

WORKFORCE ADVANCEMENT IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY: *How VIDA is Making a Measurable Impact in South Texas*





INTRODUCTION

The Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA) is at the forefront of helping residents of Texas's Rio Grande Valley receive higher education to advance in their careers and increase their income. For nearly 30 years, VIDA, a non-profit 501 (c)(3) organization, has provided financial assistance and mentoring to low-income residents to help them advance in their education, pursue successful careers, and boost their economic impact on the community. While financial assistance is an important component of what VIDA provides to the students enrolled in its programs, a major portion of the organization's success is the human connection VIDA makes with students. Utilizing what VIDA refers to as its "Complete Approach Model," students are provided with monthly case management sessions, in which VIDA counselors supplement the financial support the organization provides with emotional support and development of the soft skills that are highly sought after by employers.

VIDA's holistic approach yields significant benefits to its community, including the following:

- **A return of \$15.69 to the community for every dollar invested in VIDA in 2022-23, according to an economic impact analysis produced by University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV)**
- **A persistence rate, defined as the rate at which students return for a second year at an institute of higher education, of 92%. This bests the national average of approximately 76%.**
- **VIDA students graduate from higher education programs at an 83% rate overall, surpassing the national average of 64%.**
- **Most importantly however, VIDA graduates experience a 62% increase in their earnings on average by the time they graduate, with students upping their average pre-VIDA salary of \$14.16 per hour to \$22.96 after graduation, giving them much needed funds to support themselves and their families.**

This report will analyze the overall impact of VIDA's programs on the Rio Grande Valley by examining program participants' wage increases across multiple job categories and demographics. It also will feature student success stories, demonstrating just how essential VIDA is in the advancement of the South Texas community.

Every dollar invested in VIDA in 2022-23 resulted in a **\$15.69** return to the community.

Source: University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

PERSISTENCE RATE OF **92%**

GRADUATION RATE OF **83%**



AN UNDENIABLE RETURN ON INVESTMENT

A direct result of VIDA's efforts in supporting the educational and career endeavors of its students is the sizable positive impact their career advancement has on the local economy. In fact, according to a 2023 economic impact study conducted for VIDA by Sai Mullapudi, economic development research manager for the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, every dollar invested in VIDA resulted in a \$15.69 return to the areas the non-profit serves.

This return-on-investment determination stems from the calculation of VIDA's \$3.3 million allocation toward its operating budget and the \$25.2 million in wage increases experienced by VIDA graduates in the 2022-23 fiscal year. UTRGV's analysis also reveals that the combination of VIDA's operating expenditures and its graduates' wage increases resulted in an economic output of \$51.9 million in the local economy. The university offers a further breakdown of this economic impact:

SUPPORT OF
651 JOBS

\$33.6 MILLION
IN LABOR INCOME

AN ADDED
\$13.7 MILLION
TO THE GDP

\$1.3 MILLION
IN STATE AND LOCAL TAXES



WAGE INCREASES UNDERSCORE THE VIDA IMPACT

Among VIDA's main objectives is to increase the earnings of the students that benefit from its programs. Based on NAPCO Research's analysis (NAPCO Research is the parent company of Non-Profit Pro), on average, VIDA students that were employed after graduating in the 2022-23 school year, increased their average hourly earnings by \$8.80, from an average of \$14.16 per hour to \$22.96, marking a 62% increase.

Projected out to a full-time annual salary, this hourly rate equates to approximately \$48,000 per year, versus the approximately \$29,450 average salary students made before enrolling with VIDA. The increase in salary is well above the average annual salaries in the Rio Grande Valley region. According to the [Bureau of Economic Analysis](#), the 2022 per capita personal income in Cameron County was \$37,325, while in neighboring Hidalgo County, it was \$33,525.

In addition to the wage increases realized by students who were employed at the time they entered their VIDA-supported education programs, unemployed students saw an impressive starting salary upon their graduations. In fact, the post-VIDA average wages for students that were unemployed at the start of their programs was \$25.19 per hour.

