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Learning the language of retail

By Tabitha Whissemore

Nearly 1.5 million retail workers have limited English proficiency. A new program—Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce—will focus on increasing these employees' ability and helping them advance in their jobs.

The Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE) has joined with leadership of the National Immigration Forum, Miami Dade College, and the Walmart Foundation to develop this program, which is being funded by the Walmart Foundation.

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES

English instruction for the workplace isn't new, but it's been "very specific, very individual," says **Teresita Wisell**, executive director of CCCIE and vice president for workforce development and community education at **Westchester Community College**, which hosts CCCIE. It's often involved a company working with one community college, or a business offering in-house instruction.

"Some of the forward-thinking employers understand the power of English language instruction for their employees' advancement and for their bottom line," says Wisell, but the need for instruction among retail workers is growing.

This new program involves developing a curriculum that's "scalable and replicable," she adds. Miami Dade College is designing the curriculum that includes both in-person and online instruction. Included will be training on industry-specific vocabulary and spontaneous conversation skills, and active listening. This could give part-time employees the edge to move into full-time positions, and stock-room workers could gain skills needed for higher-paying customer service positions.

The curriculum will be customizable. It will be piloted in Houston, Miami and the New York metro area with a number of retail businesses. Training is expected to reach 750 employees in the first year, helping primarily workers in non-supervisory positions, such as cashiers, stockers and greeters.

Skills and Opportunity for the New American Workforce is part of the National Immigration Forum's New American Workforce initiative, which works to create public-private partnerships between employers and service providers. The Forum has strong relationships with businesses and the retail industry, including retailers which are participating in this program.

The Forum works with employers who will make a "full commitment" to

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helping employees, says Wisell, whether that's by having dedicated space at the business for learning, or giving employees time during work hours for instruction.

INVESTING IN IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

This kind of training is a natural fit for community colleges to be involved in, says Wisell.

"Community colleges are at the core of workforce development for local employees," she says.

In a 2015 CCCIE survey of community college staff, a majority of the respondents indicated a need for strengthening ties with employers and developing more job-related training and support for immigrants.

While many colleges surveyed are investing resources in English as a second language instruction and other academic services, respondents reported less investment in tracking workforce requirements of employers hiring immigrant workers and identifying contextualized ESL career pathways for immigrant students.

As the immigrant population grows, these type of workforce development investments and partnerships are becoming critical. By 2030, one out of five workers will be immigrants.

With this new program, community colleges will work closely with employers in the development, delivery and assessment of training. CCCIE will contribute its expertise in developing strong community-based employer partnerships and sharing information across a national network of community colleges and other immigrant-serving organizations.

The program could open more doors for immigrant workers.

"This is an opportunity that leads to pathways for further education and training for individuals," says Wisell. ■