

BY ELLEN ULLMAN

LEARNING AS A

FIRST

LANGUAGE

Creating opportunities for immigrant students

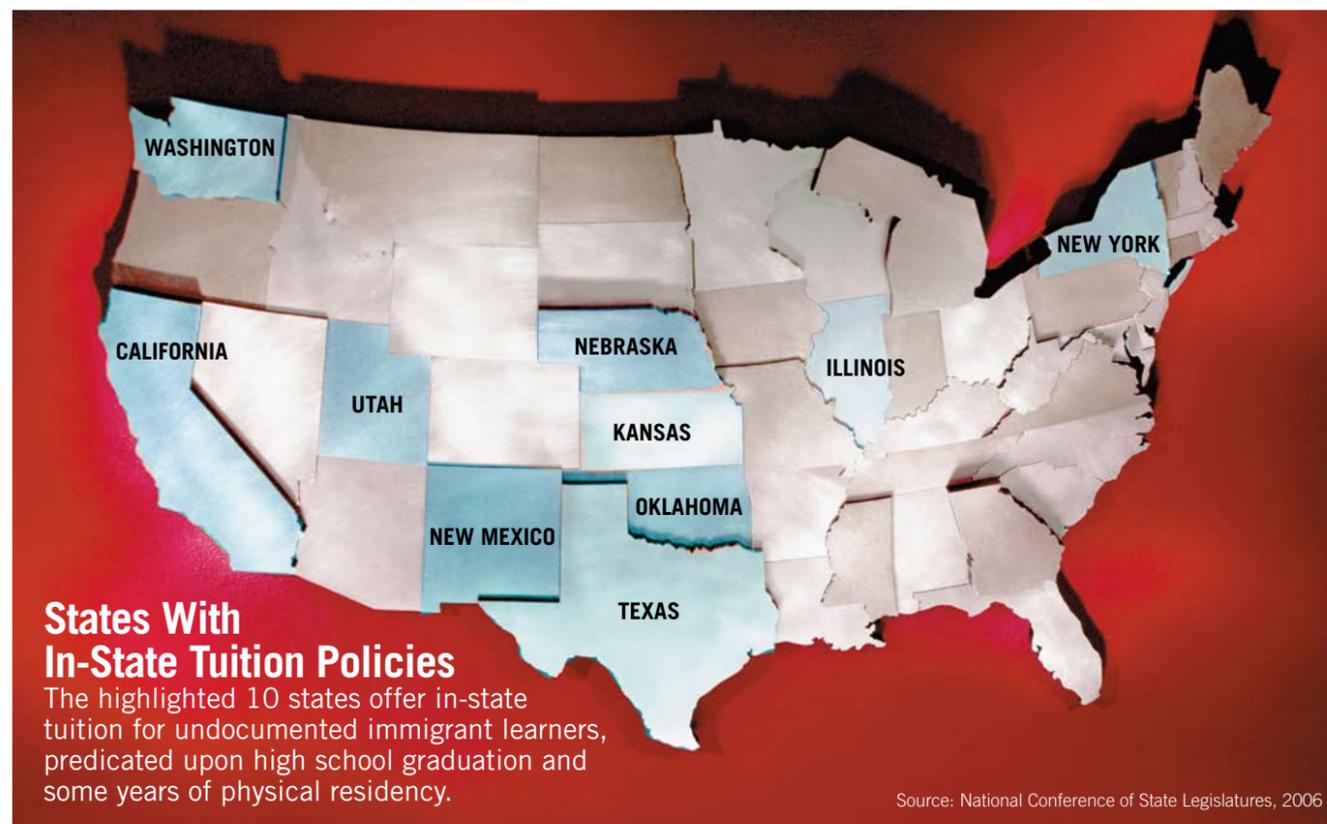
Juan Caicedo came to the United States from Colombia in 1989 with the dream of one day working in America as an architect. It seemed a realistic dream. He'd attended college and held a degree in architecture from the Foundation University of America in Bogotá. Instead, he found himself washing dishes at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. He worked at Burger King, too. He remembers watching businesspeople come and go, thinking, "Someday, I will be one of them."

It wouldn't happen on his first stint in the States; immigration troubles eventually forced Caicedo to return to Colombia without a degree. He re-entered the country a few years later determined to succeed.

