

# First-year program curbs 'summer melt' for high school grads

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By [Melissa B. Taboada](#) - American-Statesman Staff

Months after he was accepted into college, Josue Rios was still grappling with whether to go.

Having spent his high school days working construction or busing tables, leaving home for college meant one less income to help his family pay the monthly rent.



Josue Rios, right, is a graduate of Reagan High School who received help enrolling in college last summer through a pilot ... [Read More](#)

There were no college savings, and the financial forms and applications seemed too daunting.

"It was hard to choose whether I was going to go to school or not," said Rios, 19, a Reagan High School graduate who is the first person in his family to enroll in college. "My cousins and my family, they all dropped out when they were my age."

Now that he has finished his freshman year at the University of Houston-Victoria, making the dean's list in the spring, Rios thanks the counselor who helped get him there.

As part of a pilot program, Liberal Arts and Science Academy counselor Shannon Bergeron spent her summer at Reagan advising students who needed additional support to get to college. She made sure Rios filled out the paperwork, met all the admissions deadlines and got into a dorm.

About 20 counselors from Austin, Del Valle, Hays and Pflugerville worked through the summer of 2013 to help students complete the college enrollment process and avoid the so-called summer melt – the drop-off of students who say they will continue on to college as they graduate from high school but then fail to show up in the fall.

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Historically, more than 90 percent of the 15,000 Central Texas high school graduates have said they will attend college directly after high school, but only 62 percent actually do. Research shows low-income students are more likely not to enroll and points to causes that include the gap between financial aid and the actual cost of attendance, books and transportation.

Early results from last year's program to address summer melt show promise in beginning to budge the numbers upward, and three area districts plan to bear the brunt of the costs this summer to keep the momentum rolling.

"The results show that this could be a program that really helps our region reverse the leveling trend we've seen over the last six years," said Gilbert Zavala, vice president of education for the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce. "This is critical because the vast majorities of job openings are going to require education beyond high school."

The results indicate that the summer outreach helped the more disadvantaged students the most, according to an analysis by the University of Texas Ray Marshall Center.

Of 6,000 students involved in the study, about 700 received regular outreach and support from a high school counselor. Timely enrollment was 7 percentage points higher for first-generation college students who received the counseling. For first-generation, low-income students, the increase was 10 percentage points.

The gains are crucial for Central Texas, which has had flat direct-to-college enrollment rates since 2007. Researchers point to education as the single strongest predictor of future income, and federal workforce data back that up, showing that earnings rise and unemployment falls with each step up the educational ladder. In the Austin metro area, 7.8 percent of workers with only a high school diploma were unemployed in 2012, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Among those with bachelor's degrees, the jobless rate dropped to just 3.7 percent.

Last year, counselors like Bergeron helped the graduates complete financial paperwork, find money for costs not covered by financial aid and learn how to navigate orientation, housing deadlines and registration.

The cost of required immunizations was a roadblock for some students, while for others, she had to wrangle on the phone with admissions, advising or housing offices to make sure paperwork was in order, payment deadlines could be extended, and financial aid would come through on time.

“These are kids who have barriers,” Bergeron said. “They don’t have a lot of support. If their very first experience is people shutting the door in their faces, they’re likely not going to continue.”

Last summer, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Austin Chamber and the Austin district pumped nearly \$157,000 into the pilot program, paying to keep the counselors, the communication portals for students and research, among other things. This summer, the Austin, Del Valle and Hays districts will continue with the program on their own.

“We found the data to be encouraging,” said Edmund Oropez, the Austin district’s associate superintendent for high schools and interim chief of schools. “Clearly, there was a need.”

Similar efforts in other states have shown the number of high school graduates who go straight to college increased by more than 10 percentage points.

“This is how we’re going to change the community we live in,” said Bergeron, who remembers her own struggle as a first-generation college student and wishes she had similar help. “It pulls them out of poverty and breaks the cycle of minimum-wage jobs, and gives them a chance to be able to own a house and a car. Education is important. It makes a difference.”

For students like Rios, the additional help might be enough to alter the path of his life; he says he will be back in college this fall.

“I just want to be someone successful in life,” Rios said. “I know I can do everything I set my mind to. Even if I have struggles, I know that all my hard work is going to pay off.”