



GREATER TEXAS FOUNDATION

A Regional Approach to Early College and Degree Pathways

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Access to a postsecondary degree can pose challenges to traditionally underrepresented groups. This issue presents a potential barrier not only for individual students and families but also for the workforce and talent development needs of a geographic region. The value of attaining a bachelor's degree is well documented (Ma, Pender and Welch, 2016) despite more recent debate on the return on investment based on the cost of college and wages of recent graduates.

One educational model that is meant to expedite degree completion is the early college high school (ECHS). Early college high schools are predicated on the concept that high school students can take college-level coursework to satisfy high school graduation requirements and begin building postsecondary transcripts (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). The most common ECHS designs allow students to earn credits toward an associate or bachelor's degree; there is also potential to earn an associate degree prior to, or upon, ECHS graduation and expedite enrollment in universities (Lauen, Fuller, Barret and Janda, 2017). Furthermore, these schools were originally designed to help students who might not otherwise attend college, thus addressing issues related to access.¹

Support for these high schools and the ability to expedite postsecondary degrees for students led Greater Texas Foundation to commission research for scholarship program design (Cohen, Fox, Kutash, & Pandit, 2010) to target underrepresented graduates of ECHSs in Texas. This careful planning resulted in an initial \$3 million investment in 2011 to launch its signature scholarship program: GTF Scholars.

The foundation often takes a regional approach to its grantmaking to be responsive to the social and cultural differences inherent in such a large state and the potential for regional impact. Of the initial higher education partners selected for the scholarship program, one institution had evidence of a particularly strong regional approach to relationships with ECHSs. The focus of this descriptive case study is on The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) and its deeply embedded collaborative approach to educational attainment in the transition from high school to college. This study addresses three research questions related to UTRGV, the region, and the GTF Scholars Program:

1. What are the mechanisms and components of a regional program approach for the university and participating partners?
2. What evidence is there that this regional approach has had an impact on institutional partners, students who are in the GTF Scholars Program, and ECHS students in the region?
3. What are the crucial elements of success for such a collaboration?

While this case study represents only a microcosm of the larger population of ECHS graduates in this South Texas region, the example of a regional approach to student success can serve as a model for other secondary and postsecondary partners engaged in similar programming. It is the purpose of this article to highlight some of the critical work accomplished by partners throughout the

¹ Website of Texas Education Agency: <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/college-career-and-military-prep/early-college-high-school-echs>

region as highlighted by the GTF Scholars Program. To provide greater context, the following section provides a brief overview of implementation of the GTF Scholars Program at UTRGV.

GTF Scholars Program Model

Based on research, the foundation's interest in supporting ECHS students stemmed beyond financial support and included nonfinancial support. The ultimate goal was to increase the number of Texas ECHS graduates who successfully transition to a four-year institution and complete a baccalaureate degree. In 2011 the foundation provided funding for the partners to create predictable scholarship awards coupled with student support interventions such as academic advising, financial guidance and support, and social and peer-community building experiences. These types of interventions are known to be helpful to traditionally underrepresented students (Tinto, 2005; Tovar, 2015).

These guidelines were aligned with the educational goals of various leaders in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, which has one university, two community colleges, one state technical college, and collective impact (Kania and Kramer, 2011) groups. In addition to student outcomes, part of the program design was for each institution to participate in an eight-year evaluation, part of which was to capture the degree to which each university operated with a regional approach. At UTRGV, the GTF Scholars Program data was used to monitor how students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education, who already have college credits, matriculate to and through the university.

UTRGV Community Context

The Rio Grande Valley is a diverse region of Texas comprising the state's four southernmost counties (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy) along the U.S.-Mexico border. The area is home to 1.4 million people, with 94% identifying as Hispanic/Latino.² The Rio Grande Valley communities have some of the highest poverty rates in the state and 18% of residents 25 and older hold a bachelor's degree or above, compared with a rate of 30% for the state and 32% nationally. Its population is younger compared with other metropolitan areas in Texas, with the average age hovering in the low 30s.³

The GTF Scholars Program and UTRGV

The GTF Scholars Program grant was originally awarded by the foundation to the University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB) and carried over to the new University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), which was created by the Texas Legislature in 2013. Related to the scholarship program, students receive services across two main campuses that are 70 miles apart in Brownsville, Texas, and Edinburg, Texas. The university's geographical breadth is a solid representation of the need to employ a more regional approach to education.

