

Testimony Provided on 8/10/2022 to the House Higher Education Committee
By Dr. Jennifer Kent of Victoria College

Chair Murphy and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Jennifer Kent and I serve as the president of Victoria College.

When I arrived in Victoria two years at the height of COVID, my team engaged in a labor market analysis to discover that in a region where jobs were disappearing even before the pandemic began. A few industries were experiencing growth and one that caught my immediate attention was transportation.

The Crossroads, as we are called, centrally located between Houston, Corpus Christi, Austin, and San Antonio is a hotspot for transportation with approximately 2000 truck-driving jobs...and yet, Victoria College was not financially able to start our own CDL program. I learned that 323 employers were competing for the same limited drivers, many of whom are nearing retirement. With the expansion of I-69 as well as port-industries, we felt the urgency of our business partners who needed us to provide a solution. Across the state, we are expected to need an additional 49,000 truck drivers by 2026.

Since the rollout of TRUE funding, Victoria College has been awarded two grants allowing us to create a CDL truck-driving program that will address the growing shortage of drivers and local supply chain disruption. Round one of TRUE funding resulted in \$115,000 for a truck-driving simulator and round two brought \$515,000 for the purchase of four trucks. We are in the final phase of contract execution and will use the upcoming semester to prepare for full program implementation. With our initial startup, we anticipate being able to train 112 new drivers a year.

I would also like to share that in Fall 2020, Victoria College, like most community colleges, experienced a COVID dip in enrollment in our credit programs (ours was 12%) but credit programs represent only one segment of what we do. An interesting thing occurred in the COVID year that has continued since- enrollment in continuing education programs that lead to industry certifications grew, and grew considerably. We did not have a declining enrollment; we had a shifting enrollment. Unfortunately, existing reporting mechanisms that inform on enrollment in higher education reflect students in credit programs only. As a result, Victoria College saw a reduction of \$866,000 in state funding in the last legislative session, which makes it difficult to start new workforce programs without creative solutions like TRUE funding.

We appreciate Commissioner Keller for spearheading TRUE and thank you for your support at the committee level and to all legislators for ensuring its success. Victoria College is now better prepared to meet the transportation workforce needs in the Crossroads and we look forward to the upcoming recommendations of the Commission on Community College Finance that is working diligently on finding a solution to the problem of continuing education not counting in the funding formula. Thank you so much.