

Local Workforce Development Board Partners with Community College to Support Workforce Readiness



Overview

- The Upper Rio Grande Workforce Development Board assists job seekers in finding and advancing in their careers by providing training in basic and vocational skills.
- Using state and government funding, the Upper Rio Grande Workforce Development Board purchased PLATO® Instructional Solutions to use in their training programs. The Board partnered with El Paso Community College, allowing the college to use the software in their workforce development centers.
- Due to the success of the programs, the college is currently adding new centers to help more students in the community, all of which will employ PLATO Instructional Solutions funded by the Workforce Development Board.

The Upper Rio Grande Workforce Development Board is a non-profit agency that receives funding from state and federal governments. The Workforce Development Board is responsible for taking care of and managing the workforce in Texas, specifically by helping individuals prepare for and find jobs. Training for job seekers is provided through partnerships with many training contractors. The Workforce Development Board monitors these contractors to make sure they are providing the right training for their clients.

On a regular visit to observe a training contractor, employees at the Workforce Development Board saw that they were using PLATO Instructional Solutions to help clients obtain basic skills. After requesting additional information, the Workforce Development Board decided to incorporate PLATO® courseware in more centers.

“The Workforce Development Board purchased the software themselves using pre-approved government funding to help clients in other government funded programs,” said Carmen Rodriguez, I.S. manager, Upper Rio Grande Workforce Development Board. “We want to help our clients to rise from not being able to read or write to getting their GED.”

INSTITUTION/PROGRAM PROFILE:

The Upper Rio Grande Workforce System is a regional network of business, education, labor, community, and governmental organizations serving employers, workers, and students in the Brewster, Culberson, El Paso, Hudspeth, Jeff Davis, and Presidio counties of Texas. The Upper Rio Grande Workforce Development Board provides employers with qualified and skilled workers and job opportunities for workers.

The El Paso Community College Workforce Development Division is dedicated to providing quality educational opportunities to El Paso's workforce to help workers obtain and succeed in their jobs.

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Once students have registered with a workforce training center, they are assigned a case manager. The clients are assessed on basic skills and past work experience. From there, the clients work together with their case manager to see what jobs open up.

“The Workforce Development Board looks to see what type of training we can provide that matches existing skills and enhances those that need refreshing,” said Rodriguez. “We assess the level of training needed and get them going in the program to help improve in those areas, whether it’s reading, writing, ESL, or preparing for a GED.”

Since implementing PLATO courseware across more centers, the Workforce Development Board has been pleased with its success.

“Sixty percent of our population is Spanish speaking,” said Rodriguez. “We needed an efficient and effective software that could help these clients advance, and PLATO provided that for us.”

“We are hoping that PLATO Learning will expand and we can help other training programs to see the success we’re having,” said Rodriguez.

Partnering to Improve a Community

The local Housing Authority and El Paso Community College (EPCC) came to the Workforce Development Board and said that both programs wanted to purchase PLATO courseware to better serve the needs of the community. Both groups believed that the computer-based instruction would really help their clients to get their GED, develop writing skills, refresh and improve basic skills, and set the path for success. Together, the groups came up with a Memorandum of Understanding in 2000 that allowed EPCC and the Housing Authority to use PLATO® software purchased by the Workforce Development Board.

Although the Housing Authority partnership has ended, EPCC is still using PLATO courseware together with the Workforce Development Board with great success. EPCC reports results back to the Workforce

Development Board every month, and is planning on expanding their use of PLATO courseware to four more centers this year.

“Using PLATO has definitely been effective,” said Rodriguez. “We know that EPCC is anxious to get their new licenses and software going because they have students waiting to get into the program.”

Increasing Motivation to Increase Student Success at EPCC

The Workforce Development Center at EPCC uses PLATO courseware for students at their Career Training Center (CTC), with plans to use the software at the four new centers opening in the coming year. In a year, EPCC’s programs will serve anywhere from 350 to 500 students or more.

“We serve adult learners and out-of-school youth,” said Luz Taboada, director of workforce development, EPCC. “We serve a lot of displaced workers, clients referred from the Veterans’ Administration programs, farm and seasonal workers referred from Motivational Education Training, Inc., and people referred through the Welfare to Work program.”

These agencies refer students to the college’s workforce development program, where they are assessed to determine their skill level.

“The average profile of the people we serve is a 40-year-old Hispanic woman with a third grade education in her native language,” said Taboada. “Some of our students have more education than that, but the majority don’t. Most can function in Spanish, but some aren’t even literate in Spanish.”

EPCC uses PLATO courseware in their workforce development program in combination with integrated vocational

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BOARD

training. The program provides students with the vocational basic skills to support their employment. Students can also earn their GED and attend pre-vocational instruction in basic skills through EPCC's program. They obtain the instruction necessary to bring their skills up to the level they need to obtain vocational training. PLATO courseware is used to help students enhance and improve their math and reading skills and to help students build skills to perform at optimum levels in vocational training and obtain their GED.

"At the Advanced Technology Center (ATC), we serve the same population, but use the PLATO system more for tutoring and testing," said David Olivas, compliance coordinator, Workforce Development and Lifelong Learning, EPCC. "That center has a higher entry level requirement." Students have access to PLATO system to help with math and language needs.

Both centers have lab assistants and instructors. The instructors assign part of an objective in the PLATO courseware, and the lab assistants help ensure the students go through it and understand what they are learning.

Students in the workforce development programs at EPCC enjoy using the PLATO courseware to work at their own pace and add meaning to their learning. Students are able to see results as they move through each objective, helping to motivate them to move forward. Age-appropriate instruction allows them to start at low levels and move through the courseware using real-life examples and scenarios.

"Not everyone learns at the same pace," said Taboada. "Using the software allows adult learners to work at their own pace. They don't have to compete with anyone else. They can make sure that they understand the concepts before moving ahead. By working at their own speed, it gives the learning more meaning. They see that there's a goal—to enhance learning."

Taboada and Olivas have also seen an added benefit to using the computer-based instruction in the centers.

"A lot of the people who came to the center in the past weren't accustomed to using computers," said Taboada.

"The older students especially were hesitant to use it. However, we've seen that using this software really works, and they grow to like it. It helps them not only refresh basic skills, but also helps them to become computer literate."

"Our purpose for providing training is to help people obtain employment and go back into the system as productive citizens," said Taboada.

"Adult learners have to have meaning in what they're learning. They don't just do it 'because.' It has to be practical and applicable," said Taboada. "Using PLATO software and knowing it is a means to an end—it gets them to the level of performance they need to move on—motivates them. They think, 'If I can succeed at this and reach the next level, then I can move on to the next step towards my goal.'"

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