**AVATAR 2014-15 Final Report**

**September 28, 2015**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The goal of AVATAR (Academic Vertical Alignment Training and Renewal) in 2014-15 was to focus vertical alignment efforts on the College Preparatory Courses (CPCs) in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics mandated by House Bill 5 of the 2013 Texas Legislative Assembly at the regional level. A lead institution in each of the 20 Texas Education Agency regions was awarded a subcontract directly from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) or through its award to the University of North Texas (UNT). Major accomplishments of the AVATAR partnership in each region included 1) enhancing the college readiness and success of students through the CPCs and 2) developing best practices in the design, delivery, and assessment of the CPCs. This report presents the work of the regions in four groups that were at different stages of this work in Fall 2015. At that time, eight regions (1, 2, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, and 20) had students enrolled in CPCs through signed MOU (Memoranda of Understanding) of school districts and Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) and proceeded with delivery and assessment of these courses. Six regions (3, 4, 9. 10, 11, and 12) had developed plans for CPCs and MOUs but student enrollment was limited, so resources were committed to course improvement, professional development of educators, and/or collaboration to develop students’ college readiness. In two regions (5, 7), partnerships were formed and work completed to enable the offering of CPCs in 2015-16. In the remaining four regions (6, 8, 14 and 18), work was started but had not progressed far enough for CPCs to be offered in 2015-16. This report summarizes accomplishments of the AVATAR partnerships in these groupings, accolades associated with the work, the types of challenges reported, the numbers of activities held by the regions, coordinator perceptions of the leadership of the AVATAR staff at UNT, and their plans for assessment of the impact of AVATAR in the coming year. Appendices summarize two major accomplishments of each region in response to project goals and list publications and presentations about AVATAR in 2014-15.

**ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF REGIONS BY GROUPS**

**Regions Where Students Were Enrolled in CPC’s**

In the eight most developed regions, five (1, 2, 17, 19, and 20) conceived their partnerships as including most or all of the school districts in the region and multiple IHEs. In these regions, the project leaders tended to assume a coordinating role, overseeing the development, delivery, and assessment of courses offered at multiple sites and serving up to 1000 students. In these regions, oversight bodies were formed to resolve administrative issues related to the courses while VATs focused on curricular and alignment issues. Two of the regions (13 and 16) developed partnerships of one or two school districts with IHE partners that were viewed as models for other partnerships. In Region 15, multiple partnerships were developed that have the potential to expand to include other small and rural districts and their IHE partners. AVATAR coordinators in these regions tended to view as best practices the interactions among Vertical Alignment Teams (VATs) that contributed to alignment of curriculum, locally developed instruction materials, and assessments of the courses and of professional development for teachers of the CPCs. Professional development took the form of face to face and online gatherings, course starter kits, and use of train-the-trainers models within and across school districts. Facilitators often noted the contributions of IHE members to leadership of the VATs in course design and delivery. They also noted common difficulty in securing the data needed to assess the impact of the CPCs.

**Regions Where Courses Were Offered with Few Students**

It should be noted that the regions in which courses were developed but few students enrolled tended to be either new to AVATAR or located in the north central part of Texas, which includes a mixture of rural, suburban, and urban school districts and community colleges with multiple campuses. Regions in this group devoted their efforts to some combination of improving the vertical alignment of already developed courses; offering professional development to inform teachers, counselors, and administrators about the CPC mandate; and developing strategies to advance the college readiness of students through partnerships of K-12 and higher education. Coordinators in four of these regions reported improved vertical alignment of CPCs as the best practice evident in their work of 2014-15. The two other coordinators focused on the strength of the VATs as providers of professional development and on the potential for collaboration between secondary and post-secondary educators to engage students in activities associated with college readiness and college going.

