



# Innovation with Heart:

How Texas Community Colleges Are  
Changing the Student Experience



GREATER TEXAS FOUNDATION

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## Real Impact: Sparking bright futures

Space companies are flocking to Texas and counting on a skilled workforce. A recent report from the [Space Workforce Incubator for Texas \(SWIFT\)](#) revealed that over the next 10 years, 100,000 new jobs will be created as the aerospace industry expands. In addition to engineers and scientists, the industry relies on a wide range of skilled roles—and right now, one in eight space economy job postings are for welding.<sup>1</sup>

That demand isn't limited to aerospace. With a projected 23% increase<sup>2</sup> in job openings across Texas for welders, cutters, solderers, and brazers between 2020 and 2030, **community colleges are responding** with training programs designed to prepare students for these high-need careers.

And for students, the opportunity is real. With salaries<sup>3</sup> that range from \$51,000 to \$71,000, welding can open doors to work as varied as repairing underwater pipelines or helping build the next space station.

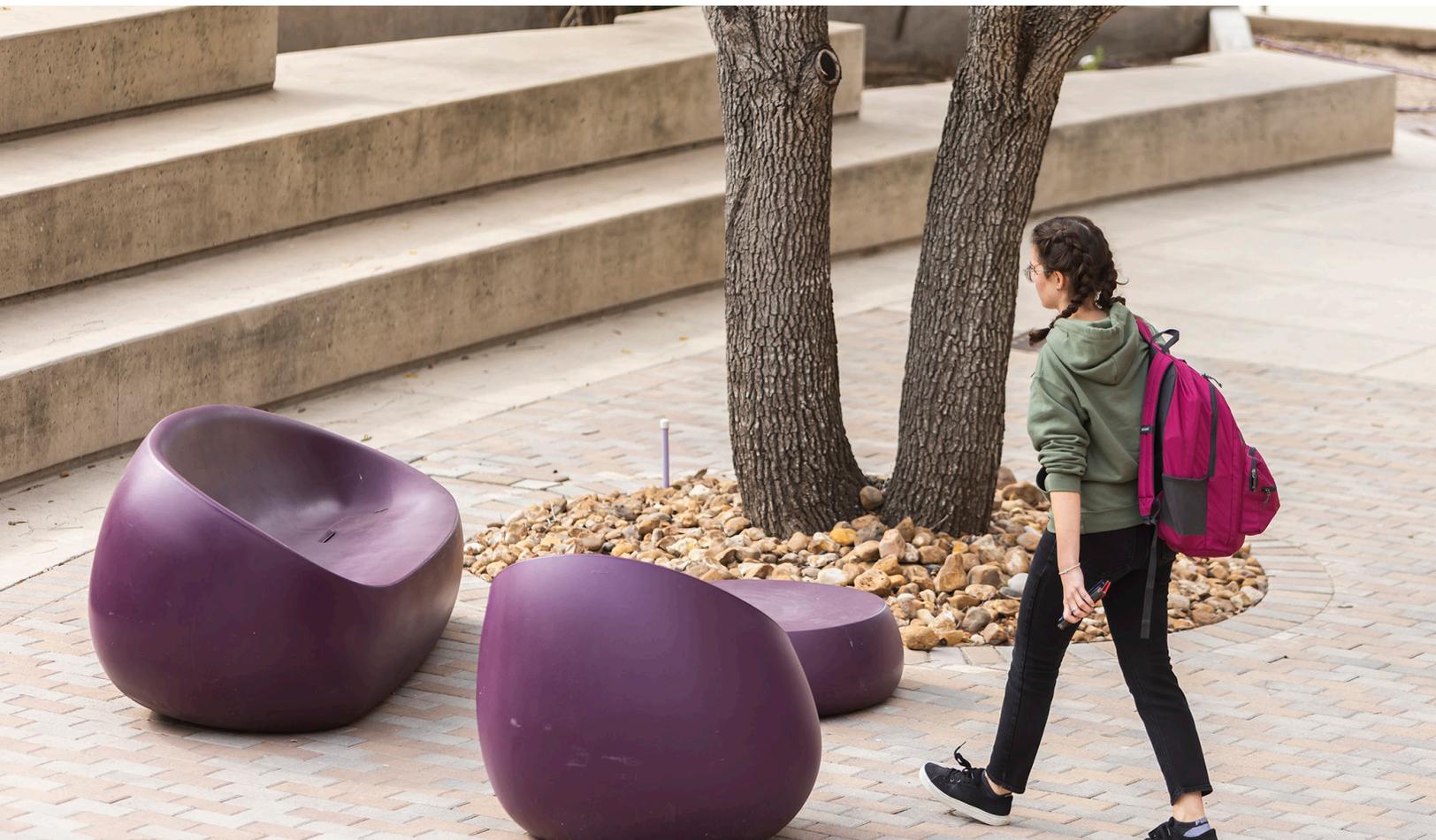
# Innovating to serve and strengthen communities

