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Heading Back to Valley

You graduate from high school, go off to college, earn your diploma ... then what? For many college graduates, the answer is to return home to the comforts of the Rio Grande Valley, a place where many have found advantages that other areas just don't offer.

According to the most recent Census estimates, only 14 percent of the population in Harlingen have earned a Bachelor's degree. This means that there can be many more job choices in the area for people with college degrees.

"If you're educated, there are a lot of opportunities in the Rio Grande Valley," said Ramiro Aleman, business development manager for the Harlingen EDC. Aleman is himself a local high school graduate who left to go to school at University of Texas at San Antonio and returned to work in the Valley.

Many large cities have a flooded job market, even for people with college degrees.

"I was able to find a good job here. The Austin job market was so competitive and my parents suggested I look here," said Crystal Olvera, a 2000 Porter High School graduate who earned a college degree from University of Texas at Austin.

The low cost of living in the Rio Grande Valley is also a consideration that lured many people back home.

"It was a smart financial decision for me being straight out of school," Olvera added. "The cost of living and having family here allowed me to save money. I was able to pay off my school loans and my car."

Julie Ezell, a 1995 Harlingen South High School graduate who went to college at Trinity University and law school at St. Mary's, shared that sentiment. "I have a sister in L.A. and a brother in Washington, D.C., and the housing opportunities here are much greater. Real estate prices are wonderful, and I like having the option of living within the city, more in the country or in suburban areas with all of them only about 10 minutes from my office."

Of course, with the rapid growth of area colleges and universities, like Texas State Technical College, University of Texas Pan American and University of Texas at Brownsville-Texas Southmost College, many high school grads are finding it not as necessary to leave the nest.

Texas State Technical College has exceeded the 6,000 mark in enrollment for the first time. University of Texas at Brownsville-Texas Southmost College and University of Texas Pan American each boast enrollment of more than 17,000 students.

University of Texas at Brownsville-Texas Southmost College in particular has seen tremendous growth since joining the UT system in 1991. Some recently completed or upcoming projects include a new East Library, a new recreation center that also serves as home for the Department of Health and Human

Performance, a new Center for Early Childhood Studies, a new Arts Center that will draw many types of concerts and performances as well as a Science and Technology Learning Center.

There is also South Texas College, which has seen explosive enrollment growth since it was established in 1993. The school offers a variety of degree and certification programs with classrooms in Hidalgo and Starr counties.

“A lot of local people are staying here and getting their education instead of leaving, choosing to go to UTB or UTPA,” said Aleman. “The Harlingen Articulation and Learning Center going up at TSTC will also help reduce the rate of Valley students leaving for college and not coming back.”

The Harlingen Articulation and Learning Center, to be built on the Texas State Technical College campus, will allow TSTC students to take classes from major universities and earn upper level degrees. This could give area high school graduates an extra incentive to stay home or for TSTC students to continue their education.

Shawna Blair, a 1997 Harlingen South graduate, realized that the Valley was destined to be home after she went to school for a year at University of Texas at San Antonio. “I did the thing that probably every high school graduate feels like they should do: leave home. But after a year, I felt like my family was here and anything I wanted to do I could do here. I knew that once I finished college, I would want to raise a family, and this is where I wanted to do it.”

Blair went to TSTC and South Texas College upon returning to the Valley, now working as a certified occupational therapist assistant.

And being originally from the Rio Grande Valley can give returning college graduates a leg up when it comes to cultivating professional ties within the community.

“You can have strong business relationships when you return home because you've known the people down here for so long. It's so much about trust, and that means a lot to the people you do business with. Being from down here can bring a certain layer of trust,” Ezell said.