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# Garden City: Multicultural Issues in Adult Education

**Hector Martinez and Debra J. Bolton**

Kansas adult education is faced with the growing challenge to prepare its programs for serving the needs of a socioculturally diverse student population. It is imperative that Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs develop effective learning techniques for multicultural student populations. These issues continue to be important topics for educators, administrators, and politicians.

To succeed in the new adult education environment, students from all racial and ethnic groups need to experience and master a variety of challenges in and out of the classroom. In our study, multiculturalism is viewed as the process of increasing awareness of and knowledge about human diversity in ways that are translated into respectful human interactions and effective interconnections (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1995). The purpose of this study is to bring to light multicultural issues at the Garden City Adult Education program. In general terms, some of the most frequent challenges, concerns, and issues for the participants are the language, the financial burdens that they have to confront on a daily basis, and their new social status—different from the one they had in their community of origin.

## Multicultural Issues and History of a Small Town

Garden City is located 48 miles west of the 100° meridian—the geographical center of the U. S.—in southwest Kansas, 50 miles west of Dodge City, and 62 miles north of Liberal. The city has a total area of 22.1 square kilometers or 8.5 square miles of land. At the time of the 2000 Census, the population was 28,451, and its racial makeup was 68.8% White, 1.5% African American, 1.1% Native American, and 3.5% Asian. Hispanic/Latinos of any race made up for the 43.9% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The change from 1990 to 2000 census shows that within ten years, the Hispanic population grew from 25.2% to 43.9% (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).

Cultural diversity is not new to western Kansas. In the early 20th century, the railroad and sugar beets farming brought both Mexican and German immigrants to Garden City and Finney County. The two

cultures lived together harmoniously, even exchanging food recipes and languages with one another (Blanchard, 1931). The second great wave of immigration to this area came with the beef processing plants in the early 1980s. At the time, various churches in the area sponsored Southeast Asian refugees as well as many immigrants that came from various Latin American countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

Newcomers found quick employment in Finney County's two beef processing plants and other agriculturally-based industries. In the past ten years, Old Colony Mennonites (also called, German Mennonites) began moving away from Mexico and into the U.S. as land and job opportunities in agriculture became scarce in their home country. Also the civil wars in Somalia purged many of its citizens, and some came to western Kansas, once again, providing job opportunities in the beef processing plants. In *Any Way You Cut It: Meat Processing and Small Town America*, Stull (1991) stated that rural communities that attract or have meat processing plants can also expect to be confronted with school overcrowding, homelessness, housing shortages, and elevated unemployment. The many Latino and Southeast Asian laborers upon whom these industries depend often pose unprecedented linguistic and cultural challenges for schools and communities.

Now in the 21st century, Finney County is anticipating the arrival of three coal-fired power plants through an agreement with Sunflower Electric Cooperative of Kansas and Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association of Colorado. Educational, health, social, and city/county services have begun to "brace" themselves for a new influx of workers and their families.

## Garden City: The History of the Adult Learning Center (ALC)

The Garden City's ALC began in the mid 1980s as a tutoring center concentrating on adult education. In 1986, Garden City Community College (GCCC) stepped in with a state-funded grant, and the ALC was born.

The adult education programs were located in a large utility van, purchased and sponsored by the United Methodist Church, called Learn and Earn. The ALC housed 27 students who studied English as a second language (ESL) or the General Educational Development (GED). The classes were taught by a staff of seven volunteers and one paid staff person. During the same year, the U.S. began to grant amnesty to foreign-born citizens and gave them opportunities for expedited work and residency legalization processes. That marked the beginning of the ALC's citizenship classes. Student enrollment grew significantly with the added refugee and literacy programs. This meant for ALC to make yet another move to accommodate more students and a growing teaching staff. Students spoke a variety of languages including Spanish, French, Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, Cambodian, German, and Chinese in addition to several different dialects. The GED test was offered in English, Spanish, and French. The cost of the GED test was \$4.00 per subject, and there was no charge for the tutoring. Students could attend on an open-entry/open-exit basis. Today the cost for the GED test is \$68.00.

