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## Rising Stars: Right Person, Right Time

Shirley Reed, South Texas College

By: John Pulley

[University Business, Nov 2006](#)

Twelve years ago, Shirley Reed traveled deep into the heart of Texas. Arriving in a region of the Rio Grande Valley beset by poverty, unemployment, and some of the lowest education rates in the country, she set about building a community college.

Reed was a first-time president. The institution's trustees were green, as well. They had no bank account, no professors, no computers, and no students. South Texas College, based in McAllen, a city located 510 miles southeast of Chihuahua, Mexico, did have a surplus of ambition. The state of affairs was summarized by a terse Texan putdown: all hat and no cattle.

"We were starting from scratch," recalls Gary Gurwitz, one of the original trustees appointed by then Gov. Ann Richards. "I had more books in my house than we had at the college." Undaunted, Reed predicted that the institution would serve 20,000 students within 20 years. "People chuckled," says William Serrata, the college's vice president for Student Services.



*Vacant structures became STC's first buildings; "the joke at the time was that the president goes to garage sales and buys the ga rages."*

Since then, South Texas College has been one of the nation's fastest-growing community colleges. Today it serves some 18,000 students at three campuses. A recent building binge has brought 16 new structures in 16 months. STC has 90 degree programs and is one of three community colleges in Texas to offer baccalaureate degrees. Three accreditation visits by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Serrata says, have been passed "at full muster."

Reed's story is a classic one of what can happen when a president's abilities are commensurate with institutional challenges. She had a clear idea of what the college would look like, and the ability to get other people to see it, too. In South Texas, the consensus is that Reed was the right person at the right time.

### Reaching the President's Post

Shirley Reed wasn't born to be president of anything. She grew up in a modest north Canadian household. Her father, a nickel miner, performed "very dangerous, dirty work" to support the family, she says.

At 5, Reed realized that there was not another little girl living within 50 miles. "It was clear to me that if you are going to make it in this world, you have to be the fastest runner, climb the highest

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**VITAL STATS**

Shirley A. Reed

trees, be the bravest, and work the hardest just to compete," she says, adding that it's "an important part of how I have built the college. I was on a mission. I was going to get it done no matter what."

Her parents moved the family to Florida to provide better opportunities for their daughter.

Her advancement to a better life took a detour when, at 16, she married, as she describes, "an alcoholic, abusive husband who was not going to let me get ahead." A decade passed before she got back on track. At 26, divorced and determined to make something of herself, Reed enrolled at St. Petersburg Junior College and began working toward a degree.

A hospital lab technician at night, she says she would go to school by day "and sleep when I could."

It took six years for her to earn an associate's degree in liberal arts, but

**Title:**

*President, South Texas*

*College*

*, 1994 to present*

**Prior Positions:**

*Northland Pioneer College (Ariz.), district VP for Administrative Services, associate dean for learning resources; Spoon River College (Ill.), director of learning resources*

**Education:**

*St. Petersburg Junior College, associate's degree in liberal arts; University of South Florida, bachelor's degree in English; University of Hawaii, Honolulu, master's in library science; Illinois State University, Ph.D. in education; Western International University (Ariz.), MBA*

**Family:**

*Met her current husband, a retired car dealer, on a golf course; She says, "He takes care of me full time; he does the grocery shopping and everything."*

**Favorite electronic device:**

*A gadget used on the golf course to estimate driving distances*

**Last book read:**

*If Harry Potter Ran General Electric: Leadership Wisdom from the World of the Wizards!, by Tom Morris (Doubleday, 2006)*

**Most admired historical leader:**

*Winston Churchill*

**Second choice for a career:**

*Prosecutor or district attorney*

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by then she was on a roll. She went on to earn a baccalaureate, two master's degrees, and a doctorate, each from a different institution.

She calls her MBA "the most useful degree I ever earned." Yet it's the opportunities at the community college, she says, that "literally saved my life."

Credentialed to the hilt, Reed set about acquiring the practical, hands-on experience that has been essential to her success at STC. In the 1970s, she joined Spoon River College (Ill.), where she was tasked with creating a learning resources center. "Many know it as the library," she says, poking fun at the jargon of the day. "They gave me a vacant bakery and wished me luck."

From that community college, she moved on to another one: Northland Pioneer College, which serves the poverty-stricken population comprising Arizona's Navajo, Hopi, and White Mountain Apache tribes. Reed was instrumental in creating a distance education program that, relying on microwave technology, delivered instruction to students at 22 locations across two sprawling counties. She managed the fiscal, administrative, and campus operations of four campuses and six satellite centers. "It seems that I've always been a pioneer," she says.

### Spotting a Lone Star

South Texas College is the state's only two-year institution conceived by statute. When the Texas legislature passed a law, in 1993, to create it, McAllen and its environs were home to about 600,000 overwhelmingly Hispanic residents. It was the largest metropolitan area in the state not served by a community college.

