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Community Colleges Build Programs That Fit Immigrants' Needs



Photographs by Corey Wascinski for The Chronicle

By Jennifer Gonzalez

Mount Kisco, N.Y.

It's 7 a.m. and the hiring hall here is buzzing. Day laborers file in, pick up a small numbered ball, and write their name and number on a large whiteboard. The ball then goes in a jug for the day's job lottery.

Soon about 40 men, mostly immigrants from Guatemala, crowd a large room at the job and social-services center, run by Neighbors Link, a local nonprofit group. The room doubles as a waiting room and classroom for the daily "Job English" class run by Westchester Community College.



The men chat, drinking coffee while they wait for area contractors and homeowners to hire them. The crowd thins as employers arrive and lottery balls are drawn. After a couple of hours, those who are left settle in for the three-hour English class led by an instructor from Westchester's main campus, in Valhalla, N.Y. A day laborer studies English and mathematics with instructors from Westchester Community College while waiting for work at Neighbors Link, in Mount Kisco, N.Y.

The class is designed to help workers communicate better with potential employers—and it's forced Westchester's ESL instructors to rethink teaching. Over the weeks, students pop in and out as jobs

come and go. There's little consistency and no quiet.

It's like holding a class "at the corner of Times Square," says David C. Bernstein, dean of the English Language Institute at Westchester.

Westchester, which teaches English to about 4,000 non-native speakers each year, has one of the most comprehensive English as a Second Language programs in the country. It's also leading the charge to transform immigrant education and make it a national priority.

In 2008 the college started the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education with a dozen partners. The consortium promotes immigrant education on the national level and identifies innovative practices on the campus level (such as the collaboration between Neighbors Link and Westchester Community College).

The United States is home to more than 38 million people who were born in other countries, according to the Census Bureau. That's more than three times the total four decades ago. Today one of every eight people in the nation is an immigrant—and one in four community-college students is an immigrant or the child of an immigrant.

A Different Kind of Student

Neighbors Link grew out of local discord: Residents were unhappy that Hispanic men were hanging out on street corners looking for work. Mount Kisco is in affluent Westchester County, just outside New York City, and has a population of roughly 10,000 people. Of those, about 4,000 are immigrants, with day laborers accounting for a couple hundred of the immigrant population.

Residents began talking about creating a hiring hall, which soon evolved into the much broader goal of providing services to immigrants and their families. And as the plans firmed up, Westchester Community College agreed to provide English classes at the center. The day-laborer program is fully subsidized by the college, while students pay \$16 for a more-traditional evening program, which covers their tuition and a portion of the textbook costs with the remainder covered by Neighbors Link.

The center also offers job training, recreation, and social-service programs. But without question its most innovative program is its "Job English" class offered daily to day laborers.

There is no set group of students that moves through lessons together, and very little interaction among students, which places the burden on the instructor to develop conversational skills. Students of varying abilities are lumped together and, when a prospective job comes up, they leave class. The student may come back the next day and stay for the full, three-hour class or not surface until the following week. It all depends on how much or how little work there is. The winter months produce fewer employment possibilities, so the day laborers receive more instruction during that time.

It is not an ideal way to learn a new language, but the instruction makes them more marketable, says Mr. Bernstein. "They are learning chunks of language," he says. "A lot of the people who come to the center looking for workers are interested in hiring someone who knows some English. So it's important for the day laborers to learn some practical language, such as being able to ask when they will get paid and at what time they can take a lunch break."

For Adolfo Teo, a house painter who came to the United States four years ago from Guatemala, the classes at Neighbors Link have been nothing short of life-changing. He says he would never have enrolled in an ESL class on a college campus, because he didn't know how to navigate the process—and he needed to work. At Neighbors Link, he found a sympathetic group of people who understood the particular challenges he faced as a newly arrived immigrant who spoke no English and needed a job.



"I feel relief," Mr. Teo says, about learning to speak English. "I can communicate. Now, I feel confident talking to anybody. I still don't understand everything, but I can explain things better."

