



# Austin Uses StudentTracker<sup>SM</sup> to Identify Student Achievement Gaps and Indicators for Successful Outcomes

Among the top benchmarked metropolitan districts in the nation, the Austin Independent School District serves a diverse high school student body of approximately 20,000 individuals. In 2009, they gained the spotlight with more than five of their high schools breaking into Newsweek's "Top 600 High Schools in the Country" list – notably more than any other Texas school district.

To meet the long-term challenges of a metropolitan school district, Austin relies on their Department of Program Evaluation to guide and assess their strategic goals for student academic success. They were primarily concerned with obtaining postsecondary data from out-of-state institutions as well as the ability to view student-level details. StudentTracker for High Schools, the Clearinghouse's student outcomes research service, supported their goals by providing real-time and nationwide data on where their students enroll for college, how they persist, what degrees or certifications they achieve, and much more. After Austin began using StudentTracker in 2003, they depended on up-to-date information they could use to conduct their own longitudinal research studies each year.

With the StudentTracker research service, Austin gained a richer understanding of their students' educational careers that extend beyond high school graduation. They discovered that not only could they easily follow students at popularly picked colleges like the University of Texas and Texas A&M University, but they could get details from institutions anywhere in the U.S. As students moved, transferred, dropped out, or returned after stopping out, Austin has been able to trace their higher education careers.

With this information, the district has been able to effectively communicate actual college outcomes of their graduates across campuses and on the policymaking level. StudentTracker has grown into an everyday tool that helps them track students throughout higher education and plan ahead in college readiness efforts for their future graduates.

## Studying the Aspiration Gap

For Austin's high schools, one of the most valuable points for assessment was the "aspiration gap" – the difference between what students intend to do and what they actually achieve in higher education. The investigation into this gap was supported by a federal grant for Smaller Learning Communities (SLCs). Each year, the district conducts a survey where high school students articulate their

plans for the future, which is a typical method of collecting research data for many high schools and districts.

In their first year of using StudentTracker, Austin discovered that the actual college graduation rate was much lower than they had anticipated. From 2003 to 2006, the rate of graduation had lowered from 5.6% to 2.4%, which initiated the urgency of examining actual outcomes. Similarly, Austin noticed gaps in postsecondary enrollment trends between what the surveys reported and what StudentTracker was returning in results. In a side-by-side comparison of the two data sources, they found that there was close to a 28% gap between student intention and student enrollment for 2009 graduates.

In addition, Austin received crucial data regarding postsecondary enrollment among various student groups, allowing them to pinpoint especially low enrollment rates among Hispanics, economically disadvantaged students, and English as a Second Language learners. In the comprehensive data provided, the district was also able to easily separate out and compare enrollment and persistence levels between their 13 regular high schools.

## One Giant Step towards Progress

Austin's district prioritizes the improvement of instructional practices used by teachers and the preparation practices by other stakeholders such as administrators, counselors, program

directors, and others. The postsecondary enrollment data from StudentTracker enables the district to gauge their progress towards ensuring that all students will graduate ready for college, career, and life in a globally competitive economy.

The depth and breadth of StudentTracker data offers the ability to examine leading indicators for successful academic outcomes. Austin's Department of Program Evaluation has been able to gain valuable insight into campus needs. For instance, the Clearinghouse's student research service has been an important stepping stone in the growth of their Campus Improvement Plan. Campus staff uses the data to assess the effectiveness of their efforts towards college readiness, many of whom advise individuals on a one-on-one basis.

Their StudentTracker reporting has also led to the campus-wide launch of "Postsecondary Data Use Seminars," a series of presentations designed to power campus conversations and action

"Using Clearinghouse data is a tremendous asset to our district. StudentTracker helps us identify postsecondary enrollment gaps across student groups. Without this data, we would not know whether our classroom or programmatic efforts have been successful."

- Karen Looby, Program Evaluation Supervisor,  
Austin ISD

towards improving college readiness, academically and beyond (also funded by the district's SLC grant). "StudentTracker provides us with valid and reliable data on student enrollment outcomes that we could not otherwise measure," commented Ginger Gossman, Program Evaluation Analyst. "This year, it helped provide campus staff with the student-level data to effectively follow up with our graduates who were expected to enroll, but did not."

With the real-time student data provided by the Clearinghouse, the Austin district was able to produce their own longitudinal study entitled, *The Determinants of Postsecondary Enrollment: Evidence from the AISD Class of 2007*. To read more about Austin and their student outcomes research, go to <http://www.austinisd.org>.

### **StudentTracker Success Stories**

Discover how StudentTracker helps U.S. school districts better understand and improve student achievement for future graduates: <http://research.studentclearinghouse.org>. To learn more about how this student outcomes research service can empower your school district, please email [studenttracker@studentclearinghouse.org](mailto:studenttracker@studentclearinghouse.org).

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