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*George Mason University established the Early Identification Program in response to the growing problem of poor academic preparation of many inner-city minority students. A strong alliance with three public school districts was established to foster and guarantee early and consistent intervention. The fundamental objective of the program is to encourage and motivate academically "at-risk" minority students to select and complete a college preparatory curriculum and enroll in college. Participants who successfully complete the pre-college program are guaranteed admission to George Mason. The program has experienced remarkable success since its inception.*

# Building Your Own Pipeline

## Introduction

Programs designed to increase minority student college enrollment have been in existence for at least three decades. During this time public and private support for activities related to college preparation have increased exponentially. With the increased visibility and realization of the centrality of K-12 education in preparing successful college students, many colleges and universities have created K-12 partnerships that go beyond traditional upward bound programs and teacher preparation programs.

One of the more successful of these is the George Mason University (GMU) Early Identification Program (EIP), an award-winning college partnership program that has been in existence for seven years. George Mason implemented the EIP in response to a notable decrease in minority applicants and an increase in applicants with inappropriate coursework or poor achievement in academic classes. The primary institutional partners include three northern Virginia public school districts and George Mason. The authors believe that the successful experience of EIP has broad application for colleges and universities concerned with increasing minority access to higher education, especially metropolitan institutions. Ninety-seven percent of the students who completed the pre-college aspect of the program are now attending colleges or universities. Of these, 84 percent attend George Mason; six percent of the students moved from northern Virginia; seven percent were counseled out of the program; and the remaining three percent, who graduated from high school but did not meet George Mason's admission requirements, were referred to Northern Virginia Community College. What follows is a discussion of the key components of the program.

## Program Objectives

The Program features:

- provision of timely information to parents and students regarding academic requirements;

- a year-round program combining leadership training, academic skills development, counseling services, and cultural activities;
- a non-residential 3 week summer program on the GMU campus to address academic deficiencies in creative and innovative ways;
- opportunities for primarily minority GMU students to serve as tutors and role models;
- parenting classes to strengthen and support families by giving parents information and skills on how to provide leadership and direction to their children and enhance family communication;
- a Parents' Council to support EIP staff and coordinate special activities; and
- a *guarantee* of GMU admission to participants who complete the pre-college aspects of the program successfully.

The fundamental objective of the EIP is to encourage and motivate academically "at-risk" minority students to select and complete a college preparatory curriculum in secondary school and enroll in college. Qualities that lead to academic success – good study habits and skills, sincere interest in college, and students' belief in themselves – are focal points of the Program, and development of these qualities is an important goal. The on-campus three week summer academy, the core of the program, provides intensive academic skills development, as well as an opportunity for students to enjoy being part of a campus community. Outstanding high school teachers, university professors, and local businessmen and women engage the students in an interdisciplinary team-taught curriculum that includes English, mathematics, science, and computers. Since the students represent diverse family, racial, and cultural backgrounds, the Program integrates activities to teach and to foster good human relations skills. A new class of approximately sixty eighth grade students is selected every year during the spring term. This is the single point of entry for participants. The program currently serves 220 students. Ninety-nine percent are from racial and ethnic minority groups, and many are language-minority students as well. Virtually all the students will be the first in their family to attend college.

## Program Description

### *Steps in the Process*

Prior to selection of the program participants, community information meetings are held in the local schools to ensure that the goals of the program are clear. Parents, students, teachers, counselors, school superintendents, and university representatives attend. Students targeted for the Program are those whose self-perception, performance, and aspirations suggest that without intervention they may not graduate from a pre-college high school program. Local intermediate school teachers and counselors nominate minority students who are not achieving up to their potential but who are believed to have the ability to succeed in a postsecondary institution. Most of these students are from low-income, single-parent families who face a future where almost all the odds are against them. The focus of the EIP is on identifying students who would not attend college without the program, as opposed to identifying students who already are college bound. The EIP focus is thus an *expansion* of the pool of college-ready minority students, not "skimming" the best students already destined for success. Over time, there has been increased pressure from parents and school officials to select the high achieving students. As a result, there has been a continual need to reaffirm the Program's commitment to expanding

the pool.

Academic skills are assessed to determine the reading, writing, and mathematics skill levels of the nominated students. Their performance on standardized tests is reviewed to determine their academic profile, and to identify areas of strength and areas in need of remediation.

Assessment of students' ability and interest is an essential ingredient in the preparation of the summer program. In conjunction with the participating public school systems, outstanding local high school teachers are carefully selected to work with university staff on the development of modules in which intellectual development, leadership training, and academic motivation are stressed.

