

# HIDALGO EARLY COLLEGE DISTRICT

College Partnerships for Early College

EARLY COLLEGE  
DESIGN SERVICES



In becoming an early college district, the Hidalgo school district developed strong partnerships with nearby colleges to create smoother pathways from high school to postsecondary education. The result has been better preparation for students to take and succeed in college classes.

Enrolling in college is a confusing experience for many students, particularly those who are the first in their families to attend postsecondary education. There are application requirements to understand, financial aid forms to fill out, and tuition and fees to pay—as well as decisions to be made about housing, transportation, and finding a part-time job. Once on campus, the college coursework is demanding and the responsibility for completing it rests squarely with the students themselves. There is also a perplexing array of courses and majors to choose from, with limited opportunities for educational and career planning. Many incoming students are unprepared for these challenges.

As an early college district, Hidalgo demystifies the college experience by preparing all students for and helping them succeed in college classes while in high school. As a key part of this process, Hidalgo has developed partnerships with three public colleges located within an hour of the high school. The schools are University of Texas-Pan American, a comprehensive four-year institution; South Texas College, a two-year community college; and Texas State Technical College, also a two-year school.

Hidalgo's partnerships with these institutions, even as they evolve to improve the early college experience for students, help smooth students' transitions from high school to college. The partnerships have led to better communications and messaging about college requirements, better alignment of coursework from high school to college, and better support for high school students as they take on the challenges of college classes.

## Partnering with a Four-Year College: University of Texas-Pan American

In 2005, Hidalgo was invited to partner with the University of Texas-Pan American in developing an early college approach. When Hidalgo decided to adopt a district-wide strategy of early college for all, Blandina Cárdenas, then the president of UT-Pan Am, pledged the college's strong support, which set the tone for close collaboration. Interim Provost Ana Maria Rodriguez has directed the university's early college program since its inception.

According to former Hidalgo Superintendent Ed Blaha, the early support and involvement of the University of Texas helped validate the innovations the school district was seeking to develop



through early college. “It’s part of the whole idea of developing the college culture,” Blaha said. “Pan Am is our flagship university, so if you have a partnership with Pan Am and the UT system is behind it, then that’s very important.”

Hidalgo and UT-Pan Am set up a steering committee of faculty, staff, and administrators from both institutions, which met monthly to plan administrative, structural, and curricular improvements. The issues under discussion were wide ranging, including course sequences for high school students, improvement of course rigor, approval of syllabi and assessments for instructors, development of student supports, changes in professional development, and communication between institutions. During the planning phase, Hidalgo strengthened community support by inviting UT faculty to meet with parents, discuss the opportunities their children would receive, and address their concerns about having 16- and 17-year-olds on a college campus.

Over time, the district and the college adopted a strategy for all high school freshmen to take a “student success” course that would help them develop better study habits and other skills associated with college success. To prepare students for college-level courses, all freshmen and sophomores can take pre-Advanced Placement courses in core academic subjects (that is, English, math, science, and social studies). In addition, the high school supports freshmen and sophomores in taking college classes in art or music appreciation—courses they could tackle early before having met testing prerequisites.

By junior year, students are encouraged to take Advanced Placement and other college-level courses in a range of core subjects, depending on the students’ areas of academic strength, including English composition and literature, college algebra, and pre-calculus, AP biology and chemistry, U.S. history, and government. Some of these courses are provided by college faculty teaching

at the high school; some are provided by Hidalgo’s teachers with Master’s degrees who receive adjunct status from UT-Pan Am. Summer sessions at UT provide on-campus experiences for students in computer information systems, communications, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and other courses.

To support student success, both the university and the high school have revised their traditional approaches. At UT-Pan Am, many administrators and faculty changed their expectations about what high school students could accomplish. This opened the door to instructional approaches beyond lecturing, such as collaborative problem solving and hands-on activities. According to Provost Rodriguez, “Our faculty found out that we need to do some things differently even for our students who are on our campus and not part of an early college high school. So it affected both institutions.”

At the school district, the changes involved systemic reforms to prepare students for taking college classes, and supporting them as they struggled with the challenging coursework. The reforms included developing a college-going culture starting in elementary school, aligning courses for more rigorous instruction in middle school as well as in high school, providing professional development on instructional strategies, and providing comprehensive and individualized tutoring and other supports for students. The reforms also included instituting extensive communication with and the involvement of parents.

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“One big result comes from the first test you take in a college class. When you see that grade and it’s not something that satisfies you, it changes everything—you’re like, ‘Oh, snap, I need to improve. My work ethic or my studying methods must elevate for this class.’”

Irving, Hidalgo High School Senior

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### **Partnering with Two-Year Colleges: South Texas College and Texas State Technical College**

As Hidalgo’s early college approach evolved, the district began working more closely with South Texas College (STC) and Texas State Technical College (TSTC) to expand the range of postsecondary options for students. For example, both institutions offer career-technical training in fields that appeal to many of Hidalgo’s students. Through STC (about 20 minutes from Hidalgo), the district offers access to college courses leading to certificates or degrees in: pre-engineering; electronic and computer maintenance; precision manufacturing and drilling; automotive technician; and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning. TSTC’s campus in Harlingen is an hour away, but it offers several college programs that would not otherwise be available to Hidalgo students. These include certified nursing assistant training, aviation mechanics, and computer-assisted design.

