One-on-one connection eases entry for high school students to community college

BY NATALIE C. HOLMES

Austin Community College (Texas) has taken up a statewide challenge to close the gap between the current rate of college enrollment and the projected future need for more highly educated workers by providing high school students with a "College Connection." Through the effort, some 5,200 high school seniors from five Austin-area school districts enrolling large percentages of low-income and minority students last month received letters of acceptance to ACC, and a personal handshake from college officials, as part of their high school graduation ceremonies. College Connection was created by ACC in the fall of 2001 with the San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District. Since then the program has expanded to include four additional districts: Austin, Leander, Del Valle and Bastrop. In all, ACC's program reaches students in 21 high schools.

It's designed to increase awareness of higher education among high school seniors, to assist those students with applying to college, and to increase college enrollment among Central Texas high school graduates. "All of these high schools enroll high percentages of minority students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds," said ACC President Stephen Kinshow. "These are students who are often traditionally underserved in higher education," he said. "This program is about increasing the transition rates of students from high school and getting them involved in college; it's about meeting expectations." Other Texas colleges, such as Del Mar Community College, meanwhile, have begun similar programs. "What started as a small program is spiraling upwards," said Mary Humley, ACC's associate vice president of instructional support services. While College Connection is part of ACC's master plan to help Texas fulfill a statewide goal of increasing college participation by 600,000 students by 2015, its approach is one-on-one.

"Without College Connection probably wouldn't have gone to college. I probably would have just started working or something," says Prissilla Lopez, a first-generation college-bound student, who is among the beneficiaries of the personalized attention from ACC. A graduate of Garza High School in Austin, Lopez is also an expectant mother. "I am the first in my family to go to college and it just seemed like, too foreign," Lopez said. "I didn't know where to start or how to apply.

With the boost from College Connection, Lopez, who said she "hadn't gone to college," was able to complete the application process to the college, get her financial aid, and then move on to a four-year baccalaureate.

"It seemed like it was too much money but they helped me fill out the FAFSA (federal application for student aid) form so hopefully I'll be getting financial aid," Lopez said. "ACC [came] to our campus and told us about the college; they told us about the programs and helped us enroll," Lopez said. "Everybody should get a chance to participate in College Connection because it's a lot of help; you can get things you never would do. They can show you that college is an option and not that far out of reach," Lopez said.

Lopez said her husband, another Garza High School graduate who also enrolled in ACC through College Connection, will study for a certificate in carpentry. His mother will watch the couple's baby — due in July — while the two attend classes in the evenings.

College Connection is unique in offering high school students hands-on individual support with ACC's admissions process in the comfort and familiarity of their high school environments, college officials say. The program stays with participating seniors until each one has successfully completed the admissions process and received a letter of acceptance to ACC upon walking the stage at their high school graduations and receiving their diplomas. ACC staff members meet with high school administrators and students staff to work out a calendar for the year and each partner names a "point person."

Then, through on-campus high school visits, ACC employee assist high school students with filling out admissions and financial aid applications, with ASSET assessment, orientation and advising and career planning.

"We try to minimize the impact on any individual," Hearing said, "so that employee from any one department — including admissions, financial aid, outreach, early college, career planning, student services and student life — will not be off campus for more than four days a year. High school seniors get a feel for college by participating in various activities such as College Day, in which academic and workforce departments provide seniors with information on various degrees and areas of study. Seniors are also given an opportunity to tour ACC's six campuses to see firsthand what college is like.

The program involves parents as well, providing them with information sessions on financial aid.

Kinshow says the positive relationships ACC and school district officials have formed through College Connection are a starting point for further collaboration to address "other large issues," such as the number of high school graduates who require remedial courses in college. About half of its entering students need remedial courses in reading, writing and mathematics, Kinshow said.

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