2016 ANNUAL REPORT

LEADERS UNITED TO CHANGE LIVES
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LETTER FROM THE LEADERSHIP

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Regional collaboration is changing lives.

To be specific: working collaboratively to change the educational landscape of an entire region so that all learners achieve a degree or credential that leads to a meaningful career takes commitment. The 2016 RGV FOCUS annual report demonstrates this commitment across our region.

The journey to bring leaders from the education, nonprofit, community, workforce and civic sectors together to transform the four-county region from one with historically low educational attainment to one that places students on a path to meaningful careers began in 2012. Our cross-sector collaboration is beginning to pay off. For example, our scorecard shows that the region’s four-year high school graduation rate increased to 90 percent in 2015 from 87 percent in 2012, our baseline year.

The annual report offers insights into the progress we are making toward building a seamless cradle-to-career pipeline. It also highlights the cross-sector work being led in four key areas: culture of attending college; college and career readiness; teaching excellence; and dropout prevention and recovery. It is within these areas that deep work is happening, and leaders from throughout the region are collaborating to implement strategies that will increase student success.

Working collectively to redefine our students’ futures matters to us – and for the state and the nation – because the Rio Grande Valley is home to a growing population of 1.3 million people who are relatively young and Latino. We have an opportunity to serve as an example of how various sectors can work together to better serve Latino students and their families. With 75 percent of high school graduates enrolling in one of the four public institutions of higher education in the Rio Grande Valley, we have an opportunity to substantially impact educational attainment by redefining the institutions so they are student-ready. This effort requires that we redesign our systems and processes to minimize the barriers students face when pursuing college degrees or credential completion. The Rio Grande Valley’s changing economy, one with jobs in education, advanced manufacturing, healthcare and retail/service, demands that we continue to close educational gaps and produce more postsecondary credentialed residents.

Entering our fifth year of work, we understand that we must celebrate progress, recognize the need for more work to be done and remain committed. We will continue to prioritize and collaborate to address areas that need attention. As demonstrated by our data, we are doing well in encouraging students to enroll in a postsecondary path; however, we must now continue to focus on helping students persist to meet their educational goals of degree or credential completion.

We graciously thank all those who have played a role and supported RGV FOCUS. Our journey to improve educational attainment in the Rio Grande Valley has just begun, and we urge everyone – from businesses and nonprofits to community and workforce organizations – to join us in this momentous initiative.

Sincerely,

LUZELMA CANALES, Ph.D.
Executive Director, RGV FOCUS

ALDA BENAVIDES, Ph.D.
Co-Chair, RGV FOCUS Leadership Team
Superintendent, La Joya Independent School District

STELLA GARCIA, Ph.D.
Co-Chair, RGV FOCUS Leadership Team
Provost, Texas State Technical College Harlingen
LEVERAGING THE POWER OF COLLABORATION

OUR APPROACH
RGV FOCUS, a collective impact initiative in collaboration with Educate Texas and Communities Foundation of Texas, was launched in 2012 to transform college readiness, access and success across the Rio Grande Valley’s four-county region. RGV FOCUS brings together a group called the Leadership Team consisting of school district superintendents, higher education presidents, philanthropic partners, and business and community leaders. The goal of convening the group is to transform the lives of the region’s more than 415,000 students by aligning systems across the cradle-to-career pipeline to ensure each student is college ready, has access to and achieves postsecondary success, and pursues a meaningful career in the Rio Grande Valley and beyond. In the Rio Grande Valley, 75 percent of all high school graduates stay within the region after high school graduation to attend one of our four local public institutions of higher education. With workforce projections suggesting that most jobs will require a postsecondary degree or credential, RGV FOCUS is committed to ensuring that students from the Rio Grande Valley are prepared to fill these jobs. Furthermore, RGV FOCUS’s work positions the Rio Grande Valley to support the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board’s (THECB) goal to have 60 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds in the state earn a certificate or degree by 2030, a plan known widely as the THECB 60x30 Strategic Plan.

HOW IT WORKS
RGV FOCUS utilizes collective impact, a framework that brings cross-sector community members together to drive social change. Leveraging regional assets around a common vision and shared goals strengthens each step of the educational pipeline.

At the core of this work is the Leadership Team, which meets regularly to identify regional assets and needs and to adopt a common vision, goals, strategies and metrics. The Leadership Team is supported by action networks and advisory bodies, such as the Data Support Council, which lead the implementation of the vision and strategy. The RGV FOCUS Backbone staff serves the collective as a neutral convener, thought leader and facilitator.

