

**TEXAS COMMUNITY COLLEGES:
CREATING RURAL PROSPERITY**

A Report of the



Rural Community College Initiative

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A VISIT TO UVALDE

There are 18 high school students here -- all boys and all refugees from the sand-it-smooth shop classes in the main building. They are listening to a woman from the local junior college talk about how to get a job. Don't smoke, she says. Don't wear a hat. Don't chew.

The next day these boys will put on clean shirts and get to work. They'll spend the afternoon at local businesses. They'll learn what happens on a real job, observing how the lessons taught at school apply to on-the-payroll work.

Students will match their time off-campus with classroom work. The name of the course is automobile electronics, but the curriculum will draw on principles of math and physics. If the boys follow this course through their senior year, they'll graduate from high school with more than a semester of college credit.

This first step in preparing high schoolers for work wouldn't have happened without Southwest Texas Junior College (SWTJC). The college provided the instructor. The college set up the curriculum and convinced the business owners to help with the afternoon training. The college even bought the clean shirts the boys will wear to work.

Even with the college designing the instruction and picking up the cost of the teacher, SWTJC administrator Dick Whipple explains it was hard to convince local high schools to take on the program. Whipple says he worked three years in a half dozen counties to begin this one class. Schools refused the program, Whipple says, because they felt their students weren't up to the work.

Nothing comes easy along the border. For most of this century sociologists and economists have marked maps of the United States where rural communities have remained persistently poor. Four regions appear on every map: the coalfields of central Appalachia, the Black Belt of the Deep South; the Indian country of the West; and the borderlands of South Texas.

For most of the 20th century, the nation has tried in fits and starts to lift these regions from poverty. Teddy Roosevelt appointed a Country Life Commission. Franklin Roosevelt created the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Farm Security Administration.

The unemployment rate of this Middle Rio Grande region of South Texas is twice the state average. In the border town of Eagle Pass, the official unemployment rate is over 20 percent. Median family income here is half the Texas average of \$22,992 a year; Hispanic families -- who represent three-quarters of the region's population -- have a median family income of just \$9,237. Poverty isn't hidden here. It's there on the back streets of Carrizo Springs, in the colonias outside Eagle Pass (where residents are hand-digging sewer lines), at the tiny Kickapoo reservation.

Not only is the economy lacking, there is no concerted effort to create prosperity. You can search this country, from Del Rio down the river to Carrizo Springs, and find few institutions that are charged with improving the local economy. Del Rio has an active city government. The Middle Rio Grande Development Council dispenses federal and state money for 911 services and solid waste management, but the agency's total budget for economic development is only \$76,000.

What's left? In 15,000 square miles along the Middle Rio Grande in South Texas, there is no institution charged with training workers and developing the economy. The only regional institution of any sort, in fact, is the school that gave those 18 Uvalde student clean shirts and a taste of real work, Southwest Texas Junior College.

“WHO ELSE WOULD DO IT?”

Half of Texas' junior or community colleges can be found in rural areas. They are scattered from Beeville to the Panhandle. Like SWTJC, these schools were founded to help kids get through college, to be a less-expensive and close-to-home way to earn the first two years of a university education.

That is still their primary purpose. Three-quarters of the students at SWTJC are there for an academic education, to build credits for transfer to four-year universities. “The way we perceived our mission,” says SWTJC's director of planning Mitchel Burchfield, “was as a traditional college transfer institution.”

Despite its concentration on academic subjects, the college never has an ivy attitude. The school's efforts to draw students onto campus have been strong and deep. The college serves a population of 134,000, in a region with just 10 people per square mile. To shrink the South Texas landscape, the school runs busses to pick up students in the little hill country towns of Leakey and Utopia. Some SWTJC students arise at 4 a.m. to catch their rides to the main campus.

Junior college teachers have conducted literacy classes in bunk houses on far-flung ranches and in city churches. “We go into the heart of the barrios,” says SWTJC president Billy Word. “We don't know who else would do it if we didn't.” The college's student body mirrors the region's population, 75 percent Hispanic.

SWTJC has done a good job -- a heroic job, given the demands of its region. These days, however, conducting traditional college transfer functions doesn't address the demands of poor regions and a changing economy. The administrators at SWTJC concluded they weren't doing enough to change their economy.