By 1995, Even Start Family Literacy was added, so children (birth to three years of age) could accompany their parents on the premises and in other sites in the community. Such change brought 110 children in age-appropriate learning programs while their parents learned English, studied citizenship, or prepared to take the GED. In 1996, the Family

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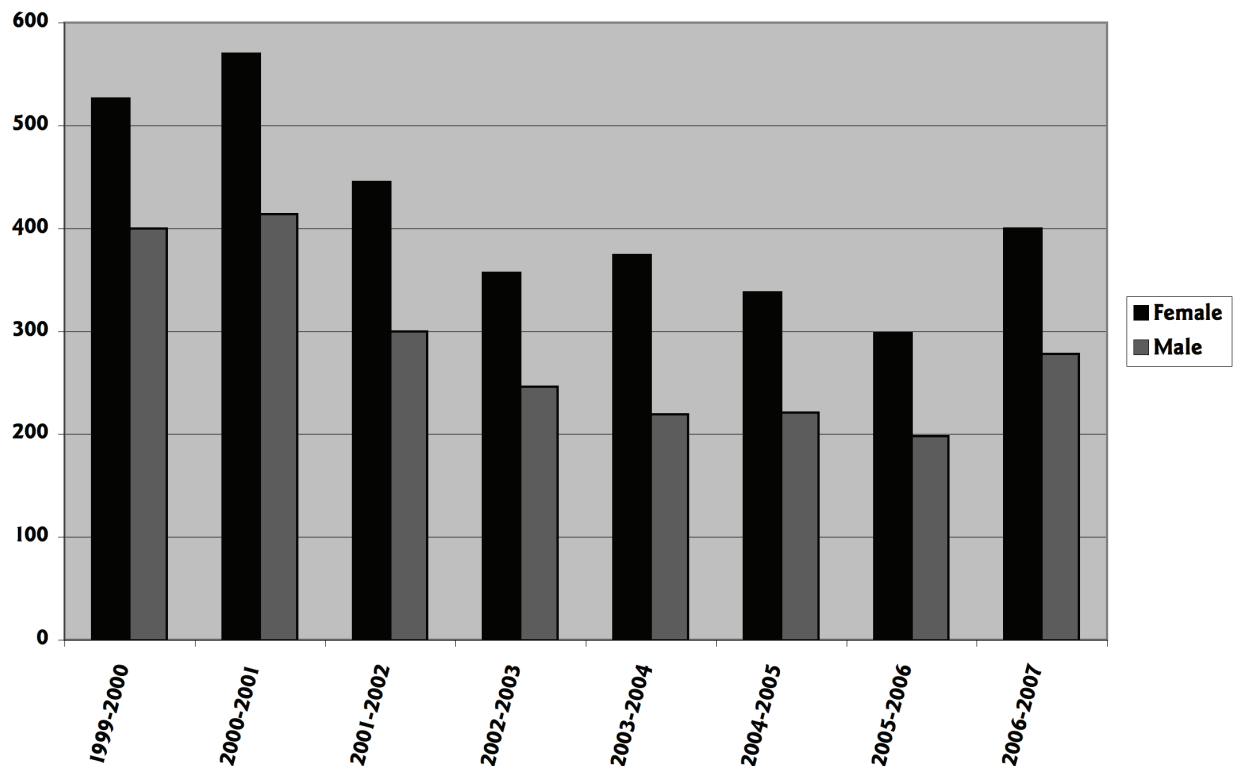
**Hector Martinez is Director of Garden City Adult Learning Center and, for more than 13 years, has been involved with adult education in Mexico and the United States. During the last three years, Martinez has been developing new programs to deliver educational programs to diverse populations. He moved to the United States from Puebla, Mexico.**

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**Table 1**  
**Percentage of Adult Education Participants by Gender, 1999–2000 through 2006–2007**

Gender	Year							
	1999–2000	2000–2001	2001–2002	2002–2003	2003–2004	2004–2005	2005–2006	2006–2007
Female (%)	57	58	60	59	63	60	60	59
Male (%)	43	42	40	41	37	40	40	41