**Regions Where Courses Were Developed**

In two regions, CPCs were developed. New to AVATAR, Region 5 formed a partnership that developed CPCs and signed the related MOU. In Region 7, a mathematics VAT developed an innovative CPC based on problem based instruction (PBI) and practical problem solving. With its focus on mathematics, Region 7 hoped to partner with Region 6 in its work with an ELA CPC.

**Regions Where Partnerships Were Formed**

In three regions, new or returning to AVATAR after a lapse of two years, partnerships were developed for collaboration between secondary and post-secondary education. Progress in these three regions was affected by changes in the AVATAR coordinator after the project had started. All wished they had understood earlier the project expectations. At a fourth site, an established AVATAR team lost momentum when its school partner signed an MOU with a different provider for offering its CPC. These cases illustrate the importance of a solid partnership in guiding the development of a vertically aligned curriculum.

**ACCOLADES**

In addition to the accomplishments described above and in more detail in Appendix A, the following accolades were noted by AVATAR coordinators as contributing to the work in 2014-15.

* Use of the school and college level data available from the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.
* The power of the Texas College and Career Readiness Standards as a resource for use in both secondary and post-secondary education.
* Agreement to a joint MOU between Regions 1 and 2.
* Availability of model CPC and MOU resources on the AVATAR website.
* The availability in some regions of funding to relieve school districts of the cost of materials and professional development associated with the CPCs.
* Creative use by project leaders of already-existing annual professional development events and tools to spread the word about good practice in collaboration with higher education, vertical alignment, and college readiness.

**CHALLENGES**

The following challenges noted by coordinators were common in the work accomplished.

1. **In forming a partnership**

* Commitment of the partners must include incentives for the same individuals to attend meetings regularly and to inform their home teams.
* Not all IHEs were familiar with the CPC mandate and its implications for action to promote college readiness.
* Starting collaborations at the beginning of the school year is important for success.
* Leadership changes set back the work.
* Finding meeting times requires attention to different calendar and scheduling patterns of secondary and post-secondary education.

1. **In developing and promoting CPCs**

* Coming to agreement about the MOU is challenging and must take place well before planned offering of the courses.
* District are required to offer CPCs but without students being required to take them. Interest will grow as high school graduation plans come to include the CPCs.
* Promotion of the CPCs to counselors, administrators, and teachers as well as to students and their families is needed to address implications for college admission and success.
* How to motivate replication is a challenge faced in regions where a partnership composed of one feeder pattern took the lead.

1. **In offering and supporting CPCs**

* Small and rural districts are most challenged in support of teachers offering the CPCs as agreed in the MOUs.
* Teachers who do not attend the training provided are most challenged in offering the CPCs with fidelity. Professional development requires use of webinar or recorded sessions as well as face to face alternatives.
* The cost of textbooks and online access fees falls on districts that offer the CPCs.

1. **Related to district practices**

* When districts offer the CPCs without signed MOUs, their students are put in danger of not being recognized as college ready.
* Not all districts are using the same PIEMS number for the CPCs.
* Some districts advocate early enrollment of students in CPCs without taking TSI implications into account.
* In some regions, district MOU with IHE’s have different policies for TSI exemption.
* In this first year, eligible students sometimes did not see how the CPC could apply to their high school graduation plans.
* Teachers who were inexperienced, uncertified, or otherwise unprepared to teach the CPCs were most challenged by the collaborative professional development expected in some regions.
* There is not an effective and efficient way for transcripts to report course outcomes to the IHEs in ways that enable them to make good decisions about the placement of the students.

1. **In assessment of impact**

* When student data are not provided by school districts and colleges, VATs cannot use them in making recommendations for improving student performance.
* Large regions with many school districts and many collaborating community colleges are challenged to collect data about the CPCs.

**NUMBERS OF REGIONAL ACTIVITIES AND PARTICIPANTS, 2014-2015**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Outcomes | Meetings | Trainings | Events |
| Total Number | 125 | 28 | 13 |
| Total Participants | 989 | 493 | 682 |

**AVATAR STAFF**

Appendix B provides information about publications and presentations related to AVATAR in 2014-15.

