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EDITOR'S PICK

# Report: ARRIBA program that helps low-income students through nursing school has \$893 million impact

By David Crowder / El Paso Inc. staff writer  
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'Right now, we're placing our health care people at twice the rate as this time last year,' said Roman Ortiz, chief executive of Project Arriba.

Photo: Daniel Godoy

Project ARRIBA has been quietly working with El Paso leaders to help hundreds of mostly Hispanic students from poor families through nursing school and drastically changing their lives since 1998.

They've been at it so quietly they barely get noticed publicly anymore. But they have been busy.

The Hunt Institute of Global Competitiveness at the University of Texas at El Paso released a study last month that found for every dollar invested in Project ARRIBA, \$28 is returned to the region. ARRIBA has added \$893 million to El Paso's economy in earnings by the program's graduates since 1995, the report says.



The nonprofit recently received a \$250,000 Bank of America grant for regional workforce development to address “a shortage of healthcare workers at a critical time.”

The El Paso region has long suffered an acute shortage of nurses, but since the novel coronavirus made its debut, the shortage has worsened. And hospitals in El Paso, like many others across America, are short on registered nurses by the hundreds.

“This grant will help guide underemployment communities toward well-paying, stable jobs that directly impact the success of the region,” the announcement read. “In El Paso, 45% of the region’s Hispanic population does not have training beyond high school, and 45% of households in poverty are female-headed.”

El Paso businessman Woody Hunt endorsed the organization in the announcement, saying, “Project ARRIBA has become a crucial community partner that is helping build the next generation of healthcare workers who come from and understand the unique needs of our region.

“We’re excited to see their work and impact grow through the investment Bank of America is making in their successful model.”

ARRIBA’s name came from Les Parker, now a retired banker, who was on the first board then, and thought of a name and acronym too good to pass up: Advanced Retraining and Redevelopment Initiative in Border Areas.

ARRIBA sprang from a social justice organization that El Paso’s Catholic Diocese formed in 1985 known as the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization, or EPISO. It’s now called EPISO-Border Interfaith because churches of other denominations have joined.

Roman Ortiz, ARRIBA’s CEO for the past 13 years, said they will be expanding the program to help students through four-year college programs and become teachers.

“We could help them transition from community college into the university, and we’d follow them on through until we get them a job here at a local school,” he said. “Right now, we’re placing our health care people at twice the rate as this time last year.

“Our people are getting into really great jobs that, on average, pay close to \$50,000 a year. They walked into ARRIBA making \$7,500 a year.”

For those students and their families, he said, “It’s a huge return on investment that’s changing their whole family paradigm.”

ARRIBA is changing lives of young adults like Angela Lopez, 19, who took early college courses in nursing at Valle Verde Early College High School and came out with an associate degree in nursing in 2019

Now working at El Paso Children’s Hospital, Lopez will graduate from Texas Tech University’s nursing program with a bachelor’s degree in December and in line for a two-year contract at \$40,250 a year.



“That’s all because a community college counselor told me I could apply for Project ARRIBA,” Lopez said. “I wouldn’t be able to graduate in December without the financial they gave me.”

Her goal is to earn a doctorate degree in nursing. Then, she would have the title of doctor of nursing practice with “Dr.” next to her name.

She also wants to stay at El Paso Children’s, which was desperately looking to fill 157 nursing positions two weeks ago.

New college students often need the kind of help they can’t get at home and that’s where case managers like ARRIBA’s Priscilla Estrada come in.

She’s one of five ARRIBA case managers who work with 30 to 60 students each at Texas Tech to help them with life skills and work skills, starting three months before they start college to be sure they’re ready.

“I need to meet with them on a weekly basis,” Estrada said, because the students typically come from families without education or money. “Money management is very important along with time management and stress management to keep them from burning out.”

ARRIBA also helps with tuition, \$6,500 per semester at Texas Tech, as well as expenses like books and uniforms.

Another of ARRIBA’s many success stories is Emmanuel Muñiz, a 33-year-old registered nurse at Children’s who graduated from Texas Tech in September, but who came from Juárez.

“I was born there and went to school there,” he said. “When I hit 18 in 2006, my parents got the call for permanent residency, and I was with that package.”

He went to UTEP, earned a degree in biology and, after a couple of years working as a clinical allergy technician, he decided to go to nursing school.

Project ARRIBA helped with orientation and came to the rescue when he and his wife ran short of money.

“They graciously helped me get through nursing school,” he said. “Without them, I’m not sure I would have made it.”

He graduated in August 2014 and had a job a week later.

“My first check was for \$2,100,” he said. “I went from nothing to \$2,100.”

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