



# ESL Speaks The Language Of Business

COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
OFFICIALS SAY  
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ENVIRONMENT

Immigrants and others who didn't grow up speaking English are often at a disadvantage when entering the workforce. One of the best ways for non-native English speakers to level the playing field is to enroll in targeted courses and job-training programs offered through their local community colleges.

The best of these programs combines important language skills acquisition with effective workforce partnerships to forge clear pathways for students from learning to career success.

Across the country, these collaborations are producing impressive results.

- At Laney College, a technical-oriented community college in Oakland, Calif., ESL students preparing for green energy jobs hone their language skills by reading textbooks about photovoltaic cells. This way, they practice English while also learning the terminology that will make them more competitive workers.
- At Amarillo College in Texas workforce-oriented ESL programs encourage more female students to pursue careers in the technical trades.
- At the College of Western Idaho displaced workers use a software program from technology-based language learning solutions provider Rosetta Stone to enhance their English-speaking while building key skills needed for possible employment, such as job applications and interview skills. (For more, see the sidebar on page 14.)
- At Westchester Community College in New York educators forge partnerships with local high-tech employers to increase employment opportunities for ESL students. The program provides students, many of whom studied the sciences in foreign countries, with the skills and knowledge to understand U.S. business culture and to communicate more effectively with scientists who are native English speakers. >>

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- City College of San Francisco (CCSF) collaborates with the mayor's office, worker unions, and community groups to provide targeted ESL training for students seeking unionized construction jobs or work in restaurants and hotels.
- Miami Dade College plans to bring together faculty, administrators, and students to create communities of interest around particular academic majors. The program integrates English for Academic Purposes students with other enrollees at the college who are pursuing the same majors.

Effective community college ESL programs drive employment for students, fuel higher enrollments, and help colleges forge lasting relationships with regional and local employers. These programs have become increasingly important as immigrants and non-English-speaking workers comprise an increasingly large share of the U.S. employment base.

### Creating Value

The challenge for colleges is to demonstrate tangible value from these efforts and secure the long-range funding and support needed to sustain and grow ESL programs, all amid increasingly difficult economic realities.

These efforts require a multifaceted approach that begins with a needs assessment—of students, of economic leaders, and of community colleges—and ends with a clear statistical foundation for understanding the effect of these efforts on the college. If done right, such efforts will help create language learning that promotes success and, ultimately, justifies continued investment.

Here are three important steps that will help community colleges take their ESL programs to the next level.

## Step One: Successful Outreach

Community college administrators must identify the ESL and workforce needs of their local communities. To do that, they must reach out to existing and potential students.

ESL experts say this research should be comprehensive and conducted with the goal of uncovering specific data that help colleges ensure ESL programs stay relevant within the changing needs of their local communities. To understand the needs of ESL students,

community colleges should drill down into the English-language written, oral, and verbal skills that students typically exhibit when they first come to the college. Also important is an assessment of the related skills students bring to the ESL program, including literacy levels in native languages. Together, this information helps educators customize ESL programs and creates options for accelerating instruction for select students.

Institutions that mistakenly gloss over this important up-front work will likely find their ESL programs out of sync with the needs of employers and community members. "An English-language learning program that a community college creates on its own and then tries to sell to students is probably not going to look incredibly enticing," explains Teresita



## The Majority Minority A workforce in transition

Community college ESL programs are evolving out of necessity: The U.S. workforce and the role of community colleges are undergoing fundamental changes. The Hispanic population has now surpassed African-Americans as the largest U.S. minority, which means colleges must serve an increasing number of students whose first language is something other than English. In fact, nearly a quarter of the 6.5 million students enrolled at community colleges come from an immigrant background, according to the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE<sup>2</sup>).

At the same time, about 2.7 college-educated immigrants are without jobs or are underemployed in jobs that don't take advantage of their skills, a CCCIE report says.<sup>3</sup> The result: Students, businesses, and community colleges are realizing that ESL programs must not only teach the language but also create pathways that help students land jobs and become more productive members of society.



Wisell, an associate dean at Westchester Community College and executive director of the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE). “Instead, we’ve found that the programs that work come out of many up-front conversations with individual students to get a real sense of what the needs really are.”

As a result, a number of community colleges are turning to contextualized ESL, which makes specific terminology and concepts related to individual vocations an integral part of the ESL curriculum. Administrators say students are often more motivated to do assigned readings and put more effort into learning English vocabulary when they see a direct connection with workplace opportunities. This strategy may also open up students to new ideas. Amarillo College in Texas offers contextualized ESL for students interested in automotive technology, industrial maintenance, machining, welding, and health care. The effort has encouraged some female students to look more closely at technical trades. “I don’t think that these women would have gone into technical education if we hadn’t had a chance to expose them to it while they were getting their language instruction,” says Tamara Clunis, dean of academic success at Amarillo.

To better tie existing ESL instruction to employment needs, a growing number of community colleges are turning to Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST),<sup>1</sup> a collection of integrative learning resources developed by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. The I-BEST models combine college-credit courses with language programs tailored to individual professions, such as health care and wellness, business, and education and library services, to name a few.

## Step Two: Work With Business and Community Leaders

Just as important as student insights is the input community colleges receive from business and community leaders. From employers, clear ideas often emerge about what skills are most marketable among ESL students. Community groups, meanwhile, are often closely connected to immigrant populations and can help college administrators generate a clearer picture of the economics of a particular city, county, or region.

CCSF, for example, works with Arriba Juntos, a nonprofit community organization that provides occupational training and employment services to local residents. The group helps CCSF ESL students find work at food banks and other organized charities and offers opportunities for immersion in business settings to supplement traditional ESL class time. CCSF ESL faculty guide ESL students through mock job interviews to hone and refine their job-seeking skills.

