By David Epstein

When students at San Marcos High School cross the stage at graduation they get two pieces of paper: a San Marcos diploma and their acceptance letter to Austin Community College.

By the time they don the gown, students at San Marcos, whether they’ve already been accepted to Yale University, or whether they’ll report for the Marines, have completed the Austin Community College application process, from initial inquiry to finding out how much aid they can receive.

On the far side of the stage, each proud graduate is greeted by an equally proud Mary Hensley, ACC’s vice president for college support systems and independent school district relations. A few years ago, Hensley and Sylvester J. Perez, superintendent of the San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District, were brainstorming for a way to help San Marcos to do its part for Closing the Gaps, an ambitious initiative in Texas that seeks to increase by over 600,000 -- to over 1.5 million -- the number of students in Texas colleges and universities by 2015.

They came up with an idea so brilliantly simple, Hensley’s wondered ever since how someone didn’t come up with it earlier: as a requirement of graduation, all San Marcos students -- 64 percent of whom are Hispanic -- would have to be accepted to Austin Community College. In a single school year -- 2004-5 -- the percentage of students at San Marcos, a school of about 2,000, who went on to Texas institutions, jumped 11 points, to 45 percent. A major goal of the Closing the Gaps initiative is to increase the number of minority students going to college. By 2008, Hispanics are projected to account for over 40 percent of the Texas population, and their college-going rate has lagged behind that of white students. That 11 percentage point jump has made Hensley -- who pledges to return all calls in 30 minutes -- a popular woman. The College Connection program has already been adopted in eight school districts that ACC serves, including the Austin Independent School District, with more on the way.

Deborah Santiago, vice president for policy and research at Excelencia in Education, a group that promotes ways to increase Latino college success, said that three main hurdles block otherwise qualified students from going to college. “If they jump through these hoops,” she said, “their chance of going to college is incredibly high.” Hurdle one: the application.

When the program began in the spring of 2002, it was without any grants or additional resources, so, again, a simple solution was the only option. Admissions staff and advisers from ACC jump in their cars and take their work to the high school. Every senior at San Marcos is taken out of English class to meet with the college staff members, who talk to the students about things like the increased earning potential of a college graduate. “They’ll say, ‘maybe you can get this kind of car with a high school diploma, and this other one with a B.A.,”’ according to Cecily Moore, San Marcos High’s advanced academics coordinator. After a bit of advising and discussion of majors, the students head for the 60 computers in the library to fill out ACC’s online application. Hurdle one cleared.
Even with the application done, some students have no plans to take the SAT or ACT, the second major hurdle, according to Santiago. So Hensley and ACC staff members take the test to them. “I took a team of assessment staff down from ACC to San Marcos, and every child who had not already passed an exam, we came in and tested them, free of charge,” she said. ACC administers two tests, ASSET and COMPASS, run by ACT, which are accepted at ACC and some other Texas institutions in lieu of the SAT or ACT. Hurdle two cleared.

The last and most imposing hurdle is applying for financial aid. “That’s absolutely critical,” Santiago said, “especially for first generation students. It’s requesting a lot of information that the child has rarely or never seen. And the onus is often on the student.” ACC sends not only financial aid staff members to San Marcos, but tax consultants from the area have volunteered time to help students navigate the fine print. Some parents “are hesitant to send [financial] information in the kid’s backpack to school,” Moore said, so there’s also a weekend session for parents who want to join but can’t make it in the middle of the school day.

Chad Kelly, the principal of San Marcos High School, insists that all families, from wealthy to undocumented, go through the entire process. Kelly said there are periodic grumbles from students who already have solid plans. “You never know what’s going to happen,” he said. “That’s how we sell it. If you want to come home and take a summer course [at ACC], you’re already accepted. You just have to call up and register.”

Hensley now has a waiting list of districts and community colleges hoping to use her expertise. At least five other community colleges, including the Houston Community College System and the Houston Independent School District -- have started or are hoping to start their own College Connection. Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, Temple College in Temple, and Coastal Bend College in Beeville have all started a College Connection program and local high schools have begun to adapt the application requirement. Individualized College Connection information for all 28 high schools that work with ACC is available online. And word is still travelling fast. In October 2005, ACC did a local cable television broadcast where staff members, administrators, and students answered questions about going to college from high school students.

With College Connection -- the name Hensley came up with when she realized the program was “here to stay,” she said – spreading across Texas like wildfire, the next challenge, Perez said, is to improve retention and graduation rates. To that end, ACC is offering classes, often at a high school, that give students both high school and college credits. Perez hopes to add one more accolade for students who get their diploma and acceptance letter at graduation. “Why can’t they leave with one or two years of college credit too?” Perez asked.