AUSTIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Enrollment up due to outreach effort

Program that requires high school seniors to apply draws interest.

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Austin Community College credits a 37 percent increase in enrollment to College Connection, a new program that requires participating high school seniors to apply to the school.

The success of the program, which lured 1,103 students to ACC this fall, has drawn the attention of colleges in Houston and Corpus Christi and the eyes of state officials.

"This is the kind of program that we believe colleges and universities are going to need . . . (to reach) the increasing participation goals of Closing the Gaps," Texas' initiative to increase college enrollment by more than 500,000 students by 2015, said Glenda Barron, an associate commissioner with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

"It's going to take the colleges themselves reaching down lower in the high schools to find the nontraditional students and (convince) them they can do it and there are ways to help them pay for it," Barron said.

The Austin school district is one of five Central Texas districts participating in the program. The number of ACC students coming from the Austin district, which allows parents to keep their children out of the program, jumped 32 percent, ACC said. About 75 percent of Austin's 2005 graduates participated in College Connection.

The Leander, Bastrop and Del Valle districts, which don't allow parents to opt out, experienced participation rates of more than 90 percent.

"What makes it so successful is that we take services to the high school campuses that these students would ordinarily seek out on their own," said Luanne Preston, executive director of the program. "I like to think of it as escorting them to college."

ACC officials have visited Houston Community College to do a presentation about the program. And officials from the Del Mar College district in Corpus Christi came to Austin to find out how their program could expand.

In Central Texas, students are introduced to the program during an assembly. Later, ACC advisers help students fill out online admission forms in high school computer labs and make arrangements if students need to take college readiness tests or fill out federal financial aid forms. Students can take tours of the ACC campuses and get one-on-one academic advising.
At graduation, students receive an acceptance letter to ACC at the same time that they receive their diplomas. Because anyone who applies to ACC is accepted, the letters are more a recognition of accomplishment, Preston said.

"There are a lot of students — I wouldn't say they wouldn't have gone to college, but this definitely got them rolling," said Austin Armstrong, a Bowie High School graduate. The program "got me started early and really got me into it."

Access to high school students gives ACC officials a chance to make their pitch to college-bound students who are unsure about where they will attend.

"It opened up my options," said Jennifer Groeschen, a McCallum High School graduate who wants to be a special education teacher. "I was actually going to go to Texas State, but ACC had more of the classes I wanted. And, of course, it's cheaper."

Last school year, the program did not get going until January; this year's seniors will begin College Connection this semester.

New districts are being added. Students in Manor, Pflugerville and Hays schools now will participate, increasing the program's size to 29 high schools and more than 10,000 students. ACC's Board of Trustees put an additional $100,000 for the program in this year's budget.

ACC officials want to increase participation rates, especially in Austin schools. The opt-out letter sent to parents will be rewritten, Preston said.

Some parents are concerned about students leaving class to fill out the application. Others are concerned about the quality of a community college education.

Preston said parents should know that ACC professors have to meet the same qualifications as those at other schools and that studies show transfer students from ACC do as well as, if not better than, students who enter four-year schools in their freshmen year.

"Last year, everyone was working pretty quickly," Preston said. "This year we're going to wait to send letters home. . . . And hopefully we can reduce the number of waivers."

Trish Dew, an adviser at Crockett High School, works with another college readiness program called Project Advance, which encourages students to fill out the Texas Common Application, used by all state public universities.

Dew said such programs get students, parents and teachers thinking about college early.

"We are really trying to change the culture of the schools, as far as getting them prepared and letting them know that college is for everyone," Dew said. "It's really exciting."

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**College Connection**
The program lured almost 700 Austin school district graduates this year, a 32 percent increase from last year. Students bound for Austin Community College, by high school:

**Akins** 72, down 9%

**Anderson** 84, up 62%

**Austin** 91, up 69%

**Bowie** 118, up 12%

**Crockett** 78, up 35%

**Garza** 20, down 39%

**Johnston** 19, no change

**Lanier** 51, up 183%

**LBJ** 36, up 50%

**McCallum** 57, up 19%

**Reagan** 21, up 5%

**Travis** 47, up 177%

Source: Austin Community College