

## SUNDAY FOCUS

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2013

9B

COMMENTARY | Paul Rodriguez

## STC is a game-changer

College needs \$159M bond to meet area growth

As a retired commercial banker and now chief executive of a real estate title insurance agency, I have had the pleasure throughout the past two decades to host many out-of-town business executives who are invariably astonished by what they find upon touring our community. They

see an impressive array of commercial developments, hospitals, financial institutions, industrial development parks. In short, they see a fast-growing community with tremendous potential for continued economic and social development.

I'm often asked how this region could have evolved so far and so quickly from its roots as a primarily agrarian economy. One of the principal catalysts for our development has been South Texas College, originally established as South Texas Community College.

Developing a well-trained and educated local workforce has always been the college's top priority, particularly during its inception as civic leaders worked to attract manufacturers and industry to this foreign trade zone and to maquiladora facilities on the U.S. and Mexican soil. This work continues today, particularly under the auspices of the North American Advanced Manufacturing Research and Education Initiative headquartered at STC with a goal of adding 10,000 highly skilled, high-wage manufacturing jobs in the South Texas region by 2017.

Since 2007, STC's Institute for Advanced Manufacturing has focused on developing and delivering customized workforce



Eric Rodriguez, left, and Juan Garcia, both of Mission, do work in the a study room located in the West Academy Building during the grand opening May 2, 2012, at the South Texas College - Pecan Campus in McAllen. Portable buildings, seen at rear, are located nearby.

Gabe Hernandez | gabrielh@themonitor.com

training to more than 17,000 employees of local manufacturers in fields including robotics, mechatronics, machining, tooling, welding, workplace literacy, industrial maintenance, lean manufacturing and more. All of this is in addition to certifying and awarding associate degrees in automotive technology, diesel technology, drafting and design technology, information technology, electrical and power transmission installation, precision manufacturing, tool and die technology, heating-air conditioning-ventilation and refrigeration, welding technology, culinary arts, law enforcement, fire science and other technical fields.

These programs provide our students with the opportunity to acquire well-paying jobs that are essential to local and regional employers.

Another key area of job development for STC is its Nursing and Allied Health Campus. While

most people are familiar with our certificates and degrees for registered nursing and licensed practical/vocational nurse training, this represents just a fraction of the healthcare careers that we support. Our area hospitals and medical facilities also require respiratory, physical and occupational therapists, radiologic technicians, pharmacy technicians, emergency medical technicians and medical insurance coding specialists, to name just a few critical positions. We are presently graduating more than 950 students per year from this campus.

At the same time, STC is focused on creating a college-going culture. We intentionally offer a limited number of applied bachelor's degrees and only in fields such as computer and information technologies, medical and health services management, technology management and organizational leadership. Our liberal arts and social sciences division and math and

science divisions are geared toward providing affordable college credit hours and associate degrees to individuals who are ultimately pursuing a four-year degree.

At one time, more than 70 percent of our college-bound students needed remedial education in at least one course. Today, that is only 17 percent of our students and we expect this number will continue to decline.

In fact, high school dual-credit enrollment participation has been skyrocketing. Since 2003, more than 67,000 students have received college credit hours. This represents more than \$71 million in free STC tuition. This would equate to \$140 million to \$221 million in savings in tuition cost at a Texas public college or university. Gov. Rick Perry has heavily promoted the goal of keeping the cost of a four-year college or university in Texas at \$10,000. That will be accomplished only

through the utilization of dual-credit enrollment programs and affordable college tuition costs offered by educational institutions like South Texas College.

Finally, STC is a tremendous resource for continuing, professional and workforce education, having served more than 24,500 students in the last year five years. We are especially proud of our GED program and partnerships with area high schools that have enabled us to serve more than 4,500 high school dropouts who have ultimately completed high school while earning credits toward a certificate or associate's degree in a skill or trade. Many have gone on to accept well-paying jobs and attained four-year degrees.

As the college's newest trustee, I have seen firsthand these accomplishments and the tremendous demands and overcrowding of our student body. Our current facilities serve more

than 31,000 students but were designed for 20,000 students. We expect to top 42,000 students by 2020.

While our region has seen significant strides in its economic development, we have much more work to do. Our various economic development corporations in McAllen, Edinburg, Mission, Pharr, Weslaco and Rio Grande City are attracting more and better industry that needs all of our graduates and their diversified educational backgrounds.

Two votes from citizens in Starr and Hidalgo counties in support of our propositions to increase our ad valorem taxes by a total of 3.5 cents will enable us to expand and improve facilities at all of our campuses. The proposed \$159 million bond would enable the addition of a Regional Center for Public Safety Excellence in Pharr and enhance our Early College High School and Teaching Center in La Joya.

If passed, disabled individuals and those over the age of 65 would not see an increase in taxes on their homestead if they have filed the appropriate tax exemption. The rest of us will see an estimated \$35 annual increase for a property valued at \$100,000.

STC has historically completed all of its facility expansion on time, within budget and without any accusations of improprieties. I enthusiastically ask for your support to invest in the economic prosperity of Hidalgo County, Starr County and the entire South Texas region by approving the STC bond and maintenance election as early voting begins on Monday.

*Paul Rodriguez is a board trustee for South Texas College. He also is CEO of Valley Land Title Company in McAllen.*