OUR MISSION
Our mission is to transform college readiness, access and success in the four counties of the Rio Grande Valley - Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy. We achieve this by working towards four goals: (1) all students graduate high school college ready; (2) all high school graduates transition to postsecondary within a year; (3) all postsecondary students achieve a degree or credential on time; and (4) all postsecondary graduates are employed within six months. Our approach is centered on the following core values:

» STUDENT FOCUSED: We are focused on students and their experiences, strengths, challenges and aspirations.

» TRANSFORMATIONAL: We pursue strategies that are transformational for both individual institutions and the Rio Grande Valley community at large.

» COLLABORATIVE: We collaborate across institutions and sectors, and invest resources to ensure collaboration will be sustained.

» COMMUNITY: We ensure our work is community centered and depends on the voices of many organizations and individuals from across the Rio Grande Valley.

» DATA DRIVEN: We are evidence driven in our approach and use shared data and metrics to drive constant improvement across the region.

OUR VISION
All Rio Grande Valley learners will achieve a degree or credential that leads to a meaningful career.
## Leadership Team

### Pre-K-12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>School District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALDA T. BENAVIDES, Ed.D.*</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>La Joya ISD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARTURO CAVAZOS, Ed.D.</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Harlingen CISD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LISA GARCIA, Ed.D.</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Point Isabel ISD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOSE GONZALEZ, Ed.D.</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>McAllen ISD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARLA GUERRA, Ed.D.</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>South Texas ISD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SILVIA IBARRA, Ed.D.</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Services</td>
<td>McAllen ISD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUARDO INFANTE</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Lyford CISD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DANIEL KING, Ph.D.</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GONZALO SALAZAR</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Los Fresnos CISD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JESSICA SWERDLOFF</td>
<td>Chief of Staff</td>
<td>IDEA Public Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPERANZA ZENDEJAS, Ed.D.</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Brownsville ISD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Public Higher Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KRISTIN CROYLE, Psy.D.</td>
<td>Vice President for Student Success</td>
<td>University of Texas Rio Grande Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STELLA GARCIA, Ph.D.*</td>
<td>Provost</td>
<td>Texas State Technical College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SYLVIA LEAL, Ed.D.</td>
<td>Associate Vice President for Student Educational Outreach</td>
<td>University of Texas Rio Grande Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHIRLEY REED, Ed.D.</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>South Texas College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIKE SHANNON</td>
<td>Interim President</td>
<td>Texas Southmost College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Community-Based

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TINA ATKINS, Ph.D.</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Center for Excellence in College Career and Life Readiness Region One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TANIA CHAVEZ</td>
<td>Fund Development Strategist</td>
<td>La Unión Del Pueblo Entero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHRIS COXON</td>
<td>Managing Director, Programs Educate Texas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIKE SEIFERT</td>
<td>Network Weaver Equal Voice Network</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUANITA VALDEZ-COX</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>La Unión Del Pueblo Entero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRACI WICKETT</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>United Way of Southern Cameron County</td>
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### Business

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FRANK ALMARAZ</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>Workforce Solutions Lower Rio Grande Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAT HOBBS</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>Workforce Solutions Cameron County</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Co-Chair
The Rio Grande Valley is a region in deep South Texas, which includes Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy counties. The region is experiencing a growing economy that continues to shift from one of agriculture and tourism to one with new opportunities in education, health services, retail, advanced manufacturing and the service industry. In 2015, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley was created to include a new medical school as the first professional school in the region. The Rio Grande Valley’s population is young and Latino with a median age of 30, compared to 34 for the state. This creates a strong competitive advantage in recruiting new companies into the region.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POPULATION:</td>
<td>1,321,814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5% of Texas)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LATINO:</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEDIAN AGE:</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEDIAN INCOME:</td>
<td>$33,757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(compared to 17% in Texas)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIVING IN POVERTY:</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(compared to 17% in Texas)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>AREA:</td>
<td>4,275 sq. miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.6% of Texas)</td>
<td></td>
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Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2011-2015

### PRE-K-12 SYSTEM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Data</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SCHOOL DISTRICTS:</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STUDENTS:</td>
<td>349,463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES:</td>
<td>20,501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LATINO:</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED:</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS:</td>
<td>35%</td>
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Source: Texas Education Agency Texas Academic Performance Reports 2015-2016

### PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

<table>
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<th>Category</th>
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<tr>
<td>UNIVERSITIES:</td>
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<tr>
<td>COMMUNITY COLLEGES:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>TECHNICAL COLLEGES:</td>
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<tr>
<td>STUDENTS*:</td>
<td>67,359</td>
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<tr>
<td>LATINO:</td>
<td>92%</td>
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</table>

*Includes dual enrollment

Source: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Higher Education Accountability System

### POSTSECONDARY AWARDS*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>CERTIFICATES**:</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASSOCIATE’S DEGREES:</td>
<td>3,945</td>
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<td>BACHELOR’S DEGREES:</td>
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<td>MASTER’S DEGREES:</td>
<td>1,379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOCTORAL DEGREES:</td>
<td>25</td>
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*In fall 2015, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley was created, bringing together the resources and assets of the University of Texas at Brownsville and the University of Texas-Pan American. These data do not include degrees awarded by UTRGV.

