McLennan Community College: Strategic Small Steps Add Up to Large Student Successes

McLennan Community College (MCC) has established partnerships that create efficient pathways from high school through university. The college also has developed practices that provide support to all stakeholders, from students to high school boards of trustees. Perhaps most important, MCC recognizes that strategic small steps add up to large student successes, so the college continuously identifies new ways to help students progress.

"The sooner we can connect with students, understand the direction that they're headed, and get them onto a pathway, the more likely they are to earn credentials without the burden of excess credit hours and extra tuition," explains Londa Carriveau, director of educational partnerships.

"We create very intentional, one-on-one relationships with all students," adds President Johnette McKown. "If a student knows someone, they're more likely to stay on their path and succeed."

Partnerships With High Schools

In fall 2022, MCC's dual credit program served 1,768 students at 29 high schools — and had an 82 percent pass rate (passing with an A, B, or C).

As part of its dual credit programs, MCC has yearly meetings with principals, counselors, and superintendents of every high school in its service area that provides dual credit, even if only a handful of students are part of the program. The MCC team that attends these meetings includes McKown and Fred Hills, MCC vice president of instruction and student engagement, and Londa Carriveau, director of educational partnerships.

At these meetings, the high school and college teams discuss a variety of issues, including:

- How MCC's partnership with the high school can be strengthened with specific scholarships for the top 10 percent and 20 percent of the high school's graduating class.
- Transfer completion through an MCC University Center partner or other universities across the state.
- Individual students' plans and areas of support that can help each student succeed.

"Like random items in a grocery store that don't necessarily make a meal, dual credit can include courses that don't amount to a degree," Carriveau says. "So we identify students who might not be on track to a degree, get them moved into a degree pathway, and provide advising that will get them to their destination."

MCC advisors do not assume that the standard, core dual credit courses offered by the high school are the best courses for every student. "We ask each student if their goal is to attend an in-state or out-of-state school. We ask if they want to earn a bachelor's degree or go for training and then get into the workforce," Carriveau says. "Because in some of those situations, the core courses may not be appropriate. It's not about making the student fit into the pattern that the high school is offering. It's about ensuring that we identify the pattern the student wants."

She adds, "We can identify the high school students' needs and then work with the high school to adapt. In that way, we ensure that the dual credit program fits the students instead of the other way around."

MCC also hosts combined college and high school board meetings, during which the board members discuss the benefits and challenges of dual enrollment, the MCC University Center, partnership details, dual credit trends, and other issues. MCC is certain that every dual credit student is on a pathway because dual credit students are part of the Texas Pathways transformation.

Agreements With Universities

MCC's University Center is a partnership between the college and several universities. The primary partners are Tarleton State University and Texas Tech University.

In addition to articulation agreements, these partnerships include a visible presence on the MCC campus and, most recently, a co-admission agreement with both universities. With co-admission, students are admitted to both MCC and the university simultaneously, but they do not have to start taking the Tarleton or Texas Tech classes right away. They can be on their MCC pathway for two years and then make a seamless transition to the university. They simply complete a form to update their contact information.

Both Tarleton and Texas Tech have large, highly visible suites on the MCC campus. They also offer in-person classes at MCC. “Students can earn a bachelor’s degree from Texas Tech or Tarleton here at MCC,” Carriveau says. “That degree is indistinguishable from a degree at the university’s home campus.”

The universities’ presence at MCC also reminds students who are not yet part of a university that they do not have to stop with an associate degree. They can continue and earn a bachelor’s degree and even one or more of a number of master’s degrees that are offered on the MCC campus.

Stackable Credentials

MCC is always looking for ways to help students move forward. Since every small accomplishment can build to another one, it offers multiple ways for students to enter, exit, and re-enter college.

“We have occupational skill awards, which are two or three particular courses or skills, or a particular skill set, that students can earn. Those stack up and connect into a certificate, which can connect to a two-year degree,” Hills explains. “We also offer a number of well-known certificates. For example, there are computer certifications that a student can pick up even in high school that will help them as they move forward.”

Progress and Success

Because MCC has multiple initiatives in place, it is difficult to connect improvements to specific programs. But there can be no question that the college’s pathways efforts are effective:

- **Course completion rates increased 4 percentage points** (from 72 percent to 76 percent) between fall 2015 and fall 2023. During that time, MCC committed to Texas Pathways and scaled the essential practices of the guided pathways strategy. This early student momentum is indicative of long-term success to come.
- **Three-year graduation rates increased 8 percentage points** (from 21 percent to 29 percent) for the first-time-in-college (FTIC) cohort of fall 2021, as compared to the fall 2015 FTIC cohort.
- **Average time to associate degree fell from 4.3 years to 3.3 years** from 2015 to 2023, a decrease from 98 semester credit hours (SCH) to 78 SCH, saving MCC students time and money as they earned credentials of value.

Support From the TSC

The MCC team credits the Texas Success Center (TSC) with helping them progress and better serve their students. "They push on the data piece and the student relational piece, both of which are very powerful," Hills says. "We've come a long way since we started this process, and the TSC has been a big driver."

"The Institutes have been very beneficial, particularly for networking," Carriveau adds. "It's helpful to connect with colleagues from across the state and discuss how to address challenging issues. I've come away from multiple Institutes with not only big-picture knowledge but also some very specific strategies that helped address needs we had in our programs."

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