

EDUCATION AND HEALTH

Grassroots effort led to Palo Alto's founding

PAC filled a void in area without higher education

By Alia Malik, Staff Writer | July 18, 2015 | Updated: July 20, 2015 8:52pm

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Photo: Courtesy Palo Alto College

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Elizabeth Aguilar-Villarreal, Palo Alto College's first enrolled student, poses outside the College's original administration office. Aguilar-Villarreal now serves as director of enrollment at Palo Alto College.

When the University of Texas at San Antonio was founded in 1969, excitement over the city's first public university faded to disappointment in some neighborhoods.

“Finally we got a university, but lo and behold! It was located 15 miles from downtown, and more from the South Side,” said María Antonietta Berriozábal, a former member of the City Council. “The first opportunity for higher education on the South Side came in the form of a community college, and it was Palo Alto.”

Palo Alto College, one of five in the Alamo Community College District, is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, partly by honoring the activists who successfully clamored for a higher-education institution serving the city's relatively

low-income South Side.

The community college at the intersection of Loop 410 and Texas 16 South opened with 231 students and now enrolls about 9,500. Many PAC students are the first in their families to attend college, and about 70 percent are Hispanic. The federal government recognizes PAC as a “Hispanic-serving institution.”

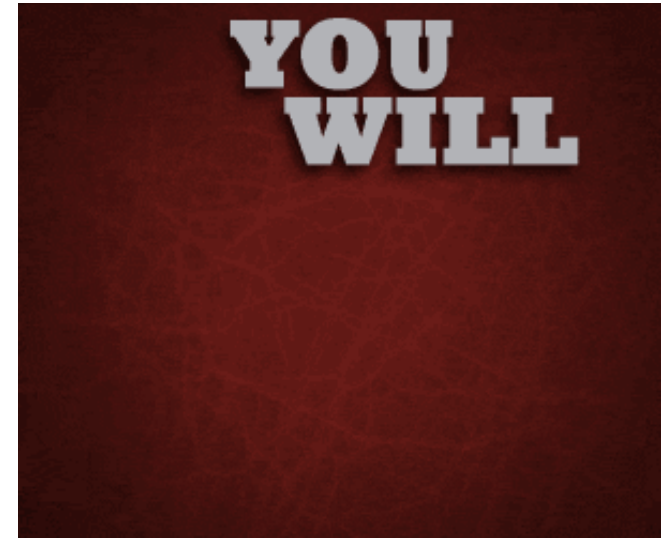
By the 1960s, many in San Antonio’s large Mexican-American community saw an increased need for college education, Berriozábal said.

“It was imperative that we get it and that it be accessible, that it be in the area where the largest population of people of color was, and that was the southern sector,” she said.

At the first convention of Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) in 1974, Fernando Rodriguez Jr. introduced a resolution to open a community college on the West Side or South Side. Berriozábal remembers the idea of such a college was a hard sell for local officials.

“If we have insensitivity now, just imagine the insensitivity back in the 1960s and ’70s when we wanted a college in that area,” she said.

Berriozábal was elected to the City Council in 1981 and served for a decade. In 1982, COPS and other community leaders got the



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endorsement of Mark White, then the Texas attorney general and running for governor, to open the community college they envisioned.

Trustees of the Alamo Community College District approved money to plan and buy land for the college. The Legislature chartered PAC on March 19, 1983. Voters passed a bond the same year to build a \$13 million campus with an initial capacity of 2,500 students, but classes began in 1985 in high schools and military installations.

Administrative offices were located just outside Kelly AFB, according to an official college history. The campus, built in the style of a Spanish mission, opened in 1987 with 11 buildings. PAC received full accreditation two years later and by 1991, it was the fastest-growing college in the state, according to the official history.

The college adopted a slogan: "The Heart of the Community."

Several new classroom buildings have opened since the campus was first built. The city partnered with PAC for a \$10.5 million natatorium and gymnasium complex. The campus library opened in 1997 and was named after George Ozuna Jr., a former district trustee widely regarded as PAC's champion on the board.

The Ray Ellison Family Center opened in 2001, accommodating 66 children. A performing arts center opened in 2009 with a 400-seat theater, recording studios and a recital hall.



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PAC now sits on 162 acres. Berriozábal and others refer to it as an example of what a grassroots group, working together, can achieve.

“We as a community had been pushing it for years and years,” she said. “It’s one of those things where I don’t think you can give credit to just one person.”

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