**A professional or trade certification earned by a person to assure qualification to perform a job or task.

Source: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Higher Education Accountability System

*Includes dual enrollment
Collaboration among various sectors in the Rio Grande Valley is paying dividends with the younger population. The impact of strategies implemented over the last decade is translating to a shift in educational attainment for the 18- to 24-year-old population. Recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows the number of people in this age group who did not graduate high school decreased from 24 percent in 2014 to 23 percent in 2015. However, there is still work to be done to move students in and through college. Data from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board shows that higher education graduation rates for public four-year institutions of higher education (IHEs) dropped from 49 percent in 2014 to 42 percent in 2015. In addition, the rates for two-year IHEs have been flat at 16 percent since 2013. This is important work, because research shows that college degrees matter. A Pew Research study indicates that college-educated millennials outperform their less educated peers, earn more money, are more satisfied with their jobs and have lower unemployment and poverty rates. Therefore, RGV FOCUS leaders are committed to ensuring that all students in the region graduate from high school and pursue postsecondary credentials.
RGV FOCUS works to strengthen, better connect and align community resources across the educational pipeline to support learners beginning at the earliest stages of their educational journey, from pre-K to postsecondary completion. Here are student achievement indicators that reflect key milestones in a learner’s education.

**3rd Grade Reading**
76%
Percentage of third grade students who met Level II: Satisfactory Academic Performance in Reading in the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR).
Source: Texas Education Agency STAAR Aggregate Level Data for 2014-2015

**College Readiness**
18%
Percentage of graduates that met or exceeded the college-ready criteria on the Texas Success Initiative Assessment as well as the SAT or ACT test, as defined by the Texas Education Agency.
Source: Texas Education Agency Texas Academic Performance Reports 2015-2016

**Pre-K Enrollment**
96%
Percentage of estimated eligible students at least four years of age enrolled in public pre-K. Total number of eligible students estimated (assuming equal cohorts) by using the number of Kindergartners who qualify for free or reduced price lunch.
Source: Texas Education Agency Texas Academic Performance Reports 2015-2016

**8th Grade Math**
70%
Percentage of eighth grade students who met Level II: Satisfactory Academic Performance in Mathematics in the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR).
Source: Texas Education Agency STAAR Aggregate Level Data for 2014-2015
Postsecondary Enrollment
57%
Percentage of 2015 high school graduates who enrolled in an institution of higher education within the school year following high school graduation.
Source: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Higher Education Accountability System 2015

Higher Education Graduation Rate
4-year Public Institutions of Higher Education (IHE)
42%
Percentage of first-time entering, full-time, degree-seeking students who graduated with a bachelor’s degree or higher from the same IHE or another Texas public or independent institution after six years.
Source: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Higher Education Accountability System

High School Graduation
90%
Percentage of 2010-2011 ninth grade cohort (class of 2015) who graduated as expected.
Source: Texas Education Agency Texas Academic Performance Reports 2010-2016

Higher Education Graduation Rate
2-year Public Institutions of Higher Education (IHE)
16%
Percentage of first-time, full-time, credential-seeking undergraduates who graduated within three years.
Source: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Higher Education Accountability System
### Definitions

**STAAR 3rd Grade Reading:** The percentage of third-grade students who met Level II: Satisfactory Academic Performance in Reading in the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR).

**STAAR 8th Grade Mathematics:** The percentage of eighth-grade students who met Level II: Satisfactory Academic Performance in Mathematics in the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR).

**4-year High School Graduation Rate:** The longitudinal rate of a ninth-grade cohort followed through their expected high school (HS) graduation. The rates reported are for the classes of 2012 (entering cohort in 2008), 2013 (entering cohort in 2009), 2014 (entering cohort in 2010) and 2015 (entering cohort in 2011).

**FAFSA Completion:** Seniors who have completed Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) as of December 2012, December 2013, December 2014 and December 2015.

**College-Ready Graduates:** High school graduates that met or exceeded college-ready criteria on the TAKS exit-level test, the SAT test or the ACT test. Note: This is the baseline definition. Since 2015, the definition has changed to the percentage of graduates that meet or exceed the college-ready criteria on the Texas Success Initiative Assessment, the SAT test or the ACT test.
Advanced Placement (AP)/Dual Credit: High school students who complete and receive credit for at least one AP course.

