

Renovated Student Center, SRAC Now Open

Lee College Offers Ultimate Student Experience



Valerie Garza, Lee College student and TRiO employee, enjoys one of several study pods in the Learning Hub of the renovated Student Center.

When Victoria Marron started at Lee College, she was 18 years old and had no idea how she was going to navigate being a new mother and a student.

"My upbringing was incredibly challenging," she recalled. "I lived in just about every Section 8 public housing in Baytown and Highlands. At one point, we barely had any food in the fridge. Our pediatrician's office donated formula for my daughter, and we were about to lose our apartment due to my husband getting laid off."

Marron shared her compelling story with a diverse audience of colleagues, community members and students celebrating the ribbon cutting for the renovated Student Center and new Student Resource and Advocacy Center.



IMPACT Early College High School students (l-r) Diamond Rodriguez, Eris Hawkins and Jefferson Rodriguez enjoy a meal in the Game Room during the grand re-opening celebration for the renovated Student Center.

Not only did she make motherhood and college work, but she has now come full circle, serving as a dedicated Lee College employee for more than a decade. The podium from where she spoke to the crowd in the Learning Hub was just a few feet from the site of her old cubicle where she had her first office as an outreach specialist.

Today, Dr. Victoria Marron, associate vice president of student success and chief belonging officer, is instrumental in empowering numerous students to achieve similar remarkable accomplishments.

"We've established ourselves as a college that cares deeply for students," she continued.



Gina Guillory, Lee College Board of Regents, plays a game of pool in the Game Room during the grand re-opening celebration for the renovated Student Center.

A Home Away from Home

The Student Center is the heart of the Lee College campus and is a home away from home where students can study, access support services, play games with their friends or just unwind.

At the beginning of the year, the building underwent a massive transformation using a \$5 million gift from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott. Scott chose the college as a recipient of the funds because of its focus on educating students from low-income backgrounds or racial minority groups.

"This wonderful money was for the community," said Dr. Lynda Villanueva, Lee College president. "We were simply the stewards to use it for the benefit of our students."

Ever since the sliding doors opened in late October, students like Valerie Garza have enjoyed the updated layout of the two-story building and added amenities — including cozy study nooks with white boards, charging stations and mood lighting; family-friendly quiet study rooms for students with children; a game room with pool and ping-pong tables; and a meditation room for reflection and prayer.

"This new Student Center provides me more support," Garza said. "When I come into work at the TRiO Student Support Services office or go to study in the Learning Hub, I light up because I get to see my old friends. We are all together now."

IMPACT student Eris Hawkins says the bright colors and fun shapes that are splattered throughout "motivate her" while she is studying, and she enjoys taking walks around the building. Jefferson Rodriguez, another IMPACT student, loves the comradery in the Game Room.

"I started coming here to play ping pong and pool, but then I started to make a bunch of new friends, of all ages," Rodriguez said. "It's a really good place to be."

Eliminating Barriers to Academic Success

Students who require assistance with basic needs — such as clothes, transportation, child care and food, can utilize the Student Resource and Advocacy Center, which opened in a new location on the first floor of the Student Center. The SRAC is also home to the largest food market in Texas and possibly the country. Students can shop for free produce, canned, dry and frozen food, as well as essential hygiene products and school supplies.

Ever since the inception of the SRAC, there's been an outpouring of financial support from the Lee College Foundation and community partners including: Yield Giving, ExxonMobil, JP Morgan Chase, Covestro, the Houston Food Bank, PVF Roundtable and H-E-B.

"Some of the challenges that students are facing today goes beyond some of the traditional things," said Brian Mayo, process manager for ExxonMobil's chemical plant. "It's the basic needs like providing some groceries to help them through the week, assisting with daycare so a single mother or father can come to campus or filling up a tank of gas, so they don't miss class. These are life-changing opportunities for students working to receive a certification or degree."

In addition, the U.S. Department of Education recently awarded Lee College \$2 million over the next four years to cover the cost of child care for hundreds of student parents.

"We are investing in our students' future by eliminating any and all barriers that are in their way and helping them to become the very best versions of themselves," Villanueva added.

That's the definition of the ultimate student experience.

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Top photo, from left: Demitri Zervoudis, Covestro site manager; Gina Guillory, Lee College Board of Regents; Pam Warford, Lee College Board of Regents; Kelli Forde-Spiers, executive director student engagement and belonging; Dr. Lynda Villanueva, Lee College president; Susan Moore-Fontenot, vice chair, Lee College Board of Regents; Brian Mayo, process manager, ExxonMobil; Tyrus Brailey, managing director, JP Morgan Chase & Co.; Gilbert Santana, Lee College Board of Regents and Dr. Victoria Marron, associate vice president of student success and chief belonging officer, attend the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the re-opening of the renovated Student Center and new location of the Student Resource and Advocacy Center.