The impact VIDA has on the South Texas community is also made clear by reviewing wage increases based on the various student categories and demographics VIDA tracks. For example, students that qualified for VIDA's programs due to their low-income status increased their wages by 59%, increasing from \$14.33 per hour to \$22.74. This maps out to a nearly \$17,500 increase in annual pay.

VIDA students that were employed after graduating in 2022-23 saw an average salary increase of

62%



VIDA's programs benefited other community members in need, including single parents, a group that faces sizable financial challenges and time constraints when seeking to further their education. Single parents that entered VIDA programs reported a starting salary of \$16.49. According to data from job recruiting site [ZipRecruiter](#), the average hourly wage for a single parent in Texas is \$19.52. With the 41% wage increase that the single-parent students enrolled in VIDA programs realized, upon completing their education programs, they reached a salary of \$23.31, 19% higher than the state average.

Similarly, first generation college students saw a salary increase of 58%, increasing on average from \$14.27 to \$22.53 upon graduation. The potential for earnings increases is imperative among first-generation college students, who are often at an economic disadvantage compared to their classmates whose parents earned a degree.

Specifically, according to reporting from [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), the median income for parents of first-generation college students is \$41,000, compared to \$90,000 among students with a parent who has earned a college degree. The ability for first-generation college students to not only position themselves for a successful future, but also help their families that may be in a lower economic position, is a major draw for higher education and the services VIDA provides. The need for higher education assistance among first generation college students is also apparent in looking at the demographics of students enrolled in the VIDA program. In 2022-23, 80% of all graduates identified as first-generation college students.

The power of a post-secondary degree also shines when looking at salaries in specific industries. For example, in the allied health field, which is defined as healthcare services distinct from medicine and nursing, there is a wide range of potential earnings. [According to data from job board site Indeed](#), salaries in the allied health field can range from \$14.74 per hour to \$49.75 per hour. Among the many industries that VIDA graduates enter upon completing their programs, allied health is one where there is a significant earnings increase, with graduates increasing their wages by 75%. In the 2022-23 school year, VIDA students entering



allied health programs reported a pre-VIDA wage of \$14.95, near the bottom of the typical allied health salary range. Upon graduation, that wage jumped to \$26.22, a much more lucrative position for a career to start.

The specialized trades are another professional area in which VIDA graduates have realized significant salary increases. In this segment, starting salaries are comparatively low, with pre-VIDA students reporting an average hourly salary of \$12.90. However, in 2022-23, VIDA graduates' salaries increased by 47%, with graduates reporting an average salary of \$19.02, a difference between making \$26,832 per year and \$39,562.

With graduate salary increases reported across multiple demographics and industries, the impact VIDA continues to have on the Rio Grande Valley is clear. In an area with underserved populations, higher education is key to unlocking a financially secure future. And with VIDA's services, the playing field is leveling for students from all backgrounds to benefit from advancing their education in their fields.

SUCCESS STORIES:

Making an Impact in the Community

Sergio Rodriguez, DIESEL SERVICE TECHNICIAN

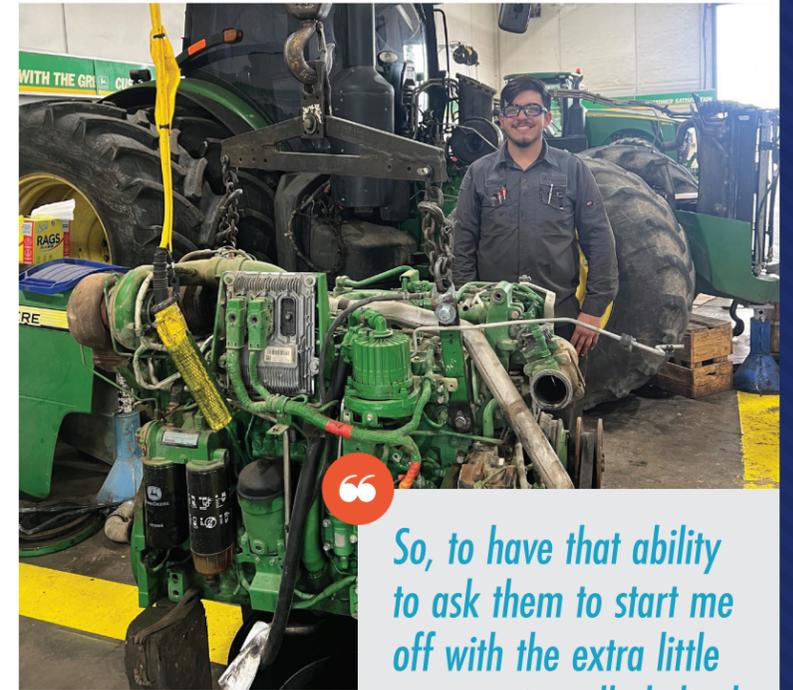
Sergio Rodriguez has always owned used cars, acquiring them either second or third hand. When maintenance and repairs have been needed, he has taken on the tasks himself. Working on his own vehicles over the years, Rodriguez realized that this was something that he both enjoyed and was good at and sought to advance his career in this field. To further his education, he enrolled in South Texas College's diesel technology program, aiming for his associate degree.

While Rodriguez was in school, he continued to work on cars, gaining experience and a starting salary in the industry. He began by restoring and modifying classic cars, followed by a stint at a local mechanic shop as a diesel and automotive technician. Now with his associate degree, he has advanced into his current role at Tellus Equipment Solutions in Harlingen, Texas, specializing in heavy duty John Deere equipment.

Assistance with the Tools for the Trade

It was while he was in school that Rodriguez heard about VIDA from a classmate. After enrolling with VIDA, Rodriguez was able to receive financial assistance to acquire the various tools needed for his education program. For example, he says that while the school does provide students with some hand tools, it doesn't offer the power tools used in welding, along with safety equipment and other materials that he was able to acquire with VIDA's support.

"It was super beneficial because I didn't come from money," Rodriguez says. "Everything I did, I had to buy out of my own pocket. So, to have that ability to



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In addition to providing the tools needed for the trade, Rodriguez says he benefited from VIDA's counseling program. He shares that he was in school during the height of the pandemic, and the counseling sessions were held using Zoom. The sessions offered financial and career goal-setting advice, along with self-care insights. A key takeaway, Rodriguez adds, was learning how to value his skillset and ensure he was maximizing his earning potential.

"It has been really beneficial," he says. "They helped me work towards what I should be making and how to value everything in my work and what I offer."

SUCCESS STORIES: Making an Impact in the Community

Jaime Davila, DENTAL HYGIENIST

As a parent of young children, Jaime Davila wanted to advance in his career, but in his prior role working in health insurance, it was taking too long to move up the ladder. With a desire to enter either the STEM or medical fields, Davila took the leap and went back to school, enrolling in the Associate of Science program specializing in dental hygiene at Texas State Technical College in Harlingen.

While enrolling in the associate program helped put him on the path toward a new career, Davila shares that the costs involved added challenges to going back to school. In addition to the transportation costs from Brownsville where he was living at the time, the materials and equipment including scrubs and dental instruments added expenses to his education.

Davila learned about VIDA from a classmate, and after applying, was selected to be part of the program. With VIDA's help, he says the burden of educational expenses was significantly reduced.

"It really helped bridge that financial gap," Davila says. "It's not a fix-all type of thing. You still have to pay most of your tuition. But they came in and helped bridge those very critical gaps."

A New Career Begins

Upon his graduation, Davila became a registered dental hygienist and began working in August of 2023 at Red Square Dental in Edinburg, Texas. Part of what Davila has enjoyed most about his new career is the variety. For example, he says that the most rewarding aspect of the job is helping patients prevent oral disease. But, he adds that there are several enjoyable aspects of working as a hygienist, including improving a patient's smile and working with kids.