Higher Education Immediate Enrollment Rate: Students who enrolled and began instruction at an institution of higher education (IHE) in Texas for the school year following high school graduation.

Higher Education Graduation Rate – 2-year Public IHE: First-time, full-time, credential-seeking undergraduates who graduated within three years. Degrees and certificates are included.

Higher Education Graduation Rate – 4-year Public IHE: First-time entering, full-time, degree-seeking students who graduated with a bachelor’s degree or higher from the same institution of higher education (IHE) or another Texas public or independent institution after six years.

Higher Education Graduates Employed or Enrolled 2-year IHE: Academic or technical graduates employed or placed in military service in the fourth quarter of the calendar year after graduation and/or enrolled in a Texas two- or four-year institution of higher education (IHE) in the following fall after graduation.

Higher Education Graduates Employed or Enrolled 4-year IHE: Graduates employed or placed in military service in the fourth quarter of the calendar year after graduation and/or enrolled in a graduate program at a Texas institution of higher education (IHE) in the following fall after graduation.
College enrollment, persistence and graduation provide a ticket to a better future. According to the Pew Research Center and the College Board, job security, higher earnings and better health are just a few of the benefits of a college education. This is especially important for students who live in the Rio Grande Valley, where 34 percent of the population lives in poverty – more than double the state's poverty rate – and 84 percent of the students are economically disadvantaged.

RGV leaders remain committed to building a college-going culture as evidenced by their aggressive goal to increase the number of high school graduates enrolling from 57 percent (already four points higher than the state average) to 70 percent. With three-quarters of those high school graduates choosing to enroll in the Rio Grande Valley, building a culture of attending college is a local matter. Based on this insight, RGV FOCUS works to align systems and processes between the four public institutions of higher education (IHEs) and 37 school districts to accelerate educational attainment in the region.

The Culture of Attending College Action Network, which was activated in 2013, has mobilized three working groups to focus on the following areas: immediate enrollment, which aims to get college eligible high school graduates to enroll in college right after high school; FAFSA/TASFA Super Saturday, which assists students with completing the college financial aid process; and TASFA completion, which aims to increase the number of DREAMers that complete the state-based financial aid process.

In addition, the Culture of Attending College Action Network developed the Resource Guide for College Access Professionals: Advising DREAMers in the Rio Grande Valley. This guide was developed in collaboration with La Unión del Pueblo Entero (LUPE), United Way of South Cameron County, public schools and IHEs. Educate Texas built a data model based on self-reported data from IHEs for tracking the number of TASFA applications submitted by DREAMers. The Rio Grande Valley saw an increase of 30 percent from 2015 to 2016 in applications.

With more than 80 percent of students from the Rio Grande Valley being reported as economically disadvantaged, access to financial aid becomes essential to affording college and is a high predictor of college enrollment. Approximately 59 percent of 2016 high school graduates in the Rio Grande Valley completed FAFSAs, compared to 51 percent for Texas. However, this fell short of the 65 percent target established by the Leadership Team. Over the last three years, the Culture of Attending College Action Network focused on regional strategies, such as those mentioned above. The group is committed to continuing this work and leveraging data to activate at the grassroots level.

KATHERINE DIAZ is the college and career readiness coordinator at Lyford High School in Willacy County. As part of the school’s efforts to prepare students for postsecondary study, Diaz and others on the campus assist students and their parents with the FAFSA or TASFA applications. Diaz uses open house presentations, social media and phone calls to inform parents of the school’s FAFSA events. The campus hosts eight FAFSA nights each year, during which parents and their children visit the college-readiness lab and receive assistance from Diaz. The school invites at least one college representative to each event.
Working with parents to complete the FAFSA is one of the highlights of my job. It is incredibly satisfying to see parents’ sense of relief after checking one more item off the senior to-do list. When they come to our FAFSA nights, parents are apprehensive about the application process, but when they leave, they are relieved and more confident in their next steps for getting their child off to college.

KATHERINE DIAZ
LYFORD HIGH SCHOOL
To be gainfully employed, 65 percent of adults will require a postsecondary credential in 2020 according to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. Currently, only 19 percent of Rio Grande Valley students earn a postsecondary degree 11 years after beginning eighth grade. To meet this need in the Rio Grande Valley, RGV FOCUS activated the College and Career Readiness Action Network in 2013 focused on increasing the number of high school graduates ready to immediately enroll in college credit bearing courses.