So, SWTJC decided to tackle a job that nobody else has been able to accomplish. The college decided to take on the economy of South Texas because, as Billy Word said, "We don't know who else would do it if we didn't."

EDUCATING PEOPLE, CREATING JOBS

economy has to work both sides of the equation -- supplying workers and building businesses so there will be a need for skilled labor. Changing the economy requires teaching students and transferring the latest knowledge and technology to existing businesses.

A college working on the development of the Middle Rio Grande region also has

school students receive training in farm and ranch management, law enforcement, office work, and child development.

Two years ago, SWTJC was invited by the Ford Foundation to join a national demonstration program called the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI), designed to help move economically distressed regions toward prosperity. The RCCI gives rural colleges a boost in creating jobs, raising income, and broadening access to education for low-income people. Under RCCI, the college assembled a planning team composed of regional leaders and college administrators. The college-community team set three priorities: expanding distance education, training the workforce, and creating a forum for regional economic development planning. It has made much progress toward those goals.

First, SWTJC garnered a \$1.3 million federal grant to set up computer and television links between the school's three campuses. Its first two distance education courses -- British Literature and College Algebra -- were delivered last year, with enthusiastic response from students. Now students in all three towns will have access to the same courses, and college faculty will be able to spend more time teaching and less time burning rubber and dodging javelina on the two-lane roads that connect the campuses. Students and faculty also can take university and graduate-level courses through the Texas Videoconference Network.

Bringing distance education to the rural high schools was more challenging. Despite the college's success raising money to link its campuses electronically, the cost of equipment to link up twenty-one school districts spread over thousands of square miles was daunting. With help from SWTJC, the school districts pooled their money to hire a grant writer who has secured federal and state grants totaling \$1.1 million for telecommunications equipment. The new distance education network will bring calculus, French, German, and other advanced courses to the rural high schools. High school students also can use the network to take college-level courses, for which they receive college credit.

The next step will be to bring internet and other telecommunications services to more people and organizations in the region -- businesses, local governments, libraries, healthcare providers, and others.

On the workforce development front, the college hired Romelia Aranda, an Eagle Pass business owner, to organize courses that meet the needs of area businesses. The response to these offerings -- mostly computer courses -- has been overwhelming. The college expected to train 1,000 people in two years; the classes attracted 500 students in the first four months. "People are just beating our doors down wanting classes," says Don Tomas.

STATE INCENTIVES AND BARRIERS

Southwest's success has little to do with state policy. The new programs and buildings were constructed out of the entrepreneurial spirit of the college's administrators and teacher, not in response to either a carrot or stick offered by the state. The new campuses in Del Rio and Eagle Pass began with local land and money. The new electronic connections between campuses came from a federal grant. Ford Foundation money hired Romelia Aranda to organize computer courses for Eagle Pass and Del Rio employees.

The state pays for academic and traditional vocational courses (cosmetology, automobile repair, data processing, criminal justice). There is little in this lineup of courses that will come close to transforming the South Texas economy. What Texas pays for are classes that prepare students to transfer to a four-year university, and vocational courses that prepare workers for a local economy that is too weak to offer a decent standard of living to its citizens.

The system is self-reinforcing. For example, the state pays community colleges retroactively for students taught in the previous two years. If a school wants to start a new program under this setup, it could take as long as three years to see the first dollar of state money. And if the program is expensive to start -- if it requires specialized equipment or a highly-trained instructor -- colleges may figure they have too much to lose. It is easier -- and more profitable -- to fill another class in child care, cosmetology, or law enforcement. Even if the local economy needs technical education, a small rural school might find the risk too great to offer this instruction.

Any new program has to start with funds raised locally, and the largest source of

It is the model that's needed, however. The economic forces that have drained rural America of resources and people are quickening. The Texas comptroller estimates that 94 percent of the state's population growth between now and 2026 will take place in the 25 largest cities. Good jobs now require more technology, more knowledge, and more resources. Regions that lack skilled workers, knowledge and technology can expect to be left behind -- a burden on the people who live there and an economic drag on the rest of the state.

