**Hill Country News** |
Jan. 14, 2005

**LISD-ACC bridge gap to college**

*By Kate Goeke, Staff Writer*

**Program guarantees ACC enrollment**
The Leander Independent School District is joining forces with Austin Community College to give the district's graduates a foot in the door to higher education. Beginning this spring, LISD will partner with ACC's College Connection program to register all graduates as ACC students upon graduation, with that registration valid for a lifetime.

Leander students who will be registered through the program will be able to attend ACC full-time, part-time, on-line or summer courses, or may return to the college in the future.

Mary Hensley, associate vice president of instructional support services for ACC, spoke to the Leander ISD Board of Trustees Thursday about the program that was begun between ACC and the San Marcos Consolidated ISD. The Austin school district announced last week it would join the program, and other local districts have shown an interest as well.

College Connection's goal is to increase the number of students pursuing education beyond high school and easing that transition by walking students through the application, financial aid and registration processes. The program would also include field trips for LISD students to local ACC campuses and special events to inform students of opportunities at the college.

Statistics presented by Hensley indicate that, out of 932 LISD graduates last year, 22 percent registered for two-year schools in Texas and 30 percent went to four-year universities, but a full 48 percent did not register at any post-secondary institution in the state. The data did not include those who may have left the state to continue their education.

San Marcos had up to 80 percent of its students not going on to college. After the College Connection program was implemented there last spring, fall enrollment by San Marcos graduates at ACC doubled over the previous year.

Hensley said college enrollment is intimidating for many students and that ACC will provide one-on-one support through each step of the college admissions process.

Students will also be helped with college placement testing. Those who do not have high enough scores on standardized tests for college admissions such as the SAT and ACT will be given additional and alternative opportunities to ensure they meet minimum standards.

Many of those who do not register for post-secondary classes may believe they are not college material, according to Hensley.

"We need to target those students we know wouldn't go anywhere," LISD Trustee Pamela Waggoner said.

"Our biggest potential is to catch those who didn't think they could attend college," school board President Debra Farst said.
Trustee Jim Sneeringer was concerned students may feel pressured to attend ACC as opposed to other colleges and that those colleges might not actively pursue LISD graduates because of the program. Hensley, however, said the College Connection program could benefit other schools as well. Texas State University in San Marcos, she said, has embraced the ACC program.

The admissions process is virtually the same at most schools, so helping students understand that process makes it easier for them to use that knowledge when applying to other colleges, Hensley said. Acceptance by ACC, she said, is not a mandate for students to attend ACC.

"This program is completely optional and is being done at a tremendous cost to ACC," Hensley said, referring particularly to the costs of testing. "There will be no cost to LISD except for transporting students to our campuses for tours."

The program could cause a potential surge in enrollments for ACC, especially at the Cypress Creek campus in Cedar Park which, according to Trustee Grace Jordan, has already had trouble accommodating the number of students wanting to attend classes there.

Hensley said ACC is sensitive to the issue and is working towards solutions to the problem. Construction on a $25 million expansion at the Cypress Creek campus is scheduled to begin in July. Superintendent Tom Glenn also said an agreement could be reached for ACC to use classrooms in LISD facilities. Several Round Rock ISD facilities are used for college courses in conjunction with local post-secondary institutions.

Even though ACC will help students with the application process, there will be those who choose not to attend college classes, but Hensley said ACC also has a place for those students.

"Austin Community College is the number one workforce trainer in the area," she said. "We offer certificates and licensure in health, aviation and a very wide range of career opportunities. We want to help people upgrade their employability."

That help, Hensley said, begins when students are still in school by making sure they know they have the option to attend college.

"We want to make sure every graduate of Leander ISD, when they walk across that stage gets two pieces of paper -- their diploma and their acceptance letter to ACC."

College Connection will be implemented this spring at both Leander and Cedar Park high schools.

"We're going to implement this immediately and try to carry through with this year's graduates," LISD spokesman Bill Britcher said.

Copyright © 2005 Hill Country News