

# Lewisville ISD Collegiate Academy at The Colony High School Enjoying Success

*First group of LISD students set to receive associate degrees in May*

By April Cunningham



*Collegiate Academy seniors, class of 2020.*

The 2017-2018 school year was a historical year for Lewisville ISD (LISD) — the LISD Collegiate Academy at The Colony High School (TCHS) was officially underway. In Spring 2017, more than 130 students in ninth grade at TCHS and eighth grade at Griffin and Lakeview middle schools had been accepted into

the academy's first cohort, beginning that fall. Fast-forward to today. Those 45 ninth-grade students are now high school seniors, and many of them are set to receive their associate degrees by the time high school graduation rolls around in May.

"We have been so blessed to have the LISD Collegiate Academy at The Colony

High School," TCHS Principal Dr. Tim Baxter said. "This is the first group of graduating seniors who have completed requirements for both an associate degree from Collin College and their high school diploma from LISD."

## THE BACKGROUND

The LISD Collegiate Academy at TCHS is a partnership with Collin College, and provides students the unique opportunity to potentially receive an associate degree or up to 60 hours of dual credit while in high school. Students who are accepted into the academy have a head start on college, enjoy minimized tuition costs, free access to textbooks and are supported by both TCHS and Collin College staff.

“When you think about a collegiate academy, a lot of times it’s on a college campus,” LISD Counseling Coordinator Jill Adams said. “The school-within-a-school cohort model found at our collegiate academy has made such a difference in the experience for these students. And, in LISD, it’s about the experience.”

What is the school-within-a-school cohort model? In essence, Collegiate Academy students aren’t just high schoolers or just college students — they’re both. Students attend TCHS and have the ability to participate in the same activities and programs as non-Collegiate Academy students.

“The Collegiate Academy is a unique format that a lot of districts don’t choose to do as far as having the ability to still have the traditional high school experience,” Collegiate Academy Advisor Ashley Stevens said. “Look at our students, they’re involved in every component of this. It amazes me they’re able to balance it

all, and have that enriching experience and get the academic side of it done at the same time.”

Although the first cohort was composed of only students from TCHS and its feeder middle schools, any LISD eighth-grade student could apply to the second and subsequent cohorts. Today, hundreds of students from across LISD apply each year to the Collegiate Academy.

“The district provides transportation using a hub system,” Collegiate Academy Counselor Delia Trahan said. “Parents drop their students off at their closest high school and the bus brings them to TCHS. To be a part of the academy takes a lot of dedication and a special kind of student who really wants it.”

## THE SOON-TO-BE GRADUATES

Meet Helena Fassil. In May, she will graduate from TCHS with her high school diploma and will also graduate from Collin College with her associate degree, something she would not have dreamed of had she not paid attention to a flyer she received her freshman year.

“This experience has been kind of like a rollercoaster,” Fassil, an active TCHS Student Council member, said. “I think going into it, everyone underestimated how much work was going to be asked of us. But now that I’m in my last two classes, it was definitely worth it and I’m really happy I got into this program and did

everything I did.”

Taylor Kinnamon credits the Collegiate Academy with helping him prioritize his time. He too will graduate with an associate degree, but not only was Kinnamon taking college and high school courses, he also worked two jobs.

“The Collegiate Academy has been helpful and great, especially with the opportunities we have like getting our associate’s early,” Kinnamon said. “It’s rough working two jobs and going to school, but with the help from Ms. Trahan and Ms. Stevens, it got easier.”

Janki Amin and Sierra Washington agreed with Kinnamon and said the Collegiate Academy helped them learn time management skills as well.

“It’s been challenging trying to balance high school and college and then doing all the other high school activities also, but it’s been great,” Amin said. “I’m still kind of trying to find a balance. You just have to be really good at time management and figuring out what you should do first and what things are more important than others.”

Washington added, “I’ve gotten a lot better with managing my time. I feel like you kind of need time management, those skills are a big thing you need growing up. That’ll help me as I go to my next step with college, and also when I get a job and start living in the adult world.”

Like Fassil and Kinnamon, both Amin and

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First day of Collegiate Academy.