A PROMISING MODEL

Rural Texas starts a lap behind in the current-day economic contest. Learning and technology -- the foundation of prosperity -- are centered in urban areas. And the current funding formulas work against a community that find an opportunity to bring knowledge and technology to rural industries. Southwest Texas Junior College faced that problem a year ago.

An opportunity to develop the Uvalde economy can be seen from the college campus. There are three orange hangers built alongside the runway at the local airport. They are owned by Sierra Industries, a business built by Mark Huffstutler.

Huffstutler graduated from SWTJC's pilot training program in the late 1970s. His pilot's license earned him a job ferrying banker and former governor Dolph Briscoe around the state. In the early '80s, Huffstutler bought the small charter service at the edge of the Uvalde field. During the oil boom, he pumped gas for the planes that swarmed over south Texas.

Huffstutler "developed a modification" in the landing gear of a type of airplane. He parlayed that modification into an aircraft repair business. In the late 1980s, he bought a defunct firm in Seattle that owned the rights to another repair technique. Huffstutler's business grew and by the early '90s, his Sierra Industries ranked 299th on Inc. magazine's list of the 500 fastest growing small businesses in the country. Employment grew from five workers in 1985 to more than 70 by 1996.

Huffstutler's customers wanted more than mechanical assistance. They needed paint jobs, interior work, and radio repair. And these plane owners didn't want to fly hither and yon to get this service. They wanted all these services in one place. Instead of expanding into those businesses, however, Huffstutler recruited three businesses from other Texas towns to take care of these needs. These new businesses -- a radio repair shop, a painting firm, and an interior refitting business -- now line the Uvalde airfield.

What Huffstutler has done is to create the nucleus of an aircraft maintenance cluster in Uvalde, a group of inter-related businesses that can learn from and grow with each other. This kind of clustering is a foundation of growth, economists have found. Small firms working together feed off each other. They trade tips and customers.

Workers from these firms spin off other businesses. What all these businesses need to grow are trained workers.

Huffstutler believes “there is a lot of potential in the existing segment” of the airline business he services. “I could do ten times the work,” he says. “Just because we live in Uvalde, Texas, doesn’t mean anything.” Sierra hangs flags from the home countries of his customers; he has banners from three dozen nations. The problem for his business is finding skilled employees. Huffstutler recruits from all over the country, but has trouble convincing trained people to move to Uvalde. If his business expands, Huffstutler knows, so will the three firms that surround his hangers. “All of our businesses could grow at a good rate,” Huffstutler says of his maintenance cluster. “The barrier to that is finding qualified people.”

For several years, Huffstutler tried to convince SWTJC to open an aircraft frame and mechanics program. The college wanted to provide the training, but could not afford to start a new program that would cost over \$1 million for equipment and a building in addition to the instructor’s salary. Even if the college could raise the up-front money, it would have to wait up to three years to get the first penny in state money for the new program.

For a school with a total budget of just under \$14 million, a \$1 million ante is a huge risk, even for a guy who has experienced the business end of an angry bull. There was no incentive to take on an expensive program, and if the school tried and failed, there was nobody to help pick up the pieces.

But wait -- this story has a happy ending. In 1996, the college received a grant from the Skills Development Fund, a new program administered by the Texas Workforce Commission. The Skill Development Fund was created to support customized training -- to train Texas workers for jobs in new and expanding industries. The \$90,000 grant to SWTJC was enough to jump-start a training program that will prepare local folks for entry-level jobs at Sierra Industries and upgrade the skills of technicians already working in the aviation industry. The college hopes this short-term training program will be the first step in developing a permanent program in aviation mechanics.

To qualify for the grant, the college and Sierra Industries submitted a joint proposal to the Workforce Commission. They had to document the shortage of qualified aviation mechanics in the region. They laid out a collaborative training plan -- the college provides classroom space, an instructor, and other basics. Sierra Industries provides facilities and shop equipment for instruction in the workplace, and agrees to hire successful graduates of the program. Today, ___ students are enrolled in the first of two 14-week training programs that will place most of them in entry-level jobs in a growing industry.

