



THE MONITOR

EDITORIAL: RGV education program for low-income gets worthy national praise

THE MONITOR EDITORIAL BOARD

March 8, 2018

The Rio Grande Valley nonprofit organization **VIDA**, which helps low-income adults attain a workforce degree or certificate, is finally getting the national recognition and praise that it deserves after showing in a national study how it helps reduce college drop outs, increase graduation rates and improves long-term job prospects for its participants.

Officials with the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation Administration for Children and Families, which is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, came to South Texas College on Wednesday morning to applaud the program and release data from a 2017 study. The “Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement: Implementation and Early Impact Report” found the Valley program — operated by the nonprofit faith-based Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA) — to be on par with a respected New York City program that also helps to inspire adult students to stay in college and achieve degrees.

VIDA’s Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) program gives each qualifying participant \$7,000 in financial aid to be used for tuition, books, transportation and even child care. In addition, participants receive extensive counseling and must attend weekly sessions with VIDA staff, as well as pre-college rudimentary skills courses where they learn how to plan a household budget, interview for jobs and write resumes.

“VIDA sets high expectations for their students,” said Nicole Constance, federal project officer, for HHS, which also studied seven other programs nationwide to gauge the best ways to help motivate and keep adult students in school until they have achieved degrees. “We found their high expectations with high support really matters. It’s really impressive.”

To have an HHS official come to the Valley and declare a program here is “really impressive,” is in itself really impressive.

We applaud VIDA and its community partners, such as the city of Pharr, and local churches that each year help to fund and support this organization that in turn helps to develop residents so they can be more productive citizens.

In this study — funded by a \$2.5 million federal grant — VIDA officials divided 1,000 participants from Hidalgo, Cameron, Willacy and Starr counties into two groups. One group, of 500, received all of the above-mentioned services; the other group received financial aid and standard college-provided advising, but no additional counseling or special home skills.

The results overwhelmingly showed that the students who were mentored and counseled regularly by VIDA staff stayed in school full-time, earned more college credits and degrees and were more marketable in the long term.

After 24 months, the VIDA-mentored group earned an average of 33.1 college credits, that's 5.6 credits more than the other students. After 36 months, the mentored group earned nearly 40 college credits, while the others earned 32.5. Full-time enrollment rates for the mentored students were 75 percent after 24 months; with only 64 percent for the other group. And after two years, 53 percent of the mentored group earned college credentials compared to 45 percent of the others. After 36 months, 69 percent of the mentored students had earned degrees or certificates compared to 53 percent of the others.

“These programs are very unique and special and VIDA has started a model for the rest of Texas on how to empower people and to help them get a job,” state Sen. Juan “Chuy” Hinojosa, D-McAllen, told about 100 people Wednesday at STC. “Basic skills that most of us take for granted — resumé preparation, interview skills, how to keep a budget — when you put all that together you really empower that person.”

Indeed, the findings show that the extra attention helped to give these low-income students the extra edge they needed to reach their goals.

STC President Shirley Reed said that “It's no surprise to the majority of us. We've always known it was an incredible success.”

Reed said over 2,000 VIDA participants have enrolled at STC and most have been successful. VIDA participants also attend the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and Texas Southmost College in Brownsville.

Sen. Hinojosa summed up VIDA's success best when he said: “There is nothing more important than for a person to have a job and support their family. It gives them pride and respect for themselves and drives them.”

Congratulations VIDA, and congratulations to our community partners who help to support this worthy initiative, one that now might be implemented in other parts of the state, and possibly the country.