



## **RGV FOCUS, VALLEY LEADERSHIP WEIGH IN ON STATE OF EDUCATION IN THE RGV**

*'Bright Spots,' New Partnerships and Renewed Message to "Work Together" Shared During Virtual Scorecard Unveiling*

**HARLINGEN, TEXAS (June 2, 2020)** – Even amidst the pandemic, business, education and community leaders from [RGV FOCUS](#), a community partnership developed to ensure all children in the Rio Grande Valley receive the education needed to achieve meaningful careers and lives, today united virtually to share the RGV FOCUS Annual Report & Scorecard and a powerful message of educational progress and the importance of working side-by-side: “Contigo, the Valley is continuing to prove that with our collective investment, students can and will succeed year after year.”

“Through new partnerships, a strong framework for analyzing and improving equity in our work, and a deep commitment by RGV education, community and business leaders alike, we’re seeing more students achieve in K-12<sup>th</sup> grades and into postsecondary education than ever before,” said Dr. Patricia McHatton, executive vice president for Academic Affairs, Student Success and P-16 Integration at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. “This momentum must continue if our students and region are to thrive, especially given the challenging environment right now.”

RGV FOCUS’ goal is to transform college readiness, access and success across the four-county Rio Grande Valley region through cross-sector collaboration of key stakeholders representing education, business, workforce, community-based organizations and philanthropy. To do this, RGV FOCUS works to measurably improve educational outcomes by aligning resources along the cradle-to-career educational pathway with a goal of enabling all Rio Grande Valley learners to achieve a degree or credential that leads to a meaningful career.

According to Dr. Rodney H. Rodriguez, senior director for RGV FOCUS, there are several important ‘bright spots’ in the [scorecard data for 2019](#), which underscore the impact RGV FOCUS is having on education in the Valley:

- **51% of RGV high school students are completing Advanced Placement or Dual Credit Courses, exceeding the state average of 43%.**
- **73% of RGV seniors are completing the FAFSA application for higher education financial assistance, exceeding the state average of 64%.**
- **80% of RGV higher education graduates are finding employment or furthering their education at 4-year colleges, exceeding the state average of 75%.**

“These bright spot successes mean more of our students are graduating college- and career-ready, receiving resources for better access to higher education, continuing their education and entering the workforce with meaningful, industry-critical careers,” said Rodriguez. “We have so much student success to celebrate – and it’s all because we’re working together. Without a unified effort in the Valley, this simply wouldn’t be possible.”

In a virtual unveiling, RGV FOCUS shared the organization’s 2019 Annual Report and Student Success Scorecard showing that Rio Grande Valley students now match or outperform their Texas peers in eight

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out of 11 key indicators – from high school graduation rates, to FAFSA financial aid and AP/Dual-Credit completion. The report, which spotlights successes along with areas needing improvement, reflects a growing shift in educational attainment for area students. The 2019 report also represents the sixth consecutive year that RGV FOCUS has met or exceeded the majority of its key indicators since the 2014 report was first released.

“Our scorecard data tells a powerful story of high-performing students in the Valley,” said RGV FOCUS Deputy Director Katherine Diaz. “We are *outperforming* the state in many areas – such an accomplishment and a tribute to the power of a truly invested, community-wide collaborative.”

New to this year’s RGV FOCUS efforts include a variety of endeavors that, according to Diaz, are key to moving the needle for students and the region, such as:

- **Incorporating an [equity framework](#) into the K-12 metrics dashboard** – to identify any additional gaps on four equity fronts (race/ethnicity, income, language and special education needs), then to understand those gaps and ensure measures are put in place to address them
- **Three new partnerships/initiatives specifically aimed at improving key RGV FOCUS metrics:**
  - **“Complete Your Degree RGV” program to reverse college completion “stop-out” rates** – through a grant from [Lumina Foundation](#), in partnership with the Kresge Foundation, RGV FOCUS – a designated Talent Hub – identified approximately 2,000 Valley traditional students and more than 9,000 dual-credit students who were close to completing a two or four-year degree and “stopped out” of college and **were able to re-enroll 384 traditional students and 550 dual-credit students.**
  - **Peer Forward partnership to create a college-going culture through peer influence** – through a partnership with national nonprofit Peer Forward and support from the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), RGV FOCUS sent 12 students from three districts in the Valley to a program to become peer mentors. **Those students then mentored nearly 950 high school students** about career opportunities, the need for college degrees and instilled a sense of future career hope and possibility in many first-generation and low-income students.
  - **Equal Voice Network partnership to more effectively improve education at the grassroots level** – again through a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant, RGV FOCUS helped Equal Voice Network – comprised of nine grassroots community groups committed to improving education – better advocate for their communities’ needs with school leadership, create governance structures to strengthen communication and community participation (stronger boards and work-based experiences) and to create meaningful goals to measure their impact (trainings, dual-language programs, expansion, etc.).

“We’re proud of our progress and innovation, yet our work is far from over. There remains a disconnect between success in K-12 education and success accessing and entering college,” added Rodriguez. “We are always in need of new partners to sign on and for others to rejoin the effort to ensure *all* students in the Valley are successful in school and in their lives. This will be particularly important going into the new school year as we’re navigating the impact of the pandemic on our students and learning – we need everyone’s involvement and investment.”

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Considering the size of the Rio Grande Valley, the RGV FOCUS collaboration is unique. The region's 1.4 million population comprises four counties (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy), 37 school districts, four public institutions of higher education and 363,375 Pre-K-12 students. Of those students 97% are Latino. Additionally, there are 74,312 higher-education students, of which 92% are Latino. In 2019 alone, students earned 32 doctoral, 1,206 master's, 4,886 bachelor's and 5,462 associate degrees and were awarded 2,188 certificates from the four public institutions of higher education in the Rio Grande Valley.

The 2019 RGV FOCUS Annual Report details how high school and college students in the region are performing compared to their peers at a baseline (metrics established by RGV FOCUS leadership in 2012). It also compares the performance of Valley students against their Texas peers.

In addition to co-chairs Dr. Narciso Garcia, superintendent of Vanguard Academy Public Charter Schools, and Dr. Patricia Alvarez McHatton, executive vice president for Academic Affairs, Student Success and P-16 Integration at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, the full list of Leadership Team members representing school districts, institutions of higher education, community-based organizations, and workforce organizations and businesses can be found online at [www.edtx.org/rgv-focus/about-us/our-network-team](http://www.edtx.org/rgv-focus/about-us/our-network-team).

To learn more or get involved in RGV FOCUS, visit <https://rgvfocus.org>.

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### **About RGV FOCUS**

RGV FOCUS is a collective impact initiative in the Rio Grande Valley – a group of leaders from school districts, higher education institutions, community-based organizations and the workforce partnering to improve student lives from cradle-to-career. In 2012, Educate Texas, an educational arm of Dallas-based Communities Foundation of Texas, partnered with Valley leaders to launch RGV FOCUS to transform college readiness, access and success across Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy counties. The work to date is driven by the following vision: *All RGV learners will achieve a degree or credential that leads to a meaningful career.* RGV FOCUS is a collaboration with Educate Texas, a public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT). For more information, please visit [rgvfocus.org](http://rgvfocus.org).

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