Community colleges are where many Texans begin their journey to a living-wage career.

Students arrive at their local two-year college from a wide variety of academic backgrounds and life experiences. Because of the diversity of students served by community colleges, it is imperative for them to make learning accessible, relevant, and attainable.

In this reality, **Texas community colleges are rising to the challenge to build innovative support structures and programs** that help students achieve their wide-ranging educational and career goals. In fact, some of the best, most collaborative, and scalable student support initiatives are coming from the community college sector.

In this report, we share some of those stories of innovation that are leading to systemic, sustainable change for **all** Texas students who want to improve their lives through education beyond high school.



# The Importance of Community Colleges

Almost half of postsecondary students in Texas are enrolled in community colleges.

## Creating Opportunity for Texans<sup>4</sup>

**50**

community college districts  
serve 254 Texas counties



**93%**

of all career and technical education  
certificates in Texas are awarded by  
community colleges



**House Bill 8 Updated the Funding System for Community Colleges to an Outcomes Based Model**

### Catch Up Quick:

[House Bill 8](#) was approved in 2023 and [Senate Bill 1786](#) approved in 2025

### How's It Going?

A grant from GTF to Texas Tech Foundation supports researchers in assessing the [impact of House Bill 8](#) on rural community colleges

## Enrollment by the Numbers (Fall 2025)<sup>5</sup>

**776,432**

Total Enrollment in  
public 2-year colleges

Total Enrollment up

**6.1%**

since Fall 2024

**46%**

of postsecondary  
enrollment in Texas

# GTF's Investment in Community Colleges

Since 2020, GTF has awarded **\$10 million in grants to Texas community colleges.**

Supporting Texas community colleges is essential to fulfilling Greater Texas Foundation's mission because these institutions sit at the heart of educational opportunity in our state. Community colleges open doors for learners who have historically faced the steepest barriers to postsecondary success, offering affordable pathways, flexible options, and support for student success.

**When we invest in community colleges, we invest in the social and economic mobility of Texas families** and in a future where every learner—no matter their background—can see a clear, attainable route to a living-wage career. Supporting community colleges means supporting Texans—and the brighter future they deserve.

**Learn More:** Peruse the [Active Grants Table](#) on our website for more details about our grantmaking in support of community colleges.

How does support for community colleges align with our [2025-2029 Strategic Plan?](#)

- **Systems-Level Change:** Districts with multiple campuses make perfect proving grounds for sustainable changes that will address systemic barriers to student success. Community colleges also regularly collaborate across districts, creating partnerships that improve the effectiveness and impact of the community college system statewide.
- **Efficient Pathways:** Community colleges are motivated to create streamlined and affordable pathways for learners to earn associates degrees and workforce credentials or find an onramp to a four-year degree.
- **Student Supports:** In order to serve their diverse learners, community colleges are leading the way in building innovative support services to help students succeed.
- **Rural Collaborations:** By sharing data and resources, community colleges are partnering with rural employers and K-12 school districts to create opportunities for rural Texans in their own home towns.
- **Disconnected Learners:** Community colleges provide opportunity to a range of learners who may not fit the traditional postsecondary profile, including parents, working students, or adults returning to education to continue or restart their academic journey.



