LEADERS EYE NEW COLLEGE ALLOY WITH HCUC

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Central Texas College would take over service area from Austin Community College

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Hill Country University Center could have a new tenant next year.

Austin Community College (ACC) and Central Texas College (CTC) are petitioning the state legislature to change the boundaries of their service areas. The proposal would transfer responsibility for serving Gillespie County, including the cities of Fredericksburg and Harper, to CTC.

ACC has had responsibility for offering community college services to Gillespie County since the legislature delineated service areas in the mid-1990s.

CTC already provides services in neighboring Mason and Llano counties, and the college can serve Gillespie County without significant additional cost, said Bob Hickerson, executive director of the Hill Country University Center Foundation.

The change also will allow CTC to strengthen its offerings in the southern portion of its service area, Hickerson said.

The director said a strong community college partner is needed, even though Texas Tech is a strong university presence in a small community. Community colleges can offer what universities cannot, particularly as related to technical and job skills training.

ACC, which has its other operations approximately 100 miles from Gillespie County, would be able to focus efforts on recent expansions of its taxing district and the surrounding counties. As a result of this change, both colleges project an increase in programs available to students in the rural communities in the Hill Country, Hickerson said.
“This will be a positive change for our entire region,” said Dr. Richard Rhodes, ACC president and CEO. “We have a responsibility to maximize resources and provide the most efficient service possible. CTC can better serve Gillespie County because of its location, benefiting students and area businesses.”

Hickerson said ACC has served Fredericksburg for the past two decades.

“They have served us well, and I salute them for that. But in those 20 years, their business model has changed, and they are more suited for metropolitan markets,” Hickerson said. “We believe CTC is better suited for rural markets, particularly ones like ours which has sought more of a focus on tech and skills training.”

Tuition, programs
Austin Community College’s model has relied on a property tax in its main service areas.

Hickerson said even though their property tax is the lowest of any in the state, the chances of expansion of that tax base into Gillespie County were unlikely.

Tuition increases over the past five years have pushed ACC tuition to near that of a four-year university. ACC tuition runs $861 for a three-hour course credit. Central Texas College offers the same three-hour course credits for about $279.

The savings for college students could total more than $8,000 while studying a 42-hour core curriculum.

CTC also may be able to expand course offerings, as they have a minimum class size of 12 students, versus 18 at ACC. CTC also could pair its course offerings with students at its Marble Falls center to make for more course offerings.

And nursing programs currently offered by ACC will not be lost, Hickerson said.

“CTC will begin its LVN (Licensed Vocational Nurse) program on Sept. 1, 2015, so there will be no lost offerings there,” he said. A more intensive Registered Nurse (RN) study program requires further accreditation, so Hickerson said HCUC hopes to see that program added within a year.

CTC also has a tax base in its main district, but has no plans for expansion into other service areas.

“CTC has lower overhead and about half of CTC offerings are done online and worldwide,” Hickerson said. “They are a bit more entrepreneurial, so their revenue model is different.”

One challenge will be funding dual credit courses, where high school students take college credits. ACC offered those courses free to high school students, but CTC will have to charge enrollment fees. Hickerson said the HCUC Foundation is pondering ways to help offset costs to high school students while admitting those students “need to have some skin in the game.”

HCUC
This change also would streamline operations of Texas Tech University in the Hill Country by providing a common community college partner in CTC, at both of its regional site locations in Fredericksburg and Marble Falls.

The legislature is expected to approve the proposal in the 84th Session, held January through May 2015.

“We’re pleased that both institutions are putting the needs of Gillespie County students first,” said Brad Hardin, chairman of the Hill Country University Center Foundation. “We’re convinced that this change in service area responsibilities will promote significant growth in University Center enrollment.”

Hill Country students will not experience a disruption of services during the transition, Hickerson said.

Fredericksburg students will continue to enroll in ACC courses through summer
2015, transitioning to CTC programs beginning with courses offered in fall 2015. Because community colleges are standardized in Texas, students will not lose credits during the transition, he said.

"Importantly, due to efficiencies created by this proposal, most students will see an overall decrease in costs," Hickerson said.

Advising

Special advising assistance will be provided to transitioning students. Information sessions will be held at the University Center at 5 p.m., Wednesday, Dec. 17 and at 6 p.m., Wednesday, Jan. 15, 2015. CTC advisers will be present at the January meeting.

For information on these sessions, contact the Hill Country University Center at (830) 990-2717.

A special advising hotline will be available to students and their parents after the first of the year. Notices will be posted on the facility’s website at www.hcucenter.org.

CTC

Central Texas College, based in Killeen, is a two-year, open-admissions institution with an emphasis on technical programs leading to associate degrees, and vocational programs leading to employment.

It also focuses on adult and continuing education programs and workforce development programs.

Hickerson said its most important offerings would continue to be the general academic core studies, but the tech career training “will be robust.”

That would play well into the plans of Dr. Eric Wright, superintendent for the Fredericksburg Independent School District.

Wright has stated that it’s important to have options for those wishing to pursue skills training, and workforce statistics bear out that there is a shortage of workers in skills jobs.

Texas Tech

Hickerson said Texas Tech has been a steady university partner at HCUC.

“We’re aware that there hasn’t been a lot of migration from ACC to Texas Tech, but TTU has still continued to offer university programs, and we’re grateful for that,” he said.

In the late 1990s, then-State Senator Jeff Wentworth invited the chancellors from Texas Tech, University of Texas, Texas A&M University and Texas State University which would like to partner for Gillespie County offerings. Wayne Harrell, a member of the higher education steering committee, said Tech jumped at the chance and has been a growing community partner ever since.
Gillespie County Commissioners are meeting this morning at the Gillespie County Courthouse. During the meeting, commissioners will consider an approval of a request from the Hill Country Criminal Defense Lawyers Association to read the Declaration of Independence on July 1 at the Gillespie County Courthouse grounds. Commissioners will also...
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