RGV FOCUS supports a culture of college and career readiness through various efforts, such as increasing advanced placement (AP) and dual credit course completion. More than a third of high school students in the region successfully finish at least one AP or dual credit course, which is a 6 percent increase over baseline and ahead of the Texas rate. Students in AP or dual credit courses take college-level courses and gain college credit, many times graduating with an associate's degree in hand. Studies have shown that high school students who complete dual credit courses are more likely to enroll in college than those who don’t take such courses. Students who complete AP or dual credit courses are also less likely to experience a loss in transfer credits.

Highlighting regional success in AP and dual credit course completion, Latinos in the Rio Grande Valley have outperformed Latinos in the state for the fourth year in a row. Early college high school partnerships currently exist between all four public institutions of higher education and many of the local school districts. The Rio Grande Valley is home to 44 early college high schools, which is 27 percent of the early college high schools in Texas.

In an area with a predominantly Latino pre-K-12 student population (97 percent), Rio Grande Valley Latinos continue to graduate at a higher rate than Latinos across the state. The four-year high school completion rate by Latinos in the Rio Grande Valley is currently at 90 percent as compared to 86 percent for Latinos in Texas. The 1 percent increase translates to 626 additional students graduating from high school on time.
Although more Rio Grande Valley students are completing advanced courses, and the region’s high school graduation rate continues to increase, we continue to fall short in preparing students to be college ready by enrolling immediately in college credit bearing courses. College readiness in the region has trailed the state since we began this work. Until 2014, just under half of high school students in the Rio Grande Valley were college ready. In 2015, however, the state’s formula for calculating the percentage of students that graduate from high school college ready changed to include results for the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA) and excluded state assessments. The goal of the change was to better align the next generation of Texas assessments to the TSIA and nationally recognized college-readiness tests. The alignment provides a wider variety of postsecondary measures that help predict future academic and occupational success. As a result of this change, 18 percent of the region’s high school students were considered college ready in 2015 – a 29 percent decrease from the previous year. From 2014 to 2015, the percentage of the state’s high school students who were considered college ready dropped from 54 percent to 35 percent – a 19 percent decrease.

Virgil U. Pierce, Ph.D.
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Our TSIA Prep Workshop has many advantages over alternative designs. The software and our workshop materials are in the public domain and will remain free of charge, and the work matches exactly what college students are expected to complete in rigor and design.

Despite this change, local school districts and IHEs continue to implement strategies to prepare students for college. House Bill 5, passed by the Texas legislature in 2013, mandated partnerships between school districts and IHEs to create college prep courses for high school seniors who were not college ready. In the Rio Grande Valley, RGV FOCUS worked closely with local IHEs, public school districts, Educate Texas and the Region One Education Service Center to develop a shared approach to the bill, as formalized in a joint memorandum of understanding (MOU). The goal of the work was for all students in the region to be seamlessly supported regardless of high school or IHE choice. In December 2016, RGV FOCUS hosted a Math Matters Summit for more than 60 faculty and teachers to review the results of a study on the impact of college enrollments and first-year college persistence of students successfully completing algebra in eighth grade. RGV FOCUS is activating a working group to build a strategy to further understand the resources required to provide greater access to algebra in middle school.
Teaching Excellence is currently the first and only Partner Led Action Network (PLAN) of RGV FOCUS. It is led by Patricia Alvarez McHatton, dean of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley’s College of Education & P-16 Integration. Unlike the traditional Backbone-led action networks, the partner is most empowered to determine and drive the outcomes of a particular action item. RGV FOCUS’ role in this scenario is to serve as a thought partner and capacity builder. Additionally, the Backbone leverages and connects resources for the partner, including platforms for the PLAN and its members to engage and share their work with varied and wider audiences.

Over the course of this past year, the Teaching Excellence PLAN has worked on further refining, defining and activating three priorities:

1. Teacher Preparation – focused on improving quality of the clinical experience and readiness of new teachers in the field
2. Research and Learning – focused on building a culture of inquiry
3. Career Exploration – focused on shifting the positionality of the field of education to build a strong pipeline of talent as early as high school

In support of its Teacher Preparation priority, the Teaching Excellence PLAN built a regional teacher landscape data model prototype. The goal is to leverage this data to better understand the needs of teachers and districts to inform future strategies to increase the teacher pipeline and identify professional development needs. Other examples of activations against the PLAN’s priorities include having supported multiple Special Interest Research Groups focused on what it means to be a College of Education in a Hispanic Serving Institution, and the UTRGV’s College of Education & P-16 Integration partnering with Region One Education Service Center, American Association of College for Teacher Education’s Holmes Scholars, and South Texas Independent School District’s Business, Education and Technology Academy (BETA) to design a summer camp for high school students aspiring to be teachers.

