



Reaching Out to Immigrant Students: A Daunting Responsibility!

Dr. Ruth Burgos-Sasscer

On January 7, 2004, President Bush outlined his proposal for immigration reform and emphatically pointed out that “America has greatly benefited from the presence and contribution of immigrants and their families.” Although many on all sides of the political spectrum agree with the President, there are those who would extend American largesse only to documented immigrants and, joined by others who are blatantly anti all immigrants, resist reform measures that would allow educators and other service providers to do otherwise.

There are many valid and non-valid reasons for this controversy and this is not the forum to argue their merits. The focus of this article is to assess how, in light of this national conundrum, community colleges can best reach out to an important group of adults — our most recent immigrant population. We must find a way to do this, not in order to make a political statement, but because our efforts will benefit individuals and families, our communities and our nation.

One of the major obstacles to doing the right thing, however, is the number of myths regarding immigrants that create doubts and anxiety in the minds of many constituents. A relevant adage comes to mind: *In God we trust; everyone else must provide data.* For this reason, an important step in the right direction is to dispel these myths by providing facts that dispute them. The following are a few examples.

One of the most persistent myths is that the majority of recent immigrants are in the U.S. “illegally.” The fact is that there are approximately 35 million immigrants in the U.S. and approximately 8.5 million are “undocumented.” Another myth is that many undocumented immigrants are criminals or terrorists. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, there is no evidence that immigrants make our nation less safe. The number of deportable criminals among the undocumented is unknown. When 250 Wal-Mart workers turned out to be undocumented, none of them were found to sell drugs or to be terrorists. They were all in this country to work.

The myth that undocumented immigrants are a drain on the U.S. economy and give nothing in return can be refuted in various ways. All immigrants, including the undocumented, pay taxes in one way or another. A recent study revealed that, contrary to popular belief, only 10 percent of recent immigrants from Mexico use emergency rooms compared with 20 percent of U.S.-born whites (*Washington Post*, October 14, 2005, A5). Undocumented immigrants tend to hold jobs that require minimum skills and pay very low wages; most Americans want jobs that pay higher salaries.

Still another myth is that undocumented immigrant parents are not interested in their

A Survey of Best Practices

Abriendo Puertas is a series of abstracts published by NCCCHC for the express purpose of surveying best practices for student success and professional development of future leaders.

In this issue, the author discusses ways to reach out to a substantial immigrant population in order to benefit individual students as well as the larger community to which we all belong.



Editor
Dr. Maria C. Sheehan,
Superintendent/President
College of the Desert
(760) 773-2500
msheehan@collegeofthedesert.edu
Published Fall and Spring



Affiliated with
the American
Association of
Community Colleges

Dr. Ruth Burgos-Sasscer is Chancellor Emerita of the Houston Community College System and former NCCHC Board member. She holds a BA in sociology from Maryville College, an MA in religion from Columbia University and a PhD in Higher Education Administration from Florida State University. Her professional experience includes teaching, senior level administration, research, and consulting. She served as CEO of Aguadilla Regional College, one of the units of the University of Puerto Rico and as president of San Antonio College (Texas), prior to becoming Chancellor of the Houston Community College System (HCCS), the second largest community college (55,000 students) in the U.S.

Under her leadership, HCCS moved into seven state-of-the-art buildings, including the only community college facility at the Texas Medical Center. She helped forge links between the college and the local business community and set up programs that prepared students for transfer to universities and for employment in the booming oil business and in medicine.

She has long been a strong advocate for women and minorities, including immigrants. During her tenure as Chancellor, the HCCS board approved the enrollment of qualified undocumented students at in-district tuition. This act preceded Texas Law 1403 that extended this privilege to immigrants throughout the state. In 1999, *Black Issues in Higher Education* recognized her as one of the most influential college presidents of the 20th Century.

Dr. Burgos-Sasscer currently serves on two national higher education boards and was recently selected by the Maryland State Superintendent of Education to serve on the Superintendent's Panel on Excellence in Adult Education.

...Reaching Out to Immigrant Students

children's education nor encourage their children to aspire to higher education. It may surprise some to learn that the school dropout rate of children of Hispanic undocumented immigrants is lower than that of children of native born or documented Hispanics. One problem, however, is that in most states, children of undocumented parents who graduate from high school, many with honors, are not allowed to enroll in college or cannot because they are charged prohibitive tuition rates.

Finally, there are some who believe that reaching out to all immigrants is not the mission of community colleges. As mentioned earlier, the mission of community colleges is to help provide our nation with a skilled workforce and an important source of new workers has always been immigrants, including undocumented immigrants who eventually become citizens. In many states, community colleges are required to offer adult education ESOL to immigrants and the legal status of students is not a requirement for enrollment. The majority of immigrant students begin their higher education in community colleges.

In addition to dispelling the above and other myths about immigrants, what else can community colleges do to help as many immigrants as possible become self-sufficient and productive members of American society? Recent issues of *Community College Week* and *Community College Times* include numerous articles with excellent suggestions for strengthening Adult Education programs in general and those that target immigrant populations in particular. National groups, such as the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL) publish reports that contain useful data to support the expansion of programs that benefit all adults. And agencies such as the Center for Applied Linguistics (Washington, DC) provide insights on how best to help immigrants learn English and move up the educational ladder. The following are some of the suggestions most pertinent to community colleges:

- Provide GED or High School level courses in Spanish so Hispanic immigrant adults with some education will not lose ground while they learn English.
- Collaborate with community based organizations and other agencies to complement educational services to immigrants.
- Align exit criteria of highest-level adult education programs with entry-level college requirements.
- Look for best practices and funding sources to implement adult education-to-college transitional programs.
- Lobby in favor of legislation that will benefit all immigrants.

Reaching out to our immigrants in a meaningful way is not easy, especially in today's environment. We must be convinced and be willing to convince others that our communities will be enriched and our nation will be better served if we do this right thing.