'A College in the Community,' St. Augustine College Seeks to Improve Lives and Opportunities for Latino Students

Celebrating 40 years of service in the Chicago area in 2020

Narrow streets, single-family homes, apartments, condos and small buildings are typical of Chicago’s many north side neighborhoods. On Argyle Street, you’ll also find the main campus of St. Augustine College. This ACI-member college is unique in many ways. It mostly serves students who speak Spanish as their primary language, plus English. It offers graduate-style classes in Spanish, English or both. Most students live in the neighborhood and have other responsibilities, such as caring for children, their parents or their jobs. The college has no dormitories or athletic teams, and the campus was once home to a well-known silent film studio and star. This year, the college, which serves nontraditional students, will celebrate the 40th anniversary of its founding.

"We are a college in the community," says Dr. Reyes González, president of St. Augustine College. "We strive to be where people live and work. We enjoy living with each other in our own neighborhoods."

A hallmark of St. Augustine College is that students learn in their own language and in their own culture, González says. "We are a true Latino institution. There are other Hispanic-serving institutions. We are a Latino institution. That’s a differentiating factor and one that we're proud of." When it was founded in 1980, St. Augustine was the first bilingual higher education institution in Illinois and one of only a few in the United States.

College opened in 1980 to educate Latinos and improve career training

The college was started under the auspices of the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago to provide a place for bilingual education for Spanish-speaking adults as well as vocational career training. Its mission remains virtually the same today, with slightly more than 1,500 students seeking associate and bachelor's degrees. It maintains four neighborhood-based campuses in Chicago and one in Aurora, Illinois. While most students are Catholic, the school seeks to be nondenominational,
promoting positive values and principles for students, faculty and staff. Its average student is 31 years of age, and more than three-fourths of the student body are women.

"I'm very excited about that," González says. "There are a number of reasons. One is because of our curriculum and also because of the types of programs and support systems that we have for women. This evolved organically. It wasn't something that was planned."

What works well for all students is the unusual graduate-style academic program at St. Augustine, González says. All courses are three hours long, so students only need to be at the campus once a week for each class. Many coordinate their courses into specific time periods, to allow them to work at other times during the day.

When students first enroll at St. Augustine, they are given a language-proficiency exam, González says. "We meet students where they are," he says, explaining that students who do not speak English are placed in Spanish-language classes. Those that speak some English are placed in bilingual English-Spanish classes, and those that are fluent in English are placed in English-language classes.

It's an expensive model, but it works, González says, emphasizing the theory that students learn best in their own language and culture. Spanish is the common language spoken on campus, but in class students learn the English language while preparing them to live and work in jobs that require a college education, he says.

**President brings extensive experience, leads effort to refocus academic programs**

González became president of St. Augustine College about 18 months ago. Among presidents of Illinois four-year institutions, he is the only president who is Hispanic. He brought more than two decades of higher education experience to St. Augustine, including executive-level experience in finance and administration. González worked for Chicago Public Schools (CPS), City Colleges of Chicago and Mount Mary University, Milwaukee. He earned a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, master's degrees in accountancy and change management from DePaul University, Chicago, and a doctorate in higher education management from the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. In addition, González is a native of Mexico who came to the United States with his family when he was a child. His family story enables him to connect with many students, he says.
"Since my arrival here in the past year and a half, we are refocusing our efforts," he says. "We initiated a transformation process, so that we can enhance student success and the quality of education that we provide. We are looking ahead to focusing our education on high-growth areas with high-paying jobs and providing economic mobility for students and their families." To make progress toward that goal, St. Augustine is focusing attention on health care, social sciences, STEM fields, and business and entrepreneurship. González also wants to graduate students who are good citizens, with a solid foundation in the liberal arts, ready to work in the global marketplace.

Among St. Augustine's most attractive academic programs for students is an early childhood education program. "It's the biggest bilingual program in the city, a very successful program," González says. There is a significant need for bilingual employees in CPS schools because nearly half of the students are from Latin America. Also, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded St. Augustine College a $99,714 grant last month to strengthen career readiness for Chicago early childhood educators through the humanities.

The college's social work academic program earned national attention in 2018 from the Latino Social Work Organization for the college's outstanding accomplishments in social work education. Also popular with students are psychology, a bachelor’s program that includes a 200-hour field practicum experience, and respiratory therapy, whose graduates have a nearly 100 percent passing rate on certification examinations.

Students earn either associate degrees or bachelor's degrees at St. Augustine College. In development is the school's first graduate offering, a master's degree program in mental health, aimed at treating Latina women. The purpose is to respond to a significant need for professionals to treat the Latina population, González says. "We want to be contributors to our own solutions. There's isn't anyone who understands Latinos better than ourselves," he says.

The school's low tuition is attractive to students, and it is among the lowest in the state for private higher education institutions, González says. Total tuition is slightly more than $11,000 a year, and for students with certain financial aid and grants, costs can be as low as $300 to $400 per semester. "Our goal is to graduate students with the lowest amount of debt, and we
discourage students from taking any debt. Most of our students graduate with a very, very small
debt," he says.

**Neighborhood concept works, but campuses may move**

Each of St. Augustine's five small campuses has its own history and life. Originally, they were
opened in neighborhoods populated mostly by people who are Latino. But the neighborhoods
have changed. González says most of the school's facilities are no longer surrounded by
neighborhoods with its traditional constituents.

"We are already looking for areas for us to move so we can be where our students live," González
says. "We're also looking to move our main campus a more prominent area that would be close
to the areas where we're going to be focusing: health care, the STEM field and business and
entrepreneurship. We need to be at locations close to business, close to the health industry and
close to the STEM field."

If the college leaves the
Argyle Street campus in
Chicago, it will vacate a
historic location. At least
one of the buildings was
once the home of Essanay
Film Manufacturing Co.
Essanay produced silent
films in the early 1900s,
and one of its biggest stars
was Charlie Chaplin.
Chaplin made several
silent comedies for Essanay
on Argyle Street and at
another location in Niles,
California. One of the
buildings on the main
campus of St. Augustine
College bears a likeness of
Chaplin on its exterior. "We
call it Charlie Chaplin
Hall," González says.

In addition to serving students from Latin American countries, González says about 13 percent
of the student body comes from places such as China and India. They choose St. Augustine for
its associate degree respiratory therapy program because the program is of high quality, low cost
and graduates can find high-paying jobs in the field. Some students who attend St. Augustine
continue their educations at prominent four-year academic programs and graduate schools, he
says.

Not long after González arrived at St. Augustine College, the school joined ACI. "I think it is
critical that all of us in higher education collaborate with each other," he says. "Our missions
may be different, but at the end of the day our focus is to help students be successful. We can do
that better if we collaborate with each other." González also noted that ACI's professional development conferences have helped with staff development at the college.

One reason for St. Augustine's success is that it focuses specifically on educating Latinos to improve their lives and improve the country's future, González says. "Not long ago, I spoke with one of the presidents of our local colleges, and he said that he can offer classes in Spanish, he can provide technology and have faculty that teach in Spanish," he says, "but he cannot create a Latino culture quite like this one."