The teachers, freed from the normal bureaucratic constraints of the academic year, are encouraged to experiment and innovate. They are treated as colleagues by their university counterparts and not as second-class citizens. The relationship between the two groups is intensely collaborative, not hierarchical. The teachers have intimate knowledge of what is required for success in high school; rather than develop totally separate and unrelated courses to address remediation needs, every effort is made to provide academic coherence in the summer offerings. Courses are carefully structured and integrated; the knowledge and skills gained in one course are reinforced, whenever and however possible, in the others. The program thus addresses academic deficiencies while furthering the students' abilities in the broad areas of problem-solving and critical thinking. This approach is the core of the Early Identification Program and the key to its success.

The integrated approach to learning has been planned and implemented at each grade level by structuring courses around a central motif. Summer teaching staff thus overlap one another's efforts and coordinate their instruction to incorporate the broad theme. English, mathematics, and science teachers seek ways to help students see not only the relationships among the disciplines themselves but also the relationship of each discipline to the selected theme. For example, tenth graders consider the theme "Appearances Versus Reality," members of the junior class study "Elements in America," and the senior class try their hand at "Shadowing Reality" during their final summer in the program. The thematic approach also affects the curriculum in other ways, including the selection of field trips. Each class participates in one summer field trip and the students tie their field trip experiences to their class theme.

Weekly self-assessment is incorporated into the design of the courses, allowing students to gauge their own progress. For scheduling and administrative purposes, students are assigned to small groups, who move together from class to class during the Summer Academy and thus are able to reinforce each other's work and to provide mutual support. A university student accompanies each group throughout the session and serves as a tutor, counselor, and role model. In addition, students attend weekly tutoring sessions during the regular academic year, where they receive academic assistance and emotional support to bolster their motivation. Those who show consistent effort and improvement are recognized in the Early Identification Program's quarterly newsletter, and receive recognition awards at various celebrations during the year and at the end of the Summer Academy.

Students' academic progress is monitored throughout the school year by the program director and designated members in the partner school districts. Together, the program director and the school supervise the tutoring program. Throughout the year, they work with students, teachers, and families to resolve academic problems.

In addition to its extensive tutoring effort, the Early Identification Program

provides opportunities for participation in cultural events and college information programs. Students are invited to the University periodically for programs of potential interest. Often these programs focus on minorities in some way, but other cultural and sports activities are also selected. The purpose of such activities is to encourage students to find points of connection between their lives and academic interests, and to realize that colleges offer a wide variety of ways to learn.

The Early Identification Program continues throughout the students' high school careers. Students are expected to return for each summer for further skill and confidence-building through enrichment.

During the participants' junior and senior years in high school, attention is more strongly focused on college entrance. A special class is added to help students prepare for the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Information meetings for parents and students are organized to help all understand the college application and financial aid processes. Speakers representative of a myriad of careers describe their own experiences and offer advice regarding career opportunities.

### *Program Administrative Staff*

The Early Identification Program is led by a director who is a member of the university provost's staff. This administrative arrangement not only facilitates university-wide involvement in the program, but sends a very powerful message regarding the importance the university attaches to the program. Most pre-college programs are handled at a much lower level of the university hierarchy, an important distinction that is not lost on either external or internal communities.

In addition to the GMU program director, each cooperating local school system's Minority Student Achievement Office Service Specialist works closely with the program's director. Two of the three school districts have reassigned existing staff to work with the program.

### *Program Teaching Staff*

A key to the success of the Early Identification Program is the quality of the Summer Academy instructors, who must meet substantial learning objectives in limited time. The teachers all share a commitment to minority student achievement, a belief in the students' ability to succeed, a philosophy of education that values creativity and independent thinking, and an approach to teaching that encourages students to see connections between their experiences, their education, and the future.

Teacher selections are based on the recommendations of colleagues and supervisory personnel, as well as interviews. Once selected, teachers demonstrate their own creativity and problem-solving skills by participating in the planning of the summer program. Their ideas on the structure of the day, the objectives for each week, and the themes and issues to be examined have a major impact on the shape of the program. Ultimately, the summer program plan is a joint venture completed over several months in the spring.

### *University Tutors*

George Mason students are employed as tutors full-time for the three-week summer academy. Each is assigned to a particular grade level. They support the teacher in the classroom and work with the students on class assignments or independent work. In addition, several of the tutors continue their employment on a part-time basis during the regular academic year, assisting in the weekly tutoring sessions

held for program participants and with special activities and events sponsored by the program. The university tutors are very important to the success of the students; their presence not only supports reluctant learners and bolsters their motivation, but also provides students with strong role models to emulate.

### ***Community Volunteers***

The program has attracted numerous highly qualified volunteers. Many are teachers or retired teachers who share their time and expertise freely to assist in the development of students' academic skills. Volunteers from the university community include interested students and faculty who take time to serve as assistants in tutoring sessions or as guest speakers for classes and activities. Still other volunteers come from the local business and professional community. They serve as speakers or permit students to visit their work sites in "shadowing" experiences. Indeed, a wide variety of volunteers have exerted a significant influence and lent important support to the Program's mission.

