



Westchester  
Community College

State University of New York

# Launches Gateway Center to Train Immigrants

by Gary M. Stern

**W**estchester County in New York is really two communities: affluent and middle-class people who reside in Scarsdale, Ardsley and Chappaqua, where Hillary and Bill Clinton live, and working-class people and a growing number of Latinos and immigrants who gravitate to Yonkers, Mount Vernon, White Plains and New Rochelle for opportunity.

To meet their needs, Westchester Community College (WCC), located in Valhalla, N.Y., and part of the State University of New York (SUNY), opened a \$40 million, 70,000-square foot Gateway Center in summer 2010. Classes at the Gateway Center are intended to strengthen the language skills of immigrants and develop the entrepreneurial skills of all students.

The Gateway Center includes an extensive ESL program, an array of business programs and specialized training in allied health, fashion and other careers. The Polshek Partnership, known for designing the Rose Center at the Museum of Natural History's Planetarium in New York and Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall, was the architect of the center, which includes a 175-seat theater for performances, lectures and multicultural events.

Westchester is more diverse than many people think. Indeed 22 of 100 of its residents were born outside of the United States and include a growing number of Ecuadorians, Colombians, Brazilians, Peruvians, Asians and Middle Easterners. Many of these immigrants work as small business owners, landscapers, nannies and nurses, explained Teresita Wisell, associate dean for the Gateway Center, herself a Cuban immigrant who moved to the U.S. as an infant.

As the largest college in Westchester, WCC has more than 7,700 full-time students and 6,300 part-time students, and issued 1,056 associate

degrees and 150 certificates in 2008-09. Of its full-time and part-time students in 2009, 22 percent were Latino, 20 percent were African-American, and 48 percent were White. Liberal arts and business administration are its most popular majors.

The project was named the Gateway Center for several reasons. "It aims to serve as a gateway to higher education. But it's also a gateway for integration between students and can serve as a passage for native students to have a global perspective," Wisell said. It's situated at the entrance to WCC, making it the gateway to the college. The Gateway Center includes 33 state-of-the-art "smart" classrooms with Internet access, videoconferencing, two-way mirrors for market research and labs for fashion study.

The genesis of the Gateway Center began in 2000 when one of WCC's board members donated \$3 million to the college anonymously. Since this board member was a major advocate of ESL programs, the idea took shape of developing a center to help immigrants with language and adapting to the country. Hispanics had grown from 10 percent of Westchester's population in 1990 to 15 percent in 2000 and were the fastest-growing ethnic population in the county.

"We had 4,000 students studying ESL annually and over 400 volunteers helping them," so launching a center devoted to immigrants made sense, explained the now-retired Shirley Phillips, vice president of external affairs at WCC and director of the WCC Foundation. The Hitachi Foundation issued a \$300,000 grant to get the planning off the ground.

Joseph Hankin, president of WCC for 38 years, rallied behind the project and used his political acumen to convince county executives

to green light the project. Westchester County provided \$14 million, and the state kicked in \$17 million. In addition, the WCC Foundation raised \$19 million, including \$9 million for capital investment, \$5 million for scholarships and programs, supplemented by another \$5 million anonymous donation.

WCC involved community-based groups in developing the building. Phillips convened leaders of 50 community-based organizations, including Hispanic, Irish, Italian, Chinese and Jordanian groups, to discuss what role the Gateway Center could provide for ethnic communities. Predominantly, their feedback was that many immigrants needed to sharpen their language skills and many former professionals needed to gain the skills to pass licensing exams and acquire professional certifications. If the Gateway Center could be a hub for immigrant education, it would advance the new ethnic community.

The Gateway Center introduces a new approach to education, explained Marge Glusker, dean of continuing education and community services at WCC. "We offer programs, activities and services to both immigrants and native-born Americans so that immigrants can integrate into our society and native-born students can understand the richness of multicultural community," she said. Classes in business management, marketing and international business were moved to the center to encourage interaction between English-speaking and foreign-born students.

Interplay between native-born and foreign-born students should take place in several ways, including taking classes together, sharing lab space and having English-speaking students become volunteers. Involving the Westchester community is

another goal of the Gateway Center. About 300 volunteers have been trained as “conversation partners” who improve the language skills of non-native speakers through everyday conversation once or twice a week.

