**South Texas College**

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**South Texas College celebrates Board Appreciation Month**

South Texas College Chairman Paul R. Rodriguez knows that to be a member of the Board of Trustees, one has to be dedicated to uplifting their community. At STC, they are able to do so through the power of workforce-driven education.

“I know what it’s like to work with a good education system,” says Rodriguez, who served on the board of the Sharyland Independent School District for nine years before being elected to the South Texas College board in 2012. “STC had a great reputation, and was growing.”

Through his experience with the Rio Grande Valley Chamber of Commerce and various other economic development organizations, the former banking CEO was well aware of South Texas College’s strong presence in the community. Every time a workforce need surfaced, it seemed to Rodriguez, one particular institution was up to the task.

“Invariably, we’d run into areas where STC was a major partner,” says Rodriguez. He has noticed a “night-and-day” change in the economic outlook of the region since STC’s foundation in 1993. “It’s important that we maintain the focus of the college, as quite frankly, an economic engine.”

This Board Appreciation Month, Chairman Rodriguez reflects on what it means to be a board member. Rodriguez currently oversees a busy agenda which includes representing STC in the community and advancing the College’s programs on both economic and political fronts. It is a role that takes passion and grit.

Rodriguez is most proud of three recent accomplishments by the board, which include

saving students and taxpayers millions with pioneering efforts in Early College High School, collaborating with the Texas Workforce Commission on classroom-to-career pathways and apprenticeships, and paving the way for the game-changing Regional Center for Public Safety Excellence (RCPSE).

The RCPSE began as a joint effort with the City of Pharr and Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District, in response to surging demand for law enforcement and public safety professionals. In its first year of operation, the center has expanded to include training for federal agencies, in addition to the local and state bodies it was established to serve.

“It’s really grown significantly before us,” says Rodriguez, who credits the herculean efforts of college, school district, and agency partners for the Center’s quick success.

“The administration was ‘Johnny-on-the-spot’ [and] the partners bellied up to the bar and really made it happen.”

When reflecting on the impact of the board at South Texas College, Rodriguez recalls memories of the region from 50 years ago. He talks of a time when unemployment rates in the Rio Grande Valley exceeded 30 percent, with economic opportunity lagging far behind the big cities. When he returned to the area after his college years, “it was still double-digits.”

But now, with sectors like healthcare, tech, and manufacturing taking hold in South Texas, regional unemployment rates have plummeted to eight percent and lower. According to the chairman, this is definitively “not an accident.”

“When you track the growth of STC and the reduction of the unemployment rate?” states Rodriguez, who then explains that the school districts and economic development commissions in the region played key roles in the region’s economic awakening. “I [was] an economics major — and I *never* would have imagined single-digit unemployment levels [here].”

The future is bright for the South Texas College board. And the momentum doesn’t stop there, with new developments always on their fingertips. Most recently, the College approved a Bachelor’s degree in Nursing — leading in Texas with *five* bachelor’s degrees.

“A lot of people were skeptical,” he says about the first-of-this-kind community college Bachelor’s degree pathways. “[Now] we’re up to five programs.”

The Board continues to collaborate with industry leaders and the Texas Workforce Commission to identify new areas for workforce preparedness and economic growth. Currently, Rodriguez and his colleagues are working on a plan to enhance associate degree-level IT offerings, especially in the quickly growing field of cybersecurity.

“Our students are in great demand,” he says about the new Cybersecurity Specialist pathway. “You can get out of that program and they’re waiting for you — in governments, colleges, financial institutions…”

Members of the board work with an urgency forged by their diverse experience and skill sets. Rodriguez is a true believer in the College’s one-of-a-kind ability to embody the traditional “South Texas spirit.”

“There’s no question that the College started out as one thing, and became something else,” he says about STC’s successful transition from trade school to all-out economic engine. “We don't know what we’re going to be looking at in five to 10 years [but] we’re very fortunate to have the leadership we have.”