College Connection keeps paying off

By Deyanira Romo Rossell
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It is now tradition at San Marcos High School for every graduating senior to be accepted to college through the San Marcos CISD/ACC College Connection.

This marks the second year that all SMHS seniors are routed through all the right channels to receive the proper financial aid information and registration guidance to begin the fall 2005 semester at Austin Community College or at the college or university of their choice.

This partnership is proving beneficial for many students who are one step closer now to fulfilling their college dreams, especially those who are the first to go to college in their families.

"We made national news last year with our historic College Connection, and we are proud that this initiative is continuing to provide many more students with college opportunities," said Superintendent Sylvester Perez.

ACC representatives are tracking these College Connection students in a longitudinal database and are reporting to Perez and the school board the number of SMHS students who enroll in ACC.

A total of 442 seniors from both SMHS and P.R.I.D.E. High School completed the College Connection process and will receive a letter of congratulations and acceptance at the graduation ceremony which begins at 7 p.m. at Texas State
University's Strahan Coliseum. This is 98 percent of the SMHS senior class and 97 percent of the P.R.I.D.E. senior class. Last year, 83 percent of the SMHS senior class and 92 percent of the P.R.I.D.E. senior class completed College Connection.

According to new data from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 55 percent more San Marcos CISD graduates chose to attend ACC in Fiscal Year 2004, than in Fiscal Year 2003. This positive change is attributed to the College Connection.

"This is great news for San Marcos CISD and a good indication of the positive impact College Connection will make in other school districts and the state of Texas," said Barbara Mink, Ph.D., Austin Community College Board of Trustees chair.

The success of the San Marcos CISD/ACC College Connection has opened the doors to college for many more seniors beyond just SMHS. ACC has expanded the initiative to include high schools in Del Valle, Leander, Bastrop and Austin.

"San Marcos CISD has proven that programs such as College Connection increase college enrollment among high school graduates," said Steve Kinslow, Ph.D., ACC president. "ACC is proud of the program's success and its positive impact in San Marcos, and we are certain this type of success will be mirrored in the four other participating districts."
At first, Gabriel Tenorio was not happy about the strange, new graduation requirement. He and the 347 other seniors at his Texas high school were told in January that they would have to apply to a college, whether they wanted to or not.

"I was one of those who thought they really didn't need college," he said.

There was much grumbling, but his English teacher at San Marcos High, south of Austin, passed out the application forms for the area's community college to students who had not made their own choice. College officials came to their classes, and a Saturday meeting was held for parents to fill out financial aid documents.

Before long, Tenorio, 18, found himself becoming excited about his prospects. "When people help you out, you change your mind," he said. "You can make a better life, not just for yourself but for your family, if you go to college." He will enroll soon at Austin Community College, a two-year school, and work toward a degree he can use in the building industry.

The San Marcos High approach reflects a particularly aggressive attitude in central Texas toward pushing more students into higher education and is part of a national effort to encourage more college participation. Educators in central Texas are not only requiring students to apply to college but also opening up facilities shared by two-year and four-year schools. That way, when students such as Tenorio finish community college, they find a path to a bachelor's degree.

"If it weren't for the convenience and offering of my degree plan, and lower cost, I would probably not be graduating in a year, perhaps not for several years," said Tracy Senn-Ashley, a working parent in Austin who is enrolled at Round Rock Higher Education Center. The new center is part of Texas State University-San Marcos, with introductory courses taught by Austin Community College.

The Austin Area Research Organization produced a study last year that local educators have been using to win political support for their plans. Officials in the Texas capital -- one of the nation's hubs for high-tech companies -- boast about their well-educated workers, 65 percent of whom have taken some college courses, compared with 51 percent statewide.

But the research study said a heavy influx of low-income Hispanic families with few members going to college would cut that figure to 55 percent by 2040. "Unless we preserve and build our intellectual capital," the report said, "individual household income would decrease by $4,000, or
6 percent, costing our community $2.4 billion of income annually."

So a group of educators, including Texas State President Denise M. Trauth and Austin Community College's interim president, Stephen B. Kinslow, began to look for solutions. They were assisted by a program called ENLACE, which is Spanish for linked or connected, funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Houston Endowment.

Sylvester Perez, superintendent of the San Marcos school district, said that when program officials suggested requiring all of his seniors to apply to a college, "we thought it was great. It would be helping the kids through the process."

Many San Marcos High students were not so sure. Tenorio said he, like many adolescents, had not been thinking about what to do with his life, preferring to spend time with his friends and let the future take care of itself.

His school is 63 percent Hispanic. About half of the students come from families poor enough to qualify for federal lunch subsidies, and few have college-educated parents. The principal, Julio C. Toro, said the college application program is succeeding because Austin Community College officials advised students on which courses would be best, helped them fill out the applications, led financial aid meetings for parents and took the applicants on a tour of the campus.

Cecily Moore, San Marcos High's advanced academic services coordinator, said she had to be sweetly persistent with some students. A senior would say: "I'm not going to college. Why do I have to do this?" She would reply: "You never know what might happen. This is a very good Plan B."

If students still resisted, Toro said, he would try to contact their parents. Only about a dozen families refused to participate, he said, and those students were exempted from the requirement.

The effort to ease the transition from community to state colleges has been met with much less resistance, education officials said. The Round Rock Higher Education Center, north of Austin, has attracted many older students who enjoy the convenience of working toward their Texas State degrees at a place near their homes, with smaller classes than the main campus south of Austin.

"It's been an absolutely wonderful experience," said Lisa Ottenbacher, 50, studying for an elementary education degree. Edgar Gomez, a computer science student, praised its "location and affordability." Senn-Ashley, 29, said the modular classrooms make it hard to hear when the air conditioners kick in. But a new building is scheduled to open in 2005.

Edna Rehbein, the center's director, said it has grown from 80 students meeting at a local high school to 1,700, with a capacity of 3,500 in the building under construction.

The growth of higher education centers, officials said, will mean more spaces for graduating high school students such as those at San Marcos High, whose parents are applauding the new programs. Gabriel Tenorio's mother, Rebecca, a teaching assistant at a local elementary school,
said she thought her son lacked the self-confidence to apply to college, despite her suggestions. "It was just a struggle," she said, but once he was forced to learn how the application process worked, it no longer scared him.

Neither of Gabriel Tenorio's parents has a college degree, and his older brother, after getting close to a degree, dropped out. Tenorio said the assistance from local and state college officials is going to make his story different. "Instead of just leading you to the water and telling you to swim, they have helped you out," he said.