### RGV Pre-K-12 Full-Time Teachers Years of Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% beginning</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 1-5 yr</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 6-10 yr</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 11-20 yr</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% &gt; 20 yr</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Texas Education Agency Texas Academic Performance Reports 2015-2016

### RGV Pre-K-12 Full-Time Teachers Educational Attainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Degree</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate Degree</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Texas Education Agency Texas Academic Performance Reports 2015-2016
VERONICA L. ESTRADA is a professor at the College of Education and P-16 Integration (CEP) at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). In fall 2016, Estrada and two of her colleagues submitted a proposal for research that focused on their work as a Special Interest Research Group (SIRG) on language and literacies of students who attend Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). A panel of education experts reviewed the proposal and felt it targeted an important issue – the language and literacy practices of Latino college students navigating the learning process – for which little research exists. The proposal earned funding in December 2016. Since then, Estrada and her colleagues attended an HSI SIRG retreat, connected with other SIRGS to share information and regularly held weekly meetings to address their project, with the goal of their work being to strengthen the connection between faculty and their Latino students. The research has helped UTRGV establish a collaborative research culture where accountability is a central force that propels and informs their work.

“We believe our work could potentially impact faculty members’ understanding of students’ needs, influence teaching approaches to support student success and contribute to the body of literacy on this topic.”

VERONICA L. ESTRADA, Ph.D.
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY
Dropping out of high school is costly to any community. The U.S. Census Bureau reports those without a high school diploma can expect to earn more than $10,000 less than those who graduate from high school. That earnings divide jumps to more than $16,000 when comparing high school dropouts with those who have a college bachelor’s degree. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Education finds high school dropouts are twice as likely as college graduates to live in poverty.

In 2015, RGV FOCUS activated the Dropout Prevention and Recovery Action Network to learn more about the dropout landscape in the Rio Grande Valley. Since then, the network has worked to develop strategies school districts can use to help students stay in high school through graduation and see beyond that point to pursue a postsecondary credential of some kind. In addition, RGV FOCUS is committed to supporting the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board’s goal to have at least 60 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds in the state earn a certificate or degree by 2030. The work of the action network will facilitate work toward meeting this goal by creating purposeful pathways for these previously disconnected adults.

To this end, educational leaders in the Rio Grande Valley are developing innovative approaches to re-engage students who leave high school before graduating. For example, the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) Independent School District made a commitment in 2007 that all students would graduate ready for and connected to college. The district created a plan that would allow all students to graduate from high school with at least 12 college credits and started the implementation of the plan with dropouts. At one point, PSJA had a dropout rate that was more than double the state average — 18.7 percent compared to 8.8 percent in 2006. In partnership with South Texas College, the district opened a dropout recovery academy — the College, Career and Technology Academy (CCTA) — to help dropouts and non-completers finish graduation requirements while also beginning college coursework. The district has pursued this vision through a partnership with Educate Texas and Jobs for the Future, a national nonprofit that builds educational and economic opportunity for underserved populations. As a result of the work, the district has seen a decrease in its dropout rate. In 2015, the district’s dropout rate was 2.4 percent, which was less than half of the state’s average of 6.3 percent that year. Between 2007 and 2015, CCTA graduated 1,552 former dropouts and non-completers.

Since the work began in PSJA, leaders from the region’s school districts and public institutions of higher education have scaled this strategy in various ways. Based on the size of the student population needing to be served, adaptations have included standalone high schools, district level programming and/or district level services.
DARCIA CUELLAR’S career as an educator spans 15 years. She is the principal at Pharr-San Juan-Alamo College, Career and Technology Academy (CCTA). The school is designed to re-engage students who need support to complete the requirements of the state high school exit exam and/or complete high school credits to earn a high school diploma. Cuellar is committed to providing students with the three R’s to accomplish academic success: recover, restore and redirect. The goal of recovering students is not only a physical undertaking, but an emotional endeavor that begins with building relationships with students. Cuellar and her staff work to earn and restore students’ trust in an educational system that previously failed them by creating a campus culture that lives that purpose. Trusting relationships and a genuine culture allows staff to begin their work in restoring students’ self-esteem, self-worth and confidence in learning. Finally, in the redirect stage, the school’s staff begin to expose students to college campus visits, field trips, team-building activities, community service projects, incentive programs, motivational talks, and college and career opportunities.

I make it my personal and professional goal to be an advocate for the students who have become disengaged from school. I am working to increase awareness and prevention of the ills of high school dropouts. I am encouraged to see that students, once they are restored, are resilient and willing to advance their academic careers.