With his career now moving in his desired direction, Davila says he plans to take it to the next level. Though a bachelor's degree is not required to work as a dental hygienist, he plans to take that step, having been accepted to the bachelor's program at Tyler Junior College, which he plans to start this year.



“Even if you have assistance for tuition, a lot of my expenses were outside tuition — materials, textbooks, gas money. VIDA really helped with that.”

"I read a statistic that only 25% of hygienists in Texas have the bachelor's,"

Davila says of his decision to return to school. "It's not really required to practice, so I just wanted to get in that top tier."

VIDA Plays a Vital Role in the Community

Regarding VIDA's impact on his career and on its impact overall in the Rio Grande Valley, Davila says that the organization plays a vital role in the community. Education costs can be prohibitive, he explains, and having an organization that can help those in need is a great asset to the area.

"You're always going to have people that need that little extra push because education is not cheap," he says. "Even if you have assistance for tuition, a lot of my expenses were outside tuition — materials, textbooks, gas money. VIDA really helped with that."

Brionna Bryant, RESERVE POLICE OFFICER

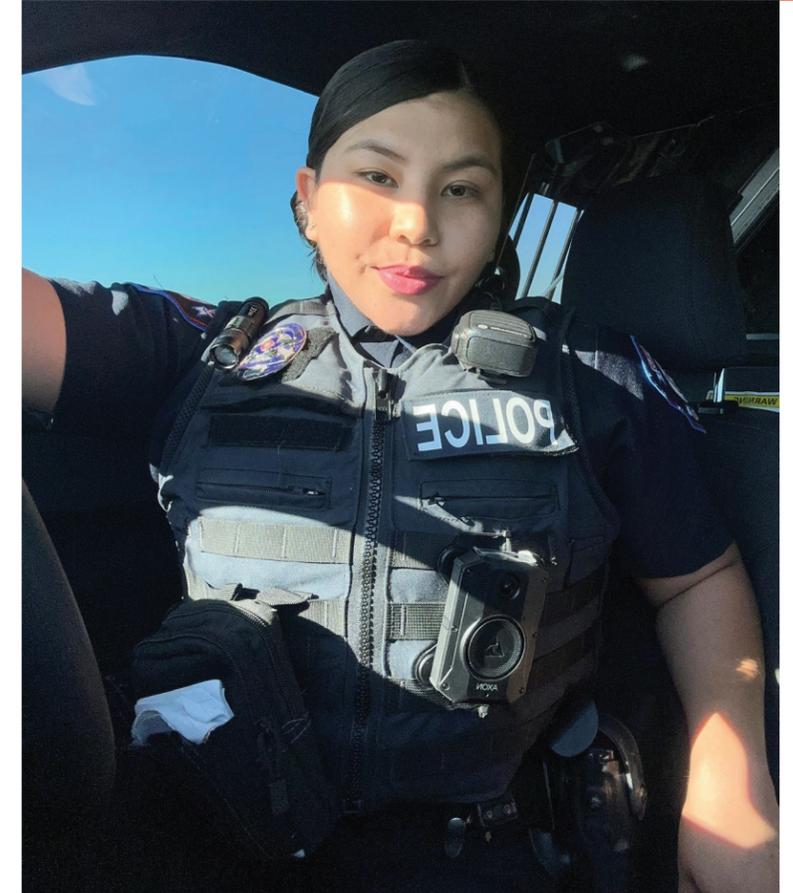
Serving as a police officer in Texas's Rio Grande Valley is a tough job, and as a member of the Rancho Viejo Police Department, reserve officer Brionna Bryant doesn't just take on community and highway policing. She also often works along the border, assisting federal agencies in helping deter illegal crossings. It's a job she says she was drawn to due to her desire to help keep the community safe, but earning her badge required her to pass the police academy and Texas state exam. While she had the drive and determination, as a low-income student, meeting the financial obligations of her training was a challenge.

