**South Texas College News Center**

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**Tex*ceptional*: STC Dual Credit Program First in State to Achieve NACEP Accreditation**

Here's to another *fabulous* first.

South Texas College has become the first institute of higher learning in the state of Texas to earn the prestigious National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) accreditation for its Dual Credit programs. The accolade marks the success of more than two decades of effort on the part of South Texas College and its partners to create clearer pathways to college success.

“It has been an ongoing process… two years just for the application itself, says Dr. Rebecca De Leon, Dean for Dual Credit Programs and School District Partnerships.

“It has been over 20 years in the making for South Texas College.”

The NACEP organization is the only accrediting body in the nation for dual enrollment. The stringent vetting process ensures that programs are providing bona fide college classes to high school students. The accreditation validates what administration, faculty, and staff at the College have known for over two decades: that when it comes to an outstanding college education at *no cost*, STC offers an *exceptional* experience.

“Even though it was a lengthy process, at the end of the day, it was worth it,” says De Leon, whose team spent countless hours working on the application.

The approval process entailed assessments in six key areas of focus, including their faculty hiring process and the consistency of curriculum.

Other critical cornerstones included academic advising and student support services — areas where the College excels. For instance, Dual Credit Programs at STC begin with an immediate advising session, followed by regular degree audits and counseling. This ensures that students stay connected to their academic goals. And thanks to the Centers for Learning Excellence, support is always available to those who need it.

“It truly takes a village to help a student continue being successful, and that’s something the STC family has to offer,” says De Leon.

Also bolstering STC’s application was its reputation for staying on the cutting edge of professional development. According to the dean, institutions across Texas and beyond regularly reach out to collaborate and learn more about the sustainability of the program, faculty and staff professional development, and partnership maintainability.

“They always want to know, ‘How do you do this?’” says De Leon. “‘We want to get to the level that you are at.’”

For faculty, professional development happens before each term, setting a tone for the semester with new opportunities to improve discipline-specific skills. The most recent training focused on Blackboard fundamentals to ensure that 100 percent of faculty were ready to teach online in the new, health crisis-affected environment.

“We were not going to have any faculty enter into that setting unprepared,” De Leon promises.

South Texas College offers four dual credit options based on students’ career and academic goals. The first and most common option is dual credit courses, in which students can earn college credit toward STC’s core curriculum. Career-focused students can opt for the Career & Technical Education programs, where they can earn a certificate or associate degree in high-demand tech careers, sometimes *before* graduating high school.

In the Designated High Schools program, student can earn college credit hours up to the amount needed for an associate degree. Meanwhile, in the Academy Programs, students can earn an associate degree in the STEM, business, or criminal justice fields.

“At the end of the day, the opportunities are endless,” says De Leon. “Based on student interest the opportunities are available to get a jump-start while they are in high school.”

As an alumna of the dual credit program herself, De Leon knows firsthand of its power not only to put students on the fast-track to college, but to set a firm foundation for academic success.

“I understood what college truly was and how to be prepared as I went forth and continued my studies,” she recalls about her time as a dual credit student at STC.

Her exceptional experience prepared her well. De Leon receive a fully paid golf scholarship to the University of Texas-Pan American (now UTRGV), where she earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees. She then triumphantly returned to South Texas College as a staff member, and simultaneously earned her doctorate degree from Lamar University. Six years later, she is still thriving at the College, and there’s nowhere else she’d rather be.

“I see the passion, the heart … that everybody has to make a difference in the lives of our students and our families in this area,” says De Leon. “I know I’m in the right place to continue impacting our community.”

Without her mentor, Nick Gonzalez, she says the program would not be what it is today. It was Gonzalez, former Administrator for Dual Credit Programs and Instructional Pathways, who initially envisioned bringing college credit to high school students. While it wasn’t easy to make his dream a reality — many thought he was trying to do the impossible — Gonzalez succeeded *anyway*.

The first cohort started with just eight students, but with unwavering determination from the College, that number has skyrocketed to about 16,000 in the most recent term. Now covering more than 1,500 college class sections delivered through partnering high schools, the tuition-free program has saved over $200 million for families in the Rio Grande Valley.

“I think that is a true testament of the passion that we have as an institution to make a difference,” says De Leon about the program’s increasing success. “It is only possible because of the entire STC family … We want to help each other succeed, and most importantly, our students, our community and our partnering school districts.”

And with the new accreditation, the college isn’t about to rest on its laurels. According to De Leon, a key driver of the Dual Credit Program’s accreditation was innovation, and she expects that persistent work to continue — everything from developing new educational pathways to helping high school partners meet student needs.

“Every day, we find new areas where we can say, ‘Okay, how can we take it to the next level?’” says De Leon. “We always test the limits and seeks opportunities to enhance the overall Program.”

It’s that kind of fighting Jaguar spirit that will keep the Dual Credit Program going strong into the future, jump-starting degrees and careers for thousands of high school students every year.

For De Leon, the NACEP accreditation proves what those at South Texas College have always held true.

“We truly have a Program that is to the quality and the rigor that a dual credit program should be.”

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