College student Diego Gonzalez helps Harvey Hernandez, 10, with his homework at the Good Samaritan Center’s after-school program.

On a late October afternoon in the Good Samaritan Center, a fifth-grader slumped over his homework, then turned pleading eyes on Diego Gonzalez.

“Sir, can you help me?”

Gonzalez, 31 and professionally dressed, circled around the table to look at Harvey Hernandez’s worksheet. “Did your teacher explain to you the different types of energy?”

This is the new face of federal work-study at the Alamo Colleges and the University of Texas at San Antonio, which this semester started to add positions at local nonprofits to their traditional lists of campus jobs.

Last spring, Gonzalez earned his work-study money from a desk job at San Antonio College, where he is studying to be an English teacher. This fall, Gonzalez is working in the Homework Zone at Good Samaritan’s after-school program.

The Alamo Colleges placed 40 work-study students at nonprofits this fall, said Martha Treviño, director of the community college district’s Office of Experiential Learning. UTSA this year created the Rowdy Corps program, placing an additional 15 work-study students at outside organizations, said Brian Halderman, director of the university’s Center for Civic Engagement.

The federal work-study program funds part-time jobs for college students with financial need. Participating schools are required to use at least 7 percent of their work-study allocations to employ students in community service jobs. Many schools comply with that mandate by placing students at campus libraries or tutoring centers that are open to the public.
Alamo Colleges Chancellor Bruce Leslie made a commitment about two years ago to develop more hands-on learning opportunities for students, Treviño said. Part of that involved reaching out to nonprofits that have relationships with the district’s five community colleges, and the partnership was formed last spring. Students can work for a long list of organizations, including Boys & Girls Clubs of San Antonio, Girls Inc. and Café College.

“It gives students the opportunity to acquire real-world work experience, ideally in the area of their chosen work path,” Treviño said.

The students placed at nonprofits earn the same $9 hourly rate as the 530 work-study employees on Alamo Colleges campuses, for a maximum of 15 hours a week. This year, the district’s federal work-study allocation funds the entire paycheck, but the district will ask nonprofits to pay 10 percent next year in an attempt to place more students off campus, Treviño said.

Gonzalez was working at SAC’s student activities office last semester, a job that included making student identification cards, when he learned of the opportunities at outside organizations on the Alamo Colleges website.

“I thought it sounded like a great idea,” he said. “It sounded like an opportunity to get practical experience in the field that I would want to pursue after graduation.”

Treviño matched him with the Good Samaritan after-school program, where he works four days a week. It averages 100 students a day, many of whom struggle academically, said Ellie Saucedo, the organization’s intern coordinator.

The children look up to Gonzalez, who plans to graduate from SAC in December and transfer to UTSA to pursue a bachelor’s degree in English with a teaching certification. He hopes to eventually teach high school.

Good Samaritan employs three more work-study students: one from UTSA, one from St. Philip’s College and one from Palo Alto College, Saucedo said.

“They’re great role models,” Saucedo said. “We try to encourage college advancement for our kids. ... Having university students help them with their homework is just pretty cool.”

UTSA’s strategic plan, which includes a push to increase community learning, partially inspired the Rowdy Corps program, Halderman said. The university is exploring whether it can give academic credit to Rowdy Corps students working in their fields of study.

“We’re really trying to create future citizens who will engage in the community,” said Rachel Halvaksz, project coordinator for the university’s Center for Civic Engagement. “They’ll be more aware of nonprofits and what resources are out there in the community.”

St. Mary’s University has been placing an average of 20 work-study students at nonprofits annually for more than a decade, said Amy Diepenbrock, director of the university’s Civic Engagement and Career Development center. The university focuses on placing students in Catholic organizations and those that do work on the West Side, Diepenbrock said.
Many biology and pre-dental students do administrative work for the Christus Santa Rosa Health System, Diepenbrock said. Other students work with Catholic Charities or even the Texas Diaper Bank.

The influx of work-study job seekers from public educational institutions will not harm the St. Mary’s program, Diepenbrock said.

“The agency need in San Antonio is not going away,” she said.

Our Lady of the Lake University has been sending work-study employees to nonprofits since 2002, said Myra Martinez, assistant director of financial aid for student employment. This semester, 16 are placed externally out of more than 400 work-study undergraduates. Because many students do not have transportation, all available positions are within a 5-mile radius of the university, Martinez said.

“This is our service to the community,” she said.

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