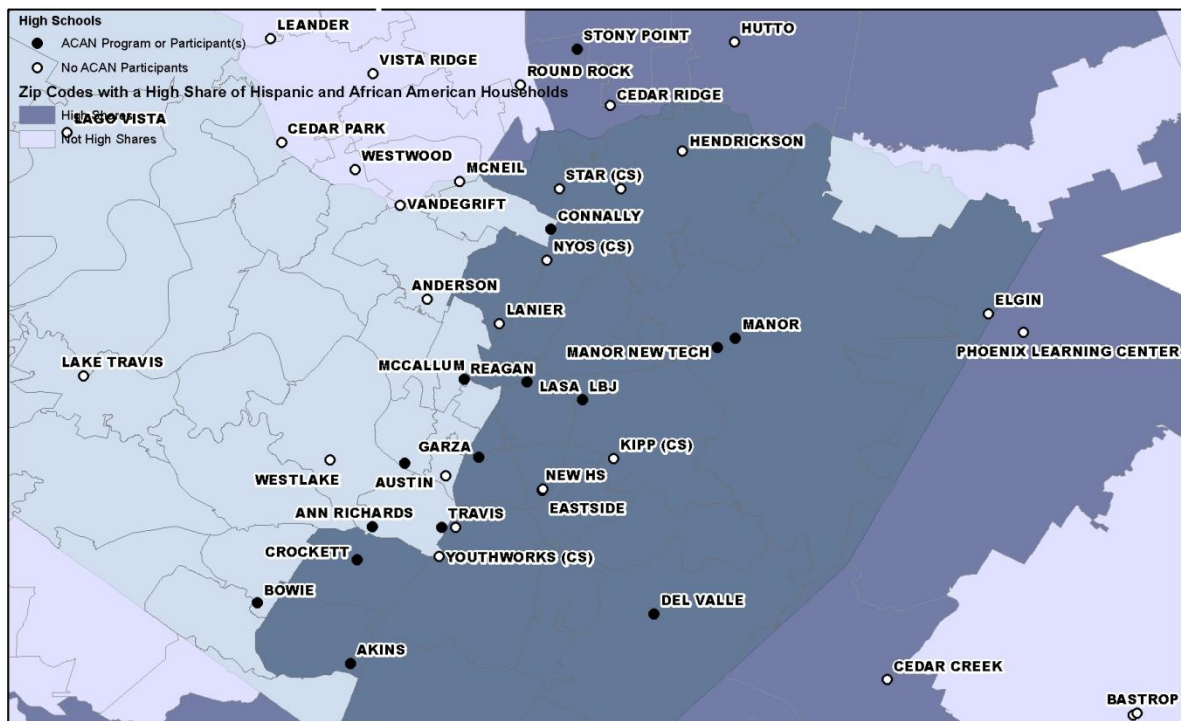
Recommendations

The work by ACAN to better connect program staff with retention, advising, and financial aid staff at institutes of higher education is one important strategy for increasing the effectiveness of persistence services. It may be beneficial to explore the establishment

of a single/small group of counseling, advising, and financial aid staff to work specifically with participants from ACAN programs. As a start, student records should indicate if he/she is an active participant or alumni of an ACAN member program. A single point of contact would facilitate communication between the school, the program, and the student, and increase opportunities to provide targeted interventions that support persistence and completion goals.

Despite these regional efforts, there are still a large number of high schools in the region without active ACAN partner organizations (Figure 6). Students at these schools are losing out on an opportunity to connect with a pre-college program that might make a difference in their future postsecondary transition and success. Public and charter schools in the region serving high shares of Hispanic and African American families in particular need access to these additional resources in order to make a significant change in students' postsecondary outcomes. One strategy would be for ACAN to host a meeting with administrators from each of the high schools without an active program to identify which schools have an interest in developing a partnership for college access and persistence services. ACAN could then work with school and district administrators to develop a service plan targeted at each school's specific needs.

Figure 6. Select Central Texas High Schools Without ACAN Programs or Participants



The challenge for the ACAN organizations and the Central Texas region is how to expand and improve these services to get more students through college, as well as to identify approaches that work for a larger segment of students. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's (THECB's) Closing the Gaps work has so far missed an opportunity to tap into the growing number of community-based organizations providing college access and persistence programming. Encouraging partnership and collaboration between community-based organizations, institutes of higher education, and the business community would help to leverage broader investments in meeting Closing the Gaps goals. ACAN organizations could help to advocate for this change in state policy, perhaps leveraging the E3 Alliance's role as the regional P-16 Council. THECB could encourage these partnerships by providing grant funds that aim to help bring together a variety of partners for targeted college participation and completion efforts.

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