DARCIA CUELLAR
PHARR-SAN JUAN-ALAMO ISD COLLEGE, CAREER AND TECHNOLOGY ACADEMY
POSTSECONDARY SUPPORT

Up to 75 percent of all college dropout decisions are non-academic in nature according to a study by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy at Indiana University. While academic preparation and performance play a major role in retention of underrepresented students, this statistic suggests that low achievement may be more a result of external pressures rather than a student’s inherent ability, such as financial, physiological and institutional.

Postsecondary success in the Rio Grande Valley begins with alignment of high school endorsements to higher education programs of study. This includes building capacity in dual credit pathways and instructor/faculty credentials for technical programs in school districts which minimizes accumulation of excess credits. Advancing the credentials of secondary instructors in technical pathways serves not only to provide additional dual credit technical courses for high school students, but also increases the opportunity of matriculation into postsecondary education of these same students. RGV FOCUS provided funding for Texas State Technical College to collaborate with school districts in Cameron and Willacy Counties to explore this work.

Along with alignment of academic programs, postsecondary success includes building stronger alignment of career exploration, advising and other support services to redesign the student experience. South Texas College is participating in the Texas Guided Pathways initiative, which, according to Texas Association of Community Colleges, is focused on working with colleges to “design and implement structured academic and career pathways at scale, for all students.” During the next three years, the RGV FOCUS Leadership Team will leverage collaborative action to build a regional approach to postsecondary supports.
ALGEBRA BY MIDDLE SCHOOL

RGV FOCUS has identified a student’s mastery of Algebra I by eighth grade as an early indicator of the student’s postsecondary success. A statewide mathematics analysis conducted by E3 Alliance, a regional, data-driven education collaborative based in Austin, found the following:

1. Students with at least one year of math beyond Algebra II are more likely to graduate college.
2. Each additional high school math course increased postsecondary completion rates.
3. Across Texas, there is a huge opportunity gap among low-income students and their peers for taking Algebra I in middle school.
4. Almost all students who are in accelerated math pathways are successful, completing the course and passing the state assessment for Algebra I.
5. Many of our most prepared fifth-grade students who meet college and career ready standards lack access to accelerated math pathways — with low-income and minority students disproportionately disadvantaged.
6. Students in the state’s most rural districts lack access to rigorous math pathways.

Strides are being made in this area closer to home. The Rio Grande Valley’s low income students enroll in Algebra I in middle school at a higher rate than low income students throughout the state and enroll in and complete higher education at a higher rate than their state peers. These students also pass college aligned math and pre-Calculus at similar rates to their state peers.

To keep these numbers headed in the right direction, the College and Career Readiness Action Network is focusing on math over the next three years.
SUCCESS IN COLLABORATION

Since 2012, RGV FOCUS has worked to show that the region can be a proving ground for effective regional collaboration. Four years into the work, the initiative is creating a structure for intentional community engagement that demonstrates how working toward a shared goal with common metrics can lead to sustainable results. Examples of this can be found in the efforts of three RGV FOCUS partners: La Unión Del Pueblo Entero (LUPE), United Way of Southern Cameron County and Region One Education Service Center. Highlights of each organization’s work within the RGV FOCUS initiative follow.

Despite Texas law that allows undocumented high school graduates to qualify for in-state tuition and state financial aid at Texas’ public institutions through the Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA), undocumented high school students in the state still face obstacles when applying for college.

“The biggest frustration is that even though Texas has allowed undocumented students access to college since 2001, educators haven’t been trained to assist undocumented students with the process,” said Tania Chavez, fund development strategist for LUPE, a nonprofit organization that works to improve the lives of immigrants.

As an RGV FOCUS partner, LUPE, a membership-based organization that serves low income and immigrant families, was a main collaborator on the Resource Guide for College Access: Advising DREAMers in the Rio Grande Valley. The guide, released in 2015, helps teachers, counselors and educators advise undocumented students on higher education access. Part of the guide’s name comes from the acronym for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, a federal legislative proposal that calls for granting conditional residency to undocumented immigrants.

“There has been a 30 to 40 percent increase in the amount of TASFA submissions coming into the region’s institutions of higher education since 2014...”

Tania Chavez
Fund Development Strategist

“The DREAMers guide has had a lot of impact, because we are seeing that students are better prepared,” Chavez said. “There has been a 30 to 40 percent increase in the amount of TASFA submissions coming into the region’s institutions of higher education since 2014, and we are happy to know that part of the increase is because of the guide and the support we have created.”
Brownsville is going All In.

The All In initiative, produced by RGV FOCUS partner United Way of Southern Cameron County, aims to increase the number of young adults in Brownsville with postsecondary credentials – an associate’s or bachelor’s degree or professional/trade certification – with labor market value by 2025. The initiative was established in 2010 and is a partnership of local business, education and organization leaders. Additionally, collaboration between United Way and RGV FOCUS allows for alignment of metrics and leveraging of strategies that impact the entire region.