# Six Ways Community Colleges are Innovating for Student Success

## Lowering barriers and increasing opportunity

Texas community colleges serve some of the most determined and diverse students in our state—parents, first-generation learners, working adults, and students navigating financial, academic, and personal challenges all at once. Across Texas, community colleges are rising to meet those realities with creativity, collaboration, and deep care for students' lives beyond the classroom.

At Greater Texas Foundation (GTF), we're proud to partner with community colleges and organizations that are building innovative, people-centered solutions that help students stay enrolled, succeed, and move toward a better future. In many cases, our investments are complemented by support from other funders.

**Here are six of the initiatives we've funded recently.**

### 1

#### **Helping Parents Achieve Education Goals:**

Parenting students in Texas face steep challenges. Only 11% earn a degree within six years, compared with 46% of students without children. To better support them, the state began requiring colleges in 2023 to collect data on parenting students and create new resources based on what they learn. However, many colleges lack the systems and tools to gather this information effectively or use it to guide their programs. With support from THECB and a \$454,812 grant from GTF, the

[Urban Institute](#) will help Texas colleges meet these requirements by building strong data systems and **turning those data insights into practical strategies** that improve support for parenting students. These colleges will also collaborate with peers across the multi-state Data-to-Action Campaign, working together to drive long-term structural change that boosts educational success for parenting students and their families.

### 2

#### **Inspire Rural Students:**

Across the country—and especially in Texas—communities are exploring new ways to make college more affordable and accessible for students in rural areas. One effective approach is the **Rural College Promise model, a community-driven framework** that brings together school districts, community colleges, employers, and local partners to promote a strong college-going culture, provide early outreach and wraparound support, and offer last-dollar scholarships that open doors to postsecondary education. By aligning educational pathways with regional workforce needs, the “Promise in a Box” helps rural communities create a [reliable talent pipeline](#) and ensures every student has a clear, supported path from high school to high-demand careers.

Since 2021, GTF has awarded more than \$4 million for [Economic Mobility Systems](#) to support rural Texas community colleges implementing Promise programs.

**We spoke with Anabel Romero-Juarez and Karen Quintero from Economic Mobility Systems to learn more about their work.**

- **How are you innovating to reach students who might not know that the Rural College Promise can help them?**

**Anabel:** “We tell our partners that data sharing is a non-negotiable part of our framework. We want every high school roster in a community college’s service area so we can communicate with all students by email and text in a consistent way about College Promise. Not only that, the high school counselors can see the real-time progress of all their students in the college recruitment cycle. No more fumbling with spreadsheets.”

**Karen:** “The underlying technology is Salesforce and because of the grant, we are able to extend this robust technology and analytics tools to all school districts and community college partners in the program. This makes it possible for them to have coordinated, personalized, and targeted communication to students and parents.”

**Anabel:** “We keep the message simple and clear that there are options for every student. We take away the complexity. In the North Central Texas College community, our colleagues make yard signs and wear their ‘Promise’ t-shirts to the grocery store. Initially, students wonder: Is this real? But when they hear about it, the light goes on, ‘Oh, maybe I can go to college!’ And, importantly, we are doing this work at scale, across an entire service area. Which is why GTF has been so supportive of this work.”



## What are the workforce needs in rural North Texas and how are community colleges helping to meet them?

**Karen:** “Grayson College is partnering with Texoma Medical Center (TMC) to try an adult-focused promise program. Together, they are offering funding to TMC employees who want to upskill, earn a new credential, and be able to take new jobs that require a higher level of education. Grayson hopes to test this kind of approach with the semiconductor and manufacturing industries that are important in their region.”

**Anabel:** “And they are using the same Salesforce technology to identify, communicate with, and support employees.”

**Hear from students about the importance of the Rural College Promise.** Watch the [video](#).

## 3

### Mapping Clear Pathways:

The [Texas Success Center](#) is leading the development of Talent Strong Texas Pathways—a statewide effort among the 50 community colleges to strengthen the journey from enrollment to a meaningful credential and a good job. The Center **accelerates institutional transformation strategies** across Texas community colleges to help more students earn meaningful credentials, transfer to universities with no loss of credit, and gain employment in careers with value in the labor market. In the last five years, GTF has supported the Texas Success Center with two grants totaling \$3 million.