Of the total 485 students enrolled in the GTF Scholars Programs around the state, 120 enrolled at UTRGV across five cohorts, each lasting three years. The program evolved over time as the university went through a complex evolution that led to the establishment of UTRGV. Throughout this evolution and multiple transitions, the program remained viable and robust. The first GTF Scholar cohort enrolled in fall 2012 and the grant's last cohort completed their eligibility in 2019. These students match the foundation's intended audience with 82% of students identified as first-generation college students and 99% identified as Hispanic/Latino, based on program records.

General Presence and Function of Dual Credit Programs in the Rio Grande Valley

Dual credit programs, including ECHSs, have become extremely popular in the region due to their defining role in connecting high school students with meaningful college experiences earlier than traditional high schools. Students are equipped with college-going knowledge, skills, and strategies that contribute to their understanding of a college-going culture. Another factor contributing to the program's popularity is the robust legislation in Texas supporting dual credit programs, such as HB 1638 (85th Legislature, Regular Session), which outlines statewide goals for dual credit (Texas Education Code, 28.009 §b-1 and §b2).

For some students looking to enter the workforce right after high school, dual credit programming takes the form of certification and associate degree programs. For others, it provides an early start to a four-year degree plan that will either prepare them for a career or pave the way into graduate or professional school much more quickly than usual (e.g., some GTF Scholars have graduated with a baccalaureate degree one year after graduating high school and most graduate about three years after graduating high school).

Dual credit programming looks different among the Rio Grande Valley's four post-secondary institutions. The two community colleges and one technical college enroll the bulk of students in dual credit or ECHS programs. The institutions commonly work together, rather than compete, based on their common objective of connecting students with the resources they need to realize their educational goals. Additionally, local organizations like RGV Focus⁴ (data-driven collective impact) and RGV LEAD⁵ (connecting K-12, postsecondary, and workforce) help foster a shared commitment to growing the next generation of employees. The thread from K-12 to workforce is followed by all these partners, who believe the community is strengthened through active collaboration.

The Role of Early College High Schools (ECHSs) in the Region

Early college high schools are specialized dual credit programs that not only allow students to earn up to 60 credits or an associate degree during or upon graduation

⁴ RGV FOCUS is a collaboration led by Educate Texas, which is an initiative of the Communities Foundation of Texas. Website: <https://www.edtx.org/rgv-focus/home>

⁵ RGV LEAD is "linking economic and academic development" in the region. Website: <https://rgvlead.org/>

from high school but also give students the opportunity to do so through structured programming. Carefully designed to connect historically underrepresented students to postsecondary education, this type of programming launched after study and investment by philanthropic groups like the Gates Foundation and Jobs for the Future (Berger, Turk-Bicakci, Garet, Song, Knudson, Haxton...Cassidy, 2013). While a student taking dual credits in a traditional high school likely receives some additional targeted support, a student participating in an ECHS will be exposed to more structured programming.⁶ Another difference is that students enrolled in an ECHS should not incur any costs for postsecondary courses, which is not always the case for dual credit programs.

Early college high school programs are overseen and regulated by the Texas Education Agency, and campuses must meet specific criteria to be designated as an ECHS. There are three main types of ECHS with the second and third types being more prevalent in the Rio Grande Valley:

1. Stand-alone ECHSs (typically capped at around 400 students, highly structured and intentionally built to support students enrolled in dual credits).
2. ECHS programs within traditional high schools (programming for a cohort of students within the school).
3. “Wall to wall” early college high schools (large traditional high schools with all students involved in ECHS programming).

Each of these ECHS models are represented in the GTF Scholars Program, creating a unique opportunity to learn more about this still relatively new program type and the academic trajectories of ECHS graduates. The GTF Scholars Program has facilitated that growing understanding and will help to fill a large gap in the literature on student academic success, postsecondary persistence and completion, and advanced study.

It is worth noting that the Rio Grande Valley region is home to the highest concentration of ECHS programs in the state—over 40⁷ are established throughout the region, totaling almost 25% of the state’s ECHS campuses. Given that 18% of adults 25 and older hold a bachelor’s degree in the region, ECHS programming is a powerful tool for increasing this figure to support the growth and health of the Rio Grande Valley community. ECHS programs must adhere to a rigorous annual designation process overseen by the Texas Education Agency that includes lengthy narratives and formalized written commitments between K-12 school districts and postsecondary institutional partners. Finally, an ECHS may have multiple postsecondary partners to support the ECHS in meeting the objectives for success as outlined by the ECHS Blueprint.

