

# New Report Emphasizes Role of Community Colleges for Immigrant Student Success

by Angela Provitera McGlynn

**I**ncreasing Opportunities for Immigrant Students: Community College Strategies for Success, by Jill Casner-Lotto of the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education, was published November 2011 but released in January of this year.

The report describes a critical national imperative to educate immigrants since they and their children will account for America's population and workforce growth for the next few decades. The demographics of the United States show an aging population with millions of baby boomers leaving the workforce in retirement. By the year 2030, it is estimated that nearly one in five U.S. workers will be an immigrant.

The Consortium report says, "Ensuring educational access and success for the immigrant population is critical to increasing U.S. college completion, improving workforce readiness, and sustaining the nation's productivity in a highly competitive global economy. The immigrant population represents enormous potential, but significant challenges lie ahead to ensure that the potential is properly developed. Community colleges are well positioned to be critical change agents in this development."

Our nation's community colleges are critical to this effort because they are the point of entry into higher education for the great majority of immigrants. The colleges offer English-language instruction (ESL courses), both academic and vocational training programs, job skills training and re-training for those who come from other countries with advanced degrees but lack English-language skills or whose credentials are not accepted in America.

So the role of the community colleges is to service both the underprepared immigrant population and the already educated. They do so by offering a slew of support in addition to ESL courses, including academic tutoring, career development and employment opportunities, and social support programs that colleges and universities often don't provide.

It was heartening to hear President Obama's State of the Union Speech in January in which he

highlighted the important role of this educational sector.

The Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE) consists of a nationwide network of 23 colleges, professional groups, and research organizations committed to increasing opportunities for immigrant students. The consortium aims to expand educational opportunity and training programs for immigrants throughout the nation's community college sector.

Recognizing the great challenges these goals present, the CCCIE report offers a "Framework for Supporting Immigrant Student Success" that identifies 11 key factors found to be what it calls "promising practices" for promoting immigrant academic success.

The report makes clear that there is no 'one size fits all' solution to the many challenges, but by compiling data and using case studies as examples, it provides a road map toward enhanced immigrant student success.

The 11 key factors make more sense if seen in the context of the special challenges that immigrant students face and the challenges that the community college sector faces. It is common knowledge that, in general, community college students, now about half of all those entering higher education, face a host of challenges they share with immigrant students. Very often, community college students come from low-income backgrounds and juggle jobs and family responsibilities that their four-year college student cohort often doesn't share.

In addition to the difficulties typical community college students face, immigrant students often have unique challenges. Frequently they must learn a new language, navigate an unfamiliar education system, fill in possible gaps in academics, and adapt to a totally new culture – all this while trying to get an education.

Add to these hurdles the need for immigrant families to settle into a new country by finding a place to live and understanding rental agreements, applying for jobs, enrolling their children in school,

applying for a driver's license if they have a car, finding medical care, legal help, and understanding the maze of social services that might be available.

Immigrant students who are undocumented who may have gone through high school unaware of their status may hesitate to enroll in community colleges. The biggest barrier is often a financial one since they are not eligible for Pell Grants. Undocumented students might be eligible for private scholarships and even state aid in some states, but this information is often not readily accessible to them.

The other immigrant student population mentioned above – namely those who were educated outside the United States – might lack English-language skills that would enable them to re-enter the same careers they left behind in their countries of origin. Additionally, they may face a maze of re-credentialing processes, not know how to navigate professional networks in this country, and consequently, may remain unemployed or underemployed.

The community college sector faces its own set of challenges to meet immigrant students' needs. Highest on that list is supporting and maintaining immigrant education programs with limited funds. They must also expand ESL programs to meet demand, increasing the need to hire additional, well-qualified ESL instructors. Moreover, they must adopt flexible scheduling of such classes to accommodate the ESL population.

In a nutshell, the report says that the community college sector: "must find ways to improve the learning gains of students entering noncredit ESL instruction and accelerate their transition to college-level programs. While a promising alternative to the traditional sequential approach is contextualized ESL instruction that assures both English-language proficiency and preparation for college-level work or career training, the contextualized model is not easy or inexpensive to implement. The increased academic rigor of contextualized ESL often requires comprehensive support services to help students keep on track,

and a high degree of coordination among various college departments and outside community partners is needed to make this work.

