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Angela White
Lawrence Adult Learning Center

Norma Herrod
Haskell Indian Nation University

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Voice from Lawrence, Kansas: Diverse Adult Learners in a University Community

Angela White and Norma Herrod

Our Community

Nestled in a neighborhood of modest bungalows, the Lawrence Adult Learning Center (LALC) is a part of the greater Lawrence High School campus. The high school annex building houses LALC, along with Native American Student Services, special education offices and personnel, and Lawrence Public Schools Nursing Services. The location is within walking distance of many apartment complexes in the central part of Lawrence and on the bus route for students living in other parts of the city. The physical facility furnished by the district is ideally located for the LALC's student population. It allows a variety of study settings including large and small group activities and one-on-one instruction. One challenge we face is the public, and even other school district personnel do not know who we are and where we are located.

Lawrence is a city of contrasts. Home of the University of Kansas and arguably the most educated community in Kansas, Lawrence is a liberal and progressive city. As with many university communities, Lawrence has a strong economic foundation with low unemployment that is for the most part recession proof. It is also one of Kansas' cultural centers with a flourishing arts community, museums, and intellectual avant-garde. Yet, there is still an under-recognized class that is hidden from the general public. This group consists of those who have not profited from the well-developed education system and new immigrants who have moved here for jobs and opportunity. This is the group that LALC serves.

The LALC has been moved, and moved, and moved again. From the old Lawrence Memorial Hospital building to the library of Cordley Elementary School, the LALC has been a program on wheels, always moving to another location. After trading in the small chairs, teeny-sized bathrooms, and books and materials on carts, the center was moved to a shopping center on Haskell Avenue in East Lawrence. It managed to survive drive-by shootings and frequent window

Angela White is an ESL teacher at the Lawrence Adult Learning Center. She has taught English language learners in the workplace, in a family literacy setting, and at the Adult Learning Center for over ten years. Originally from St. Joseph, Missouri, she began her career in education as a high school speech, drama, and English teacher.

Norma M. Harrod joined the Lawrence Adult Learning Center as an ESL instructor seven years ago after serving as an adjunct professor at Haskell Indian Nation University. Before she became an adult educator, Harrod taught at all levels in the public schools, and for over 20 years served as the district media coordinator.

shattering. On the road again, the LALC took up residence at 19th and Delaware. The program continued to expand, and English as a Second Language (ESL) soon was major program in our center. In 2004, the LALC settled into another new home at the Lawrence High School Annex, which is where the program is today. Our success in large part can be attributed to a stable and flexible leadership structure: The center since its inception in the mid-1960s has had only two directors and, the present director has been in her position for 30 years. During her tenure, she has provided strong leadership through many changes, moves, and visions of the center's future.

According to 2000 U.S. Census Bureau data, Lawrence's population was 80,098, of which 5,767 adults 25 years of age and older did not have a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.a).¹ This represents 7.2% of the adult population. U.S. Census Bureau 2000 data showed that 7,929 persons five years and older spoke a language other than English in the home.² According to current LALC program data, 60.7% of enrollees are age 25 and older. (See Table.) U.S. Census Bureau 2000 data also indicated 18.9% of the population had an income below the poverty level. Of the adults served at the adult learning center, 10% are on public assistance, and 36% are unemployed and available to the job market. There has been strong growth in Lawrence since the 2000 census, resulting in many changes. According to the latest population estimate (2006), there are approximately 112,123 people living in the metropolitan Lawrence area which encompasses Douglas County (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.b).

Our Program and Students

The LALC has worked with approximately 163 individuals in the first three quarters of this year. The breakdown by ethnicity, gender, and age group are found in the table. The mission of the LALC is to enable adult students to:

- acquire appropriate skills and knowledge necessary to become informed decision makers and effective communicators who assume responsible roles in society;
- assist students to set attainable goals that meet their personal needs;
- recruit and serve adults who are in need of Adult Basic Education;
- provide English language instruction with an emphasis on life skills and employability for ESL students;
- prepare students to complete the GED.

These goals are accomplished by teaching students a challenging curriculum enriched by a community committed to the conviction that learning is lifelong endeavor.

The LALC is the only program in the county offering Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education Skills (ASES), GED preparation, and ESL. The LALC is sponsored by the Lawrence Public Schools. Since the passing of state Senate Bill 27 in 1985, the local school board has imposed the mill levy of ½ mill to support adult education. The program is supported by the Adult Education and Family Act Grant from the federal government which in turn is matched by the state of Kansas. Competent staffing is a central focus of the program with an abundance of experience and expertise at all levels of instruction. From elementary and secondary certified teachers to a linguist, a law student, and a psychologist, students receive quality instruction from a devoted staff with a wealth of knowledge and skill and a love for working with adult students.

