



Victoria College:

Everyone in Our Community Is Our Student

A few years ago, Victoria College (VC) audited its practices and discovered a surprising fact: The college was losing more than 60 percent of the people who contacted it and indicated a desire to attend. These potential students never made it to enrollment.

“That finding led us to ask, ‘When does a person become our student?’” recalls President Jennifer Kent. “We were only looking at the people who completed all of the steps, forms, and processes and also managed to jump through all of the hoops. What if, instead, we look at all of the people who started to communicate with us. What if we considered all of them ours?”

Redefining What the College Controls

That aha moment led faculty and staff to reassess all practices through the lens of a student — and to reconsider what they have the power to change.

“For years we have been talking about the declining enrollment in community colleges across the nation,” Kent says. “And in our small, South Texas town of 65,000 people, we have growing poverty and a low participation rate in the workforce.”

She continues, “We decided to see ourselves as the solution provider. That thinking gave us new ways to empower ourselves and also address things that, historically, we thought were outside of our control. We decided that we’re not going to be held up by barriers — even when they aren’t our barriers — any longer.”

This new way of looking at the college’s role changed the way VC does business.

Nursing Crisis? Figure It Out

VC is a Hispanic-Serving Institution, and the majority of students are nontraditional and/or first-generation college students. Many families are experiencing deep generational poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the community’s struggles, so

VC focused on developing systems that would support its students — now defined as everyone in the community — over the long term.

The college began to focus on nursing. Victoria, TX, is a small rural community, but it is a regional health care hub. And like communities across the country, it had a shortage of health care workers, particularly nurses. In addition to burnout from the pandemic, local nurses left because they could get paid significantly more as traveling nurses or in nearby cities.

“We needed more people to apply for nursing so we could meet the increased need in our community,” Kent explains. “And we learned that to become a licensed vocational nurse (LVN), a person in our community could have to spend upwards of \$1,000 out of pocket before even enrolling in our Vocational Nursing Program.”

She continues, “The people in our community were struggling to keep food on the table. They simply couldn’t afford to apply for the nursing program.”

So VC began identifying, and then eliminating, the barriers that stopped people from applying. For example, before applying to the nursing program, students had to:

- Drive to a town 25 miles away to complete an official state criminal background check — and pay for the background check itself. No public transportation is available for that 25-mile trip.
- Get multiple vaccinations, which could cost up to \$800 — a significant hurdle for a population that is unlikely to have health insurance.
- Pay to take — and score well on — the Test of Essential Academic Skills (TEAS), a standardized entrance exam for students applying to nursing and allied health programs.

“The background check is a Texas Board of Nursing requirement, and the office that does this check uses a specific piece of equipment that costs \$20,000,” explains Darin Kazmir, director of marketing and communications as well as a member of the team that is working to help more new students apply to the nursing program.

Kent’s reaction: “There is special state equipment for people to be fingerprinted before they can enroll for nursing school. Why isn’t there one in our town? If there are 17 reasons why we don’t have it now, it does not matter. Let’s figure it out.”

Kazmir talked with people in Austin to get permission, and the college secured a private grant. As a result, VC will soon be able to conduct official background checks.

To eliminate the vaccination hurdle, the college built on its partnership with a nearby hospital, which opened a clinic on VC's campus. Through special arrangements with the hospital and donors, vaccinations are now offered to potential nursing students at low or no cost.

"That is a game-changer for our community members who want to enter the health care field but cannot afford to pay. It just made sense," Kent says.

For the TEAS, VC began offering no-cost TEAS tutoring for anyone who wanted to apply to the nursing program — and to help them pay for the test itself.

"These are community members who haven't been in a math class in maybe 10 years, so they can't just go take the test," Kent says. "But when we think of everyone in our community as our student, we offer tutoring. And then they can become our student."

The college also used a grant to hire a person to serve as a health care enrollment guide.

"The enrollment guide will help applicants through all of the pre-application steps, including getting their vaccines, going to tutoring for the TEAS, taking the TEAS, and completing their background check," Kazmir says. "And that allows our nursing pathways advisor to focus on advising the students."

Once a Victoria College Student, Always a Victoria College Student

The college is also focused on career progression. For example, as in many communities, there is a shortage of nurse aides, a job that does not pay a living wage.

"We have an obligation to help provide nurse aides," Kent says. "But we also recognize that in this community, a nurse aide makes approximately \$12 an hour, and the living wage is \$18.36 an hour. We are not okay with that gap."

Kent and others at the college believe they are responsible for the nurse aides they have trained. The college provides supports and scholarships for additional steps in students' careers.

"Even though they are out in the community and working, they are still ours," she says. "We work to get them back on campus because in 10 months, we can take them from \$12 an hour to \$24 an hour as an LVN. And when they are ready, in one year we can bridge them to becoming a registered nurse (RN) and higher earnings."

From there, VC pushes for more.

"Across the parking lot is the University of Houston-Victoria, and they have a bridge to a BSN, a bachelor's-level RN. And with that, our student can work toward becoming a charge nurse with a salary of at least \$80,000 a year."

Living Wages and Steady Improvement

Kent serves on the board of the area's Economic Development Corporation (EDC), which works on recruiting new businesses to the area as well as helping current industry retrain and expand.

"Considering the number of jobs a project would bring is not enough," Kent says. "I'm looking for projects that bring jobs of high economic value — jobs that pay a living wage."

The college uses the same lens to evaluate which of its programs lead to living wages.

"We are not offering programs that lead to low-paying jobs as their final destination," Kent says. "You're not going to see Victoria College build bridges to nowhere; our career paths must be clear and align to well-paying careers right here at home."

Many of VC's changes are just getting to scale. The college now requires students to meet with an advisor for their program of study before the student enrolls in a class. Every first-time-in-college (FTIC) student is also assigned a success coach and is required to meet with them regularly so the student successfully completes college and then transfers to a university or transitions into the workforce.

These changes already are making a difference. In fall 2023:

- 67 percent of FTIC students earned all As, Bs, or Cs — a dramatic increase from 58 percent in fall 2020.
- 94 percent of FTIC students participated in success coaching.
- Among FTIC students who met with their success coach at least once a month, 82 percent completed the semester with a GPA higher than 2.0.
- 86 percent of FTIC students who attended tutoring four times or more in a semester passed classes with an A, B, or C.

Texas Success Center (TSC): Focus on the Important Before the Urgent

Kent refers to the TSC as a consistent, stable force for the college.

"We can always count on our pathways coach for support and to ask us difficult questions," she says. "The Pathways Institutes help us press pause, as a group, so we

can really reflect on challenging issues. You have your data right in front of you, and your coach is asking, ‘What are you going to do to address this issue for all students?’”

She continues, “That’s exactly what we need. It helps us to focus, and it helps us keep the important before the urgent.”

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