

## **CONNECTING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS TO SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESOURCES**

*By Alexandra Lowe, ESL Instructor at Westchester Community College*

In recent years, community colleges have invested heavily in supportive resources for their students. Campus libraries, academic support centers, writing centers, career services offices, peer-to-peer mentoring programs, and student clubs have mushroomed, offering students a wide array of services and networking opportunities designed to promote academic, personal and professional success.

But paradoxically, these vital resources often go unused by many of the very students who need them most – immigrant students working on improving their English in the college’s ESL programs. Isolated as many ESL students are in a separate world of non-credit ESL classes, many are unaware of the campus resources available just steps away from their ESL classrooms that could help speed their progress toward their dream of attending college in the U.S. and landing a better job.



Claudia, an advanced ESL student, is a case in point. An immigrant from South America, Claudia is a bright, extremely hard-working student who had been taking advanced writing classes for three semesters at a community college’s English Language Institute in preparation for applying to an American “vet tech” program. It was a revelation to her when she learned from a hallway conversation with a former ESL instructor that she could find a free math tutor at her college’s academic support center to help her to prepare for the math section

of the college’s placement test.

In this issue brief, I have highlighted seven promising practices that may make it easier for immigrant ESL students like Claudia to succeed at your college by becoming more knowledgeable about the wealth of supportive services your college provides for all its students.

## #1 Integration of ESL Students into the Wider Campus from the Day They Register for ESL Classes

Informing ESL students when they register for ESL classes that they are entitled to use all of the services available on campus sends a strong message of inclusiveness. At South Texas College (STC), for instance, students who register for ESL classes are told from the outset that “they are STC students and that they have access to all services provided by STC, namely, library, Center for Learning Excellence (tutoring), advising, counseling, and other support services,” notes Juan Carlos Aguirre, STC’s Director of Continuing, Professional and Workforce Education.

## #2 Campus Tours for ESL Students

Community college admissions offices routinely offer campus-wide tours for prospective students. ESL students at intermediate and advanced levels can be encouraged to sign-up to take one of these campus tours early in the semester. At Westchester Community College in Valhalla, NY some ESL instructors have partnered with colleagues in the area of student involvement and admissions to arrange for special campus tours for their ESL students.

In other instances, it is students’ ESL instructors themselves who may be in the best position to introduce their students to the resources available on campus. Some community colleges, therefore, encourage or even require ESL instructors to devote one class period to taking the students on a campus tour. At Hostos Community College in the Bronx, NY, for example, ESL instructors in the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP) program lead tours that introduce students to the Single Stop center<sup>1</sup>, student clubs, the writing center, athletic facilities, library, student success coach center and baby-sitting service for day-time student-parents. At Pima Community College in Tucson, AZ, ESL instructors not only lead tours of the campus library, tutoring center and language lab, but strongly encourage their use and may even award “extra credit” to students who make use of some of the resources showcased on the tours, according to Lisa Jurkowitz, who teaches ESL at Pima.



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<sup>1</sup> Single Stop USA is a national non-profit organization dedicated to helping low-income families and individuals build economic security. Through its partnerships with community-based organizations and community colleges, Single Stop centers provide students and their families with a variety of free services, including financial and legal counseling, tax assistance, and child care and health care referrals.

With so many ESL instructors hired as adjuncts who, themselves, may feel disconnected from the rest of the campus, keeping ESL instructors up-to-date on campus resources that would benefit their students is an **urgent administrative priority**.<sup>2</sup> Strategies used by some colleges to keep their adjunct faculty current on relevant resources include e-blasts at Pima Community College and professional development workshops offered by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. For example, ESL faculty at all 34 community and technical colleges in Washington State can access an annual EL Civics training session, a bi-annual three-day targeted training conference, and extensive state-sponsored professional development trainings that support the six goals of the Washington State Adult State Plan.

### **#3 Special Orientation Workshops for Immigrant ESL Students**

Palm Beach State College in Lake Worth, FL offers regularly scheduled integration workshops to both current and prospective ESL students to help them navigate the college's academic programs and career services and also learn about U.S. culture. Workshops are offered in English, Spanish, and Creole, and cover such topics as: English language acquisition, educational system and programs, career planning and job search, financial literacy, immigration and legal issues, citizenship preparedness, financial literacy, American history and political system, youth programs, and do's and don'ts of the U.S. culture.

