



El Paso
Community
College,
Mission del
Paso campus

Minority *Rule*

BY MARGARET MILLER

*How administrators at EPCC
meet the needs of a multicultural population*

EL PASO, TEXAS, has been in the national spotlight recently as a north-of-the-border refuge from what has become the world's most dangerous city: Juarez, Mexico. Perhaps this proximity accounts in part for the increased number of Hispanics in its population.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Hispanics now make up 82 percent of the El Paso County population—a 4 percent increase over the previous Census period. As the largest grantor of associate degrees to Hispanic students in the nation, El Paso Community College (EPCC) (www.epcc.org) is a recognized authority on meeting the needs of a multicultural population.

Its efforts were formally acknowledged earlier this year when EPCC received a \$25,000 award from Lumina Foundation for Education for increasing student success and college access in a border area where 27 percent of students are low-income, and 54 percent have only a high school or less education. The award was based on EPCC's participation in Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count, a national organization that helps community college students succeed, particularly students of color and low-income students. >>



El Paso Community College,
Transmountain campus

El Paso
Community
College, Rio
Grande campus

El Paso Community College awarded 1,792 associate degrees to Hispanic students in the 2008–09 school year, the most in the nation.

Source: Top Associate Degree Producers 2010, *Community College Week*

Achieving the Dream President and CEO William Trueheart praised EPCC's leadership and institutional engagement and the effect of its programs on the community. "EPCC is showing the nation that high-level commitment and well-focused, evidence-based decisionmaking can lead to substantial improvements in student success and completion," he said. "El Paso Community College's resolute commitment to student success and completion has set it apart as an impressive example of what is possible at community colleges all across the country." EPCC President Richard Rhodes accepted the third annual Leah Meyer Austin Institutional Student Success Leadership Award on behalf of the college system.

In the past 10 years, enrollment at EPCC has increased from 18,561 to 30,225, some 24,000 of whom are Hispanic. With five campuses and more than 24,000 credit students and 8,000 noncredit students, the foundation for EPCC's success rests on several fundamental ideals. Want to improve the prospects for low-income and minority institutions at your own college? Consider these six approaches.

Expect Excellence

Though international students are sometimes accused of using EPCC as a haven to permanently escape the violence in Mexico, Claude Mathis, dean of communications and performing arts at the college's Valle Verde campus, says most Hispanic students don't enroll for immigration purposes—they enroll for education.

Rhodes credits the college's success, in part, to its undaunted spirit. "The faculty, staff, and administrative team working together to focus on students' achievement is awe-inspiring," he says. "Much of this dates back to when we got involved with Achieving the Dream, using data to focus on students' success. Before that, we focused on access—getting students into higher education. We weren't taking time to work with them on collaborating with K-12 and UTEP (The University of Texas at El Paso, where many EPCC students matriculate). I think that our system represents the best collaboration in the country between three sectors of

education. The support and recognition we've garnered from foundations across the country—including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Texas Education Agency, the Greater Texas Foundation, and the Meadows Foundation—have been phenomenal."

Creative Solutions

Like most community colleges, EPCC holds two commencements a year, featuring keynote speakers. "We try to obtain a combination of local and national personalities," Rhodes says, "and have invited coaches, art gallery owners, executives, journalists, musicians, and many others to share their stories and insights." That thinking has turned this biannual event into a scholarship opportunity. Each speaker has an endowed scholarship established in his or her name and is given the opportunity to articulate the parameters of the award. In one example, a former NASA astronaut designated that the award in his name be given to a student in the sciences. In most cases, Rhodes says,

the speakers continue to contribute to “their” fund, resulting in at least two new scholarships a year for the college.

Employees Who Care

“We don’t just have a mission,” says EPCC’s Mathis. “We are *missionaries*. Most faculty members are very engaged with the student population.” President Rhodes agrees. “My wife and I were in Salt Lake City five years ago,” he recalls, “visiting with friends who were regents with the Utah system of higher education. During our conversation, they asked what it was about El Paso that we loved so much. My wife was the first one who spoke up. She said, ‘We see it as a mission field. The level of need here—and the opportunity—is great.’ And I agree. Our faculty, administrators, and staff have great ideas and are willing to work as a team.” While community college systems in other cities face different obstacles, the mission remains the same: to reach and assist.

Align With High Schools

In his speech last year at the White House Summit on Community Colleges, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan emphasized the need for “seamless articulation between high schools and community colleges and between community colleges and universities.” Through one of EPCC’s five Early College High Schools, students can earn an associate degree at the same time they’re earning a high school diploma. The Pretesting Retesting Educational Program, or PREP, prepares high school students for the ACCUPLACER test with the objective of placing out of developmental education courses, which are costly and time consuming and don’t count toward a degree. College readiness initiatives have reduced the number of developmental education areas that students are placing into and increased the percentage of entering students who are college-ready. Students not attending an Early College High School can enroll in a dual-credit program, a cooperative partnership between school district and EPCC that enables high school students to earn



After returning in 2000 for one class, she re-enrolled in 2009 and is working toward an associate degree in computer networking security. “I always wanted to come back,” she says. “Financially, it just wasn’t possible. Thanks to a few small scholarships and a Pell grant, I now have a better chance to finish my education and begin my career.” While in college, Alex works full-time as a bus driver for the local school district. She expects to graduate from EPCC in 2013 and hopes to continue her education at The University of Texas at El Paso.

college credits while completing the requirements for high school graduation. Participation in El Paso high schools’ dual-credit program has increased 3,179 percent over the past nine years, from 102 students in 2001 to 3,345 in 2010.

Serve Your Entire Constituency

Every community college must strive for accessibility. In El Paso, this means meeting not only the needs of the Hispanic community, but also reaching out to the soldiers and their dependents at Fort Bliss, one of the largest military posts in the United States. “We want to give these individuals and their families every opportunity to continue their education,” Rhodes says. After meeting with the commanding general at Fort Bliss, administrators identified a 200-acre parcel of land, where they plan to build a sixth higher education campus for soldiers and community members at large through partnerships with UTEP and other four-year college partners.

Publicize Your Triumphs

When Café Central Executive Chef Armando Pomales was recently named a semifinalist for best chef by the revered James Beard Foundation for a third consecutive year, EPCC was delighted to take some of the credit.

Success Story: Alejandra Jimenez

Born in Fabens, Texas, Alejandra Jimenez spent the first 16 years of her life in Barreales, Mexico, a small town just across the Mexican border, where she lived with her parents. Alex moved to El Paso when she was 16 and, after taking one semester of English-as-a-second language, was able to study English as part of her regular curriculum at Socorro High School. Although communication was a problem at first, she understands, reads, writes, and speaks at a competent level now. Like many students, Alex first enrolled at El Paso Community College (EPCC) at age 25, but dropped out after taking only a few classes.

“My experience at EPCC was wonderful,” says Pomales, who obtained his culinary degree while enrolled at the college. “The caliber of education was excellent. It’s great that people don’t have to travel outside of El Paso to get a quality education. I was lucky enough to get financial aid, so I took the opportunity to study hotel management and culinary arts. Not a single penny came out of my pocket. Community college may not have the prestige, but for the individual who wants to stay close to home and family, it’s perfect.”

Today, the program boasts 400 students and a new facility. “Attending class full-time wasn’t feasible for me,” Pomales says. “It took me four years to complete the degree program.”

While a decision has yet to be made regarding use of EPCC’s latest award from Lumina Foundation, Rhodes says he’s considering establishing an endowed scholarship. “Because Achieving the Dream made a commitment to assisting students in need,” he says, “I’d like to create something that will retain the name and continue our shared mission to assist deserving students.”

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