

Palo Alto College's Pursuit of Excellence



By Dr. Mike Flores, President
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In 2015, Palo Alto College (PAC) was one of three organizations in Texas to win the Texas Award for Performance Excellence from the Quality Texas Foundation. Not only was PAC the sole higher education institution among the winners, it was the first higher education institution to earn the award since 2007, when Northwest Vista College, also in the Alamo Colleges district, won.

PAC's quality journey began with a simple desire: to improve instruction and service. Previously, they had relied upon their accreditation requirements to improve their practices, but eventually they felt that wasn't enough. They wanted to become more efficient in service and education delivery. In 2008, they decided to embark on a quality journey at a state level, through the Quality Texas Foundation, using the Baldrige Excellence Framework to improve their performance.

In 2010, they doubled down on their commitment and joined the Continuous Quality Improvement Network (CQIN), which helped them reframe their practices by learning from other community colleges and organizations outside of higher education. Every year, the College sent a different team to Summer Institute, tasking them to return with at least one actionable project that would help them move closer to their goal.

In 2012, Dr. Mike Flores stepped into the presidency and got to work building a culture of collaboration and innovation. He instituted listening sessions, bringing together more than 300 people from across the PAC community to help develop a vision for the future. This and other engagement activities marked a turning point for the College. In Spring 2013, over 40 faculty, staff, and students engaged in the Texas Award effort, and task teams worked with individuals on campus to engage them.



After attending CQIN's 2015 Summer Institute in Dallas, Texas, where the learning theme was "Leading and Managing Change," Dr. Flores decided to create a vehicle for celebrating student success initiatives on a regular basis, acknowledging the stakeholders who were involved in those efforts and engaging students whenever possible. The resulting monthly "Celebrate & Share" breakfast highlights inspiring new initiatives, such as the Palo Alto College Honors Program, which supports students with a minimum GPA of 3.25 who wish to develop creative expression and have a desire to give back.

PAC's Honors Program consists of 15 hours of coursework, small classes, and mentorship from faculty as well as the creation of an e-portfolio that students can use to advance their academic and professional careers. Honors-level courses will be offered across a variety of disciplines, but all of the courses will be themed around "global citizenship." Students will fully engage with their courses, the college, their

community, and beyond through opportunities to travel—both regionally and abroad—in an effort to extend the learning environment beyond the classroom. For example, this year’s participants took an alternative spring break trip to New Orleans to renovate and clear a park. This program, which had a soft launch this spring and will be fully rolled out in September, was made possible by a team of over 40 faculty and staff members who brought the vision to life. The student reaction has been overwhelming.



PAC Honors Program

In April 2016, Palo Alto College applied for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Of the year's 34 national applicants, PAC was one of 15 organizations selected for a site visit—and was the only educational organization in the country to host one. Though PAC did not receive the 2016 award, officials provided high praise for the College as well as insight into how they can improve upon their existing success. Furthermore, PAC’s continuous improvement journey and use of the Baldrige criteria has earned them \$7.8 million in grants that will directly impact students in their community.

Stories like this remind us that while the path to excellence isn’t easy, so much can be gained from taking the journey.