### ***Parent Participation***

Too often programs are designed for students with insufficient parental participation. An essential aspect of the Early Identification Program is the focus on communication with families. In fact, during the program's opening ceremony both the student *and* the parent or guardian sign a contract committing themselves to the program goals. Parents are invited and encouraged to attend workshops that outline the objectives and activities of the program, demonstrate materials and types of assignments expected of the students, and discuss ways in which parents can support their children's preparation for college. Each workshop has specific activities; for example, the admissions workshop involves parents in reviewing sample college applications and hearing admissions officers describe which high school programs of study are best suited for college-bound students.

At the conclusion of each Summer Academy, parents are invited to a closing reception. At that time, recognition is given to students who have demonstrated consistent attendance, effort, and marked improvement in their skills. Parents are provided with strategies to reinforce gains made during the Summer Academy.

## **Integration of the Program into the Institution**

Since the Early Identification Program is a partnership program, integration occurs on two levels. At the university level, the program has the commitment and support of the administration and faculty. The university provides the program's director, office facilities, Summer Academy facilities and staff, arrangements for participants' admittance to selected university activities and events, financial aid and scholarships, tutoring facilities and tutors, and counseling services as needed. Once students enroll they are encouraged to participate in university academic support services, such as minority student support services and departmentally-based support activities. The partner school systems provide coordinators, transportation to university-sponsored activities and events, summer transportation and lunches, facilities for tutoring at selected schools, and counseling services as needed.

## The Evaluation Process

The effectiveness of the program is assessed by several methods. The most consistent method is close monitoring of students' grades throughout each academic year. Although their grades may drop initially due to a more rigorous program of study, over the course of their participation in the Program their grades are expected to climb. Other evaluative tools include monitoring the students' courses of study, noting changes and guiding students to select college preparatory courses. Teachers of the participating students are asked to evaluate student attitudes toward their work in comparison with similar students who are not participants in an intervention program.

During the Summer Academy, teachers review attendance, noting assignment completion, and assess overall participation by the students. In addition, teachers are asked to submit assessments of the Program's effectiveness and to recommend improvements for the following year.

The most important measurement of the effectiveness of the Program is its impact on the students' persistence in school as demonstrated by seeking out teacher assistance, completing homework, meeting tutors as assigned, enrolling in academic courses, and ultimately, applying to college with a solid academic program behind them.

The Early Identification Program is unique in several ways, which makes the evaluation outcomes particularly interesting:

- It is an alliance in which local public school districts work with the university on a program that addresses academic remediation while developing motivation in high-risk secondary school students.

- It brings together academically successful college students with less successful high school students. Both gain from the experience. The weaker has a role model from whom to learn new skills, while the stronger experiences the satisfaction of serving as a role model.

- It provides an opportunity for secondary and post-secondary school system personnel from a range of disciplines to work together as colleagues in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of a challenging program for future college students.

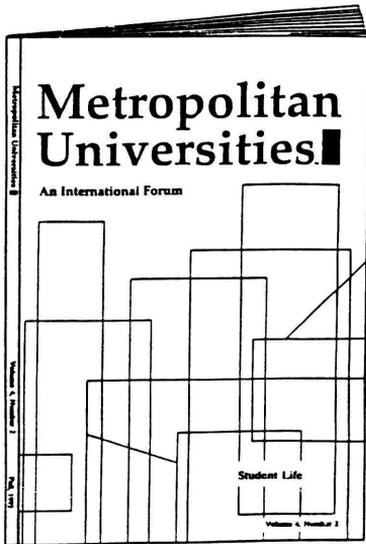
- It encourages increased, informed dialogue between parents and children, between the school system and families, and between the university and families about high school and college opportunities, concerns, and activities.

## Conclusion

The George Mason Early Identification Program model, if widely implemented, could have a profound positive effect on minority participation in higher education. In a very short period of time, the program has shown that it is possible to expand the pool of college-ready minority students. In secondary school, many students are inappropriately placed in nonacademic programs that fail to provide the academic preparation essential for making genuine choices concerning life beyond high school. By identifying students before they commit themselves to an academic program that ultimately limits their choices, by raising performance expectations, by providing them and their families with the kind of information they need to address their academic deficiencies and abilities, by demonstrating what is possible with role models who are teachers and students in a Summer Academy that is exciting and recognizes their particular life experiences, and by providing tutorial support during the aca-

demic year, the Early Identification Program offers students the necessary support that can make a difference in their high school experience, in their beliefs about themselves, and in their future.

**Note:** For detailed program information, please contact Ms. Hortensia B. Cadenas, Director, Early Identification Program, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia 22030.



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The Coalition of Urban  
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**Published for the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities  
by Towson State University and the University of Massachusetts at Boston  
Business Office: 8000 York Road, Towson MD 21204. (410) 830-3468.**