His English has become so good that he volunteers his time helping other immigrants learn English during the center's weeknight classes. And the center even hired him to coordinate its Sunday ESL program.

Mr. Bernstein screens potential instructors for the day-laborer classes carefully. The job is not for everyone and requires a certain nimbleness.

Justin C. Smith, an ESL instructor at Westchester Community College, wasn't sure he would come back to Neighbors Link after teaching one semester

"As a teacher, you want your students to stay in class. You don't want them to leave," says Mr. Smith, who teaches at the center three times a week. "It took a while for me to get over the fact that they weren't leaving because they didn't like my teaching."

Beyond students leaving for work, he had to overcome other distractions. Neighbors Link houses a self-sustaining community cafe and recreation center, with several billiard tables. The center serves food and nonalcoholic drinks to more than 400 clients each week. During one of Mr. Smith's lessons (identifying in English the items found in a bathroom), the whack of a cue stick against a ball could be heard amid the buzz of chatting men.



Now, after two years as an instructor at the center, Mr. Smith is accustomed to working with the day laborers. He tends to emphasize vocabulary rather than grammar, and he juggles his students' different language abilities by paying extra attention to those with more-advanced skills after class. Because the day workers enter the class at a low level, Mr. Smith tends to conduct the semester-long course at a slower pace than he would any other ESL class. That means that even those day laborers who miss a lot of classes are still able to learn some English. And that's a good thing, he says, because "I have at least one new student every day."

Replicating What Works

The collaboration between Neighbors Link and Westchester Community College is exactly the kind of work Teresita B. Wisell, executive director of the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education, wants other community colleges to learn about. It's one of many programs that have been added to a database kept by the organization.

She says highlighting such practices is the only way to bring about effective education for immigrants, which is crucial for not only their personal success but also the economic and

cultural health of the United States. The consortium encourages leaders in immigrant education to raise awareness by presenting, publishing, and exchanging ideas, and sharing effective practices.

"We knew community colleges were doing varied innovative, valuable work for immigrant students," Ms. Wisell says. "But there was no central voice and no thread that would bring us all together so we could learn from each other."



Fourteen community colleges and associations participate in the consortium at Westchester. Among them are Alamo Community College, in Texas; Bunker Hill Community College, in Massachusetts; Miami Dade College; the Migration Policy Institute; and the National Community College Hispanic Council.

One of the founding members of the consortium is Johnson County Community College, in Overland Park, Kan. Julie J. Pitts, the college's director of international- and immigrant-student services, says she is most enthusiastic about the advocacy aspect of the consortium's work.

Ms. Pitts says it can be difficult for community colleges to get enough money and staff to effectively serve immigrant students, especially those who are undocumented, because taxpayers are sometimes reluctant to support those students.

She hopes the consortium can focus on the plight of immigrant students and help solve the problems they face, such as having to pay out-of-state tuition and running into obstacles when trying to obtain a driver's license. Not having a car becomes a barrier to higher education, especially for those students who need to reach a suburban campus, Pitts says.

"There is some weight we carry as a group instead of individuals," she says. "We need to educate the population about who these people are and the need these students have. Right now these students are virtually unseen. They are underserved. They are larger than college administrations realize."

The services offered to immigrant students, documented and undocumented, at Johnson County Community College go far beyond the usual academic and financial assistance. The college helps its students with tasks outside the classroom, such as purchasing car insurance, searching for a dentist, finding housing, applying for a job, obtaining legal services, and getting health care.

"Helping this population is a challenge," says Ms. Pitts.

Neighbors Link understands that, and that's why it offers the "Job English" class to day laborers, as well as its evening ESL program to all immigrants. Learning a new language can make the challenge of starting a new life in a foreign country less daunting. Students are also encouraged to seek more-advanced ESL classes at Westchester and even enroll in an academic program.

"We are a great place to start," says Carola Otero Bracco, executive director of Neighbors Link. "But we want them to go further. We want them to achieve more. Ultimately we want them to become contributing members of our society."