

# IMPLICATIONS FROM UCEA

## Realizing the Goal of College Readiness in South Texas: The Role of School & Community Leaders



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Going to college is a familiar first step towards fulfilling the American dream for graduating high school students and their families. Yet for many in this country, the reality of their everyday lives is increasingly riddled with obstacles and tough choices about their future educational and career pathways. In light of these challenges, many school, community, and state education leaders, as well as various public and private agencies have pressed on with aggressive campaigns to build a more robust college-going and college-readiness culture within their local schools and communities.

### College Readiness in South Texas

College readiness is an especially salient goal in South Texas, where educational attainment rates hover among the lowest in the country (Texas State Data Center, 2007). But what does college readiness mean within this educational context, especially from the perspective of school and community leaders charged with promoting and realizing this goal? This brief highlights some key findings from a study that examined the role leaders assume in promoting the goal of college readiness in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. Using focus group data gathered as part of a larger initiative focused on college readiness efforts within this region, the study investigated how school and community leaders decode the goal of college readiness and self-examine their respective roles in promoting a college-going culture. To further understand the educational context of this region, it is first necessary, however, to review the higher education infrastructure and opportunities that currently exist.

### Higher Education Infrastructure in the Rio Grande Valley

While viable higher education opportunities exist for residents in the Rio Grande Valley (i.e., two four-year universities, two community colleges and one technical college), they represent an insufficient infrastructure to serve a population approaching 1.2 million (Texas State Data Center, 2007). The

educational infrastructure of the Rio Grande Valley—from Pre-K through college—is in dire need of additional investment and expansion. Recent enrollment trends at Rio Grande Valley institutions suggest that participation rates are increasing at local two-year and four-year colleges (THECB, 2007). Yet, the only notable advances in institution-building over the last 20 years came as a result of a concerted legal challenge that resulted in a short-lived infusion of state resources (Sharp, 1998). In short, the educational attainment gaps remain prevalent when comparing this region to all other geographic regions of the state, and a key contributing factor is the lack of support for an expanded higher education infrastructure in the Rio Grande Valley. Within this context, school and community leaders are charged with realizing the goal of cultivating a more robust college going and college readiness culture. Here are some of the challenges voiced by these stakeholders.

### How do School and Community Leaders Define College Readiness?

Leaders offered two distinct categories to help define college readiness: academic skills and “soft skills.” Academic skills were characterized by classroom or textbook knowledge and comprehension. They cited literacy, public speaking, and the ability to use technology as key skill sets needed to be college-ready, and they also stressed the importance of reading comprehension at an early age. Academic “soft skills” included practical daily skills (e.g., balancing a checkbook), critical thinking skills, and motivation. In addition, school and community leaders believed self-regulation and motivation were key ways to build college readiness among students.

### What are Some Obstacles to Realizing the Goal of College Readiness?

School and community leaders identified several barriers to promoting the goal of college readiness. Economic factors included the responsibility of some students to work and

support their family, as some families would not be able to meet their basic needs. For the students who are college bound, leaders felt increasingly concerned about their ability to pay for higher education. Colleges and universities offer scholarships, but leaders felt that they do not consider the hidden costs associated with going to college (e.g., transportation home, appropriate clothing for cooler climates, etc.). Structural barriers also emerged as additional impediments to college going. Leaders identified the current high stakes testing climate as a significant challenge to promoting college readiness. Also, the school building itself was identified as an obstacle, as they believed it can create an “invisible line” that discourages parental engagement. Finally, leaders noted that families in South Texas can be apprehensive about sending their children away to college, preferring them to remain closer to home. There was also a concern over countering the “microwave mentality” of the students in order for them to learn how to persevere when faced with challenges and the increased rigor of college coursework.

### Implications

In order to begin an effective college readiness movement in South Texas, the efforts must be collaborative and intentional. Stakeholder collaborations are seen as an instrumental component to promoting a college-going and college readiness culture. School and community leaders suggested a multi-prong approach where the goal of college readiness is supported by multiple constituencies (e.g., school districts, churches, Boys & Girls Club, Rotary Clubs, etc.). The area/county must draw on the expertise within the community to identify role models, to showcase success stories, and to highlight collective effort among all stakeholders, and they must continue to make schools a nurturing space for students and families alike. Mentorships, internships, and job shadowing are additional opportunities that community/business leaders can offer to promote a college going culture in the community. Finally, stakeholders note that the institutional capacity of the region is inadequate in light of the growing regional population, a key issue that needs to be addressed if they are committed to their goal of promoting a college going and college readiness culture among students in this region.

The lessons learned in South Texas are ultimately relevant across the state as well as other areas around the country that are experiencing high growth among communities that have historically been challenged in accessing higher education. Such historic trends need to be reversed so we might continue to make progress towards the goal of preserving the college dream for all.

*This issue of Implications was developed by Victor B. Saenz, PhD, and Taryn Ozuna, University of Texas at Austin.*

### References

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