The region was poor. Congress's passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 resulted in an increased importation of Mexican produce, further decimating the region's withering agrarian economy. At the time, Hidalgo County, of which McAllen is the seat, had an unemployment rate of about 24 percent. In neighboring Starr County, which is included in the community college district, unemployment eclipsed 40 percent.

Reed calls it "criminal neglect" on the state's part to have a region with 600,000 people but no access to a community college.

A stipulation of South Texas College's creation: Local residents would pay for it. Reed's challenge was to convince Latinos to endorse the institution at the polls, pass a bond referendum, and create a taxing district. It was a tall order for a "blond, non-Spanish speaking, non-Hispanic woman" from the Canadian hinterland, says Michael Metke, a prot?g? of Reed's and president of Lake Washington Technical College, near Seattle.

"That was a major hurdle," Reeds says. "The community could not comprehend the critical role that we would play in this region. ... We did what any smart politician does. We walked the streets. We went door to door. We registered voters. We helped people get to the polls."

It worked. Voters endorsed the college, created a tax district, and floated a \$20 million bond issue to construct the first buildings. In 2001, Reed went on the campaign trail again and convinced voters to pass a \$98 million bond referendum for the college.

Few people could understand her vision when she was first hired, says Leila Salinas, coordinator of the college's instructional resources lab. "She really could see things that other people could not see."

## Devising a Business Plan

Reed likens the creation of a college to the launch of a company. "It's just like starting a business," she says. "Where are we going to locate? How do we market it? How do we price the product?"



Initially, the college held classes in any unoccupied space administrators could find, including church basements, police stations, a converted laundromat, and vacant buildings, recalls Reed, who bought up surplus portable buildings that had been used as food-stamp distribution centers. "The joke at the time was that the president goes to garage sales and buys the garages," she says.

By all accounts, Reed has acquitted herself with gusto—putting in 12- to 14-hour days, seven days a week, for the first five years.

"She is aggressive. She is enthusiastic. She is organized," Gurwitz says. "You know when she asks you to do something that she's ready to stay with you and work side by side to get it done."

Early in her tenure, Reed realized she needed a crackerjack staff but couldn't afford to hire established top-shelf talent. She would have to grow her own. She assembled her staff by giving opportunities to inexperienced people in whom she saw leadership potential. If they performed well, she gave them more. "She told us that the college was like a train that was starting

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to move and that if we were not ready, we would not be able to keep up," Salinas says.

Little by little, she created a team. Subordinates say Reed's confidence allows her to embrace the good ideas that bubble up from her staff, that her generosity of spirit allows her to share credit for the college's success.

Staff members with an affinity for hard work thrived. "She took a chance on me when I was relatively young," Serrata says. "She has allowed me to grow with the institution."

Others burned out. "She pushed her staff so hard that I thought some of them would break," says Mike Perez, city manager for McAllen and a member of the committee that interviewed presidential candidates, including Reed. "She was relentless."

Reed concedes that the work simply wore some people out. But she doesn't possess the demeanor of a drill sergeant. Wedded to her tenacity and resilience is an easygoing manner that disarms people.

"She's so down to earth, you think you're talking to a fourth-grade teacher," Perez says. "She's got about an inch of softness around her before you hit the steel. Don't be fooled by her high voice and her bubbly personality. The woman is tenacious and tough."

### The College of Choice

The president's commitment to South Texas College and its students is informed by her own experience. Her life took a dramatic upward turn when she enrolled in community college, she says. Reed is determined to provide that same chance for learning to the people of Starr and Hidalgo counties. "I know what it meant to me," she says. "Everyone should have the same opportunity."

In STC's early years, the institution billed itself as "The People's College." A logo depicted people reaching upward, a symbol of how STC would "give everyone an opportunity to be an equal participant in society," Reed says. "The battle cry was, 'Go to college and earn a living wage so that you can provide for your family.'"

The college has been a transformative force. Since its opening, the Starr County unemployment rate has declined from 40 percent to about 13 percent. In Hidalgo, unemployment has fallen from 24 percent to 7 percent. The consensus opinion in this corner of the state is that Shirley Reed and her college have been a critical factor in the region's rising economic fortunes.

Today, STC bills itself as "The College of Choice." Its leaders routinely collaborate with employers to train workers in the right skills. They strive, as well, to prepare students for advanced academic endeavors, including the pursuit of four-year and advanced degrees.

Across constituencies, Reed has pushed to make the college user-friendly. "She has an outstanding perception of what students would like to see and what their needs are and what we can do to fulfill those. She knows that it's not easy when you have too many responsibilities, family and work and school," Salinas says. "I think she really gets her fulfillment from knowing that what she does matters and that it will make a difference to a lot of people who need it."

The secret of her success? Reed says there is none: "Quite frankly, the road map was

very clear. It was simply a case of one hurdle at a time, one partnership at a time, one coalition at a time."

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