Regional final report guidelines asked coordinators to state how the AVATAR staff could have been more helpful. Overall, the coordinators felt supported and appreciated the work of Drs. Mary Harris and Jean Keller. Two new coordinator expressed appreciation for the guidance during the transition period from one coordinator to another. One coordinator expressed appreciation for the face-to-face meetings. One coordinator expressed gratitude for the staff support in leveraging funding. A coordinator asked for more help with writing the MOU. Multiple coordinators thanked the staff for their dedication, perseverance, and passion for AVATAR. Several coordinators asked the staff to keep the website current with postings. A coordinator thanked the AVATAR staff for the excellent sharing of resource materials related to the AVATAR and vertical alignment work. A coordinator indicated a desire for more face to face meetings to develop products, services, or professional development modules to be used at the regional level. Two new coordinators indicated the AVARTAR Directors expected too much from the coordinators in light of their other ESC duties and responsibilities and desired webinars versus telephone calls. One coordinator suggested AVATAR staff meet with TEA to request the districts put more emphasis on the importance of offering and providing data related to the CPCs.

**PLANS FOR ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT**

Coordinators noted in their final reports plans for assessment of the CPCs’ impact on students. Even regions that were well along in the offering and coordinating the courses saw this as a major challenge. They noted the need to find a way to track students who have completed the CPC from high school to college. Some saw data collection by the state agencies as important to both high schools and colleges. Many regretted that their original MOU, sometimes in effect for three years, did not give more attention to data collection and sharing. Reactions to lack of local data and, in some cases, unwillingness to provide it due to FERPA or other concerns varied from making data collection a formal research activity agreed to by all parties through IRB agreements to accepting that data assessment for the immediate future would be limited to what is collected through the TEA and THECB accountability systems. Some regional partnerships were confident that stronger emphasis on the need for data to fulfill the mandate of HB 5 for continuous course improvement would lead districts and colleges to provide data using agreed-upon protocols. There was general agreement that needed data included enrollment, completion, and success indicators related to the CPC’s and enrollment, related course enrollment (including both developmental and non-developmental courses), and persistence and success data from colleges. Needed success data were perceived to include grades in related courses, TSI indicators, and persistence and completion information.

AVATAR partnerships understood the on-going role of VATS in assessment and improvement of the CPCs over time. In some regions, VATs engaged in data collection through surveys of students, CPC instructors, and school districts. One coordinator pointed out the ease of survey administration as part of an online course or professional development module. Actual or anticipated content of surveys varied. One coordinator anticipated learning from students about their college readiness experiences; another wanted to learn from CPC instructors how their courses were aligned across sites. Regional coordinators saw surveys as a way to keep current on CPC enrollment and assessment details across multiple districts that had, in some cases, different TSI exemption criteria.

Several coordinators perceived that the IHE’s had an interest in CPC data and should be active in its collection. Another pointed out the need for information about students who were eligible to enroll in an available CPC but chose not to do so.

**APPENDIX A: OUTCOMES REPORTED BY REGIONS**

1. Region 1, University of Texas, Pan American

* CPC’s developed in 2014 were offered in the 35 districts in the region that had signed MOUs. UTPA assumed leadership for course management, professional development, and evaluation of the courses, which included some online components. Approximately 1400 students were enrolled. Region 1 signed a reciprocal agreement with Region 2.
* Partnership among the four IHEs in the region led to their common acceptance of the CPCs developed and to collaboration in development and evaluation of the courses based, in part, on student data.

1. Region 2, Citizens for Excellent Education

* Eleven districts offered CPC’s in collaboration with all colleges in the region, and some of the enrolled students were identified as college ready. The VATs developed assessments and templates for data collection. Region 2 signed a reciprocal agreement with Region 1.
* The Bridging the Gaps Mathematics Symposium, sponsored by the Mathematics VAT, provided strong professional development for both secondary and post-secondary educators.