**Figure 1**  
**Number of Adult Education Participants by Gender, 1999–2000 through 2006–2007**



Resource Center was welcomed into the ALC. It focused on health and social services for the students and their families along with other residents in the community. In 1999, the ALC embarked on a partnership with the local school district to combine the Garden City Alternative High School with the GCCC's adult education programs. That was the beginning of the Finney County Community Learning Center. Under one roof owned by the school district, the adult education programs, which included ESL, general education development (GED preparation in Spanish and English), Even Start Family Literacy, One Stop Workforce Development Center, Operation Advance (Migrant High School Completion Diploma), Newcomers (for newly arrived, non-English speaking student orientation), and the Family Resource Center (now staffed by an advanced registered nurse practitioner, a Master's degreed social worker, family advocate, and a family life educator), joined with the alternative high school to become a "one stop educational shop" for the community. The

center served 1600 students' of all ages. That partnership dissolved in 2006.

The adult education programs recently had a brand-new home built for it on the GCCC campus. Since its beginning, the ALC has changed locations from a utility van to an old gas station, to two store fronts, to an old furniture store, and finally to a building built specifically for its use. Currently, the ALC serves 700 students with 21 part-time and three full-time staff. It offers services on ESL, GED in Spanish and English, citizenship preparation, and computer instruction. By partnering with diverse community agencies and services, the ALC provides students with information about health, finances, community activities and family recreation.

Adult education opportunities in Garden City began with the sponsored program from the United Methodist Church. After a year, the program received grant funding from the Kansas Department of Education, the Kansas Board of Regents, and considerable support from

GCCC. Grant funds have included adult basic education funding from refugee resettlement funds, work readiness skills, ELCE (civics), and family literacy funding. After receiving funds, the ALC began to hire qualified instructors to provide improved services. Most instructors were required to have some teaching experience at elementary, secondary, or adult education levels.

As of today, the majority of the staff holds a Bachelor's degree in education or related field. The ALC requires the staff to participate in ongoing trainings to develop and complete an individual development plan which aligns with the center's program improvement plan. One of the goals for the program is to keep 100% of the instructors involved in continuous training by attending national conferences, state workshops, and monthly local trainings. The ALC has maintained an 85% average of instructors with a Bachelor's degree for the past ten years.

### Participants' Demographics

The ongoing changes in the adult education evaluation system transform how the instructors and staff will perform their activities in relation to students. The ALC strives to provide innovative opportunities that promote and assist participants in successfully meeting their educational and life goals in an environment that is committed to life-long learning.

The adult education programs were designed to provide services to adults 16 years old and over. In 1985, the ALC participants consisted of approximately 85% adult students (25+ years of age) who were enrolled in ESL classes and 15% younger students (between 16 and 25 years old) who were preparing for the GED diploma and attending the English classes as well.

The majority of the students participating in adult education around the end of the 1980s were over the age of 19 while the percentage of younger adults (16-18 years old) was minimal. In 1999, the percentage of students using adult education services were: 6% between

ages 19 and 24; 73% between ages 25 and 44; 16% between ages 45 and 59; and 5% were 60 years and older.

In 2001, when GCCC joined services with the local school district and the ALC, the latter's serviced population changed once more: 10% of the participants were between the ages of 16-18; 20% between 19-24; 55% between 25-44; 10% between 45-59; and 5% were 60 years old or older. In terms of gender, in the last seven years the ALC's student population was mostly female as Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrate. During the same period of time, the ALC's ethnicity's composition was overwhelmingly Hispanic as Table 2 and Figure 2 illustrate.

### Program Performance

The adult education programs have modernized the way in which they provide services and are now accountable for participants' success. One of ALC's biggest changes over the past ten years has been the increased emphasis on accountability and program quality. Ten years ago, the focus of the adult education program relied solely on student recruitment and attendance. The goal was to get a student to participate in it for 12 or more hours. Now, to be successful as a program, the students also need to demonstrate proof of academic success as measured by improved scores on standardized assessments. A significant portion of funding is determined by the percentage of student achievements. Programs are also evaluated using a rigorous set of quality indicators ranging from levels of student success, amount of local financial support, and specific program procedures to level teacher education and staff development. The program's score on quality indicators also determines a significant portion of funding. These indicators are adjusted on a yearly basis.

