



CASE STUDY

Preparing Oklahoma Students for the Future

Challenge

In the early 1990s, Oklahoma high school students were graduating largely without the skills necessary to succeed in college. College remediation rates exceeded 60 percent in some areas, and the majority of high school graduates were unprepared for the rigor of entry-level college courses. In addition, wide achievement gaps existed between racial/ethnic minority groups and Caucasian students in the state's K–12 schools.

Solution

The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education sought to help K–12 students better prepare for college and work, as well as to narrow the achievement gaps that existed in K–12 schools in the state.

Their first step was to raise college admission standards from 11 to 15 required units of core coursework in high school. This stronger core curriculum, they believed, would increase Oklahoma students' readiness for life after high school.

The State Regents understood, however, that raising admission standards could have a negative impact on college access. A state study showed that higher standards might leave some students behind, particularly low-income and minority students who might not have the same opportunities as others to prepare for the more rigorous requirements. At the same time, the study revealed that all students would individually benefit from the extra academic preparation and better information on college readiness.

As a result, the State Regents decided to help all students in Oklahoma succeed through ACT's EPAS[™] Educational Planning and Assessment System. With ACT as partners, they implemented EPAS as a voluntary program with four pilot school districts in 1993.

Why EPAS?

EPAS is a voluntary program over and above Oklahoma's mandated K–12 testing requirements. So why would school districts participate? In part, because the three assessments in EPAS—EXPLORE[®] (8th grade), PLAN[®] (10th grade), and the ACT (11th or 12th grade)—comprise the only assessment system in the state that measures student readiness along a continuum of college readiness benchmarks.

In addition, the data, guidance, and feedback provided by EPAS are useful to students, parents, and teachers. For example, they can: help an individual student work on math skills; help a teacher revise how a particular concept is taught; help a student choose a career, as well as plan the academic courses he/she will need to achieve that career goal.

EPAS also helps the Oklahoma State Regents make policy decisions and communicate to the public what colleges expect in the way of readiness skills through ACT's College Readiness Standards.

Results

EPAS, which remains a voluntary program, now serves over 95 percent of Oklahoma's 8th- and 10th-grade public school students. In 2003, Oklahoma EPAS served 489 school districts (including 42 private districts and two Bureau of Indian Affairs schools), with nearly 85,000 students taking the assessments and benefiting from the system's early interventions.

The results are clear:

- **More students are taking the ACT college entrance exam.**
 - For the 2002 graduating class, 26,717 students (72 percent of all graduates) took the ACT, an increase of 25 percentage points compared to 1992.
- **ACT scores have risen.**
 - The average ACT composite score in Oklahoma rose from 20.0 in 1992 to 20.5 in 2002, outpacing the national growth in scores during this period.
 - Oklahoma is one of only three (out of 16) member states in the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to have made gains on the national ACT average score.
- **Rigorous course taking has increased, particularly among minority students.**
 - The proportion of African American students taking core coursework has risen from 38 percent to 51 percent since EPAS was implemented.
 - Native American core course taking rose from 39 percent to 46 percent during the same time period.
- **Students' educational aspirations have risen following administration of each assessment.**
 - Educational aspirations of Oklahoma EPAS students rise between 8th and 10th grades, as well as between 10th grade and their taking of the ACT.

- Most students upgrade their aspirations to the level of a two- or four-year college degree.
- **College attendance rates are up.**
 - The college-going rate rose from 51 percent in 1997 (when participation in EPAS reached a critical mass number of districts) to 58 percent in 2002.
- **College remediation rates have dropped in all content areas.**
 - Oklahoma higher education's core competencies for college readiness and success are clearly defined and communicated to students and schools through ACT's College Readiness Standards.
- **Gaps between and among demographic subgroups have narrowed.**
 - Oklahoma's African American, Native American, and Hispanic students now outscore their national peers on the ACT.
 - The most significant contribution to the state's gains in ACT scores comes from increases in minority student scores.