Case Study Methodology and Scope

This article focuses on the unique synergy between the GTF Scholars Program in the context of UTRGV, and its regional partnerships, by employing a case study methodology. When employing a case study methodology, Stake (1995) recommends that participants be selected based upon their ability to respond to the research

⁶ In the past, only students participating in ECHS programs were given the opportunity to take up to 60 college credits of their choice, while dual credit students in traditional high schools were limited to the core college curriculum; although state legislation has been passed that expands more equitable access to both student populations, the additional supports and intentional programming of ECHSs remain advantageous.

⁷ Texas Career and College Readiness School Models: <https://www.texasccrsm.org/School-Locator>

questions in substantive ways. Additionally, Patton (2014) suggests that qualitative studies may include participants in the process and that pragmatism, or usefulness, is a legitimate way to think about constructing a study. While there is abundant evidence over an eight-year period of evaluation, we have narrowed the scope as described in the following section.

Sources of Data

The authors relied on existing GTF Scholars Program data including six years of principal investigator and program coordinator interview transcripts, specifically the responses to questions about regionalism and relationships with ECHSs. The authors used historical document analysis for all qualitative artifacts, and reviewed student matriculation and graduation figures, and two grant reports, with permission, submitted by UTRGV to Greater Texas Foundation. One of the reports was a cumulative report at the end of the scholarship grant period, and one was a report submitted after UTRGV hosted two ECHS regional convenings through a separate grant from the foundation.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with school district representatives, a community member involved in the ECHS movement, and the former executive who led the collective impact organization. They were recruited for interviews based on their deep knowledge of ECHSs and regional history.

Elements for Successful Outcomes in the Region

Evidence from the annual GTF Scholars principal investigator interviews indicated that strong, evolving and trust-filled relationships among school administrators and post-secondary partners were a key to success. A few excerpts from the interview transcripts support this finding:

- I think we're very active and have strengthened our ties with early college high schools. We attend their meetings as we're invited and so we're very conscious to make sure we're there.
- We sit on the steering committee for some of the early college high schools so that has been made available because there are more early college high schools in our immediate area...we do attend, and we do participate.
- I think we've maintained our ties with early college high schools. I believe we already have a strong outreach program so this is just maintaining that strong collaboration that we have. We've spent a lot more time talking about dual credit opportunities at UTRGV with our early college high schools so those are new connections I would like to report.
- We have really built that partnership with the school district, meeting with either their advanced academic folks or their college readiness teams. It's really just building up the relationships...I will say the college and career readiness representatives and the counselors...we couldn't do the work that we do without them.

Further, the UTRGV interview participants (i.e., principal investigator and program coordinator) stated that flexibility from the foundation accelerated student success because the university could create financial aid packages that reflected the needs of each student, with the goal of expedited degree completion and a reduction in student loan debt. Another factor was the high alignment of credits that applied to a bachelor's degree for UTRGV students who had attended ECHSs in school districts with more precision in course selection and degree pathways than other ECHSs across the state that take a less prescribed approach. Case in point, of the total 485 GTF Scholars across the four participating grantee institutions, 41% (199 students) graduated within three years of beginning the program.⁸ The U.S. Department of Education reports the same percentage (41%) for full-time, first-time college students who are earning a bachelor's degree in *four years*.⁹ GTF Scholars at UTRGV had the highest baccalaureate completion rate of the four universities in the program with *57% of its students graduating from the university within three years*. Part of this success is attributed to the agreements negotiated between independent school districts and their partners which allow intentional collaboration on dual credit programming. It is noteworthy that UTRGV has an ECHS on its campus in Brownsville.

When looking at credits earned and credits applied to degree at the time of university enrollment, GTF Scholars at UTRGV had the highest average of ECHS credits earned in high school, at 69 credits, with 51 credits, on average, applied to their degree program for a rate of 74%. Broadly, the credit figures for all GTF Scholars among the four grantee institutions are 65 and 44, respectively, or 68% of their incoming credits applied to their degree at enrollment.

Notably, case study participants identified one of the key elements of success in their approach was minimal to no cost for the ECHS students to take college credits. Knowing that the financial barriers to college can be insurmountable to some families, the collaborators in the Rio Grande Valley have accounted for and removed that barrier by negotiating very low rates or free enrollment in credit-bearing classes. In the case of low rates, \$25 per credit for example, the school district is paying the higher education partner on behalf of the student. In the case of no-cost credits for the ECHS students, the university partner waives the fee.

In the context of the GTF Scholars Program at UTRGV, the university awarded participating students an average scholarship of \$3,805, compared with the overall program average of \$5,308.¹⁰

Creating opportunities to access and finance education are not insurmountable obstacles, as evidenced in this region. The collective social and civic will, and financial agreements among partners, to provide postsecondary education and the subsequent credits cannot be overstated. The themes are explored below.

