**South Texas College**

News Center – June 2020

**STC is on *IT:* High-Tech Careers Remain in High Demand**

Even as the unemployment rate crossed the 12 percent threshold, South Texas College Vice President Dr. David Plummer remained optimistic about the crisis-stricken Rio Grande Valley.

South Texans are a resilient people, he figured. And South Texas College is a resilient institution. And, by the way … weren’t the pre-pandemic employment rates flirting with a record low in McAllen and Starr Counties?

Already, Plummer’s positivity is proving justified. Recent reports suggest that the region is poised to rebound quickly. And when it does, he says, its workforce will be savvier than ever.

“Something is working,” says Plummer. “Our region is growing, and we’re doing really well. We have a much better-trained workforce than we did 25 years ago.”

And despite the COVID curveball, the need for skilled workers in Texas hasn’t subsided. A diverse labor market continues to create high-paying opportunities for those with college-level career education. The tech sector, in particular, will need qualified “middle skills” professionals to keep pace with projected growth in the region.

“I’ve referenced South Texas, along with the Rio Grande Valley, as being the next Silicon Valley of Texas,” says Julian Alvarez III, the first Commissioner Representing Labor from the RGV on the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC).

Many of these burgeoning tech career pathways, from software developers to network engineers, require a bachelor’s degree or less. According to Alvarez, more and more students are skipping the student loans and declaring: “‘I’m going to a community college, pick up a software engineering associate degree, and someday work at Google or Amazon.’”

STC’s job-focused certificate programs cover everything from maintenance to programming, jump-starting immediate IT careers and paving the way to a choice of three associate degrees. For those with even *higher* educational aspirations, STC is one of the few community colleges in the entire state to offer a bachelor’s degree in Computer Information Technology.

So whether students want to start working right away with a certificate or dive straight into a degree, they have options.

“We built these stackable credentials so that people can enter and exit as their life demands,” says Plummer, who maintains that a four-year degree isn’t the only viable option. “We give our students some flexibility toward what they want to do.”

In fact, starting with a workforce certificate may prove to be an even safer investment than diving into a degree.

“You can’t go wrong by receiving an industry-recognized credential,” says Alvarez.

With demand increasing for “middle skills” positions that require more than a high school but less than a four-year degree, stackable certifications provide not only a strong foundation, but a confident cushion to “fall back on.” With 1,000 people moving to Texas *every day*, and new facilities popping up in the state for companies like Amazon, SpaceX and Google, Alvarez says that tech will continue to grow — and South Texas College will be there to catapult students into the careers of the future.

Says the commissioner, “It’s a border community that has the creativity of being able to provide students with college that’s affordable, and with opportunities that are in demand.”

Among the many emerging IT fields in Texas is cybersecurity, where the need for information security analysts is booming at 32 percent annually. Median annual salaries in this surging sector have crossed into six figures.

STC’s cybersecurity program is the only one south of San Antonio approved by the Department of Homeland Security. In addition to industry-standard CompTIA certifications like A+ and Security+, the program also covers EC-Council industry creds like Certified Ethical Hacker. From quick certificates to a specialized bachelor track, the program remains a launchpad for the Valley’s high-tech professionals.

STC’s approach is all about building a local tech pipeline that aligns with industry needs and launches students into critical careers. It’s the kind of innovative thinking that also guides the school’s globally recognized FESTO lab, a first-of-its-kind robotics training facility, and the FANUC lab, a standard for industrial robotics certification and soon to be a certified training center.

“People had to fly to Minnesota to get certified, and now, we can do a lot of that training here,” says Plummer.

Throughout the health crisis, critical classwork persisted via virtual sessions, continuing to afford future industry professionals the industry knowledge they will need to maintain automation lines in factories.

“I worked at Intel Corporation for a few years, and if the manufacturing line went down, it was a million dollars an hour,” Plummer recalls about his experience in this critical field. “We have partners on both sides of the border that really need that kind of training.”

The cutting-edge robotics labs are largely the work of the Texas Workforce Commission and other partners, who have supplied grant money to keep the programs running. For the TWC commissioner, these efforts represent not only a savvy response to recent industry growth, but a secure long-term investment in the region.

“South Texas College has always been at the forefront of technical education … listening to what’s industry-driven,” says Alvarez.

That was true before COVID, and it continues during these challenging times. STC’s “boots on the ground” attitude, focusing on *essential skills* for *essential careers*, is what has made its students so successful. Says Alvarez, “South Texas College has always been proactive in any situation.”

That forward thinking was evident during the health crisis, when STC fast-tracked its pioneering efforts to bring tech classes online. According to Plummer, going virtual was already part of the backup plan.

“It was really a hurricane plan that we adapted for COVID,” says the vice president, who was committed to making sure that students weren’t losing time.

The results have exceeded expectations.

“What it taught us is that we could do things we really weren’t too sure we could do,” says Plummer. “And I think our students feel the same way.”

To hear the professor tell it, *nobody* believed that a hands-on program like robotics could go virtual … until it *did*. With live feeds beaming into living rooms and kits mailed to each student, online classes proved such a success that some students are asking for more.

“We’re in a good spot to continue training … high-demand, high-wage workforce programs, and putting classes online,” says Plummer.

Potential efforts include expanding student choice by providing “mixed” classes, with some sections on campus and others offered virtually. From cybersecurity to the Computer Information Technology bachelor’s degree, he says, “We have the capability of focusing on our region and supporting our *entire state* as needed.”

Alvarez doesn’t doubt that the future-driven institution will continue to connect students to tomorrow’s top tech jobs. After all, it’s due to the College’s stellar track record that the TWC saw fit to invest $20 million in the first place.

“They graduate folks, and they know that there’s going to be a career waiting for them upon graduation,” says Alvarez. “I find it gratifying that I’m doing everything I can to improve the unemployment rate for the people of South Texas.”

With Texas being voted as one of the best places to do business, and with the IT industry expected to maintain a significant presence, South Texas will remain strong … as long as higher education opportunities continue to adapt.

“Hopefully, we don’t have to go through COVID again,” says Plummer. “But if the second wave hits, then we’ll be ready to continue training.”

*Sources:*

[*https://apps.texastribune.org/features/2020/texas-unemployment/*](https://apps.texastribune.org/features/2020/texas-unemployment/)

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[*https://ycharts.com/indicators/starr\_county\_tx\_unemployment\_rate*](https://ycharts.com/indicators/starr_county_tx_unemployment_rate)

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