

City of Rockwall Adopts University Type Approach To Employee Education

The City of Rockwall, Texas with 235 employees including its Volunteer Fire Department enters its second year of offering classes through Rockwall University. Don't let the name deceive you. Rockwall hasn't started its own institute of higher education, but rather, an internal employee program of higher knowledge about the internal and external workings of City operations. So far, three semesters and six classes have been offered with two more beginning in October 2003.

This program is designed to allow communication through education to and from the different departments in the city. There are classes that employees can take focusing on each department, management, and daily functions of the department. It is the City's hope that this program will provide and encourage involvement in local government; give the participants a greater knowledge base about the city and where it is moving in the near and distant future.

The mission of Rockwall University is to provide education to the employees of Rockwall in order to form a collaborative effort in creating and maintaining a high level of knowledge and interest in local government. It is our belief that better knowledge of the inter-workings of each department will foster better communication within and between departments, thereby helping them to become more efficient in providing services to the City's residents.

"We had an idea about developing a program to teach our employees about the departments of the city and how each department's role impacts other departments. The City hired a social studies teacher working for the Rockwall Independent School District

as a summer intern to develop and write the curriculum for the program. Within a few months, Rockwall University was born.” - Rick Crowley, Assistant City Manager. The City is also enthusiastic that the social studies teacher has had an opportunity to work within the City organization because his social studies students also stand to gain from his experience at City Hall.

Employee interest has been very good in the first year, with 49 employees or almost 21% of the City’s entire employee population from 13 separate departments participating in the first 3 semesters. What’s even more impressive is that through the first six courses offered, approximately 1070 combined hours of employee education have been received by the City’s workforce and 360 more hours will be added to that total upon completion of this semester. “I think Rockwall University is a great benefit to everyone. It benefits the employees which also benefits the customer. It’s a great idea and I am happy to be a participant.” – Denise LaRue, Planning Department Coordinator.

A course is five weeks long and lasts two hours per week. Courses are taught by the department directors, consultants, and actual departmental personnel that perform daily functions. Instructors are encouraged to test the students, give special projects, offer field trips, and require attendance at City Council meetings and Boards & Commissions meetings. For example, in Spring 2003, the Parks & Recreation class took a field trip to the new Myers Park Expansion site and while learning how to read a detailed landscape plan, were given the opportunity to decide where new trees are now being planted. And, during the Police Department course, students were allowed to have “ride alongs” with a Rockwall Police Officer. "Rockwall University is a great learning opportunity that should not be passed up.” – Lea Ann Ewing, Purchasing Agent.

Rockwall University students are required to complete 8 core courses which include: City Management / Administration, Engineering, Planning & Zoning, Human Resources, Police Department Operations, Fire Department Operations, Public Budgeting & Finance, and the Balanced Scorecard Strategic Plan, as well as 4 elective courses which may include: Internal Operations, Building Inspections / Code Enforcement, Parks & Recreation, Economic Development, Leadership Rockwall, an Internship, or a Special Project. A participant must complete a total of 12 classes before graduating the program.

“This program has been very positive for our employees. Not only do they get to learn valuable information about the City’s daily operations, but they also get the opportunity to interact with their co-workers in a way that strengthens teamwork and builds personal and professional relationships that will benefit the City, its residents, and customers” - Julie Couch, City Manager

The City’s ultimate goal is to offer Rockwall University courses to the employees of the school district, other local entities, and to the public. City officials believe that by providing the public the opportunity to learn about how their tax dollars are spent and how the City is operated – much like the current Citizens Police Academy currently offered through the Rockwall Police Department and the Citizens Fire Academy offered through the Rockwall Fire Department, they will have a greater understanding of how much planning and preparation goes into providing simple services such as garbage collection and code enforcement. The City organization will also gain insight as to its customer’s needs.

Another goal of the program is to offer a lecture series for its participants which will focus on leadership. The City hopes that this program which will include leadership

presentations from outside the City organization will further contribute to the effectiveness of Rockwall University.

Rockwall is approximately 22 miles east of downtown Dallas on Interstate 30 and is the County Seat of Rockwall County. Located on the eastern shore of Lake Ray Hubbard with a population of 22,000, Rockwall is one of the fastest growing cities in the nation. Rockwall County was noted as the fastest growing county in the nation last year. For more information about Rockwall University, please contact Joey Boyd at Rockwall City Hall, 972-772-6408.