⁸ This figure jumps to 91% when data are analyzed one semester later, according to the Greater Texas Foundation's evaluation report.

⁹ According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 41% of first-time full-time college students earn a bachelor's degree in four years. Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2019). The Condition of Education 2019 (NCES 2019-144), Undergraduate Retention and Graduation Rates.

¹⁰ More information on program-specific and broad program outcomes related to the GTF Scholars Program can be accessed at <https://www.greatertexasfoundation.org/gtf-scholars/>

Themes from the Case Study

After a careful review of evidence related to collaboration and regionalism, and the scholarship program, the authors identified themes for success as follows:

Student-centered Focus

Through multiple resources, it was evident that the leaders at UTRGV and other educational entities in the Valley had a huge commitment to putting students first. While this is a common catchphrase, the participants included in the case study interviews offered multiple examples of how they tried to maximize opportunities for their students. As the ECHS movement grew, they had a commitment to “figure it out,” as one participant said. Parents and families were deeply invested in seeing their students attain success and also contributed to the student-centered approach. Many students were encouraged by their families to take advantage of the offer for “free college.”

Within the scholarship program itself, UTRGV staff members visited high schools in the area. At first the recruitment focus was within a few major cities, mostly in Brownsville, but by the end of the program, GTF Scholars staff at UTRGV were making presentations and visits to ECHSs up to 85 miles away. They had built significant relationships with ECHS principals, counselors, and college-readiness staff to promote the program and help students continue their education at the university with a scholarship.

Innovation Among Partners

One of the most striking features of the regional approach with UTRGV, school districts, and the GTF Scholars Program was the “can-do” attitude. When faced with obstacles, multiple participants explained that they or their institution was inclined to find pockets or opportunities where they could find funding, challenge the status quo and look at problems from an asset-based vs. deficit-based mindset. With a student-centered focus, they challenged assumptions about what their students could accomplish and secured the resources to help them. The GTF Scholars Program was small relative to the overall UTRGV student population—ECHS graduates comprise only one portion of entering students. However, the small size of the program allowed the university to test ideas about student recruitment, student services and orientation strategies for students who technically enter the university as freshmen but may have the credit accrual of sophomores or juniors. The related high school partners appreciated this specialized approach. Likewise, at the high school level, leaders figured out how to pay for college books using Instructional Materials Funds, or get codes for online texts, or develop faculty who were qualified to teach college-level courses through content-specific certifications.

Intentionality of Collaboration

Among interview participants, two words stood out: intention and intentionality. Participants described a doggedness to collaborate and achieve their goals. They compared their work to areas of the state where ECHSs are approved and implemented with less fidelity to pathways, or “crosswalks,” as they said, to ensure that students are

not taking courses that do not apply to an associate degree. This is further evidence that what the collaborators are doing in the Valley is prescriptive and intentional toward degree completion. The intentionality of the partnerships is tied to the previous theme of innovation whereby the participants see institutional or bureaucratic obstacles as hurdles that can be overcome for their students instead of insurmountable barriers.

Data-Sharing and Data-Informed Decisions

The degree to which UTRGV and its regional partners have invested in and embraced data collection is a hallmark of the region. This rings true at the university level and at the collective impact organization RGV Focus. While the information is de-identified and shared only in aggregate, the power of data-sharing was apparent in the data. In one case, UTRGV shared with partner districts how their students were faring at the university after matriculating post-high school. UTRGV also hosted two regional convenings that focused not only on building relationships but also on the postsecondary results of ECHS students, specifically those in the GTF Scholars Program. Participants at those convenings may not have heard those results before, which may have then impacted their decision-making about student degree pathway planning. In another example provided by one of the interview participants, when college faculty questioned the preparation and success of students from ECHSs, the organization was able to provide data that proved ECHS students were not only able to achieve success at the college level but also had a higher success rate than non-ECHS students. As the interviewee said:

The university found that the dual credit kids coming in from the community college were 10 to 12% more likely to be successful. Credits complete and retention and things like that. So that kind of silenced the faculty a lot, and then we had the study, the why behind it.

In addition to the regional aspect, the GTF Scholars Program external evaluation, in which UTRGV participated, included significant qualitative information about how students experience the ECHS-to-university transition, which helped inform larger efforts at student onboarding and student support.