Washington are set to receive their associate degrees this spring. And so are Ethan Muzquiz and Richard Verastigui.

Unlike many of his counterparts whose parents encouraged them to apply to the Collegiate Academy, Verastigui said the program caught his eye right away.

"I heard about the program, you know, it's supposed to be college classes or dual credit classes within the high school setting," he said. "I thought, 'You know what, this seems different and interesting. I might as well do this instead of just the regular high school route.'"

Verastigui will walk away from the Collegiate Academy with no regrets.

"For me, this [experience] has been a character build up," he said. "In life, it's not always going to go the way you want it, especially how you plan it. You have to adapt to your certain situations, and I feel like this experience has helped me with that."

Muzquiz echoed similar sentiments.

"I remember I was not interested at all," Muzquiz said. "But once you look back, you definitely think, 'I wouldn't change anything about this.' I think once you're at the end of the road, you don't really look at all of the struggles you had. You think more about how you're at the end, how you're happy to be there, and how you saved a lot of money and time."

He added, "It was definitely worth taking this route because at the end of the day, I'd rather be in this position than anywhere else or in any of the other programs."

From writing 20-page essays to managing newfound independence, Muzquiz and his classmates also said the Collegiate Academy has set them up for success when they head off to a four-year university. Muzquiz is currently

exploring his options but he's considering schools such as Baylor University and Indiana University for his postsecondary education.

"The Collegiate Academy separates you from the crowd," he said. "On top of the writing skills and the associate degree, you end up getting really ready for college. You know how to do all of the basic things like registering for classes, that most people are blind to going in."

Something else the students weren't expecting but have welcomed? The friendships.

"There's a lot of people I met and became close with through this program that I don't think I would have, if I followed the traditional high school route," Fassil said. "I built long-lasting friendships outside of high school that I think are very special."

Kinnamon added, "We have group chats, study groups and even meet up outside of school just to hang out."

This group of six—Amin, Fassil, Kinnamon, Muzquiz, Verastigui and Washington—are special to Trahan and Stevens.

"We've been through a lot together," Trahan said. "Nobody really knew what the program was going to look like. These seniors and the junior class, because they were the first cohort together, built this program into what it is today."

For Baxter, he couldn't be prouder of the Collegiate Academy's first cohort, especially the graduating seniors.

"These students began Collegiate as sophomores, and it was especially challenging for them to get involved in college courses and to catch up from missing freshman courses, since they were the first group," Baxter said. "They have come so far, have worked extremely

hard, and have shown a tremendous amount of perseverance and dedication to be successful. We are so proud of them and can't wait to see their future success."

## THE IMPACT

Collectively, the seniors mentioned time management as their biggest takeaway, but Trahan said they have gained much more.

"They're learning skills that they don't even know that they're learning right now," Trahan said. "They're getting scholarships, they're all getting into great schools. They are leaders in groups and organizations, too. I think a lot of that comes from the learning in these classes, not just the academic side, but the social and emotional as well. These students are learning so many skills that are going to be so beneficial for them later on."

As Adams had said, in LISD, it's about the experience. Many doors have been opened for the nearly 350 students enrolled in the Collegiate Academy.

"Thanks to this cohort model, these students have gone through this together," Adams said. "The Colony High School has dedicated an entire wing to the academy; the professors love to come back and work with the collegiate students; there are parent ambassadors and tailgate events, and they have Collegiate Academy sponsors who take the students and pour into them, so they are successful. They truly get to have both the high school and college experience."

The LISD Collegiate Academy at TCHS may have changed the lives of those six students and their classmates.

"I think the Collegiate Academy has literally changed the life trajectory of some of our students because of the fact the district has the physical and financial investment in it," Monya Crow, LISD Director of Counseling Services, said. "There are students who are receiving an associate degree where they maybe never would have otherwise. Then that begins to open the door for them to think, 'Well, what about a bachelor's degree?' From what we've heard from our students and parents, the academy has changed their pathway."

On May 15, 2020, 30 seniors in the Collegiate Academy's first cohort are set to receive an associate degree from Collin College.



Ribbon cutting ceremony for LISD Collegiate Academy at TCHS.