

Lee honors first graduates of the Weekend College

Less than 2 years after program launched, nearly 30 students will receive associate degrees

BAYTOWN, TX — Less than 24 months after entering the Weekend College at Lee College and embarking on a brand-new journey targeted to adult learners and working students juggling school with other responsibilities, the first 28 graduates of the program were honored at a special ceremony held just days before they cross the stage to receive their associate degrees at the 2017 Spring Commencement.

“It is amazing to recognize the very first graduates of our Weekend College program. You all are truly trailblazers. Because of your persistence and cooperation, we’ve developed something that will serve a lot of students in the future,” Pres. Dr. Dennis Brown shared with graduates in a keynote address at the ceremony, held Sunday, May 7, in the Rundell Hall Conference Center. “What you have done sets in motion something that will inspire those who will follow you someday.”

Funded through a \$2.7 million First in the World Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the Weekend College gives students the opportunity to earn associate degrees in less than 2 years by attending classes only on Friday evenings and Saturdays. Five majors are offered: Transfer in Allied Health, General Studies – Social Science Concentration, Business Administration and Management, Industrial Welding Technology and Computer and Network Maintenance Technology.

Of the first cohort of students to enroll in the Weekend College in Fall 2015, fully 65 percent are expected to complete their degree programs within three years or less – significantly more than the state average of 12 percent. Much of that success is attributed to the program’s unique design, which keeps the same groups of students together from enrollment to graduation or transfer; offers courses at multiple campus locations, with many delivered in a hybrid format that blends online and classroom instruction; provides block scheduling that enables students to know exactly which courses to take and when they will be held; and ensures Weekend College courses are never dropped or filled to capacity. Students also work with a completion coach who helps them apply and enroll, secure financial aid and conquer any challenges that arise during the program or after graduation.

“You would never have made it through the Weekend College if you didn’t have ambition, faith and belief that this could be done, and you did it,” Brown said. “You challenged yourself in this program, and you should continue to challenge yourself. Never settle for the least; always look for the most. Go out, find, search, seek and make it happen. Education is the one thing that no one can ever take from you.”

At the ceremony, graduates received glass trophies acknowledging their completion of the program and awarded certificates to someone whose support made a difference during their Lee College career — whether it was a faculty or staff member, classmate, parent, spouse or even their child. Reyna Gomez, who will be receiving an Associate of Applied Science degree in Management, thanked Weekend College Completion Coach Jessica Falla for helping her at every step of the journey.

“I started the program really nervous and was going to stop going to school completely, but you were always there from the beginning,” Gomez said, referring to Falla and the other Weekend College staff and instructors whom she got to know in the program. “Nobody knew I was struggling trying to keep up with my classes, but I had a dream to accomplish. Though it wouldn’t be easy, you told me it would be worth it. Thank you all, because I made it.”

The Lee College Foundation also awarded scholarships to four of the top Weekend College students in the 2017 graduating class that can be used to continue their education or for expenses they face as they prepare to enter the workforce. Recipient Alex Garza, who maintained a 4.0 GPA while attending classes and working a full-time schedule of 40-50 hours per week, plans to earn a specialized certification in computer technology and pursue a bachelor’s degree at the University of Houston.

“I would tell anyone thinking about signing up for the Weekend College to go for it,” said Garza, who will receive an Associate of Applied Science degree in Computer and Network Maintenance Technology. “You get to know your fellow students and instructors in a way you wouldn’t if you were in a more traditional program.”

The tight, close-knit bond shared by the students, instructors and staff is part of what makes the Weekend College so special. Grant director Victoria Marron encouraged the graduates to stay in touch with each other and their Lee College family as they continue into the next phases of their lives and careers.

“I’m full of thanks, appreciation and reflection,” Marron said. “Creating a program from scratch is no easy task and it takes a village to come together. When you get this degree and walk across that stage, take a moment and look around you. You’ve defeated so many odds and all your cheerleaders have been there to support you. Know that we support you and encourage you still.”