



BREAKTHROUGH MOMENTS



Outreach, Outreach, Outreach

Temple College (TC) is playing the long game for the communities it serves. The college is building a college-going culture for everyone from elementary school students to adult learners. And with creative approaches to community engagement, staff members are literally meeting potential students wherever they are — and making sure those students see the value of attending college and earning credentials.

“We are using every chance we can find to connect with the community and make sure they are aware of what’s happening through Rural Pathways,” says Christy Ponce, president. “We are making sure we have a bigger public presence so the community knows about the programs we offer for high school students, traditional-age students, and adult learners.”

The Rural Guided Pathways Project helped kickstart this work by requiring colleges to bring community members to Institutes and advising TC about effectively communicating with the community.

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“At the Institutes, we had all the key players at the same table,” recalls Susan Guzmán-Treviño, provost/vice president, academic affairs and student services. “When we returned to Texas, we didn’t have to re-create what we learned for our community partners because they learned it with us. And that allowed us to move the needle faster.” At various Institutes, the TC team has included a high school superintendent, a principal, a counselor, a career and technical education director, the deputy executive director of a local workforce organization, and a local judge.



The Rural Guided Pathways Project helps a national cohort of rural community colleges implement evidence-based, institution-wide reforms grounded in the guided pathways framework. College teams include community partners in their regions, and they receive support from coaches, subject matter experts, and other colleges that are part of the project. The National Center for Inquiry & Improvement leads the project.

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Connecting With High Schools to Put Students on Pathways

To engage high school students, TC created dual credit programs in high-demand technical fields, added academic classes that start as early as ninth grade, and embedded workforce certifications in dual enrollment classes.

“We met with all of the stakeholders and designed this program together, and we were able to move quickly and start the very next semester,” Ponce says. “Having students in dual enrollment classes is a game changer, especially because

students are starting early enough that they can easily finish their associate degree without going to a traditional early-college high school.”

The school district partners have found dual enrollment so beneficial that some are scaling back Advanced Placement (AP) classes to offer more dual credit. One school district, after attending a Rural Pathways Institute and seeing data on dual credit, eliminated AP classes altogether.

“They came back from the Institute, presented the data, and took a formal vote of the board,” Ponce says. “It was transformational to make a bold move like that and really let teachers and parents know how successful students could be when they went through these pathways.”

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TC also is opening an Education Center in a former rural hospital. When the hospital closed, its board donated the building to the local school district. Because TC already had a strong partnership with the district, the college has been able to move quickly to apply for grants to renovate the space and make plans for the Center.

Starting Early With Elementary School Students

Even the best degree programs cannot succeed if students are not thinking about and planning to attend college.

“Our school district folks were telling us that families weren’t encouraging their kids to value higher education so they could go into the workforce more quickly,” Guzmán-Treviño explains. “Families didn’t understand how much their economic mobility could improve with higher education and particularly with dual credit.”

TC began focusing on ways to engage its community and create a college-going culture. One key element of the plan: starting early.

TC launched its Adopt a School Program in fall 2023. The college adopted one elementary school in each of the five independent school districts in its service area. Staff worked with superintendents to choose the elementary schools and typically identified the elementary school whose students had the greatest need for economic mobility.

The college's work with its adopted elementary schools is broad and deep. It includes, for example:

- * Launching with a pep rally kickoff and ribbon cutting.
- * Bringing special speakers, such as astronauts and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) engineers, to the school.
- * Participating in the school's field days, parent nights, and other events.
- * Bringing donuts to the teachers and greeting students as they enter school for the day.
- * Bringing TC's mobile Go Center to the school. The Go Center is an 18-foot trailer wrapped in TC colors and filled with a variety of STEM equipment, thanks to a grant from Meta. The Go Center is a visible reminder of TC and an opportunity to give students hands-on experience.

"Adopt a School includes a lot of different events happening all the time," Ponce says. "So the students are steeped in the idea of college and learning about the different careers that are available to them because of college."

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TC's work with younger students is not limited to the five adopted elementary schools. Last summer, the college hosted 84 different summer camps, including a number of STEM camps, so young students could have a variety of experiences. The college also is involved with after-school and Saturday programming for elementary school children. Communication with parents is ongoing, often through materials TC provides to principals, who then share the content with families.

Reaching Adult Learners Throughout the Community

TC has done a lot of work with high school students (and future high school students) because the impact can be so significant. In Texas, all students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch can now enroll in dual credit courses for free. That funding helps drive dual credit activities to improve economic mobility.

But the college's work extends to learners of all ages. For example, TC has an adult education and literacy program through which students work toward a high school equivalency degree or enroll in adult education and literacy programs. Through a Texas Workforce Commission grant, students enrolled in these programs also can take a free certification program in a technical field at the same time.

“Getting career training while they’re going through an adult education and literacy program has been really beneficial,” Ponce says. “And it has helped us spread the word to the community on all of our different credit programs.”

The college’s outreach team also is regularly out in the community. College representatives visit churches and Walmart; sponsor football games; and even having a presence at donkey basketball, which is a huge draw in some high school communities. (Prominent members of the community play basketball while riding on donkeys.)

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“We participate in community parades, sporting events, and other activities — we go where the community is,” Guzmán-Treviño says. “And it’s not just buying some ads. We show up with a team of people who can discuss all of our programs from dual credit to adult education and literacy. And people have a lot of questions and engage in conversations.”

Having a Measurable Impact

“Creating a college-going culture has been beneficial for our college and our community,” Ponce says. “It has really led to the ultimate goal of all of this work — the point of Rural Pathways — which is to help students get on a path, guide them through the path, be there with them, and help them through graduation and beyond. And we have already had our first set of successful graduates through the Rural Pathways program.”

From fall 2021 to fall 2024:

- * Enrollment increased 23 percent.
- * Adult education and literacy enrollment increased from 858 to 995 students.
- * The number of TC graduates increased 40 percent, from 816 to 1,144.
- * Dual credit enrollment increased 69 percent, from 810 to 1,371 students, the highest dual credit enrollment in TC’s history.

TC also looks at dual credit enrollment for different parts of its service area. Dual credit enrollment from rural communities has increased. For example, Rockdale High School, located in a rural community with one of the highest poverty rates in Texas, enrolled approximately 36 students in fall 2022. In fall 2023, Rockdale High School had 108 dual credit students.

As TC’s reenergized outreach was underway, the college got a grant to open a second location of the Texas Bioscience Institute (TBI), a program through which high school juniors and seniors can work toward earning a degree in a STEM field.

Students choose to be part of a morning or an afternoon cohort so they have the rest of their day to participate in regular high school extracurricular activities. Even with the half-day structure, they are able to take a full college load each semester during their junior and senior year of high school, so they earn a

STEM degree along with their high school diploma. Other elements of the program include a Friday lecture series, research opportunities, and internships.

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“It’s an incredible program that was only based in Temple, and now we’ve been able to bring it to our Hutto campus as well,” Ponce says. “But students have to go to the TBI, which is about a half-hour drive from some of the more rural areas we serve.”

Before TC’s extensive outreach, this travel time would have been a big hurdle to overcome. But the college’s regular conversations with high school superintendents, principals, and counselors opened the door for the school district to promote the program and encourage students to enroll.

“We graduated our first two classes in the program, and our enrollment is higher than ever in that location,” Ponce says. “These students are graduating high school with an associate of science degree, and then they are going on to four-year programs including the Naval Academy and Harvard University.”