## 4

### Improve Transfer Success:

The [Alamo Colleges District](#) is launching the Alamo Colleges District Credit Mobility Project to create a **student-facing degree planning portal to facilitate seamless transfers** between the five Alamo Colleges and its many college and university partner institutions. The portal will provide essential information on credit applicability, estimated costs, admissions, advising, and financial aid, benefiting Alamo Colleges students and fostering collaboration with four-year partner universities. GTF has invested \$499,840 in this systemic transformation project. The funding provides technical infrastructure to scale the district’s Transfer Advising Guides (TAGs). In 2020, the TAGs saved students \$374 million<sup>6</sup> in tuition at the four-year schools they transferred to. Students who start at the Alamo Colleges now earn their degree, which requires 60 semester credit hours, in an average of 65.1 hours, compared to the Texas state average of 80 credit hours.

### We spoke with Dr. George Railey at Alamo Colleges District about the success of this program.

- **How did you create a culture of collaboration that allowed you to implement this transfer credit work so extensively and successfully?**  
**George:** “The South-Central Texas Transfer Compact transformed transfer from a transactional process into a shared mission. By fostering trust and aligning goals across Alamo Colleges and our four-year public and private partners, we built a culture of collaboration that made seamless credit transfer not just possible—but scalable and sustainable.”

- **What would you recommend for other institutions?**

**George:** “Here is my guidance to other institutions aiming to innovate at this scale:

- **Start with Shared Vision**

Convene partners around a common student-centered goal, not just compliance or convenience.

- **Formalize Commitments**

Use MOUs or compacts to create accountability and clarity on roles, timelines, and outcomes.

- **Invest in Relationships**

Build trust through regular communication, joint problem-solving, and transparency in data sharing.

- **Leverage Technology & Policy**

Align systems and policies early to remove friction—credit evaluation, advising, and degree maps should be integrated.

- **Measure & Celebrate Impact**

A win for your students is a win for everyone.”

## 5

### **Creating Belonging:**

With support from Greater Texas Foundation, the [Institute for Evidence-Based Change \(IEBC\)](#) has brought its signature Caring Campus program to cohorts of Texas community colleges. Caring Campus helps colleges strengthen students’ sense of connection and belonging by coaching faculty and staff to adopt simple, research-based behaviors **that make campuses more welcoming and supportive**. Over time,

### **Case Study:**

Trinity Valley Community College empowered their entire campus to take ownership of student mental health and wellbeing. [Read More](#)

these practices contribute to broader cultural change, reinforced by updated policies and procedures that address students’ current needs and remove barriers to equity and success. Most recently, a \$721,294 grant from GTF will support IEBC to implement a regional approach so that students have a seamless experience between two-year and four-year college partners in the Central Texas and Kingsville regions.

## 6

### **Supporting Student Wellbeing:**

The [Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute](#) is partnering with the [Texas Success Center](#) to launch Minding College Minds Learning Communities, an innovative effort to support community colleges as they build comprehensive, **evidence-based mental health supports** for their students. Participating schools leverage the Meadows Institute’s [Minding College Minds Postsecondary Mental Health Framework](#) to strengthen their capacity to support student mental health, well-being, and success. Altogether, the project has the potential to reach more than one million students—with a special focus on rural institutions—and to transform how campuses care for their communities. This work is made possible through a \$700,000 grant from Greater Texas Foundation.

### **We spoke with Leilani Lamb from Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute to learn more about their work.**

- **Why is this work important now?**

**Leilani:** “Supporting student mental health is fundamental to helping students thrive academically and complete their credentials. Often, academic persistence hinges on whether students have access to the supports they need, when they need them. In light of House Bill 8’s focus on

outcomes, colleges are increasingly recognizing that student supports are a 'have to have,' not a 'nice to have.' The research has grounded us in the *why*, while Minding College Minds supports colleges with *how* to build postsecondary mental health systems that promote student success."

servicing multiple campuses. This creates logistical challenges, both in offering student supports and creating a sense of belonging for a largely commuting student body. As a result, community colleges must be innovative, strategic, and resourceful. The thoughtful approaches we're seeing from these institutions hold promise for replicating across the field at large."