1. Region 3 ESC

* Collaboration between secondary and post-secondary educators strengthened capacity for focus on why and how students can prepare for college and the role of the CPC in assuring a smooth transition.
* VATs used Index 4 in the TEA Accountability System to affirm vertical alignment of the CPC’s as they were related to student and school success

1. Region 4 ESC

* A partnership was formed of districts that had signed MOU with IHE’s, but enrollment was low and varied by high school campus.
* Partners embraced the need for discussion of vertical alignment of mathematics and ELA curriculum that includes the CPCs.

1. Region 5 ESC

* Leaders formed a partnership, agreed to syllabi for the CPCs, and reached agreements that led to a mutually acceptable MOU.
* In the future, best practices will be recognized through the evaluations of the CPCs as they are offered.

1. Region 6 ESC

* The district members of the partnership offered CPCs in 2014-15, but they were not the CPCs developed through the AVATAR group. A survey of CPC implementation in the region was conducted.
* Best practice in development and improvement of a CPC depends on the commitment to collaboration of the partners as developed in earlier years but not maintained in this partnership

1. Region 7 ESC

* The mathematics VAT developed a CPC that provided for practical applications of mathematics through project-based instruction (PBI), developed projects and activities aligned to the TEKS, and is ready to embed them into an online course that includes a how to study format.
* Development of a CPC mathematics course around PBI demonstrates best practice for a rural region that must depend on its own resources.

1. Region 8 ESC

* A partnership was formed that will work on development of CPCs in 2015-16.
* The region can benefit from the work of others in CPC development and implementation

1. Region 9 ESC

* After development of the CPCs, primarily in 2014-15, the VATs continued to work to provide information about them and offer professional development for secondary and post-secondary teachers.
* The participation of the same teams of educators in development the CPCs and providing information about them to other educators assured that professional development was practical and aligned with student needs.

1. Region 10 ESC

* The CPCs developed in 2014-15 were strengthened by deepening their frameworks and expanding resources and activities.
* Modules developed for the mathematics CPC curriculum improved the quality of the course.

1. Region 11 ESC

* Focusing on IHE participants, two-year partners assessed vertical alignment of CPC curriculum and ways to offer districts support in their CPC offering through signed MOU.
* Critical conversation between secondary and post-secondary faculty helped to assure vertical alignment of the curriculum, assisting transition of students across levels.

1. Region 12 ESC

* In fall 2014, a symposium of all potential partners in the region drew attention to the CPC mandate. By February, 2015, 16 districts had signed MOUs, but student enrollment was not sufficient. Current work focuses on how student transition from high school to college can be facilitated through partnership.
* Data provided to school leaders about enrollment of graduates of regional high schools in developmental education brought new impetus to the concept of college readiness. Visibility was brought to the “boot camp” associated with Upward Bound as a tool for promoting college readiness

1. Region 13 ESC

* The partnership was able to expand its influence as an AVATAR and Pathways Partner by reaching out through the regional Curriculum Council, the two member school districts, the community college district, and a four-year partner.
* Critical conversations among VAT members improved the quality of the original CPC curricula and led to identification of issues related to student needs, resources, and instructional methods.

1. Region 14 ESC

* Discussion was started within a partnership about how to assure the success of students in college through strategies that include the CPCs.
* Discussion was started about development of an MOU to support offering the CPCs in light of regional characteristics and needs

1. Region 15 ESC

* Surveying the region, we found that the districts offering the CPC’s with students enrolled had been involved in our 2013-14 CPC vertical alignment meetings. Many of the districts where CPCs were not offered in 2014-15 signed MOUs with partner colleges for 2015-16.
* Some aspects of best practices were evident in the reports of districts about their successes and challenges in offering the CPCs. Information about the success of the students is still being gathered.

