Texas Postsecondary and Career Counseling Academy  
The University of Texas at Austin  
Fall 2015

Background
In May 2015 the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 18 with overwhelming support, to bolster the college and career advising available to students in middle and high schools. HB 18 establishes a statewide initiative to train counselors and advisors in public secondary schools about the range of educational pathways and career opportunities available to students, especially as a result of House Bill 5 in 2013. HB 18 also requires each school district to provide instruction to students in seventh and eighth grade about preparing for high school, college, and possible careers.

HB 5 made substantial changes in Texas high school graduation plans, so that the default for all students is no longer a college preparatory plan with four courses in each of the core subject areas (English, math, science, and social studies). Instead, starting with the class of 2018, every eighth grade student begins with a basic “Foundation” high school graduation plan, then meets with a counselor to develop a Personal Graduation Plan that may include enhancing the Foundation plan with one or more optional ‘endorsements,’ including: (1) arts and humanities; (2) business and industry; (3) multidisciplinary studies; (4) public services; or (5) STEM. Students may also elect to pursue a Distinguished Achievement graduation plan that includes more advanced courses and enables them to be eligible for automatic admission to the state flagship universities.

Even before the new graduation pathways and advising requirements established by HB 5, Texas counselors were overburdened. Standardized testing and various clerical and administrative responsibilities demand a significant portion of a typical Texas secondary school counselor’s time. In general, the ratio of counselors to students in Texas is also well above the American School Counselor Association’s recommended 250:1 ratio. For example, in the 2010-11 school year, Texas had a counselor to student ratio of about 440:1; by 2013-14 the ratio had risen to 465:1.¹

HB 18 assigns primary responsibility to The University of Texas at Austin for developing the Texas Postsecondary and Career Counseling Academy, including developing instructional materials that schools can use with seventh and through twelfth grade students and their families. To support this work, the Legislature also made a $20 million appropriation to UT Austin for the 2016-17 biennium. UT Austin’s principal investigator and lead is Dr. Harrison Keller.

Approach
Any statewide initiative in Texas faces inherent challenges due to the state’s size and diversity. Texas public schools serve more than 5 million students in more than 8,500 traditional public schools and charter schools, from Divide ISD with fewer than 15 students to Houston ISD with more than 200,000. There are more than 8,000 secondary school counselors and thousands more educators with formal or informal advising responsibilities. The Texas Postsecondary and Career Counseling Academy must provide content and tools that will be relevant to educators and students across the state, and improve advising across a spectrum of complex issues related to high school, college, and career readiness.

Given the scale and complexity of these challenges, this initiative must include a strong network of partners, including counselors, school leaders, colleges and universities, state agencies, state and national funders, and other stakeholders. The initiative must also leverage the best available content, technologies, and research, so that the appropriated funds can be targeted to develop, enhance, and incorporate the highest quality tools and learning experiences for counselors and advisors, and for students and their families.

With deep experience in leading innovations in technology-enhanced education and large-scale professional development opportunities for educators, and strong established partnerships with leading educators,

instutions, and organizations across the state and around the nation, UT Austin is well-positioned to achieve the following objectives for the Texas Postsecondary and Career Counseling Academy:

1. **Establish advisory committees** of leading experts in the development and provision of support services, resources, and systems for secondary counseling and advising, beginning in Fall 2015. These advisors will contribute to the design, review, development, and evaluation of all aspects of the initiative.

2. **Establish a data analytics infrastructure** to inform and manage the development and implementation of the initiative, while also increasing data accessibility for stakeholders, beginning in Fall 2015.

3. **Specify core competencies** by January 2016 to be addressed by the initiative. Based on HB 18, these should include competencies related to high school graduation plans, options for students to earn course credit, college and university admissions requirements, regional workforce opportunities, and effective strategies for engaging students and their families in planning for high school, college, and career opportunities.

4. **Develop high quality content or adapt existing content** by September 2016 to build and develop the target competencies in counselors and individuals providing counseling services to students and families across Texas.

5. **Implement scalable infrastructure** by September 2016 for delivering and credentialing robust professional development for secondary counselors and advisors, for connecting participants with each other, and for delivering online content and tools that schools may use with seventh and eighth grade students and their families.

6. **Incorporate technology-enabled tools** for delivery in the 2016-17 academic year to improve secondary school counseling and college and career readiness advising in multiple dimensions, and to educate students and their families about potential educational pathways and career opportunities.

7. **Deploy online professional development** modules for delivery in the 2016-17 academic year that enable educators to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to advise students appropriately about high school, college, and career readiness, and to fulfill additional counseling responsibilities associated with HB 5.

8. **Distribute online instructional materials** for delivery in the 2016-17 academic year including content and tools for middle school students and their families, and supporting resources for educators related to high school, college, and career readiness.

**Broadening Impact**

Beyond these initial goals, we see opportunities to work with partners to develop deeper content and tools to reach new populations of advisors, broaden use, and improve sustainability.

**Deeper Content Development:**
UT Austin will develop online, self-paced professional development modules focused on the most critical content and skill areas. The content in these courses is dynamic, and will be updated to reflect developments in academic and workforce demands, and based on participants’ feedback.

**Expanded Reach:**
The initiative prioritizes counseling professionals as the target audience for the first two years. However, it is clear that other educators and family members play important advising roles. The initiative will provide tools to support all individuals providing counseling, and middle school students and families planning for a postsecondary education.

**Microcredentialing:**
UT Austin will deploy technology-enabled tools for validating and managing “microcredentials” associated with participants’ demonstration of specific competencies. This infrastructure may be deployed in a variety of educational contexts, including other professional development initiatives.

**Partnership Opportunities**
Strong partnerships are critical to advancing this work. We hope to deepen and expand our current network of partners through shared contacts and introductions. For more information please contact Dr. Harrison Keller at harrison.keller@austin.utexas.edu or (512) 232-8277.