“We’re trying to engage different populations in the process of renewing our community,” said Blanca Davila, postsecondary success coordinator for United Way of Southern Cameron County. “Developing a college-going culture in our community is essential to increasing the number of young adults with postsecondary credentials.”

A key element of All In is its Student Ambassadors program, through which Brownsville’s high school graduates who have enrolled in college return to their alma maters to talk about their college experiences, including everything from degree selection and financial aid to testing, course work and general college life. In the 2015-2016 school year, 18 Student Ambassadors reached more than 2,100 students in elementary, middle and high schools in the Brownsville area.

This year, All In launched an internship program. Through the program, 90 students from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and Texas Southmost College will have access to hands-on experience and training in their fields of study. Each semester-long, paid internship position will provide work assignments and a learning component related to the students’ academic majors. In addition, students will get 20 hours of job coaching, guidance in resume writing and interview training in advance of applying for the internships.

All In has also launched a program for parents. The goal is to give parents tools to support students at home.
In 2013, the Texas legislature passed a bill requiring school districts to collaborate with at least one college to develop English and math preparation courses for high school seniors whose academic performance indicated they were not college ready. The goal of the legislation was to give students a chance to rise to a college-readiness level that would prevent them from needing remedial or developmental classes once enrolled in a college.

To meet the needs of the bill, public schools and colleges in the Rio Grande Valley combined their energies instead of working in silos. Region One Education Service Center, an RGV FOCUS partner that supports the region’s public schools, led an effort that brought area colleges and school districts together to develop the mandated courses so that each one used the same curriculum. High school math and English teachers worked collaboratively with faculty professors from each college to develop courses in line with college-level rigor and standards. As a result, the region’s students can take the courses at any of the high schools and any one of the local colleges will accept them. In 2014, school districts and institutions of higher education in the region signed a memorandum of understanding to support the collaboration on the courses.

“This effort allowed the region as a whole to collectively set a unified vision in order to meet the state’s requirement for this course,” said Tina Atkins, administrator for College, Career & Life Readiness for Region One. “Working with RGV FOCUS, the schools and the colleges helped to create a consistent class in order to help high schools and institutions of higher education meet the state requirement in a way that would ultimately be better for all of the students in our region.”
RGV FOCUS BACKBONE

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Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT) works with families, companies and nonprofits to strengthen our community through a variety of charitable funds and strategic grantmaking initiatives. CFT is committed to serving and understanding donor needs, expertly handling complex gifts, wisely managing charitable funds, and leveraging its community knowledge to increase charitable impact. CFT professionally manages more than 950 charitable funds like the W. W. Caruth, Jr. Foundation and has awarded more than $1.6 billion in grants since its founding in 1953.

Educate Texas, a public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas, began in 2004 as the Texas High School Project when it introduced the Early College High School model to the state of Texas. In 2010, the organization transitioned into Educate Texas with a vision of strengthening the public and higher education system so that every Texas student is prepared for education and workforce success. Now with offices in Dallas, Austin, and the Rio Grande Valley, Educate Texas focuses on the areas of college and career readiness, effective teaching, higher education and regional collaboration. In addition to RGV FOCUS, Educate Texas’ work in the Rio Grande Valley includes programs supporting T-STEM Academies, Texas Regional STEM Degree Accelerator and the Investing in Innovation Fund.

Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT) works with families, companies and nonprofits to strengthen our community through a variety of charitable funds and strategic grantmaking initiatives. CFT is committed to serving and understanding donor needs, expertly handling complex gifts, wisely managing charitable funds, and leveraging its community knowledge to increase charitable impact. CFT professionally manages more than 950 charitable funds like the W. W. Caruth, Jr. Foundation and has awarded more than $1.6 billion in grants since its founding in 1953.

Monte Alto Independent School District
“Where Every Child Is A Winner”

Rio Grande Valley
Equal Voice Network

COMMUNITIES FOUNDATION of TEXAS
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EDUCATE TEXAS
5550 Caruth Haven Lane
Dallas, TX 75225
edtx.org

San Patrón de los Inmigrantes

United Way of Southern Cameron County

La Unión del Pueblo Entero
Founded by César E. Chávez

VIDA
Vida Initiative for Development and Advancement

UTRGV

WESLACO

VIDA
Vida Initiative for Development and Advancement

LUP

La Unión del Pueblo Entero
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United Way of Southern Cameron County

Regional One Education Service Center

South Texas Educational Technologies Inc.