



High school senior Aaron Chambers at Tulsa Community College's Southeast Campus, where he is enrolled in college classes

## ACADEMIC EDGE

Tulsa Community College and Union Public Schools target first-generation college students.

BY LUCAS BRADLEY

**Aaron Chambers** had no intention of going to college. I definitely did not want to go anywhere in Oklahoma if I went to college at all," the Union Public Schools senior says. "I was so sure that I didn't even sign up for Oklahoma's Promise (which allows eligible students in grades 8-10 whose families meet income requirements to earn college scholarships) when I could have, and that's kind of biting me a little now."

Luckily for Chambers, along came Earn a Degree, Graduate Early his freshman year. A pilot program from Tulsa Community College and Union Public Schools, EDGE offers students the chance to take college classes concurrently and graduate high school with an associate's degree, all at no cost.

"Between the reimbursement that is provided by the state regents and the school district paying for the portion of it there is no cost at all to the students," says **Leigh Goodson**, TCC president and CEO.

The difference between EDGE and other concurrent/dual credit programs at TCC is in the students who participate and how they are supported, explains **Nicole Burgin**, TCC media relations manager. EDGE focuses on students

and families who qualify for Oklahoma's Promise based on income guidelines, as well as first-generation college students.

"The key is catching them in eighth grade," Goodson says. "They may not be thinking college is for them, but they haven't really been thinking of it fully, so they don't have a concrete decision yet. And when their parents see that there is no cost, it's hard for them to turn down the program."

Burgin says students are provided with "intentional support structures," such as preparing the student for college-level academic work, beginning in ninth grade and continuing through graduation.

This month, 27 students will graduate from the EDGE program, which is planned for expansion into other districts, Burgin says.

"They gave us an invitation to join the program, and my parents were like, 'Hey, this seems like a good idea,'" says **Yesenia Portillo-Urquiza**, another Union senior. "It's a pretty big deal. I get to go straight into university with almost two years completed."

Chambers is headed to Oklahoma State University. "I just fell in love with the place and the people," he says. "I didn't even apply anywhere else." **TP**