Table
Students Served by Lawrence Adult Learning Center by Ethnicity, Gender, and Age
(First three quarters of 2007)

Ethnicity	Gender	Age (in years)					Total
		16-18	19-24	25-44	45-59	>59	
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	F	3	0	1	0	0	4
	M	2	0	5	0	0	7
Asian	F	0	0	12	11	2	25
	M	0	0	3	6	2	11
Black/African American	F	6	2	2	0	0	10
	M	2	1	9	1	0	13
Hispanic	F	2	5	12	2	0	21
	M	1	3	4	0	0	8
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	F	0	0	0	0	0	0
	M	0	0	0	0	0	0
White/ Caucasian	F	17	6	13	4	0	40
	M	7	10	5	2	0	24
Total		40	27	66	26	4	163

Data source: Kansas Board of Regents Institutional Research.

ESL classes include multilevel non-native English speaking students, Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) levels 7-12. They provide instruction and guided practice in reading, listening, speaking, and writing. A variety of instructional methods are used including: teacher-led large and small group instruction; individual instruction; group discussions; computer-based instruction; video and audio-based instruction; reading and writing assignments; use of print media such as newspapers; partner and group work; and hands-on activities.

During the school year, many varying educational opportunities are used to meet student needs. Outside sources such as city government, school personnel, and community business leaders are included in classroom activities. There also are regular, planned field trips to different places in the community, such as the hospital, Lawrence Human Relations Department, Bismark Gardens, and Lawrence Fire Department. Field trips have enriched our students' life experiences in many ways, occasionally providing surprises as well. On one occasion, our ESL morning students went on a walking field trip at a nearby strip mall. We were having a scavenger hunt practicing directions. Small groups of students were working together to complete their answer sheets as they walked through the parking lot. We soon noticed that we were being observed by three officers from the Army National Guard recruiting office. One younger officer sheepishly came over to ask us what our business was. We marveled at being considered a security threat! We told them who we were and explained that an afternoon class would be doing the same activity at noon. Even then, we were carefully scrutinized. Although we chuckled about it when we returned to the classroom and students remarked how only a few of them were young enough or strong

enough to have really done anything, it was sobering to see how just by being non-native speakers of English, students were perceived as potential trouble.

Culturally Diverse Voices

Our ESL classes have students from 16 countries, speaking 14 different languages. They are a culturally diverse group in regards to age (18-65), ethnicity, religion, educational background, and economic status. Students share the goal of improving English language ability in order to live, work, and become a part of U.S. society. As one student put it:

For me, living in the U.S.A., may have many difficulties. The greatest challenge is language. When I first arrived in the USA I noticed that if one doesn't understand English, one is like a blind and deaf person. Also, one is the same as a handicapped person because one doesn't have the ability to completely be independent. Therefore, if you decide to settle in the USA, you have to learn English first. Studying English for me is very hard. However, I don't feel discouraged. I have a lot of opportunity to practice speaking and listening while living in the U.S. if I concentrate and learn continually with a good school. In several years, I will be able to write and speak English better. I can communicate with people, which can help me communicate with other people. It can help me to adapt to the new culture more quickly.

Learning to speak English is an absolute necessity for anyone who plans to live and prosper in Lawrence. There are no other language groups with a large enough population that would have the

capacity to be an independent community. This holds true for the new immigrants as well as those who have been here for a long time. Having so many languages and cultures represented in our classes presents both benefits and challenges. When students speak the same native language, it is very easy to fall into communicating in the first language or wanting someone to interpret everything. Although this is very understandable, it can be counter-productive in learning a new language. With many languages spoken, our center's philosophy is that students need to use English as the common language. This educational approach has facilitated the development of new relationships between cultural groups.

When LALC was closed over spring break, a group of afternoon students from China, Morocco, Spain and Mexico decided to meet for lunch to practice English. Bonds of friendship formed, helping to combat the loneliness and isolation many students feel. One student expressed it this way:

First, I'm come to America, my most important challenge, my two daughters, they have no friends. Sometimes we are crying, my husband not here. I can't tell anybody and we always crying a lot, think about tomorrow. Will it be good? So this is my challenge, just for my children.

