

Friday, August 8, 2008

The making of a college

Texas A&M close to reaching numbers that trigger funds for building San Antonio campus

San Antonio Business Journal - by [Mike W. Thomas](#)



MARCELA RIOS GARY / SAN ANTONIO BUSINESS JOURNAL

Maria Hernandez Ferrier, Ph.D., a former undersecretary of education in the Bush administration, is helming Texas A&M University's branch campus in San Antonio.

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The Texas A&M University branch in San Antonio may not look like much today, occupying borrowed space in an old elementary school on the South Side. But it is just a matter of time before it blossoms into a fully modern university campus.

Right now, the school is expecting enrollment in the fall of about 1,400 students, just 100 short of the number it needs to trigger an explosion of state funding. Once the school reaches the equivalent of 1,500 full-time students, it will set in motion an elaborate plan for developing a new campus and the surrounding community in part with \$40 million in state funding.

Maria Hernandez Ferrier, who currently serves as executive director of Texas A&M University-Kingsville System Center San Antonio, is very optimistic about the school's future. The mouthful-of-a-name the school is using is necessary until it crosses the 1,500 student threshold. Once that line is crossed, however, the lengthy moniker will be dropped in favor of the more straightforward Texas A&M University - San Antonio.

"Once we reach 1,500 full-time equivalents, we will be able to start building," Ferrier says. "We are expecting January 2010 as the date when the first shovel will go into the ground."

Modest start

The seed for a Texas A&M branch in San Antonio was first planted in 1999 when the school started as a satellite campus for Texas A&M University - Kingsville using some temporary buildings at **Palo Alto College**. It had just 126 students that first year, but over time the school has graduated 1,300 students.

Today, the school is set to enroll more students for one semester than the total number it has graduated since starting out. The school currently has a staff of 77 tenured and adjunct faculty and an annual budget of approximately \$6 million.

As a satellite of Texas A&M - Kingsville, the San Antonio branch is limited to offering only courses that are also offered at its parent facility. Right now that includes 17 undergraduate programs and seven graduate level programs spread across three colleges — Education, Arts & Sciences and Business.

Of the 1,300 students who have graduated from the school, 36 percent have received degrees from the College of Education, 36 percent from the College of Arts & Sciences and 46 percent from the College of Business. The total exceeds 100 because some students received multiple degrees from more than one college.

Moving forward, Ferrier notes that the school will place a bigger emphasis on education and is introducing several new graduate level courses this fall including specialties in Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Bilingual Education and Educational Leadership. The fall enrollment is broken down to 46 percent in education, 29 percent in business and 23 percent in arts and science.

Educational focus

The emphasis on education courses is especially important in light of the increasing demand for new teachers on the South Side and in the rural communities surrounding San Antonio, says Rick Alvarado, associate director for administration and instructional services for the Region 20 Educational Service Center.

“It is wonderful to have a new source to meet some of our critical shortages in teaching, particularly in the areas of math, science and bilingual education,” Alvarado says. “Having the A&M campus there provides a great opportunity to place new teachers in our rural districts.”

The shortage in teachers has always been there, Alvarado says, but it has lately been exacerbated by new state requirements for additional courses in math and science to meet the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills or TAKS, which is required of all students to graduate.

In order to meet the growing demand, the ESC has been relying on alternative programs such as the Teacher Orientation Preparatory Program to certify enough teachers to fill the gap from those being certified through the more conventional methods. But lately, Alvarado notes, the number of alternative certifications has

been slipping. In 2007-08, the Region 20 ESC certified 29 new math teachers and 56 new science teachers through its alternative certification program. But this year, 2008-09, they had 28 new math teachers and just 46 new science teachers.

Therefore, a push by schools such as the Texas A&M branch in San Antonio to certify more teachers through traditional means is very welcome, he says.

“We think this is a wonderful opportunity and we are excited to have them as part of our district,” he says.

Alvarado says one of the biggest problems in attracting new teachers is the imbalance in pay versus what they can get in the private sector. It is hard to transition people into the teaching field when they can get better-paying jobs elsewhere.

“We are competing with the business sector and we are just not as competitive as we need to be,” he says.

Ferrier says the school is working closely with the five surrounding area school districts to address their needs for new teachers with particular skills. They are also meeting with area businesses to discuss the types of skill sets graduates will need to secure employment in San Antonio and elsewhere.

“We are aggressively working with these groups looking at what we need to do on our part,” she says. “My goal is to make this one of the most sought after educational programs in the U.S.”

Before taking the position at Texas A&M - San Antonio, Ferrier served as a deputy under secretary in the Department of Education where she oversaw a staff of 50 professionals and a budget of approximately \$668 million.

Community integration

While the seed for the new Texas A&M campus was germinating at Palo Alto College, the fertile field in which it will eventually grow was being prepared by a group of investors under the name Triple L Management LLC. The group purchased a 2,700 acre tract of land on San Antonio’s South Side and put together a plan to develop it into an urban community in which the A&M campus could thrive.

Scott Polikov, a principal with Fort Worth-based **Gateway Planning Group Inc.**, was brought on to help develop a master plan for a university community that would

be fully integrated with the retail and residential community surrounding it. Known as Verano, the planned community proved persuasive to the Texas A&M Board of Regents who approved having the new A&M campus move onto the property once the enrollment goal of 1,500 students was met.

“Our grand philosophy is to develop a complementary community with support services that the university can plug into,” Polikov says. “We are planning on a unique community that will be here for hundreds of years where people can stay connected with the school and surrounding neighborhoods.”

The Verano development is setting aside 700 acres for the Texas A&M - San Antonio campus which is being designed by San Antonio-based Marmon Mok Architects.

“At build out, Verano and Texas A&M could be home to 30,000 residents, 30,000 students and 30,000 jobs, generating an estimated tax base of \$2 billion,” Polikov says. “The Verano community will create a sustainable balance of ecological responsibility, social well-being and economic viability.”

Ultimately, Polikov says, the Verano development will build on the neighboring Toyota plant’s manufacturing facility and could eventually become the hub for a proposed commuter rail line that would connect the school with downtown San Antonio and the San Antonio International Airport and continue north all the way to Austin and the University of Texas campus.

Bill Reeves, a partner with Marmon Mok, says the Verano development will be a unique community within a community. Once the state releases the funding for the new campus, Reeves says, they will begin phase one with the construction of an 85,000 square foot multi-purpose building that will initially serve to provide classroom space, administrative offices, a library and a dining facility.

“There will be more refinements after that,” he says. “We are just laying the groundwork and expect that the campus will continue to grow for some time.”

Texas A&M - San Antonio

Present address: 1450 Gillette Blvd. (Olivares Elementary School)

Future address: Near South Loop 410 and Zarzamora Road on 700 acres inside the Verano Community development

When: Construction expected to begin in 2010.