

Issue BRIEF

Engaging English Learners in Manufacturing Training Programs: Michigan's M-CAM Experience



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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The lessons in this brief are drawn from Social Policy Research Associates' (SPR's) evaluation of the Michigan Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing (M-CAM) TAACCCT grant. M-CAM is a coalition of eight community colleges in Michigan that used grant funds to strengthen four career pathways—Welding/Fabrication, Production, Multi-Skilled/Mechatronics, and CNC Machining.



ABOUT THE TAACCCT GRANTS

The Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants were funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. TAACCCT funding assists community colleges in expanding and improving training programs that can be completed in two years or less for high-demand, high-skilled occupations.

"The best parts [about the program] were that they talked to me a lot, they guided me, and they opened my eyes to opportunities that are out there that we don't know about. I had lots of good instructors at the college who were there to support me and give me options in new things I can learn, to have a better future and find a better job and have the opportunity to make more money. There were always people there to help out." —Samuelⁱ

Samuel is a native Spanish speaker and English learner who was able to pursue training in advanced manufacturing at a local community college with the support of an English literacy instructor embedded in the classroom. He had previously attended English classes at his local community college and had received GED instruction. After obtaining his GED, he decided to continue his studies in computer numerical control (CNC), a skill highly desired in the advanced manufacturing industry. He planned on pursuing studies in welding thereafter.

Reaching students like Samuel is important, particularly given the shortage of skilled workers in Michigan. Census data show that in 2010, 3.1 percent of the Michigan population was considered to be limited English proficient, and this number has increased in subsequent estimates.ⁱⁱ A large number of individuals with limited English proficiency are employed in service occupations and maintenance and construction work, and they are more likely to live in poverty than are individuals proficient in English.ⁱⁱⁱ As a result, individuals with limited English can benefit from the English-language instruction, technical knowledge, and workplace skills offered at local community colleges.

This brief describes promising practices and lessons learned for engaging English learners in manufacturing training programs, drawing on a model developed and piloted by Grand Rapids Community College as part of their implementation of the Michigan Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing (M-CAM) TAACCCT grant. The college created a contextualized English literacy training course in computer numerical control (CNC) as part of their targeted efforts to reach Latino English-language learners in their local area.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- Partnerships with immigrant and ethnic-specific organizations are important for reaching and engaging immigrant populations and English learners. Because ethnic-specific organizations already have trusting relationships with the community, they can serve as a conduit for gathering community feedback and helping to understand obstacles that might interfere with recruitment. They also can often provide additional support needed to support student completion and success, such as transportation and housing assistance.
- Courses incorporating English-language instruction and technical skills can help students acquire the technical skills needed to get living wage jobs, while at the same time building confidence in their ability to speak English in an educational and work setting.
- In addition to technical training, it is important that students in contextualized English classrooms also receive assistance and coaching on how to interview effectively and interface with employers.

Grand Rapids' Contextualized English Literacy Training

Grand Rapids Community College, leveraging additional funds from the Kellogg Foundation, and in partnership with the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan and the Literacy Center of West Michigan, created a CNC course to serve English-language learners as part of a larger effort to increase their outreach both to English-language learners and to the local Latino community. Using hands-on equipment and situations from the manufacturing context, the enhanced CNC course contextualized English literacy learning in order to help students develop knowledge, skills, and work readiness.

In collaboration with the Hispanic Center, the college conducted targeted outreach to Latino and Spanish-speaking students. They also sought out feedback on the course structure, in consideration of the challenges that full-time employed students would face in attending classes that conflicted with their work schedules. Grand Rapids and the Hispanic Center coordinated a community event at which potential students picked the time and date of the new class. As college staff explained at the event, the college had tended to build schedules around what was convenient for it rather than for students, and this time, it would be different.

The Literacy Center hired an instructor to teach the class alongside the college's CNC instructor; together, the instructors developed a new curriculum that incorporated both English-language instruction and CNC concepts. The three-hour class was held twice a week for approximately 10 weeks. M-CAM staff prepared students to interview in English, suggested additional courses and programs available at the college, and assisted students in acquiring financial assistance. The Hispanic Center also provided supportive services, such as transportation and housing support.

Ninety-four percent of participants finished the course and received a CNC precision machining certificate; two participants received apprenticeships. Moreover, Grand Rapids served the largest number of Latinos of any of the eight colleges in the grant consortium; 13 percent of its participants identified as Latino compared to 5 percent of the overall M-CAM population. The college has since expanded their English-language learner (ELL) outreach to refugee Swahili-

"The hardest part was getting them ready for interviews. [Staff] spent a lot of time with those students because—even though they were level four of ESL when they went into the program, so the higher parts of ESL—it was really hard to get them through the interview process. They did it."

—GRCC grant leadership

"When we were about to finish the class, there were from six to eight companies that came to give us interviews on what we studied, what we wanted to do, and what they did as a company. ... Two of those companies called me back to offer me a job."

—English learner and CNC student

and French-speaking populations via a construction trades ELL course. The college also offered subsequent ELL courses in CNC and Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) programs, in collaboration with the Hispanic Center.

Lessons Learned

During interviews, stakeholders identified the following as lessons learned:

- ***Instructor collaboration in the classroom was crucial.*** The college’s original strategy was to have the literacy and CNC instructors teach separately, but it became apparent that both instructors could supplement each other’s content. Thereafter, the instructors taught alongside each other, with the literacy instructor creating material that incorporated CNC terminology.
- ***These programs benefit both the community college and English-language learners.*** The contextualized ELL courses opened new pools of students to recruit from, while also providing these students with a course that would improve a crucial skill—command of the English language—while also initiating a new skill set.
- ***Partnerships with immigrant-serving organizations are key to recruitment and provide invaluable community feedback.*** At the start of the project, partners had to regain a mutual sense of trust after prior lapsed relationships. Discussions between partners began with deliberate conversations around partner strengths and weakness and what each brought to the table. The Hispanic Center also reiterated the need for the college to listen to the needs of the community instead of implementing what was most convenient for the college.

About This Series

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ⁱ All names used in briefs are pseudonyms.

ⁱⁱ Source: Migration Policy Institute tabulations from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 1990 and 2000 Decennial Censuses and the 2010 and 2013 American Community Surveys.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, “The Limited English Proficient Population in the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, July 8, 2015, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/limited-english-proficient-population-united-states#Distribution by State.

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