1. Region 16 ESC

* Building on the work completed by one AVATAR partnership in 2013-14, 303 students completed the Mathematics CPC, and 408 completed the ELA CPC, and some data were collected to enable assessment of progress.
* The successful work of one partnership provides a starting point for CPC development and emulation by other partnerships

1. Region 17 ESC

* By the end of 2014-15 51 districts in the region had MOUs in place with South Plains College. ESC 17 has offered eight professional development sessions for 200 CPC teachers. In Spring 2015, 879 students completed the mathematics CPC, and 1024, the ELA. Pass rates were low for both courses, and especially for mathematics.
* Starting with CPCs already developed, VATs worked on supporting materials for teachers. The ELA VAT developed a starter kit that is available in Live Binder maintained by ESC 17. The mathematics VAT is drafting a similar document.

1. Region 18 ESC

* Some members of a partnership centered in Ector County ISD were identified.
* The region can benefit from the work of others in CPC development and implementation

1. Region 19 ESC

* By 2015, all districts in the region had signed MOUs with the IHE’s. Eight of the districts offered the CPCs in 2014-15, with 500 students enrolled.
* The ESC provided materials, training, and support for the offering of the courses. Workforce partners were added to the partnership to help with continued planning.

1. Region 20 ESC

* A region-wide partnership that included 34 districts, Alamo College, and UT-San Antonio implemented CPC’s and MOUs signed in 2014-15 for 1500 eligible students, about half of whom enrolled.
* Being a region-wide partnership led to the ESC’s providing professional development and training of course instructors. With many high schools involved, we used a train the trainers’ model, placing CPC teachers in VATs to explore the intent and potential impact of the courses.

**APPENDIX B: Publications and Presentations about AVATAR, 2014-15**

**Publications**

Keller, J., & Harris, M. (August, 2015). Lessons from AVATAR for reaching 60x30TX. *College and Career Readiness Digest, 16.*

<http://www.txccrn.uh.edu/news/TXCCRN%20News/2015-8-AVATAR/index.php/>

Harris, M., & Keller, J. (May, 2015). HB5 college preparatory courses: A look after one year.

*College and Career Readiness Digest,* 14. <http://www.txccrn.uh.edu/news/TXCCRN%20News/2015-5-22-avatar/index.php>

Harris, M., and Keller, J. (March-April, 2015). Results of AVATAR Regional College Preparatory Course Survey. *College and Career Readiness Digest,* 13. <http://www.txccrn.uh.edu/news/TXCCRN%20News/2015-3-1-avatar/index.php>

Wright-Chapman, K., Harris, M., & Keller, J. (February, 2015). AVATAR and CTE. *College and Career Readiness Digest,* 12.

[*http://txccrn.uh.edu/news/TXCCRN%20News/2015-2-1-avatar/*](http://txccrn.uh.edu/news/TXCCRN%20News/2015-2-1-avatar/)

Harris, M. & Keller, J. (November, 2014). Welcome to the AVATAR Website. *College and Career Readiness Digest,* 10.

<http://txccrn.uh.edu/news/TXCCRN%20News/2014-10-1-avatarweb>

**Presentations to External Groups**

Harris, M. & Keller, J. (May 25, 2015). *Creating and implementing college preparatory courses, Texas-style.* National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development International Conference on Teaching and Leadership Excellence, Austin, TX.

Harris, M., Keller, J., & Mills, S. (March, 27, 2015). *College preparatory courses as developmental education.* 10th Annual Developmental Education Regional Forum, North Texas Community College Consortium and Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Fort Worth TX.

Harris, M. & Keller, J. (January 30, 2015). *HB5 mandated college preparatory classes: Statewide development.* Keynote address. North Texas Community College Consortium Spring Leadership Conference, Plano, TX.

Harris, M. (December 2, 2014). *AVATAR college preparatory course project*. North Texas Regional P-16 Council. Fort Worth, TX.