In 1999, after working at several restaurants and a junkyard in New York City, Caicedo enrolled in Westchester Community College (WCC) in Valhalla, N.Y. "I took ESL classes and spent lots of time in the library and at the tutoring center," he recalls.

He soon earned an associate degree in civil technology and went on to the New York Institute of Technology for his bachelor's in architecture. Today he works for an architecture firm in Connecticut.

BARRY AUSTIN PHOTOGRAPHY/GETTY IMAGES



A History of Helping

WCC, like many community colleges across the country, has a reputation as a friend of the immigrant population.

Its latest initiative—the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE)—aims to underscore the significance of immigrant education through community colleges, professional organizations, and higher education in general.

Teresita Wisell, CCCIE's director, is creating a blueprint that will provide assistance and mentoring to community colleges looking to expand programs for immigrant students.

“With baby boomers leaving the workforce during the next decade, we need a skilled workforce,” says Wisell. “Community colleges are effective places for immigrants to get the start they need.”

The CCCIE will be housed in the college's new Gateway Center, which is slated to open in the spring of 2010, along with the college's modern-language program, its English language

learners (ESL) program, and a new entrepreneurial center. Wisell has already recruited a blue-ribbon panel of 14 community college experts to provide advice on what services to offer the school's immigrant population. She's asked panel members to speak about immigrant-education issues and contribute to a Web site showcasing best practices.

Cross-Country Effort

WCC is just one of several community colleges across the country that provide services tailored to immigrant learners. The majority of colleges offer basic ESL classes, but many programs strive to do more than simply breach the language barrier. The most successful programs teach important job skills with a focus on helping students land jobs in lucrative career fields.

Luzerne County Community College (LCCC) is located in Nanticoke, Pa., home to one of the nation's fastest-growing Latino populations. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates

that jobs requiring higher education will grow by 22 percent between 2002 and 2012—nearly double the rate of non-college jobs. To help ESL students prepare, LCCC created the Achieving a College Education (ACE) club. The program, launched earlier this year, is targeted at high-intermediate and advanced ESL students and teaches computer literacy and communication skills through the use of technology.

“We provide students with necessary college skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and computer technology in a college setting,” says Peter Balsamo, chief GED examiner and director of community outreach for LCCC and a member of CCCIE's blue-ribbon panel. “We want to help students overcome any apprehension about attending college while increasing their chances for success.”

LCCC also is in the midst of improving its basic ESL offerings. “We offer only two ESL courses, which is not sufficient to get people literate enough to be successful in college,” says Balsamo.

LCCC has hired a consultant to determine best practices at other colleges and replicate them.

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) in Annandale, Va., also is assisting immigrants with their career prospects. Its ESL for Employment Program teaches job-search and interview skills to non-native English speakers, provides résumé assistance, and encourages students to practice “workplace English.” When the class ends, students are invited to a job fair with local employers.

“A highly qualified workforce is critical to the survival of our country and our society,” says Heidi Adamson, director of the academy for culture and language at NOVA and a CCCIE blue-ribbon panel member. “Skilled immigrants come to this country with education and training from their home countries, but are often forced to take jobs for which they are overqualified while learning English.”



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—Heidi Adamson

The San Diego Community College District (SDCCD) runs an Immigrant Professional Transfer Academy. The academy serves students who have at least a bachelor's degree from another country. In a series of eight free three-hour workshops, students learn about the U.S. educational system, opportunities available at colleges and graduate schools, and job prospects. Participants receive help defining their goals and developing career action plans.

“A lot of what we discuss is about appropriateness,” says Sheyla Castillo, SDCCD counselor for continuing education. “For instance, in some countries

it's appropriate to send a photo and information about your spouse and children along with your résumé when applying for a job. When you come here, you don't automatically know what's right and what isn't.”

Castillo has witnessed her share of success stories while at SDCCD: the engineer working as a school janitor, who was later hired as a network technician for the same school district; the Brazilian architect and accountant who met in the academy and started their own design firm; and the nutritionist from Mexico who became a community health educator at a California state university.

Similar efforts are under way at Alamo Community Colleges (ACC) in San Antonio, where educators insist immigrant students have the skills to be successful; they just need someone to help open the right doors.

“I refer to this group of immigrants as the workforce that's most left

behind,” says Anson Green, coordinator for economic and workforce development at ACC. “What you have here is a professional immigrant who, except for language, has all the skills necessary to fill great needs in our workforce.”

