Community Partnerships Spotlight

RGV Focus

The Landscape

Region: Rio Grande Valley

Partner districts: 37 K-12 districts in Region 1 Education Service Center

The Work

Connect public school districts, higher education institutions, philanthropic entities, and workforce, community, and civic leaders

Increase FAFSA completion rates to 71% of high school seniors in the region, above the statewide average of 60%

Learn More

RGV Focus
La Unión del Pueblo Entero (LUPE)

Background

In 2012, RGV Focus was established in response to low FAFSA completion rates in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). As a collective impact initiative of Educate Texas, RGV Focus works to connect students in Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy Counties with access to higher education opportunities.

This region of Texas is young (its median age is 30), Latino (92%), multilingual, and multicultural. It has one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. RGV Focus has identified the unique challenges facing students in this area and works to improve educational attainment so that students may be ready to enter a growing and changing regional economy.

The Need and Solution

Approximately 1.36 million people live along the Texas-Mexico border, and the region faces many challenges. When analyzing low financial aid application completion rates, RGV Focus recognized that 30% of the area’s population lives below the poverty threshold. The median income is $40,000 per year. This region has a debt-averse culture. RGV Focus found that if families couldn’t pay for college, kids wouldn’t go.

When RGV Focus began, around half of high school seniors completed a financial aid application. To increase completion rates, RGV Focus had to understand and work within the cultural dynamics of the region. They also had to build trust with students and families and see the financial aid application process through from start to finish, not just to submission.

RGV Focus worked to connect partners from all relevant sectors to support families and increase financial aid application completion in several ways:

• Build trust and understanding around the financial aid process early to help families prepare for senior year
• Dedicate time for one-on-one help for families navigating an unfamiliar process
• Create systems to monitor financial aid application status more easily

Turning Ideas into Actions

We know that community partners serve varied functions and offer different strengths. Consider how your organization can bring RGV Focus’ support practices into your own work.

Build Trust

In a region with a history of low college enrollment and graduation rates, RGV Focus serves many first-generation college students. They need to educate families and make them comfortable with a process whose requirements can be very confusing.

Because of prior-prior year tax document requirements, education and planning for financial aid application completion must start early. RGV Focus begins working with students in eighth grade to share college access resources. They developed guidebooks that support and repeat school counselors’ points to ensure that messaging helps create trust with the process.
Community organizations like La Unión Del Pueblo Entero (LUPE) also build trust. They help families get individual taxpayer ID numbers when needed, file taxes, and respond to concerns about how this information will be used.

Your Action Items

• Start talking about financial aid early to help students and their families grow familiar with the process. They learn the language they need to know to be successful in preparing for high school and beyond.
• Connect with other trusted organizations. Find business and nonprofit leaders in your community that have built trust. Partner with them to serve families by teaching financial literacy, providing tax support, and more.
• Develop relationships with local higher education institutions. Working together can help you understand their processes. It can also make your students’ transition after high school easier. Knowing what institution-specific documents schools may require can ease the way for students and parents.

Commit the Time

RGV Focus helped schools host monthly Super Saturday events. Staff and volunteers would help families complete any step in the college-going process. They quickly saw that one day a month was not enough time to get families through all the steps. Super Saturdays grew into FAFSA Fridays and TASFA Tuesdays. One-on-one help with time to ask questions and feel comfortable made the biggest impact on successful completion.

Your Action Items

• Some families may need more than just informational programming and basic support. Knowing your community’s needs will help you determine what types of financial aid completion events will be successful and plan the right amount of time.
• Work with your school, district, and local higher education providers to offer one-on-one support and many ways for families to get help. Find out when schools can do office hours or assist with completion events. Tap into community organizations, like your local chamber of commerce, to find volunteers. You can also get school staff involved.
• Monitor students and identify who may need help with verification. Offer extra help, instructions, or one-on-one support so that students can move from submitted to completed. That will give them the best chance to receive aid.

Monitor Progress

RGV Focus worked with Educate Texas to develop a data dashboard. They pull FAFSA completion data by campus from the US Department of Education databases. Updated monthly, these reports give schools in the 37 districts they serve a clear system to evaluate and monitor progress toward completion goals. A stoplight system clearly shows if schools are on track to meet the 65% FAFSA completion goal set by the RGV Focus leadership team.

Your Action Items

• Find out where your K–12 school partners get student-level financial aid data. Schools and partners can work with their regions’ Education Service Centers and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to get data through ApplyTexas or enter into an agreement with the US Department of Education.
• Set up an easy-to-use system to monitor progress! RGV Focus used stoplight coding to show which schools were on track (green), close (yellow), or behind (red) meeting regional goals for financial aid application completion.
• Connect with higher education institutions to get monthly reports on TASFA data.

Financial Aid Application Completion Success: Lessons Learned

Understanding the culture of the community they serve has helped RGV Focus to have a collective impact.

Submission Is Not Completion

RGV Focus learned that many students’ applications were not considered complete. They needed help following up. The verification process can be tricky! RGV Focus kept in touch with the families they served, helping them through each step of the process. Knowing which students were selected for verification and helping them through it was key to improving completion rates.

Create Partnerships

Each institution of higher education had different policies and forms related to financial aid. This made it tough for students and their families. RGV Focus brought leaders, financial aid officers, and others together across the institutions. They developed a set of handouts covering all institutions in their area. This eased the transition from high school to post-secondary education. RGV Focus also helped families through the process.

Grow Your Own

Your region’s culture is key! The RGV is family-driven and has low mobility out of the region. RGV Focus created a network that supports families through collaboration, not competition. They aligned student and community interests to find success for all by connecting community organizations, higher education institutions, and school districts. Giving consistent advice also helped families trust the process and eased fears of the unknown.