



InET Consortium

Dual Enrollment: High School and College

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RIO GRANDE CITY, RGV – South Texas College (Weslaco TX) has a higher percentage of students graduating from early college high schools with an Associate degree than any other college in the nation, according to surveys. This summer, **44 percent** of the graduates from the 30 early college high schools in Hidalgo and Starr counties that partner with STC earned an Associate degree. The **national average is 30 percent**.

The **key to this success** in the Rio Grande Valley is **dual enrollment, through which Associate degrees are earned at the same time students are graduating from high school**, said STC President Shirley A. Reed, in an in-depth discussion of dual enrollment in South Texas at an economic development forum. The economic development forum was held at STC's Starr County Campus in Rio Grande City. Reed was joined in the discussion about dual enrollment by Rio Grande City CISD Superintendent Joel Trigo and Roma ISD Superintendent Carlos Guzman.

Reed pointed out that STC's mission is to **create a college going culture** in Hidalgo and Starr counties. The strategy for creating a college going culture is dual enrollment, Reed said. "It is a simple strategy. It is **an opportunity for students while in high school to get college credit, a real college course, taught with the academic rigor of a college course**, with students being assessed as though they were on a college campus. And it is made free of charge to all students and all families."

Creating such a college going culture in Hidalgo and Starr counties **revolves around dual enrollment and strong relationships with local school districts**, Reed said. "The audience we want to reach are the families, the parents, those who may not realize that opportunities are available for all children in Starr County," Reed said. No less than 80,000 students at 74 different school sites across Hidalgo and Starr counties have participated in the dual enrollment program, Reed said. "We also have what are called early college high schools. This is a high school operated by the school district with South Texas College as the Higher Ed partner and the goal is for ninth graders to begin this early college high school with the expectation that they will graduate from South Texas College at least two weeks before they earn their high school diploma." Reed said **STC has waived tuition fees for all students participating in the dual enrollment program**. Because of this, she said, it is "very challenging" financially and for the participating school districts. Since dual enrollment began, Reed said, STC has waived about \$110 million in tuition fees.

Reed also spoke about Middle College Academies. In such academies in Hidalgo County, high school juniors spend their morning in high school and their afternoons at STC. "By the time they graduate from high school they have earned an Associate degree. We have programs specifically designed for

students interested in the medical sciences, computer science, engineering, criminal justice, and we just started a new one for students that want to go into the workforce skills area,” Reed said.

STC has partnerships with 24 school districts across Hidalgo and Starr counties leading to the creation of 30 early college high schools. “We are here today to commit to working very closely with both (Rio Grande City and Roma) school districts to expand these opportunities. It is not easy. It is difficult for any of us to afford it.”

Reed said dual enrollment and early college high schools do have their detractors. “Is this for real, they say. Can a high school student really start college as early as the ninth or the tenth grade? Some people say they are not mature enough, they don’t really know what they want to do; that the faculty are going to lower the expectations. These students have been tested. They have been assessed as college-ready.”

Reed said STC leaders had a “pretty interesting conversation” with Robert Nelsen when he was president of UTPA. “We said, why don’t we just check the data to see if there is any truth to some of this criticism. And they did. They studied the transcripts of the students who came to UTPA from South Texas College and who participated in dual enrollment. When it was all said and done **they found that students who had gone through dual enrollment outperformed students who began at the university without any dual enrollment.** Their retention and grade point was higher and they had higher graduation rates.”

Both Guzman, superintendent of Roma ISD, and Trigo, superintendent of RGC ISD, said they appreciated the partnership STC has forged with their respective school districts. Trigo said dual enrollment is happening at RGC CISD’s three high schools, La Grulla, Rio Grande City High School and Rio Grande City Early College High School. He said the early college high school began last year and has about 250 students. “They all have a common goal. They want to earn an associate degree. We are aiming for 100 percent of students earning an Associate degree.”

Despite RGC CISD fostering a college going culture, **Trigo acknowledged that many students want to go directly into the workforce.** This is why programs like welding, lobotomy, cosmetology and website design are important, he said. “**We live in area where many parents, grandparents, guardians have never attended university,**” Trigo said.

Roma Superintendent Guzman said his son took advantage of dual enrollment, graduating with an Associate degree two weeks before graduating from high school. “Those programs are invaluable. Our kids have to take advantage of them,” Guzman said. **Asked how to better communicate with parents about the benefits of dual enrollment, Guzman said one way would be to use social media more, as well as traditional media and to leverage support through partnerships in the community.** “It is a team effort,” Guzman said.

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