CCSF, which has a sizeable Asian enrollment, works with the San Francisco-based Chinese Progressive Association to provide specialized programs for educating and organizing Chinese immigrants. “We value our work with community agencies because they can help with job placement for students,” says Gregory Keech, chair of the CCSF ESL department.

The college also coordinates its ESL instruction with CityBuild, an employment program run by the city’s Office of Economic and Workforce Develop-

ment. The program provides workforce training and job-placement services for students in the construction industry. CCSF now offers ESL instruction that’s integrated into the workday, with break-out periods, so that non-native English speakers can attend ESL classes on site.

When employers in Oakland noticed that a growing number of applicants for certain trade jobs lacked sufficient English skills, they approached administrators at Laney College to come up with a solution.

The result, *Carpentería Fina*, is a job-training program that helps Hispanic woodworkers hone their craft while learning the English terminology of the woodworking trade and the English inch-foot measurement system. “The programs are cohort-centered so there is math, English, and the trade instruction all in one semester with the same group of students,” says Sonja Franeta, an ESL instructor at Laney College.

## Opening Doors for International Students

Immigrant students aren’t the only population on the rise on U.S. college campuses. According to “Open Doors 2012: Report on International Educational Exchange,” the number of international students who come to the United States in search of higher education increased by 6 percent in the 2011–12 academic year, reaching a record high 764,495, while U.S. students studying abroad increased by 1 percent.

Researchers say international student exchanges contributed \$22.7 billion to the U.S. economy in 2012. For more on the rising tide of international students on U.S. college campuses, or to read the full “Open Doors” report, visit the Institute of International Education at [www.iie.org](http://www.iie.org).



Partnerships such as these often have beneficial ripple effects for community colleges. “Grantors are looking for collaboration among community partners,” says Jill Casner-Lotto, CCCIE director. “If these groups are applying for grants and they do it collaboratively, that’s going to be looked upon favorably.”

### Step Three: Measure the Impact and Value of the ESL Program

To ensure that community colleges derive value from their ESL programs, it’s important that educators identify effective measurements to gauge a return on their investment. A combination of statistics and anecdotal evidence creates a picture of progress.

One key metric for schools is the linkage between ESL classes and future enrollments. “There is a payoff for the college in that ESL can help foster continued enrollments,” says Franeta. “We have seen people participate in the contextualized classes and go on to take more classes at the college.”

Job placement for students is another important indicator. In some cases, the combined efforts of community colleges, job agencies, and employers are impressive. Though San Francisco’s CityBuild doesn’t specifically break out statistics for its ESL graduates, administrators say that more than 85 percent of the 600 students that graduated from the construction-training program have been placed in union construction jobs.

Raw numbers rarely tell the whole story. Officials from Westchester Community College’s English Language

## Successful Job Placement in Idaho

### ESL students achieve career success through technology-rich education

When a large beef-processing plant in Idaho was forced to cease operations, educators at the College of Western Idaho (CWI) began looking for ways to retrain the factory’s more than 500, largely Hispanic workers for new jobs in the local community.

With support from the Idaho Department of Labor, CWI obtained funding for a transitional six-week job-training program to teach displaced workers, many of whom were not native English speakers, to fill out job applications, perform well in job interviews, and be among those considered for possible employment.

To enhance students’ English-language skills, the college invested in TOTALe from Rosetta Stone, a provider of technology-based language solutions. In addition to traditional coursework, students averaged one to three hours a day with the Rosetta Stone language and skill-acquisition software.

The combination of traditional job-training courses with language learning has produced encouraging results. Ninety-five percent of students enrolled in the program completed the course, and more than one-third of participants achieved employment as a result.

“By breaking down language and technology barriers to employment, 35 percent of participants re-entered the workforce, leading to a more skilled labor force in our local economy,” said Scott Fenwick, CWI’s director of business partnerships and workforce development.

“Some students were able to obtain jobs before they even completed the course,” said Rebecca Sherman, CWI’s director of technology and business solutions. “When the initial program ended, we had a lot of students asking for more English, more time on the computer, more learning.”

For more information, visit [www.rosettastone.com/highereducation](http://www.rosettastone.com/highereducation).

Institute regularly visit classrooms to assess how the college’s ESL programs are performing and whether adjustments are necessary. One area of focus is the level of comfort ESL students exhibit when interacting with customers in a business setting. Another measurement is how quickly these workers advance from lower-level jobs to management-track positions.

### Anytime, Anywhere Instruction

ESL program administrators are turning to one other resource to help students accelerate their efforts—technology. A wide range of computer-based English instruction tools are available for use in classrooms, language labs, and outside the school environment to reinforce traditional lessons and improve competency and retention. “Without a doubt, the innovative programs are using technology,” Wisell says.

Amarillo College is currently evaluating technology tools with an eye toward enabling more intensive instruction for its students. Among the resources under consideration, the college is exploring Web-based programs that would give students access to instructional mate-

rials 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

“We hope that we can encourage more speaking time and more listening time through technology,” Clunis says.

When all these efforts come together everyone stands to win, particularly students and prospective employers.

For businesses, the value of vocationally oriented ESL programs is the steady stream of skilled workers available to serve in entry-level positions, and possibly grow into areas of greater responsibility. “Businesses recognize that they are making an investment in their employees and in the advancement of their employees’ careers,” Wisell says of college ESL programs. “Employers that recognize the long-term value of this training are going to realize that they can expect workers to stay longer with the business and even see a pathway for the next level.”

#### FOOTNOTES

1. [http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/e\\_integrated/basiceducationandskillstraining.aspx](http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/e_integrated/basiceducationandskillstraining.aspx)
2. <http://cccie.org/immigration-and-education-resources/higher-education-facts>
3. [http://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)