The SWTJC-Sierra program does more than offer its trainees job opportunities. It also offers hope for development of the regional economy. Don Tomas, the head of the

college's Del Rio campus, notes that the U.S. Air Force base there is taking over jet maintenance for a number of other facilities. There is an aircraft maintenance business in Hondo, also in the SWTJC service area. These, along with the cluster of companies at the Uvalde airfield, can form the beginnings of an industry hub in Southwest Texas. They can spawn a network of inter-related firms including metalworking, toolmaking, upholstery, and aircraft parts manufacturing.

HOW CAN THE STATE HELP?

With help from the Texas Skills Development Fund and the Ford Foundation's Rural Community College Initiative, SWTJC has begun offering job training that can fuel the region's economy. Thanks to federal and state grants for distance learning, the region now has the foundation for a telecommunications network that can spark further economic development.

How many similar opportunities go untapped throughout rural Texas? How could the state encourage more colleges to be "entrepreneurial" -- to reach out aggressively to people who need education, and to create the undergirding needed for rural economic development? It is an issue of money and motivation. Bob Lahti believes that many community colleges "have the opportunity to do something, but they don't have the up-front money." Given limited resources, other colleges simply do not see aggressive outreach, job training, or regional economic development as a high priority with an immediate payoff.

One step in the right direction was the creation of the Texas Workforce Commission, a compiling of 30 training programs found within nine state agencies. The Commission's \$25 million Skills Development Fund enables community colleges to provide customized training like the SWTJC-Sierra Industries program.

There are other proposals that could go further to address the problems and opportunities brought to light in Uvalde:

- ***Provide more support for technical education.*** The Skills Development Fund enables community colleges to provide customized training for particular jobs in particular firms. Colleges also need up-front funding to start high-cost, technical degree programs that are important for the state's economic development. This could be provided through a special, competitive fund like the Skills Development Fund. Alternatively, Texas could change its basic funding formula for community colleges to provide more support for expensive technical education programs.
- ***Ensure rural community colleges a viable funding base.*** Half of Texas' community colleges are rural, and these institutions are essential to the future of the state's economy. Yet many rural community college districts have assessed valuations too small to sustain a modern community college. The state could offer these colleges incentives to create regional consortia for joint planning, purchasing, sharing

automated data systems, and other means to achieve economies of scale. It could offer incentives for small community college districts to merge, or it could require institutions within a region to do joint planning for course offerings and economic development activities.

- ***Encourage “entrepreneurial” colleges.*** What incentives can encourage public community colleges to become more creative and aggressive in providing access to education and sparking regional development? The RCCI has helped SWTJC and other colleges form partnerships with their communities and become catalysts for economic development by providing small amounts of flexible money, support for a guided college-community planning process, and exposure to a network of innovative rural colleges. Texas could fund a similar support system for rural community colleges throughout the state.

Recommendations like these must compete for attention within a state budget that has profoundly ignored higher education for too long. Although the number of students attending Texas colleges and universities increased 24 percent (or 180,0000 people) from 1982 to 1992, the percentage of the state budget allocated to higher education fell. Adjusted for inflation, the amount Texas state government spend for colleges fell 15 percent between 1984 and 1994.

Meanwhile, population projections tell of a growing need for higher education and workforce training. By the year 2010, the Texas workforce will include 2.6 million more older adults (ages 45-64) than in 1993. Many will need education and training to change occupations, upgrade their computer skills, or improve their basic literacy in order to keep up with changing technology. The state will also have 875,000 more young people (ages 5-19) than in 1993. This group will swell enrollment at colleges and universities for two decades to come, much as the baby boomers did in the 1960s and '70s. How will state funding for education and training respond?

Driving on the smooth, fast two lane roads that flatten through the Middle Rio Grande Valley, it's easy to play a game of “what if.” What if every high school had an automobile electronics class like the one SWTJC started in Uvalde -- classes that had young people excited about math, seeing the connections between physics and a paycheck? What if SWTJC could add the technical courses and instructors to further support the growth of aviation-related firms in the region? What if the college could open those television classrooms in every high school, so that the skills of a small faculty could be instantly transmitted across 15,000 square miles of mesquite, milo and cattle?

Would all that make a difference? Billy Word thinks so. And all he's asking for is a little help. “The difficult part is picking our opportunities,” Word says in his Uvalde office. “We're not lacking for opportunities. They are there. The difficulty is deciding which good idea we say no to.”

