

Program connects high school seniors with a college start

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Austin Community College's College Connection program, a nationally-recognized program to recruit central Texas high school students, enrolled approximately 5,200 in the fall of 2005 from 5 neighboring school districts, an increase of more than 50 percent over fall of 2004's enrollment numbers.

ACC Communication Specialist, Veronica Obregon, said that College Connection was developed to aid the State's Closing the gaps initiative. Obregon said the program started in 2004 when the San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District decided to encourage seniors to pursue higher education after graduation.

The Closing the Gaps plan is an initiative to increase the number of minority college graduates. A report released by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board said that the Closing the Gaps plan was initiated because by 2008, 55 percent of Texas will be minorities., but only 5 percent of the whole state of Texas is enrolled in higher education, which is 76,000 students less than 10 other populated states.

According to the report, this presents a problem for the economic future of Texas. If the majority of the workforce in Texas is made up of people with no college education, that gives the Texas businesses less skilled workers to choose from.

The report encourages a college education because people with a college education will have a better financial future and will be more likely to give back to their communities. In the report the National Center for Education statistics said, "College graduates will make \$1.2 million more in total salary over their lifetime than non-graduates." The report said that college graduates' higher earnings contribute to economic base through taxes.

This is where College Connection comes into play. Obregon said "College Connection is an ACC program and growing partnership with area school districts. Currently ACC is partnering with eight school districts through College Connection."

According to the College Connection Web site, high school seniors are informed about the college application process. The Web site said seniors are also given information about where to start applying for financial aid and what is necessary to complete the process.

College Connection encourages seniors to pursue a college education. It also makes the college application process less intimidating, said the Web site.

While assisting students with orientation, advising and career planning, College Connection also provides a spot for parents to learn more about the college application process. Information sessions are held to give parents more information about financial aid.

In an Austin ISD-ACC College Connection Web site, students go through a series of activities in approximately one weeks time that gets them enrolled at ACC. According to the Web site students go through a career planning and assessment booster, completion of the admissions application, completion of financial aid forms, course placement/TSI assessment, orientation, advising, and finally tours of the ACC campuses.

The Web site also gives the costs and payment options. Students have the options of paying in full, an installment plan, or, if eligible, students may have tuition costs waived.

Obregon said, "So far the College Connection scholarship committee has raised \$9,000 and the ACC Foundation has matched another \$9,000, giving the College Connection scholarship program a total of \$18,000 for scholarships."

A press release by College Connection, May 24, 2005, said that approximately 5,200 high school seniors from Austin ISD, San Marcos ISD, Leander ISD, Del Valle ISD and Bastrop ISD have completed the College Connection process and received acceptance letters to ACC.

Obregon said that College Connection is highly recognized by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the program is being modeled by other Texas community colleges.