

**UTD is paving a bridge to academics for
First-generation college students.**

By LAURIE DENT

Bridging the Gap

They visit high schools. They give lectures. They conduct personal interviews. These are talent scouts of a non-sporting kind- they're the staff of UTD's Academic Bridge Program (ABP), a plan designed to help smooth the transition from high school to freshman year at UTD. The ABP, often referred to on campus as the "Bridge" program, gives selected students' resources they wouldn't otherwise have, from summer school housing to college-long tutoring and mentoring to business skills. Students admitted to the program typically come from school districts with limited resources and have slightly lower average SAT scores than regular-admissions students, yet they have demonstrated in other ways their potential to excel academically. The program provides UTD with a rich pool of motivated and qualified students who would otherwise fall through the cracks.

With the first graduates of the ABP receiving their degrees this spring, it's already easy to see how the extra attention made the path to success easier- and reachable- for these students. And as long as the funding continues, the ABP staff will keep recruiting otherwise overlooked high school graduates with the potential to score home runs for UTD.

"There are so many benefits from being in the program," says Cassandra Gandara, an ABP spring 2004 graduate with a degree in business administrations. "The great support and guidance from the Bridge administration, the early start, and the special bond created with the other Bridge members are sure to last a lifetime." Soli Ghirmai, the project supervisor for ABP, is on the front lines recruiting at area high schools. She also works daily with the students and sees first hand the benefits of having a bit of extra attentions and care. "If there was a program like this when I graduated from high school, I definitely would have done it," she says. "The secret is out now."

Crossing the Bridge

THE INAUGURAL BRIDE CLASS OF 2000 had thirty students. Today, the number has tripled, and more students apply than can be accepted. Funding comes from the university, which in turn receives monies from the state of Texas. In UTD's budget, the ABP is a line item with a price tag of approximately \$300,000 per year.

Entry into the ABP is preceded by strict scholastic and personal requirements. First, prospective students must be in the top 15 percent of their high school class and live in the Dallas, DeSoto, Duncanville, Wilmer-Hutchins, or Lancaster areas. Each student must follow the traditional enrollment protocol of any student applying to UTD, and must be accepted for admission.

The third and most critical test is passing an individual interview in which each student is evaluated on what ABP staff has dubbed “the five C’s”—commitment, which shows how much the student wants an education at UTD; competency, demonstrating that the student has the math, science, and language arts skills necessary to succeed in the college classroom; confidence, a belief in oneself; caring, meaning the student wants to work with others and enjoys social activities; and character, an attribute that leads the student to avoid harmful behaviors, such as drinking or drugs.

“We don’t think you can find the five Cs by looking at transcripts,” says Dr. George Fair, ABP director and dean for the School of Graduate Studies. “With personal interview, we find out whether or not they have the kind of constitution that can help them be successful.”

If there’s a profile of the typical ABP student, it generally includes being a first-generation collegiate—a student whose parents did not attend college. Many of the students also come from school districts with substandard resources which can impact their ability to qualify with the standardized measurements typically used to select incoming freshman.

Fair cites that SAT as an example. For many Dallas Independent School District (DISD) students, the SAT test is introduced for the first time in their senior year. Other districts have the resources to introduce the SAT much earlier so students have an opportunity to practice the test many times and improve their chances of a high score. As a result of this discrepancy, some DISD college-bound students are starting with a bit of a disadvantage and they will have to play catch-up. “There’s a difference,” says Fair. “It would be foolish for us to say there’s not.” The average ABP student SAT score is 1000 as compared to 1225 for the average UTD freshman.

This is precisely why the ABP exists- to compensate for some of the differences in the school districts. But Fair is emphatic when he points out that ABP students are on par with the rest of the student population- they’re smart and driven. “We’re bringing in people who have good character and work habits,” says Fair.

The ABP program is not geared toward any particular ethnicity. Of the ninety-nine students currently enrolled, thirty-seven are African American, twenty-three Latino, twenty-eight are Asian, and eleven Caucasian. Sixty-five percent are women, and Fair says the gender breakdown isn’t surprising. “That’s typical as to who gets the education for more cultural reasons that go beyond the Academic Bridge Program.”

Getting Ahead

ONCE STUDENTS PASS the rigorous admission requirements, their college careers officially begin in the summer before the regular-admission freshmen arrive. ABP students take three core classes: English, math, and rhetoric.

“They’re the same classes any UTD student would take. Bridge students are getting a jumpstart on their coursework. At the end of the summer, they have seven credit hours toward their freshman year,” says Fair. Since the typical UTD student takes fifteen hours per semester in order to graduate in four years, ABP students only need to take twelve hours per semester the first year and will still be on target. “That makes the first semester a little easier,” adds Fair.

Also, during the summer, ABP students’ first three classes are self-contained, and they get gratis housing and a meal stipend. “That’s what I tell the students when I go out to recruit them,” says Ghirmai. “In the summer everything is paid for.”

After the seven summer hours are complete, ABP students mesh with the rest of the UTD student population, and the room and board allowances are dissolved. But they still receive plenty of other benefits. “Throughout their college careers, we provide teaching assistance for all their classes and provide tutoring,” says Fair. In addition, the ABP staff helps its students apply for financial aid (80 percent are eligible) as well as learn other necessary skills, like writing a compelling resume and learning business acumen. The ABP also introduces students to internships and career counseling.

Bridge students can compete for two scholarships- the Polsky Prize, a \$2,500 award given to the most outstanding summer student, and the Bridge Builders Award, worth \$1,000 and given to excellent summer students.

ABP students are also given extra opportunity for help with math, and the ABP offers peer-to-peer tutoring, as well as assistance from older students who lend their skills in chemistry, computer science, biology, government, history, and math. With many UTD classrooms holding upwards of eighty students, the individualized training makes a big impact. Tutoring is also available for test preparation and exam finals.

Perhaps most significantly, the ABP offers students camaraderie and support. There are trips to amusement parks and the theater, and even pool parties and barbecues. Students also bond by volunteering for charitable organizations, such as the North Texas Food Bank. And during spring break they travel together by bus for the semi-annual Civil Rights Trip, which includes several historic sites in Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee, such as the Civil Rights Museum, Rosa Parks Museum, and the Martin Luther King Historical District. “The students come back a little bit changed,” says Ghirmai.

From the classroom to social culture, the ABP is all about creating tomorrow’s business leaders, academicians, and working professionals. Gandara says the ABP guided her to a law career. “The program has helped me throughout the entire law school application process, including my preparation for the LSAT.

“The ABP has filled me with motivation and purpose, giving me a reason to push toward my goals,” Gandara says. “It has provided me with a strong base of support to face the challenges of the world today.”

ABP is only one of many ways UTD is working to even the playing field for students who come from under-funded public schools, and this program is a piece of larger puzzle. The two primary underlying problems-discrepancies in the quality of public schools and a lack of access to higher education for certain groups- are widely recognized on the state and national level as the root cause for serious “education gaps” that could be detrimental to our nation’s economic and social future.

Recently, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board established its Closing the Gaps program to address gaps in student participation, success, excellence, and

research – not only within the state of Texas, but also between Texas and other states. At the national level, the American Association for Higher Education has established The Education Trust, which works to close “achievement gaps” at all levels of education, with an emphasis on low-income and minority students.

As one of the most important public education institutions in Texas today, UTD plays a role in supporting the missions of these other institutions and building a bridge to close education gaps before they reach crisis proportions. **UTD**