**South Texas College**

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## A Road Less Traveled: Francisco Cantu’s Expressway to Success

When Francisco Cantu stands atop one of the new bridges he’s building as part of a multi-million dollar construction project near his hometown of Sullivan City, he can look out toward the horizon and see his past.

Metaphorically, in the sense that he can reflect on the challenges and choices that got him here, and literally, because he can actually see his high school from where he stands.

A first-generation student with the determination to design his own road to success, Francisco Cantu now oversees a massive local expressway project, as a transportation engineer for the Texas Department of Transportation. He has come a long way since his days at La Joya High School, where he first developed a passion for engineering while taking dual credit classes through South Texas College.

“The Dual Enrollment program gave me the rocket fuel to continue setting goals,” says Cantu, who earned his Associate degree in engineering from STC in 2011—*weeks* *before* his high school graduation.

Cantu took the Engineering Academy Pathway at South Texas College, one of four Dual Enrollment routes available to high school students to earn college credit, and one of the most challenging. He applied during his sophomore year and was chosen to join the highly selective program for his junior and senior years.

After going to class each morning at La Joya High School, Cantu would receive transportation to STC’s campus for free afternoon classes taught by college professors. The best part? Tuition and textbooks were alsofree.

”I was able to get credit for both high school and college, totaling almost 90 college hours,” says Cantu, who touts the accessibility of the program. “I’m a first-generation student, so that’s a big chunk of money I saved! It was a big help.”

Cantu ignited his passion for engineering and drafting at STC, where he gained a solid background in 2D modeling. His stellar work led to a conditional grant from Texas DOT— a scholarship that paid for a major portion of Cantu’s Bachelor’s degree at the University of Texas Pan-American and promised two years of employment when he finished.

While earning his Bachelor’s degree, Cantu dove into learning about cutting-edge 3D modeling. By the time he started with Texas DOT, he was qualified to assist with the company’s transition from 2D to 3D roadway design.

“I became like a statewide leader in the implementation of 3D-design,” Cantu remembers.

According to Cantu, it was South Texas College that inspired him to connect his drafting and engineering interests. To be a good engineer, you also have to be a good drafter in order to effectively communicate to others the product you want to produce, he explains. His comprehensive training at STC helped him to later excel in 3D modeling and become a leader in his company.

“I started creating very complex models that included the roadways and bridges of very important projects in Starr County,” says Cantu. “Then, I used visualization tools to make project presentations so people could see how everything ties together.”

It was his ability to make these innovative connections that launched him into more significant projects and positions at his job. Now, Cantu works as a construction project manager for Texas DOT, overseeing inspectors, contractors, and other groups who work on construction projects.

He continues to credit the soft skills he learned at STC for his leadership ability. When Cantu started taking dual enrollment classes at STC, he received tutoring support in various subjects. Eventually, he became a math & science tutor himself. Not only was Cantu able to give back to his peers, but he also learned valuable leadership and people skills.

“From being a tutor at STC, I’ve learned how to guide people and how to be patient,” Cantu recalls. “Now, where I work, I’m able to use these qualities in working with different personalities and departments.”

Looking back, Cantu is grateful to South Texas College for opening so many doors.

“Without the dual enrollment program, I would have had to start from scratch at the university,” he says. “Maybe I would have been up to the challenges, but it would have taken longer for me to finish.”

Cantu is especially appreciative of the small class sizes at STC that helped him receive individualized support and guidance. He also found that the excellent instructors at STC were able to explain the challenging course material clearly: “The professors were always willing to talk to us. I would ask a lot of questions, and that’s what helped me learn.”

In particular, Cantu was inspired by his math instructor Todd Steckler, who teaches at both La Joya High School and STC. Steckler helped him succeed in math courses, which were critical for his engineering degree. Though the courses were challenging, Steckler’s support would make all the difference.

“He was one of the teachers to encourage me to apply to the program in the first place,” says Cantu. “He was a tough teacher, but he was also like: ‘Hey, you’ve got to just go for it.’”

Steckler also made Cantu feel welcome at the College.

“I would see him on campus, and I felt at home, like I was back in high school. That helped out a lot.”

It goes without saying that Steckler is proud of his former student. And it comes as little surprise to him that Cantu has continued to excel since taking his calculus courses. According to Steckler, Cantu has always been driven to give his best.

“Getting a positive start on his college experience while in high school allowed him to visualize future success coming his way,” says Steckler. “He is the one who set his life road map and followed it.”

Steckler adds that Dual Enrollment not only levels the playing field for students who do not have educational opportunities, but also gives these students advantages.

Cantu agrees, noting that he had a competitive edge when he applied for the grant because he was already about to earn an Associate degree in engineering from South Texas College.

The Texas DOT grant guarantees students two years of employment, after which recipients can decide whether they want to stay with the company. For Cantu, nothing could pull him away from his dream job.

“I’ve stayed for more than five years with Texas DOT already,” says Cantu, who aims to one day become a Director for the department, so he can use everything he’s learning to give back to the region in even greater ways. “Thankfully I’ve been progressing in the agency and achieving all my goals inside of it.”

When Cantu was young, he would hear about the expressway project near his hometown, which has been “on the radar” for more than 15 years. But he never thought he would be the one overseeing the construction of the project and building a loop around his old high school.

“Every day we see how our innovative programs impact the growth our college going culture, but there is no better metric than the transformation that these opportunities bring to an individual, their family and our region,” says Rose Benavidez, Vice Chair of the South Texas College Board of Trustees. “We congratulate Mr. Cantu for his dedication and commitment to his professional advancement and for choosing to share his talent with our Starr County community.”

Cantu himself is still wrapping his head around what he has accomplished thanks to his strong work ethic and the guidance of STC.

“Sometimes, when they are pouring concrete for the bridges over La Joya Lake in the early morning when the sun is coming out, from far away, I see the stadium and the high school. It’s like a dream come true,” Cantu reflects.

## Hashtags

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## Bureau of Labor Statistics

*[Statistics and information taken verbatim from the BLS]*

**Industrial Engineers**

* 2018 Median Pay: $87,040 per year
* Job Outlook, 2018-28: 8% (Faster than average)
* Firms in a variety of industries will continue to seek new ways to contain costs and improve efficiency.
* Texas is #1 in the nation for top paying States for this occupation and is #3 for states with the highest employment level in this occupation.

**Civil Engineers**

* 2018 Median Pay: $86,640 per year
* Job Outlook, 2018-28: 6% (As fast as average)
* As infrastructure continues to age, civil engineers will be needed to manage projects to rebuild, repair, and upgrade bridges, roads, levees, dams, airports, buildings, and structures of all types.
* Texas is #2 in the Nation for states with the highest employment level in this occupation and is #4 for top paying States for this occupation.

**Drafters**

* 2018 Median Pay: $55,550 per year
* Job Outlook, 2018-28: 0% (Little or no change)
* Increased construction activity is projected to drive demand for drafters, but this is expected to be tempered as engineers and architects increasingly perform some tasks previously done by drafters.
* Texas is #2 in the nation for states with the highest employment level in Architectural and Civil Drafters occupations.