



The Highline Community College Phlebotomy I-BEST program offers integrated ESL and career training.

Workforce Development Needs for Immigrant Job-seekers

By Naomi Cytron

For the past decade, immigrant workers have been making up an increasingly large share of the workforce, composing nearly 16 percent of the labor force in 2008. For much of this time period, they have enjoyed a higher employment rate than their native born counterparts. But data released in March, 2009 from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that these trends are reversing, and that for the first time since 2004, the unemployment rate among the foreign-born has edged up to match that of native-born workers.¹ For both groups, the jobless rate at the end of 2008 had risen to 5.8 percent, but for immigrant workers, the rate rose more steeply throughout 2008. Foreign-born Hispanic workers—who compose nearly 50 percent of the immigrant workforce—saw a particular rise in unemployment, with an 8 percent jobless rate at the end of last year.²

The disproportionate rise in job losses among immigrant workers largely stems from the fact that their recent employment gains have been mostly concentrated in only a few sectors—construction, production, and service occupations—sectors that have seen mounting job losses over the past year.³ Employment in these sectors had also

been driving wage progression for immigrant workers, who, while still composing a disproportionate share of the low-wage workforce, had recently begun to move out of the lowest end of the wage distribution.⁴

The downturn has thus placed immigrant workers at particular risk of losing the foothold they had begun to gain in the U.S. economy. But they are additionally vulnerable because safety-net and job training resources that the native-born can utilize to help weather hard times are either more difficult for immigrants to access, or not available to them at all. For instance, One-Stop centers, the primary outlet for federal workforce development resources, often do not have bilingual staff who can assist immigrants with limited English skills. Additionally, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds, which can be used not only for cash benefits but also for vocational education, English classes, and pre-employment skills training, are not accessible to legal immigrants until they have been in the U.S. for at least five years.⁵ Undocumented immigrants face higher barriers still, as they can utilize only “core services” at One-Stop centers, which include access just to

information on local labor market needs and job-search assistance, and are ineligible to participate in intensive skills and literacy training programs.

Immigrants also face workforce barriers associated with limited educational attainment. While some immigrants arrive in the U.S. with very high skills and education credentials, many more do not. In 2008, for instance, 26 percent of the foreign-born labor force 25 years and older had not completed high school, compared with 6 percent of the native born workforce.⁶ Not only does this limit job and earnings prospects for immigrants, it can also interfere with participation in job training programs, which can require not only spoken English proficiency but also higher reading and math skills, or even a GED. A sequential path through various education programs in language, math and jobs skills may simply take too long for immigrant workers seeking job placement or advancement.

However, training programs specifically geared toward overcoming some of the above noted hurdles have begun to operate around the country. These programs, typically cross-sector partnerships between local nonprofit groups and community colleges, and sometimes drawing in corporate partners, aim to improve job placement, retention, and advancement for immigrant workers by pairing the hard language, math and job skills needed by immigrants with “softer” cultural acclimation and on-the-job social skills.

In Chicago, for instance, the Instituto del Progreso Latino, a community based organization incorporated in 1977, has partnered with the Humboldt Park Vocational Education center, which is a campus of the City Colleges of Chicago, to connect Hispanic immigrants to jobs and skills. Their programs provide both basic English as a Second Language (ESL) classes as well as vocation-specific ESL (VESL) classes to prepare workers to participate in bilingual courses in advanced manufacturing (a “Bridge” program), and then place trained workers in area firms. An estimated 90-95 percent of participants in the Instituto’s Bridge program are first-generation immigrants. The Instituto also offers classes that help transition students with limited English-language skills into Licensed Practical Nursing positions. Here in the 12th District, Washington State’s Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training program delivers an innovative curriculum that integrates specialized automotive skills, ESL, and employability skills through Seattle’s Shoreline Community College. This program helps immigrants successfully complete an Automotive Service Associate Degree program, which in turn offers opportunities for workers to move up the career ladder to middle-management positions. Shoreline has also been able to secure additional state funding in order to offer other supportive services, including childcare

Growing the capacity of integrated programs will thus not only entail simply creating spaces in the classroom, but will also necessitate expanding the responsiveness of programs to the array of cultural and linguistic needs of job seekers.

and assistance with transportation, to enhance student success rates.

While there is limited research regarding the most effective ways to retrain and “upskill” displaced or underemployed immigrant workers, evaluations of individual programs indicate that this kind of “integrated” training yields significant increases in earnings, job quality, and stability over programs that focus solely on one skill set.⁷ Yet most of these integrated programs operate at a very small scale, training 20-40 students on an annual basis. Going forward, many will not have the capacity to meet the growing ranks of displaced immigrant workers who could likely benefit from job training and placement services. Growing—or in some places, creating—the capacity to meet the needs of displaced immigrant workers should be a high priority, particularly in areas that have seen a considerable increase in low-skilled immigrant populations, including a number of 12th District states. Nevada and Arizona, for instance, rank as the states with the highest growth nationwide in their shares of foreign born residents from 2000-2007; Washington State ranks 12th.⁸ While immigrants from Latin American countries have composed a great deal of this growth, significant numbers of immigrants have also arrived from other countries, including the Philippines, Vietnam, India as well as a number of African nations.

Growing the capacity of integrated programs will thus not only entail simply creating spaces in the classroom, but will also necessitate expanding the responsiveness of programs to the array of cultural and linguistic needs of job seekers. It may also require improved outreach to immigrant workers who may not be aware of the programs available to them.⁹ Close collaborations between community colleges or other established adult education centers and community based organizations that have effective outreach channels can facilitate this kind of support for immigrant job-seekers. Aiming in these ways to meet what will likely be growing workforce development needs of immigrant job-seekers will be essential in the times ahead, as it can enable immigrants to progress beyond low-wage work as the economy recovers. **CI**

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Beyond Lump Sum

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San Francisco Works to Support Working Families

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