

**There is more to college readiness than academics-
Mission CISD addresses several issues that have an impact**

Mission, TX --So many times when you hear discussions of whether a high school graduate is truly ready for college, that discussion deals primarily with whether or not students are ready to tackle college-level coursework. While that is one very important issue that is being addressed by school districts, Mission CISD (Consolidated Independent School District) has found that there is much more to “college readiness” than being prepared to handle college classes without having to take remediation level courses first.

“We serve a student population that traditionally tends to feel that college is something unattainable,” said Oscar Rodriguez, Jr., superintendent. “As we began to take a closer look at the whole issue of college readiness, we realized that we needed to go well beyond preparing students, academically, for college.”

To do this, Mission CISD developed and has begun to implement a new college readiness program for high school juniors and seniors. This program will require all students to take two semesters of college readiness related courses before they graduate from high school. One semester will focus on preparing for and taking the ACT college entrance exam. The other semester will focus on helping the students with college applications, financial aid applications, interviewing skills, college entrance essay writing skills, as well as guiding students through the maze of applications deadlines and processes.

“What we are really trying to do is help remove any roadblocks our students have in getting to college,” Rodriguez said. “We are also working with the post secondary institutions in our area to see what can be done to help make the transition from high school to college less intimidating. Once we get them to the entrance of the college, we don’t want the students to get lost in the shuffle.”

Currently, the college readiness courses are voluntary. They will become mandatory beginning with the Class of 2011. To jump start the process, Rodriguez approached The University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) and South Texas College (STC) with a basic idea. “My main thought when I first approached the two colleges was

to get their help in de-mystifying the college application process and to make sure getting the applications done was not a reason for missing out on going to college,” Rodriguez said.

In just over two weeks, that basic idea grew into a project that included 200 staff members from Mission’s two high schools, the central office, UTPA, STC and about 200 laptop computers. The project was given the name Operation College Bound and it became a first-of-its-kind event for South Texas that was used as a model for other area districts.

Operation College Bound was a day-long event designed to have each senior complete a college application for UTPA and STC, complete their financial aid applications and also attend mini-sessions that would give the seniors information to make their transition to college a little easier. On each of the two event days, the high school seniors reported to the main campus gymnasium to find over 100 Mission CISD, STC and UTPA staff members waiting for them, along with 200 laptop computers that had been set up in the gym with Internet access. The seniors were then divided into groups that would rotate through the many sessions offered that day. The laptop computers were used for the online financial aid applications. Other campus computer labs were used for the completion of online college applications. Student sessions also included information on college life, handling credit, and why to go to college. At the end of each day, not only had each student attended each session, but they also received a special Mission Accomplished t-shirt, a letter of acceptance to STC and were entered into a drawing for two scholarships from UTPA, an iPod Shuffle from SureScore and college memorabilia from STC and UTPA.

District officials report that over 91% of the seniors completed their UTPA and STC applications. Completed financial aid applications by seniors increased by almost 40%. More financial aid applications were completed by district students in the two days of the event than the entire previous year.

STC reported an increase in Mission CISD student applications of 114%. The number of Mission CISD graduating seniors enrolling at STC in the fall of 2007 increased by 37% over the previous year.

UTPA officials reported an increase in Mission CISD students applying of 98%. Preliminary figures indicate a Mission CISD graduate enrollment yield increase at UTPA of 14%.

“Another thing Operation College Bound did for our seniors was it helped provide a safety net,” explained Rodriguez. “Even those students who had perhaps already applied and been accepted at other universities outside of our area immediately had an option for continuing their education if something were to happen that would keep them from being able to attend the their college of choice outside of the Valley.”

Rodriguez said he hopes to make Operation College Bound an annual event at each high school until the new college readiness requirements and courses make the event obsolete within the next three years.

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