Students enjoy learning about their friends' native countries. LALC facilitates these new relationships with "culture days" twice a semester. Students bring food, clothing, pictures, videos, and music from their countries. Each student shares information about what they have brought to the class in English. Everyone has a wonderful time and gains an appreciation for how we are unique and yet the same.

Occasionally there have been challenges. One student said, "My big problem is I can't talk with another person, and always do not understand." This potential for misunderstanding each other led to one incident where a student became offended when she perceived that another student was laughing at her. We used stories from *Our Own Journeys: Readings for Cross-Cultural Communication* (Dresser, 2003) as a springboard to discuss how we often react differently to situations because of our cultural background. The student who laughed did so out of personal embarrassment and didn't realize how others perceived her outburst. The student who took offense was very sensitive and insecure about her language ability, which only heightened the tension. As each of them gained an understanding of where the other was coming from, the misunderstanding was resolved, and the group was able to come together.

Providing for the basic needs of their families is foremost on the minds of many of our students. A student summed it up this way: "When I come here, my challenge is not to speak English; it is to get a job!" One big hope is that more employees will see the need to help and support employees, encouraging them to attend ABE, GED and ESL classes when needed. Alternatives that could be pursued are paid time for classes, time off to attend classes, or on-the-job training. Another student explained: "I hope in future better English will help me get a job in a hospital, or another place!" In Lawrence, beginning in the fall 2007 semester, a partnership between a local business and the ESL program will offer English language classes to employees. Based on students' needing to be employed where there are opportunities for advancement, the goal is to improve their language skills, resulting in future consideration for promotion by their employer.

LALC's Future

The LALC will continue to attract more ESL students, consistent with the national trend. As more new immigrants move to Lawrence, there will be a growing need to focus on and establish a curriculum designed specifically for second language learners. As our center's budget barely covers rent and instruction, LALC needs to increase its budget to allow staff more time to develop new curriculum and instruction. Our goal is to move more students from ESL to GED classes as their language skills improve. Facilitating this transition is one of the most difficult challenges faced by adult educators. Students making this transition from ESL to GED programs typically need more time to learn vocabulary necessary for "reading to learn" in contrast to rather "learning to read."

The puzzle of how to survive as an adult center in future years is a complex one. If we were to envision what a center would be like ten years from now, there is little doubt that ESL classes will dominate our program. It is LALC's responsibility to make sure all people who live within our boundaries have an opportunity to learn how to survive in American culture. Language is the bridge that makes such a journey a reality. With the challenges all immigrants face when they enter the United States, the everyday challenge is to learn to speak English more fluently. The continuing community support and that of our local school district and school board illustrates in Lawrence that education for adults is a priority.

Change is the name of the game. With the growth of the diploma programs throughout the state and in particular, Lawrence, real financial changes loom in the future of many programs. With a recent trend at LALC in declining enrollments in ABE and GED students, we envision that our future will be dependent upon ESL. As long as school district diploma programs continue to enroll struggling high school students, other adult education programs are not going to see significant growth. Sadly, ABE and GED students are better prepared for life and careers than those graduating from school district diploma programs. ABE and GED require exit exams, illustrating an individual's ability to achieve success in the work place and in the academic world. Yet, as long as the present funding structure does not change, diploma programs will continue to thrive.

No matter what color, age, background, gender, or religion, the challenges our students face are countless and overwhelming! In their own words, they offer a collage of what it is like arriving in America! Imagine the trials even everyday living presents:

- I cannot speak with others unless I have a translator.
- Challenges? When I go to the market, when I need transportation, figuring out the culture, a new language.
- I have a problem finishing my GED. We came from Nepal to USA. The first time got here I had many problems, because I have to pay for the tickets, and do not understand a word.
- I have problems sometimes when go to the bank. They don't understand my problem.
- My largest challenge was the language. My son goes to school alone, and does speak English so good. It makes me embarrassed.
- I didn't know how to pay my bills, too many different types.
- When I want to go to mall, I should like a car, but no car.

Arriving in America! A challenge, a chance and a communicative adventure! The ESL population will continue to grow as the group most in need. In ABE, ESL, and GED, there will be a shift toward more language education. In ESL in particular, there will be a need for more intensive classes in writing, grammar usage, U.S. History, and Social Studies. The futures of millions of people in the United States lies in their ability to better understand and communicate in English. This is an immense challenge for both the educator and the learner!

Endnotes

¹ The latter figure is calculated from data in this reference.

² Calculated from U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.a). State and county quickfacts: Lawrence, Kansas.

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