Gateway is structured around four components: the Welcome Center, which directs students to where they want to go and serves as a meeting place; the Entrepreneur Center, a cornerstone program to train small business owners; the Community Center for Immigrant Education, a clearinghouse for immigrant education; and a center for new Americans (which wasn’t officially named) that will guide students in citizenship and provide job skills such as writing résumés and financial literacy.

The center’s Dean Wisell also chairs the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE), a group of 17 community colleges across the country. CCCIE operates like a think tank to help each college grapple with immigrant issues. Wisell said the consortium exchanges best practices on issues such as work force development, language acquisition and access to higher education.

### First Master the Language

The extensive ESL program has trained nearly 20,000 students over the last five years. “Language acquisition is one of the first steps toward integration into a society,” Glusker noted.

The ESL program offers 10 levels of classes, depending on the students’ proficiency in English, based on pre- and post-language tests. Classes include English needed for business tied to specific industries. For example, Whole Foods and Stop & Shop subsidize classes for their employees who need to improve their English-language and business skills.

There is also a noncredit certificate program for students who want to teach ESL.

Classes in ESL incorporate “contextual learning,” Phillips said. During the classes, students who express an interest in launching a business will be encouraged to do so, and elementary business principles will be interwoven into the class. In addition to ESL, students can learn French, Spanish, Italian and Chinese at Gateway Center classes.

### Entrepreneurship Reigns

The Entrepreneurship Center brings all of the business and entrepreneurial programs at WCC together under one roof. Students can take courses in how to launch and sustain a successful business. “Many immigrants want to be entre-

preneurs, as do many people born here,” Glusker noted.

Moreover, the entrepreneurial program reflects changes in Westchester, which was once noted for housing the headquarters of companies such as Texaco, which left, and IBM, PepsiCo and MasterCard, which remain. But recent job growth has stemmed from small busi-



“But it’s also a gateway for integration between students and can serve as a passage for native students to have a global perspective.”

Teresita Wisell, Associate Dean,  
Gateway Center, and Cuban  
Immigrant

ness rather than corporate hiring and expansion.

The Professional Development Center sharpens the skills of students in information technology and other office jobs. For example, it trains students in Microsoft Office applications, QuickBooks and Web 2.0.

Another component of the Professional Development Center is the Academy for Entrepreneur Excellence, which evolved from a partnership between WCC and the Westchester Business Council. The program is noncredit but targets entrepreneurs who are ready to take their business to the next level through coaching, mentoring and seminars, said Wisell. She

expects the academy to link to programs that help immigrant entrepreneurs.

“We pair English-language courses with entrepreneurship courses and create learning communities,” Glusker said. Interdisciplinary learning, such as IT students working with allied health majors, is encouraged at the Gateway Center and throughout WCC.

The college offers a variety of careers in fashion, green technology, allied health (nursing, radiologic tech, respiratory care), culinary arts and early childhood education. Fashion includes courses in fashion technology, merchandising and textiles that can lead to transferring to Fashion Institute of Technology, a four-year SUNY school located in the heart of the Garment Center in New York City.

The Gateway Center also contains academic support centers that provide tutoring and counseling. WCC students have access to the financial aid office and are eligible for more than a million dollars in scholarships annually provided by the Westchester Community College Foundation.

One program that brings together native and non-native speakers is the Davis Global Scholars program. Twenty full-tuition scholarships of \$5,000 each are awarded to 10 native-born students and 10 foreign-born students who take classes together that focus on global education and global awareness. In addition, students are involved in service learning and engage in projects such as last year’s, which raised money for a Rwandan school.

It isn’t easy to engage students on a campus where there are no dormitories and where most part-time and continuing education students work either part time or full time, often while raising families. Wisell says that groups on campus such as the human rights club and international club attract interested students. She also expects some students will volunteer as conversation partners and that the new theater will attract multicultural students to events and lectures.

Isabel E. Vilar, executive director of El Centro Hispanico, a White Plains, N.Y.-based multipurpose social service organization that offers 17 educational programs for Latinos, calls the Gateway Center a “breakthrough concept” that “will help expand the horizon of immigrant students. They can continue to develop their computer skills or pursue a variety of other careers. The sky is the limit.”

Wisell sees the Gateway Center as another example of Westchester Community College addressing the region’s changing demographics and evolving student population.