- **How is your approach to mental health innovative?**

**Leilani:** "What is innovative here is that this approach serves all Texas community colleges at the same time. Students are mobile and may enroll at multiple institutions along their journey. If colleges across the state are adopting a similar framework and approach to supporting student wellbeing, this leads to greater consistency in messaging and supports across their region.

Beyond that, statewide adoption of the Minding College Minds framework gives colleges a shared language and common resources. Put any six Minding College Minds colleges in the same room, and they can easily share what's working and what could be improved within their campus context, so their peer colleges don't need to recreate the wheel. We haven't seen this level of statewide collaboration on mental health and student success before. And the Texas Success Center is scaling and braiding this effort with Talent Strong Texas Pathways, to avoid initiative fatigue; we've found that partnering this work to Pathways also helps with sustainability."

- **Why is this work focused on community colleges?**

**Leilani:** "Community colleges in Texas serve a diverse array of students across a wide regional footprint, often with a limited number of counselors



## Emergency Aid: A Lifeline When It Matters Most

Emergency aid can be the difference between a temporary setback and a student leaving college altogether. Across Texas, too many community college students face sudden financial crises—car repairs, medical bills, housing instability—that put their education at risk. In response, **Greater Texas Foundation has invested \$2.7 million to launch and expand the [Texas Emergency Aid Roadmap](#)**, helping community colleges build emergency aid systems that are efficient, equitable, and sustainable.

Through this initiative, community colleges receive expert technical assistance from [Reos Partners](#) to design and strengthen emergency aid programs that respond quickly to students in crisis and prevent small financial emergencies from becoming reasons to drop out. Over three years, the participating schools have built long-term systems for delivering aid that improves retention, completion, and overall student success.

**In our Resource Library:** Find a [case study](#) from the first year of the Emergency Aid Road Map implementation.

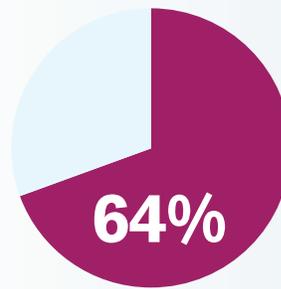
## Real Impact: Bridging Students to Success

Our work on the EA program increased institutional awareness of service gaps, prompting a closer examination of student needs and informing policy adjustments to improve access, equity, and overall program effectiveness. One example of student impact is a single parent of three who faced eviction after reducing her work hours to focus on a 16-week health science program. With our emergency aid support, she was able to remain housed, stay enrolled, and successfully complete the program in August.

– **Ebony Dennis, Kilgore College**

**“Students emphasized that receiving the EA award has made them feel seen and supported, knowing that the college believes in their potential to succeed.”**

**- El Paso Community College**



### **The Need is Urgent<sup>7</sup>**

of Texas community college students say they would have difficulty finding \$500 in cash or credit in case of an emergency expense.

## **Real impact: Stability When It Mattered Most**

When Nikki, a behavioral sciences student at San Jacinto College, found herself in an unsafe living situation due to domestic violence, she made the courageous decision to leave her home in search of safety. She moved temporarily into a hotel while working to secure stable housing. Support from the Emergency Fund helped Nikki restore what she needed most to stay enrolled—reliable internet access and computer equipment essential for both her remote work and college coursework. With those basic needs met, Nikki was able to stay focused on her classes and continue moving forward in her education.

## Sources

- 1 [KXAN News](#)
- 2 [Need for welders is on the rise](#)
- 3 [How much does a welder make in Texas?](#)
- 4 [TACC 2024 Annual Report](#)
- 5 [THECB Oct 2025](#)
- 6 [Alamo Colleges District News](#)
- 7 [Trellis Strategies Student Financial Wellness Survey \(SFWS\) results](#)

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