



El Paso Community College: Expecting More Success With HB 8

“I always recognize that there’s a face behind every single data point,” says William Serrata, president of El Paso Community College (EPCC). “That’s really what we’re focused on — just helping students cross the finish line.”

Serrata believes that with passage of House Bill 8 (HB 8), EPCC will be able to help more students graduate — and do so in less time and with fewer credits. The college has been moving in this direction for more than a decade, but until recently, the changes did not help the college get state funding.

In the past 12 years, EPCC has dramatically decreased time to degree for its students. In 2012, on average, students took five years — and 102 credit hours — to earn a 60-credit associate degree. Today, on average, students complete an associate degree with 75 credits in 3.8 years.

Before Texas passed House Bill 8 (HB 8), fewer student contact hours led to fewer dollars for colleges. Now, under HB 8, Texas has outcomes-based funding that is based on colleges’ success in awarding degrees, certificates, and other credentials of value. Serrata was chair of the Texas Association of Community Colleges from 2021 through 2023, and during that time, Texas established the Community College Finance Commission, which made the recommendations that led to HB 8.

“We’re always going to focus on what’s best for students, and we’re always going to raise the bar,” Serrata says. “I’ve yet to see a student rise to low expectations.”

Today, EPCC is focused on continuing to serve its students well into the future, and college leaders believe the state’s new funding model will help EPCC do this work effectively.



For example, before the pandemic, EPCC adjusted its master plan to focus more on STEM and career technical education, and in 2020, the college completed construction on several new facilities to allow for expansion in these areas. With this new infrastructure, the college was able to add new technical credentials to its offerings — credentials that Texas is now recognizing through HB 8.

Other recent and ongoing changes include introducing eight-week courses, expanding competency-based education, and improving communications with EPCC's primary transfer partner.

Introducing Eight-Week Courses

Last year, EPCC converted its Mission del Paso campus to eight-week classes.

“We’ve just completed our first year of eight-week semesters at Mission del Paso, and we found that eight-week students complete in greater numbers and we retain them in higher numbers,” says Steven Smith, vice president for instruction and workforce education. “Our next step is to potentially increase short-term classes at other campuses.”

In fall 2023, 81 percent of students completed eight-week classes with an A, B, or C, and in spring 2024, 82 percent of students completed these classes with a C or better. Both of those semesters, only 72 percent of students in 16-week classes completed with a C or better.

Expanding Competency-Based Education

In recent years, EPCC has converted 23 classes to competency-based education. The college hired instructional designers to help faculty members develop competency-based classes, and the college has a waiting list of faculty who want to convert their classes to this model.

“We use a hybrid format, and students work at their own pace,” Smith explains. “The instructors approach the class like an online or hybrid course, but the lectures are recorded so students can work at their own pace. We have a number of students who complete their classes early, and then they can move on to the next semester’s class.”



The college set up a podcasting suite for faculty to record their lectures and provided training for that part of the work. The classes also include one-on-one meetings between students and instructors so students have guidance when they find the work challenging.

“Career and technical education is the low-hanging fruit for competency-based education, so we have a lot of those classes in the pipeline and already developed,” Smith continues. “We also have worked on courses that have a lab component and training for lab assistants for those courses.”

He adds, “The less low-hanging fruit are English, history, and government courses, but we’re having some success there as well. Faculty for those classes have rethought how they approach the course objectives and created new competency-based assignments.”

Improving Communications to Simplify Transfer

EPCC encouraged each department to be intentional about the math and science requirements for its majors, and that work had an added benefit: improving communications with University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), EPCC’s primary transfer partner.

“Some departments were not thinking carefully about which math or science would be best for their majors,” Smith says. “So we set up meetings for each department to talk with the math and science folks and make an intentional decision about what the best pathway would be.”

As part of that work, departments also looked at which classes transfer students would be expected to take at UTEP.

“Some of our faculty were surprised to learn what was happening when students transferred to UTEP. It was a real eye opener for many of our faculty. And now we have regular meetings between the various departments and our transfer partners,” Smith says.

Expanding Capacity With the TSC

EPCC had participated in the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Guided Pathways project. But the college found that working on Texas Pathways with the Texas

Success Center (TSC) helped the pathways team expand their capacity beyond what they could do with AACC.

“The AACC Guided Pathways project had only a five-person team,” Serrata says. “Texas Pathways allowed more individuals from across the college to experience the Institutes, thoroughly understand the pathways concepts, and share what they learned with even more colleagues throughout the institution.”

“We have asked different departments or divisions to take the lead on Texas Pathways,” Smith adds. “At one point, Student Services was the lead, and we currently have our Institutional Research department running point. Of course, the instructional team is still highly involved, but this approach engages other departments in a more meaningful way.”

He continues, “In a lot of initiatives, you get the same players going to meetings over and over and over again. Because the focus of the Texas Pathways Institutes changes, we have different people participating based on their role at the institution. And that participation helps them understand how their job fits into the overall pathways effort and exposes them to their colleagues across the state, which is invaluable.”

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