VIDA was able to cover \$4,000 of the \$5,000 tuition cost of the police academy, along with key components of police training including her weapon, uniform, and courses in de-escalation tactics, live shooting, and active shooter training.

"Being from a low-income family, it's hard for us sometimes," Bryant says. "Sometimes we have to work and help our parents out. We have to pay the bills. We don't have that much help when we're starting off in our profession."

Beyond the financial support that VIDA provided, Bryant says that the organization's regular counselor sessions helped her get through the difficult times with moral and emotional support. She said these sessions helped keep her focused on achieving her goal, despite the challenging schedule.

"VIDA and their personnel, they treated me like they genuinely cared," Bryant says. "They cared about my studies, they cared about the education, and they invested in me. I'm glad that I made it worth it."



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For Bryant, as a single mother, the road to starting her career in law enforcement was filled with jam-packed days. During the six months she spent in the police academy, the days could stretch to 14 hours, with eight hours spent at the academy and six hours working. That also does not include the homework required to complete the training. Undeterred however, Bryant is continuing her educational endeavors, pursuing an associate degree in criminal justice from Texas Southmost College, with an ultimate goal of obtaining a bachelor's degree and getting accepted into law school.

SUCCESS STORIES: *Making an Impact in the Community*

Lupita Caballero, REGISTERED NURSE

As a registered nurse in the orthopedic department at Valley Baptist Medical Center in Harlingen, Texas, Lupita Caballero is a member of the care team serving patients as they contend with surgeries. Caballero joined the hospital in December of 2022, beginning her nursing career upon graduating from South Texas Technical College with her associate degree.

Before embarking on her new career, Caballero was working as a health aid making slightly above minimum wage. The pay was just enough to cover expenses, she says, but she still had to rely on food stamps and other government support. She was already enrolled in the nursing program at South Texas Technical College, but eventually ran out of the financial aid that was helping her to pay for tuition, books, software, and the other materials needed to progress through the program. After a friend told her about VIDA, Caballero applied and was able to receive the support needed to complete her degree.

"I went and applied and was able to get in," she says. "[VIDA] really helped me get through it. The [nursing] program is stressful enough and I had to worry about money. I was already in the program and was like, 'What am I going to do?' [VIDA] was very beneficial."

Now a year into her career as a registered nurse, Caballero has developed experience in multiple areas of the hospital. She began her tenure at Valley Baptist working in the NICU for six months before transitioning to orthopedics, where she currently assists patients before and after surgeries, helping them heal from a variety of conditions.

Group Counseling Beneficial

In addition to VIDA's financial assistance, which was so instrumental in Caballero completing her nursing program, she says that the emotional support VIDA provides helped her get through the long and challenging days in school, which often stretched 12 hours followed by additional studying for exams. Through it all, VIDA's group counseling sessions allowed Caballero to connect with other students going through their own educational journeys and share their similar experiences.



They're willing to help you as long as you put in the work. I'm just grateful that they were able to help me, and they help a lot of other people. I think it's a great impact on the community."

"We would have those gatherings and people would relate this was a stressful moment in their life," she says. "That really helped me, hearing that I'm not alone. Other people are going through this, and we all can make it through just knowing you have somebody on your side."

Caballero says that her experience with VIDA was positive not only because the program helped her advance in her career, but also because VIDA's staff was always so welcoming and supportive. The impact the organization is having in the community is highly beneficial she adds, and the VIDA team is a big component of its success.

"I couldn't have done it alone," Caballero says. "They're a partner in education. If you want it, they're willing to help you as long as you put in the work. I'm just grateful that they were able to help me, and they help a lot of other people. I think it's a great impact on the community."





VIDA's mission is to empower Rio Grande Valley residents to achieve economic prosperity through market-driven training, resources, and career pathways.