Discussion of the Findings

These findings hold promise for the burgeoning growth of ECHS models to help underrepresented students attain an associate or bachelor's degree. In addition, the concept and growing practice of "reverse transfer" is relevant, whereby four-year institutions collaborate with two-year institutions to retroactively award associate degrees to students who may have not technically completed their 60 credits for associate degrees at the high school level but later earned additional credits. For other regions that seek to propel degree attainment and the talent pipeline, this model of regional collaboration among school districts, and higher education partners and civic groups, combined with scholarships and student support, might suggest a powerful model to transform a region.

As demonstrated in this case, employing a regional, multifaceted approach to addressing issues related to postsecondary access and completion requires collaboration and a willingness to push past the status quo in support of positive academic outcomes for students. The underlying thread connecting participants' descriptions of the work they did was to keep students as the central focus of all decisions. A regression to making siloed decisions could be counterproductive for creating systems that would enable success across a broader swath of the regional community; whereas, partnering rather than competing, intently focused on outcomes, is critical to the work. While a regional approach may not be the most effective method for promoting academic achievement in every community, it has shown to be successful in Texas' Rio Grande Valley and may be worth further consideration in other geographical areas with similar intentions.

Study Limitations

The authors limited this study to one university in Texas that received grant funding to design and implement a scholarship program that included various financial and non-financial supports for cohorts of ECHS graduates. One-hundred twenty (120) scholarship recipients participated over the life of the grant period, thus representing a microcosm of the larger ECHS population. Also, by the nature of the scholarship's design, the university made a commitment to help students avoid student loan debt, to not displace other financial aid beyond the foundation's scholarship, and to fill the remaining gap in a student's financial aid package with university resources. The university also ran a criteria-based recruitment process and selected students through a competitive process who may have been more likely to earn their degree in the time allotted.

Another limitation was the reliance on interview transcripts produced through annual interviews with the GTF Scholars Program principal investigator and program coordinator, which may not fully reflect the nuances occurring in the region. While both the data sources and rationale for inclusion in this study are sound, the transcripts represent a moment in time and the descriptive perspectives of only two individuals. Despite these limitations, this study can contribute to the growing body of literature on ECHS student academic outcomes, historically underrepresented students in postsecondary education, the need for intentional alignment between dual credit programming and postsecondary academic requirements, and university/K-12/community collaboration.

Conclusion

The collective efforts documented in this case study dispel the myths and expectations about what underrepresented students can accomplish. By taking a regional approach, with detailed agreements and innovative solutions, educational leaders in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas are capitalizing on young talent to prepare the region for educational and economic opportunities. Texas has the most ECHSs in the United States, making it a favorable host for these types of educational opportunities that cross

traditional boundaries of high school and college. Building student-centered, long-term relationships across institutions is a formidable task, but the Rio Grande Valley may be an example to watch for other regions that seek to expedite and fortify degree completion for traditionally underrepresented young adults.

Areas for Further Research

Throughout the GTF Scholars Program, the foundation staff and board members, grantees, and evaluation team have been curious about the types of ECHSs and how their program models might affect college enrollment, credits applied to degree, majors, and degree attainment—both at the associate and bachelor's degree levels. This type of research would be an informational asset as more state legislatures or state departments of education consider dual credit options.

Another area for inquiry would be the dynamic between structured institutional agreements and the concept of “dynamic leaders.” Was it the result of a dedicated group of educators and administrators in the Rio Grande Valley “figuring it out,” innovating, or taking risks, as they described in interviews? Was it related to the edicts of university leadership, and if so, what were their incentives to participate and offer free or nearly free college courses to local public school students?

Another exploration would be the ethnic, social, and cultural dynamics of the area and its commitment to families and students who traditionally are underrepresented in higher education. Quite often “underrepresented” status holds a negative or deficit-based connotation in higher education, but how did the positive ethnic, social, and cultural fabric of the community contribute to dismantling educational barriers to success?

Lastly, these findings lead to other questions about the strength of regional partnerships and the degree to which they can be maintained. How might this regional approach be susceptible to political and economic changes in the Rio Grande Valley? Will university leadership/staff turnover positively or negatively affect its longevity? Will the influx of new business and economic engines in the region create opportunities for these students or stifle their career paths to a limited number of fields based on what is needed for economic growth?

The Rio Grande Valley of Texas is home to almost one and one-half million people. While statistics related to educational attainment levels and socioeconomic status might paint a bleak outlook, opportunities to change the course of the region are being intentionally designed and implemented by countless stakeholders. Through thoughtful collaboration among K-12, postsecondary institutions, workforce, civic organizations, and others, the number of students earning postsecondary credentials is steadily increasing. While the region may be unique in many ways (i.e., historically, economically, and demographically), the approach to education and community is one for consideration by leaders in other areas for replication.

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