

## International Town and Gown Association



### 2017 Larry Abernathy Award



Program Name: ACT-San Marcos

Submitted by: City of San Marcos and Texas State University

City Population: 54,076

Student Enrollment: 38,808

---

### Program Summary

San Marcos, Texas, home of Texas State University, is located on Interstate 35 between Austin and San Antonio. For the past three years, the Census Bureau listed San Marcos as having the highest rate of growth among all U.S. cities with at least 50,000 people. Like many town and gown communities, San Marcos has experienced tension and conflict between students and permanent residents especially related to noise and disturbances late at night. Our story highlights how building trust and relationships can improve quality of life and serve as roots for a sustainable and robust future.

In the fall of 2007, students and permanent residents collided in a land use conflict between densely populated rental property and an adjoining single family neighborhood. The public outcry that noise and disturbances from student populated areas affected the safety and quality of life in residential areas was met with resistance from students who perceived disparate treatment from permanent residents and the police. The police were in the middle of the dispute that enforcement ranged from “not enough” to “too harsh”. Blame was cast on the City, specifically the Police, for not quelling rowdy behavior and the university for “not doing anything” about off campus conduct. It was apparent there had to be a change. The potential crisis in university-city relations was averted through effective problem-solving, building relationships, communication, community involvement and on-going assessment.

The City and Texas State collaborated to form Achieving Community Together (ACT). A key foundation was including a variety of community stakeholders to better understand the core values of each and formulate a balanced response. The ACT Committee included the Vice President for Student Affairs, Dean of Students, Attorney for Students, Housing and Residential Life, Student Health Center, University Police Department, San Marcos Police Department, City Code Enforcement, Neighborhood Services, property managers and owners, Central Texas Dispute Resolution Center and community members.



## ***The Need for Change***

In 2007, the police handled 2,833 noise complaints – the most frequent 9 1 1 call for service at the San Marcos Police Department. Loud party calls were a huge drain on resources. Officers were frustrated with their efforts to deal effectively with noise, especially when they responded repeatedly to the same location. Property managers hosted large scale events with alcohol that often resulted in brawls and trashed neighborhoods. Raucous parties had become part of the culture and a norm that enforcement could not change.

## ***Cooperation and Keys to Success***

An innovative response to the noise problem was using the **S**canning, **A**nalysis, **R**esponse, **A**ssessment (**SARA**) problem-solving model. This systematic method is generally applied to crime problems but in this case was used to address noise as a quality of life issue. The ACT Committee developed a comprehensive noise response plan with emphasis on education and community influence, not enforcement. A fundamental element to creating community influence is relationship building. Individuals, groups, cultures and communities do not share the same values and goals. Bringing together the City of San Marcos, Texas State University, students, permanent residents, the community at large plus property owners and managers requires an understanding of individual and cultural values. The relationship-building efforts put theory into action - Beck and Cowan's *Spiral Dynamics*, with an understanding of the core values of individuals and cultures. All stakeholders had to be considered to achieve the goal of reducing noise. Neighbors wanting quiet. Property owners and managers wanting a high occupancy rate; hosts wanting to have a gathering without the police showing up. Patrol officers wanting to eliminate wasted time spent on noise complaints. The University wanting students to make good choices. These values had to be integrated with the need to reduce conflict, improve quality of life and use positive steps to retain students and develop success for graduation.



Integral to success was strengthening the City/University relationship with property owners and managers for them to have a better understanding of the impact of noise and associated conditions. Noise affects quality of life and can have a detrimental economic impact on the property owner or manager. A noisy place can be a less desirable place to live in. Tenants who repeatedly host noisy gatherings most likely have other issues – such as not paying rent on time or not taking care of property, thereby increasing make-ready costs to management. Out-of-control parties or uninvited guests often were responsible for damaging property or harming residents through burglaries, thefts, and assaults.

In 2009, the ACT Committee formed ACT Ally, connecting ACT, the Department of Housing and Residential Life and residential property owners/managers. ACT Ally is based upon establishing relationships to incorporate the diverse goals and values of a dynamic community for a successful off campus living experience. Changing the environment through property owners and managers in the off-campus housing market has been integral to the successful efforts to reduce noise.