The CCCIE report makes it clear that community colleges cannot provide all that is needed for immigrant student success on their own. The colleges profiled in the report have been able to make headway in this area by finding ways to get financial support for their initiatives. They were able to accomplish this often through a combination of private and public sector funds and by using their resources effectively through multisector partnerships.

Community colleges cannot meet the vast challenges of enhancing immigrant student success without multisector partnerships. The report's framework for supporting immigrant student success is meant to be "a guide to help community colleges develop a strategy for launching and expanding innovative immigrant education practices."

Here is a sketch of the report's 11 key factors that make up the framework for supporting immigrant student success:

1. Executive-level commitment and follow-through. Community college leaders need to demonstrate commitment to immigrant education by developing resources to finance what they do – link immigrant education program goals to the college mission and strategic plan, build the organizational capacity for innovation, facilitate cross-departmental collaborations and community partnerships to implement strategies.

2. Proactive outreach and a welcoming campus environment. Community colleges need to reach out to public school systems, community agencies, and local businesses to teach staff, potential students, and parents about available resources to immigrants and to help them use these services. Community colleges should be proactive in supporting undocumented students by providing funding, connecting students with legal and financial resources, and working with student groups that actively support the DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors).

3. A community-wide needs analysis. Community colleges should be aware of their local labor market information, demographics of the area they serve, and specific immigration trends so they can be responsive.

4. The redesign of ESL programs. Effective community college programs involve restructuring traditional ESL instruction to include flexibility of class sections and locations, aligning non-credit and credit coursework, the use of technology/multimedia-based delivery programs, and the creation of a contextualized or content-based approach that quickens the transition to a college degree or certificate program, vocational training, and careers. Innovative colleges are providing a continuum of support services and design-

ing more highly differentiated ESL programs and career pathways to accommodate an increasingly heterogeneous immigrant student population.

5. Comprehensive and culturally sensitive assessment of immigrant student needs. Effective community colleges are using more comprehensive assessment measures that use diverse approaches to measure immigrant student proficiency, address cultural differences, and get a better picture of their unique needs and strengths.

6. A holistic, integrated approach to student support services. Emphasis is on the "whole student," to provide a continuum of support services.

7. Focus on immigrant education outcomes, evaluation and sharing data. Community colleges making the greatest headway are the ones that

immigrant student success when they develop diverse partnerships with various stakeholders: K-12 sector, four-year colleges, adult education systems, community- and faith-based organizations, employers, and workforce investment boards, and when there is ongoing face-to-face communication to build trust among staff members, to manage and leverage each partner's resources and strengths, and when community colleges are open to innovative ideas that may come from outside academia.

11. Emphasis on program replication and bringing best models to scale. The key to enhancing immigrant educational success nationwide among community colleges is to share promising practices. The CCCIE Blue Ribbon Panel (BRP) does this and attempts to scale up the best ESL



forge strong partnerships between their ESL programs and institutional research departments, and that affiliate with third-party evaluators and national college completion initiatives.

8. ESL faculty professional development and participation in curriculum design. Colleges doing well in enhancing immigrant educational success are training qualified ESL instructors, encouraging faculty to help design ESL curricula, and developing teamwork among ESL, basic skills, academic and vocational skills faculty, and student services staff.

9. Development of immigrant student leadership skills. Promising practices include helping immigrant students develop leadership skills, creating student clubs that promote immigrant integration, providing opportunities for immigrant students to help each other and the communities in which they live through peer-to-peer mentoring, learning communities and service learning.

10. Meaningful multisector partnerships. Community colleges tend to do best enhancing

and immigrant education models at their own campuses and at other colleges. Key strategies include: sponsoring peer-learning communities, offering faculty "train the trainer" workshops, providing technical assistance to other community colleges and community groups. Several BRP members and their partner organizations also participate in national initiatives designed to strengthen and replicate programs for the underserved community college students and low-wage workers – many of whom are immigrants.

In addition to the 11 key factors, the report provides recommendations for action. For anyone interested in a more complete picture, the report can be found at: [www.cccie.org/images/stories/Increasing\\_Opportunities\\_for\\_Immigrant\\_Students\\_2011.pdf](http://www.cccie.org/images/stories/Increasing_Opportunities_for_Immigrant_Students_2011.pdf).

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