In working more closely with STC and TSTC, Hidalgo has stepped up its career and educational planning for students—for example, it introduced a semester-long career awareness course for

eighth graders. The high school also began requiring all incoming ninth graders to select one of five career pathways: business and marketing; industrial and engineering technology; health science and technology; human development management and services; or personal and protective services.

Regardless of their career pathway, all high school students enroll in rigorous academic courses to prepare them for college. According to Superintendent Blaha, "The core academic courses have to be rigorous for all. Nothing should be watered down for anyone. The auto tech worker is going to get technical manuals he's got to read, so watering down his English class won't benefit him or anyone else. That rigor has to stay."

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**"A professor in philosophy said he would have bet that a high school kid couldn't have the highest grade in his class. At the end of the semester, he was shocked to find out it was a Hidalgo student."**

Ana Maria Rodriguez,  
Interim Provost, UT-Pan Am

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In the 2010-11 school year, Hidalgo strengthened its partnership with South Texas College through a memorandum of understanding that formalizes their relationship and builds in cost savings for the district. For example, STC now waives tuition, library fees, and other usage fees. In addition, it has agreed that its courses will use the same editions of their textbooks for at least four years, which helps to hold down textbook costs for the district. As well as providing the district with cost savings, the partnership also provides students with a wide range of career pathway options, as well as full access to library, gym, and other facilities and resources within 20 minutes of Hidalgo.

### **Aligning Institutions for the Benefit of Students**

Hidalgo's collaborations with the three colleges have improved the transition from high school to college. The traditional institutional setup requires most students to meet one set of standards in high school and then leaves them on their own to understand and adapt to another set of standards for college. In contrast, early college supports the high school-to-college transition: by the time students graduate from high school, they are already familiar with college expectations and have succeeded in college courses.

Based on Hidalgo's partnerships with colleges, the district has improved student transitions to college in these key ways:

» **College readiness assessment.** Most entering community college students must take a college readiness assessment. If they fail this assessment, they must pass remedial courses to qualify for college-level classes in core subjects such as English and math. In Hidalgo, incoming high school freshmen participate in a month-long summer academy that provides them with accelerated instruction in English and math. At the end of the summer, they take the statewide assessment

for college readiness. The high school uses the students' results to plan coursework and supports that lead all students toward earning college credits by graduation. Most of our students pass the college readiness assessment while still in high school, and can therefore earn college credits in core academic classes before graduation and enter college with no need for remediation.

» **Remedial coursework.** For the few Hidalgo seniors who do not pass the college readiness assessment before graduating, Hidalgo is working with South Texas College to provide remedial courses in math and English while the students are still in high school, thereby removing the need for remediation in college. The courses will be taught by Hidalgo teachers under the supervision of college faculty. Seniors who complete the courses and pass the final exams would be cleared for college-level math and English.

» **Curricular alignment and instructional rigor.** Based on Hidalgo's experience in working with its college partners, the district's academic and career-technical departments have adjusted instruction to make their coursework more rigorous. This has included aligning the high school and middle school curricula to what colleges expect of entering students. In addition, Hidalgo has adopted instructional strategies that help engage students in the deeper learning needed for success in college classes. It has also improved articulation, grading policies, and other agreements about course credits between high school and college.

» **Student supports.** Hidalgo's college partnerships have facilitated the development of tutoring and other strategies that support student success in college classes. For example, teacher schedules and advisory periods allow time for tutoring during the school day, and teachers also provide instructional support after school and on selected Saturdays. In addition, some teachers audit the college classes with





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“One thing that’s important is that the public school knows that we’re going to teach a college course. We don’t water it down for the students. This is a college course, and we’re going to work to get the students college-ready, and they will rise to the occasion.”

Juan Mejia, Vice President for Academic Affairs,  
South Texas College

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students and can better tutor for them as a result. Because colleges often offer classes on alternate days, high school teachers work with students during the off days to provide academic direction and assist with homework. In addition, high school counselors play a strong role in explaining college policies and requirements and in providing educational and career planning.

- » **Professional development and instructional quality.** Once a month, South Texas College offers professional development opportunities for high school principals, counselors, and other staff engaged in early college. The college also provides at least two professional development days annually. Going beyond that, some of the most lively and persistent exchanges between Hidalgo and STC involve the interactions between high school teachers and college faculty. These interactions developed gradually, particularly as a result of Hidalgo teachers’ applying for adjunct status with STC to teach college courses at the high school. Adjuncts must have a Master’s degree, and Hidalgo teachers offering college courses are supervised in the same ways as other adjunct instructors. The department chair must approve

all syllabi and textbooks. The chairs or other faculty in the department observe the instructors, and students evaluate them. Adjuncts become part of the college faculty and receive ongoing communications as members of their college departments. As a result, Hidalgo’s adjunct instructors are well-informed about college expectations and requirements, which they in turn share with their colleagues at the high school.

In short, Hidalgo’s college partnerships have helped transform the culture and structure of the district. The more Hidalgo’s teachers, staff, and administrators have learned about colleges and their policies, the more effective they have been in providing students with the skills and knowledge they need to prepare for and succeed in college.

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“Teaching strategies that are incorporated within the early college high school model are different and innovative and challenging. So it really does bring these kids up to the task.”

Sofia Pena, High School Programs Coordinator, South Texas College

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