The problem, according to Green, is that immigrant students often do not figure prominently in the various missions of community colleges.

“Community college systems, by and large, don’t have a clear strategy to serve this population,” says Green. “But with the proper development and training, this group could plug the gaps where we have huge shortages of workers.”

ACC is developing a series of courses designed to help immigrant learners enter and reenter specific industry clusters. One class will help students develop specifically American work skills. “The course will cover such questions as ‘How do you interact with your boss in America versus Mexico?’” explains Green. He points out: “The idea of being a self-starter and taking initiative is a very American, entrepreneurial one. In other countries, being a self-starter is frowned upon.”

The idea, according to Green, is to make information more transparent and provide individuals with the support they need to move through the system. He stresses the importance of

case management and personal navigation. “We have to have someone’s transcript, experience, and goals to be able to align them on the proper strategic path, but I don’t know many places that are assessing individuals in their native languages,” says Green.

ACC assesses students in Spanish to accurately measure their academic skills. If someone has, say, excellent math skills, he or she will be placed into the appropriate Spanish-language training course. “Many businesses in Texas have given up on policies that workers must speak English,” says Green. “They couldn’t find enough people for certain jobs, so they changed the jobs to fit the labor pool. Unfortunately, the education folks haven’t caught up—yet.”

Legal Battles

Despite the progress being made, lingering legal issues could keep a sizable portion of the immigrant population from taking the next step in their careers.

The Urban Institute estimates that 26 percent of the 34.5 million foreign-born people in this country are undocumented. That status prohibits them from enrolling in college programs in three states: North Carolina, Alabama, and South Carolina. Alaska, Colorado, Georgia, and Virginia have legislation pending that would place similar re-

strictions on undocumented students.

Even in places where it is legal for undocumented immigrants to attend college, there are conflicting methods of paying for it. In Arizona, Proposition 300 says that no undocumented citizen can receive in-state tuition. In a decision that could have far-reaching implications for colleges everywhere, California’s Supreme Court is considering overturning a state law that grants in-state tuition to undocumented students.

“We don’t know what will happen in California, but it won’t be the end,” says Ruben Barato, director of international and immigrant student affairs at WCC. “It could have a negative backlash. Other states have said they’ll have to redraft their rules to abide by whatever is decided.”

Of the 10 states that still allow undocumented immigrants to pay in-state tuition (see sidebar), every one has lawsuits pending. Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas provide state financial aid, but there have been attempts to repeal these provisions as well.

Educators involved in the immigration debate also are watching the federal DREAM Act. If passed, the DREAM Act—for people who came to the United States before the age of 16, graduated from high school or obtained a GED, and have no criminal record—will allow immigrants to gain conditional residency if they receive a two-year college degree or complete two years of military service.

Jim Hermes, senior legislative associate for the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), says the association supports passage of the DREAM Act. AACC is working to reintroduce the bill in the House and the Senate and is seeking co-sponsors for the legislation. “A lot of how the DREAM Act moves forward will hinge on the overall immigration debate,” says Hermes. “It’s hard to tell what the political situation will be.”

States, meanwhile, must decide how to proceed. In 2008, the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) hired a firm to study the issues related to admitting undocumented students into curriculum courses at its colleges.

“The state board is anxious to receive the final results of that study in hopes it will provide the framework necessary to craft a policy regarding undocumented immigrants,” says Kennon Briggs, NCCCS executive vice president and chief of staff.

Education for All

“In states where we serve undocumented students, it can be frustrating when we can’t take them to the next step: legal employment,” says WCC’s Wisell. “We work under the hope that things may change through immigration reform, allowing these now-skilled immigrants to seek permanent residency or citizenship.”

Wisell is hopeful that the DREAM Act will pass soon and looks forward to the challenges its passage will create for community colleges—not the least of which is higher enrollments. “We can advocate for immigration reform, but we can’t let the politics get in the way of educating the two-thirds of immi-



grants who are here with proper documentation,” she says. “An enormous majority of immigrants are already citizens, have the proper documentation, or are on the path to citizenship. Our energies have to be focused on educating that group.”

Ask Juan Caicedo. Caicedo credits the academic support he received while enrolled at WCC with giving him the

confidence to continue his studies and achieve his dream. This September, his oldest son will attend a four-year university. “You have to set goals and be motivated,” says Caicedo. “Community college is a great place to help you find your way.”

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