### **#4 Library Tours for ESL Students**

Learning how to use the campus library is an essential skill for advanced ESL students. At Austin Community College, South Austin Campus, TX, ESL students, at the request of their ESL instructor, were recently given a library tour by the head librarian, who tailored her orientation to their needs and has developed a handout of questions for the ESL students to answer as they learn about the resources their campus library has to offer, notes ESL instructor and mentor in Adult Education at Austin CC. ESL students often linger afterwards to read books and magazines, and check out books to take home.



Eileen McKee, Director of the Welcome Center at Westchester Community College offers information sessions to ESL students. The sessions provide an overview of the U.S. higher education system and the College's resources, including career services and financial aid and scholarships. Students get help in understanding the requirements and next steps to take to enroll in college-level courses. And, for those students who have higher education credentials from their home countries, information on getting their foreign credits evaluated and recognized is provided.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Community College Student Engagement (2014). Contingent commitments: Bringing part-time faculty into focus (A special report from the Center for Community College Student Engagement). Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Program in Higher Education Leadership. [http://www.ccsse.org/docs/PTF\\_Special\\_Report.pdf](http://www.ccsse.org/docs/PTF_Special_Report.pdf)

### **#5 Invite Guest Speakers from the College Into the ESL Classroom**

One sure-fire way to ensure that ESL students learn about supportive resources is to bring someone from that area of the college into the ESL classroom as a guest speaker during one of the ESL class periods. This has the twin benefit of not only providing first-hand information directly to the ESL students, but gives them additional, authentic English speaking and listening practice.

At Westchester Community College, staff from the Single Stop office have made themselves available as guest speakers in ESL classes, simplifying some of their materials to meet the needs of low-intermediate English speakers as well as undocumented students. Members of the WCC campus honors society have made site visits to individual upper-level ESL classes to offer their services as peer mentors to ESL students interested in applying to college in the U.S.

### **#6 Encourage ESL Students to Join Student Clubs or Take Courses Outside of the English Language Institute**

One way to break down the unintended barriers that separate many ESL students from the rest of the campus is for their ESL instructor to actively encourage them to join student clubs, where they can meet local students and become more engaged with the rest of the campus. Another is to follow the lead of the University of Hawaii at Hilo and encourage ESL students to enroll in less linguistically challenging courses outside its English Language Institute, like University Chorus or studio art classes, according to Julie Mowrer, ELI Director at University of Hawaii.

### **#7 Field Questions from Immigrant ESL Students at an International Welcome Center**

For many immigrant students, the college campus and the world beyond remain a puzzling enigma. Even after taking tours and hearing from individual guest speakers, students may remain perplexed by certain aspects of life in America, both on and off campus. To address these ongoing issues, 25-30 faculty at Prince George's Community College donate one hour of their office hours to staff an **International Center** that connects students with mentors and answers student's academic and personal questions.

We hope these promising practices and recommendations have been helpful. Now, we'd like to hear from you. What are you doing on your campus to connect your ESL students to resources available on the wider campus? Please write us at [info@cccie.org](mailto:info@cccie.org) to share your success stories!

## Recommendations

As the promising practices described above make clear, the effort to knit ESL students into the fabric of the larger campus calls for “all hands on deck.” CCCIE recommends the following steps:

1. **Devoting at least one class period in ESL classes to a tour of relevant campus resources (tutoring center, career center, library, student center)** will help introduce ESL students to the wide array of supportive resources your college provides.
2. **Updating adjunct ESL faculty on available supportive resources that would benefit their students** will help ensure that ESL instructors, who often have a close relationship to this population of students, are equipped to recommend key supportive services and make appropriate referrals.
3. **Featuring links to your college’s support resources on the homepage of your English Language Center** will help immigrant ESL students discover the kinds of helpful, supportive services which might currently be scattered under a variety of different tabs on your college’s website.
4. **Synching the hours that supportive services are available to the hours during which ESL students are present on campus (including nights and weekends)** might help increase the likelihood that ESL students will avail themselves of those services.

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