

VIDA wins recognition for helping low-income individuals improve their education

By **Patricia Martinez**
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MCALLEN, RGV – The Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA) program was recently celebrated for its achievement in aiding low-income individuals as they further their education.

The recognition comes after the results of the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) [study](#) were published this past October, listing VIDA as one of the country's most effective program models for helping participants gain more credit hours and complete more certifications.



Eddie Anaya speaks at VIDA gathering.

In a ceremony at South Texas College, the study's authors presented their findings to those gathered, with special remarks given by state Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, D-McAllen, VIDA Executive Director Priscilla Dinn Alvarez and [Valley Interfaith](#) leader and VIDA Chairman Eduardo 'Eddie' Anaya.

"The program was going to evaluate how well VIDA's model works, so today was about presenting those findings," said Dinn Alvarez. "As was discussed today, the findings were phenomenal."

The study, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families, evaluated nine program models from across the country that had "career pathways framework" for assisting primarily older, nontraditional students in completing post-secondary training. After 24 months, the study found that students enrolled in VIDA obtained an average of 5.6 more credit hours than those not in the program. In addition, 75.7 percent of VIDA participants were enrolled full-time in college while full-time enrollment for the control group was at 64.8 percent. VIDA also positively impacted

credential completion with 53.3 percent of VIDA participants earning a certification after 24 months compared to 45 percent in the control group. The numbers show that VIDA's impact is right behind the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) – the “gold standard” of career pathways programs.

“Frankly, it’s no surprise. We’ve always had tremendous success with participants in the VIDA program,” said STC President Dr. Shirley Reed. “Students can be so vulnerable – car breaks down, kid gets sick, and it’s all over. They drop out, and they never ever get back to going to college. They [VIDA] have a masterful way of doing case management, counseling, helping to intervene, helping students figure out how to solve their problem. So, I applaud their work. They do a great, great job.”

VIDA's goal is to help low-income adults in the Rio Grande Valley earn a living wage through continuing education, specifically targeting individuals between the ages of 25-50. VIDA provides financial assistance for tuition and school expenses, counseling sessions, childcare and transportation. Since its establishment in 1995 by business leaders and members of Valley Interfaith, about 7,000 people have participated in the program.

“A lot of them don’t have a history of college-going,” said Dinn Alvarez. “They have to work because they have a family. Life has happened, and they’re not making enough money, but the *ganás* is there, the commitment is there, the desire to change their lives. They just need a little bit of help, and that’s where VIDA is able to come in and invest in their education.”

One great VIDA success story is that of San Juanita Sanchez. After leaving an abusive relationship and finding shelter at Mujeres Unidas/Women Together, Sanchez quickly realized she needed a job. She hadn’t worked in seven years, and the job search was proving difficult. For the next three months she would use public transit, riding the bus past STC on her way back to the shelter, and wondering what it would be like to go to college. When Sanchez finally mustered the courage to go on campus, the registrar informed her that there were fees even to take the entrance exams. With that, she thought her chance had passed.

“It just so happened that I had been going to the City of McAllen [Public] Library because it was close by the shelter ... and VIDA was there,” said Sanchez. “And, they had a sign on one of the doors, and it said ‘Do you want to go to college?’”

That was all the prompting she needed. Through VIDA, Sanchez took college prep courses to refresh her English, writing and math skills, paid for and passed her entrance exams, enrolled at STC and completed an associate degree in social work. She is now the executive assistant and placement coordinator for VIDA and is currently a senior at UTRGV finishing her bachelor’s.

“Look where I’m at now,” said Sanchez. “Just where I came out of, and how they’ve helped me from the very beginning is amazing. It’s amazing what VIDA does.”

While Sanchez was able to successfully benefit from VIDA's services, Dinn Alvarez points out that, unfortunately, individuals are limited by their city's investment or the lack thereof. Money invested in VIDA by a certain city can only be used for residents of that city. Because of this, she says they've had to turn people away. She emphasized that this is why it's so important for local partners, banking foundations, economic development corporations and cities to look at this study, as well as their [annual report](#) and [economic impact study](#), and make the decision to invest in their community.

"The return on investment is for every dollar that a city invests in their human capital, they get back \$12.12. That's economic development," said Dinn Alvarez. " ... When our participants graduate, and they go on to earn an average of \$37-\$38,000, all of a sudden they have disposable income. They're able to go shopping. They're able to go to restaurants. They're able to go to concerts and things like that. And, that's where the city gets back that initial investment."

Anaya, the Valley Interfaith leader and VIDA chairman, estimates that the program receives about \$1.3 million from cities each year, with VIDA providing an average of \$7,000 in assistance per student annually. VIDA is also one of six programs in the state to receive match funding from the Texas Innovative Adult Career Education Grant Fund (ACE Fund), for which Sen. Hinojosa spearheaded. The ACE Fund grants approximately \$5,000,000 between the programs for investment in high-skill training for high-demand, high-wage jobs.

Still, more investment in the program equals more people being served, and Anaya, like Dinn Alvarez, says the results should speak for themselves.

"I think this is a fantastic, independent study – federal study – that basically proves, or better yet, justifies the investment that our cities, our counties are making into our communities through the VIDA program," said Anaya. "As board members, we don't see quick results, especially independent results. This, in itself, shows that what we're doing is the right thing ... VIDA works."