

ACC offers summer catchup classes for college-bound

Free program focuses on reading, writing and math



By [Katie Humphrey](#)
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Professor Tina McGaughey asks who needs a dictionary, and almost every student raises a hand.

"Who wants the Bible: Webster's?" she asks, holding up the thick hardcover.

Peter Miranda, an 18-year-old recent graduate of Stony Point High School in the Round Rock school district, quickly claims the heavy volume.

Miranda and 13 other students, who grab smaller paperback dictionaries from a cart, have been spending their afternoons this summer at Austin Community College in a writing class offered through ACC's Pre-Collegiate Bridge Program.

The free program aims to prepare rising high school seniors and recent graduates for college through four-week courses in writing, reading and math. The students have met requirements for high school graduation but fall short of the state's college readiness standards.

Miranda, who hopes to be an engineer, knew that his writing needed work. He couldn't pass up the free classes.

"I didn't want to start (college) in low-level classes," he said. "It's an opportunity."

Between a third and a half of graduating seniors in many Central Texas districts are not ready for college, according to E3 Alliance, an education research organization based at ACC.

"There is still a significant number of students who graduate having passed TAKS but not meeting the readiness standards by TAKS," Hannah Gourgey, director of analysis and alignment for E3 Alliance, said, referring to the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

Readiness often mirrors income level, with lower-income school districts producing fewer students who are prepared for college on graduation day, Gourgey said.

The Texas Legislature established guidelines for college readiness in 1987 based on standardized test scores in writing, reading and math.

The TAKS scores students need to be "college ready" are higher than the scores they need to graduate. If their TAKS results don't measure up, students can try to achieve a college readiness level on other exams, such as the SAT or ACT.

The Texas Success Initiative, a 2003 update to the 1987 standards, allows flexibility in the type of developmental education offered at public colleges and universities. The remedial work could range from a few hours in a computer lab to semesters in a noncredit course.

Providing early support keeps more students from dropping out of college because it gives them the skills they need to keep up with future course work, said Glenda Barron, associate commissioner for participation and success with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

A seamless transition from high school to college is important, said Sharon Frederick, director of student learning services at ACC. Returning to school is harder if students wait before entering college, she said.

ACC is using grants from the coordinating board to offer the free writing, reading and math classes, which are taught by ACC faculty members, throughout the summer.

So far, about 70 students are registered for the classes, which meet three hours per day, four days a week. The Austin school district was the primary target for the program, but classes are open to anyone in ACC's service area, Frederick said.

At the end of each session, students are given another chance to take one of the readiness exams.

"If they pass the assessment test, they will be ready to roll in college classes," Frederick said.

Carolina Velazquez, 19, just graduated from Stony Point High. She hopes to attend St. Edward's University in Austin to study communications and photography.

But English is her second language, and she knew that her writing needed work, so she enrolled in the developmental writing program after hearing about it from an ACC counselor.

As she typed an essay during a recent class, she paid particular attention to vocabulary and spelling errors that McGaughey had marked on the handwritten first draft.

"This is something serious, and you have to do the work," Velazquez said. "You're going to struggle until you do it right."

khumphrey@statesman.com; 445-3658

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