Owners and managers who promote ACT programs and services, use marketing strategies without alcohol or disruptive behavior, cooperate with police on noise violations, and collaborate with ACT to resolve conflicts or disputes, will then have priority access to campus to market to students. ACT Ally participants are highlighted in the Texas State Housing and Residential Life Office, eligible to attend the annual Housing Fair on campus and be included in advertising in residence halls and events sponsored by the office of Off Campus Living. Over the last eight years the program has evolved to a fee-based membership which offsets the burden on taxpayers and the university to fund off campus living programs.

***ACT Ally: Benefits beyond Noise Reduction***

Solving noise issues uncovered a variety of problems associated with students moving off campus. Moving off campus is normally the first time students live on their own. They face challenges of finding housing, transportation, money and budgeting, roommate conflicts, disagreements with management, renter’s insurance, renting in a single-family neighborhood, and leases. ACT Ally has become an educational program to help students successfully transition off campus, get along with neighbors, and fulfill the responsibilities of living in a community. All are of interest to Texas State University to reduce outside stressors for students to stay in school, the City of San Marcos to improve quality of life, and property owners and managers to directly market to students on campus, and have a better-prepared tenant to move onto their property.

***Measuring Success: Time and Money***

A comparison in noise calls for service shows a consistent reduction from the benchmark year of 2008. Noise is no longer the most frequent call type handled by police. Noise occurring at all hours has



decreased by 47.4%. This reduction in spite of a 34.5% increase overall in police calls for service and a 33.0% increase in student enrollment. The time saved in patrol labor handling noise calls translates to 2,315 hours. The 2,315 hours of uncommitted time has freed up staff to dedicate time elsewhere rather than handling noise complaints. The reduction in noise complaints has been accomplished without the need for writing tickets or making arrests. From 2008 – 2016, citations and arrests have decreased by 73.4%.

In the 2016 – 2017 membership year, ACT Ally generated more than \$62,000 in revenue and alleviated the burden on the City of San Marcos taxpayer and Texas State University to fund ACT Ally and its programs and services.

***Relationships and Replicating Success***

ACT Ally has achieved significant success by incorporating differing cultural values and goals to build relationships, create community, move through conflict with respect and improve quality of life. The close partnership of the City of San Marcos, Texas State University and the rental housing industry has resulted in noise reduction plus addressed the issues associated with students moving off campus. As we have learned over the last ten years, successful town and gown relationships branch out and create more relationships. We started relatively small and have found an extended network connecting many dots. Some of these networks are individual and the noteworthy collective networks are the Transportation Master Plan, San Marcos Neighborhood Commission, Downtown Master Plan, Texas State Campus Master Plan, Student Liaison on the City Council and Planning and Zoning Commission, 'Cats Love Downtown project between the Department of Housing and Residential Life and Main Street to greet new freshman and transfer students, and Bobcat Build as the largest service project on campus and second largest one-day community service project in the state of Texas.

ACT, ACT Ally, and successful town and gown relationships must be organic in nature, evolving with the successes and challenges every community faces. We believe the relationship with the City of San Marcos and Texas State University reflect the spirit of Mr. Abernathy's vision of networking professionals, sharing resources, and using creative solutions to create vibrant and flourishing town and gown communities.

Contact Names: Lisa Dvorak, Community Liaison, City of San Marcos  
Dr. Rosanne Proite, Director of Housing and Residential Life

E-Mail: Lisa Dvorak: [ldvorak@sanmarcostx.gov](mailto:ldvorak@sanmarcostx.gov)  
Dr. Rosanne Proite: [rp43@txstate.edu](mailto:rp43@txstate.edu)

Telephone: Lisa Dvorak: 512.753.2310  
Dr. Rosanne Proite: 512.245.5595

For more information about ACT and ACT Ally, see:  
<http://www.reslife.txstate.edu/OffCampusLiving/ACT.html>

Also see ACT Ally from a community perspective: <https://youtu.be/xR3Qyw2OdAI>