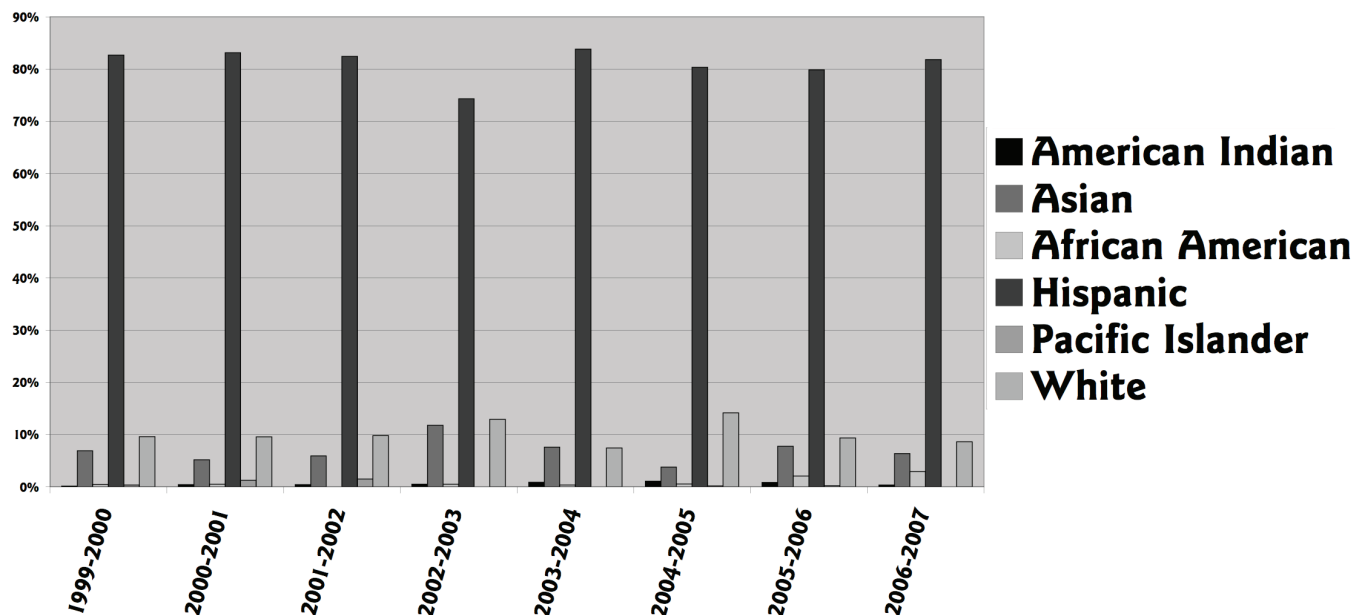
### Student Questionnaires

Because we wanted to learn more about and validate our students' learning experiences, we designed a questionnaire with the purpose

**Table 2**  
**Number of Adult Education Participants by Ethnicity, 1999–2000 through 2006–2007**

Ethnicity	Year							
	1999–2000	2000–2001	2001–2002	2002–2003	2003–2004	2004–2005	2005–2006	2006–2007
American Indian	1	4	3	3	5	6	4	2
Asian	64	51	44	71	45	21	38	37
African American	4	5	0	3	2	3	10	17
Hispanic	768	818	614	448	497	449	392	476
Pacific Islander	3	12	11	0	0	1	1	0
White	89	94	73	78	44	79	46	50

**Figure 2**  
**Percentage of Adult Education Participants by Ethnicity**



of identifying the educational challenges they face at home, at work, in the community, and in school. We also wanted to see if those challenges changed through time. Our questions were:

1. As a student, what challenges did you experience at home?
2. What challenges did you encounter at work?
3. What challenges did you find at school?
4. What challenges did you encounter within the community?

These questions were available in English, Spanish and Vietnamese, and given to all current program participants involved in ongoing learning sessions. Instructors were asked to administer the questionnaire and have students complete it during class. A different questionnaire was delivered to the administrative staff, instructional staff, and previous students. All answers were confidential and anonymous. We had a 56% response rate.

Regarding the challenges at home, most students said that it was difficult for them to find time to “be with my family”. Over 55% of the responses indicated that it was a problem for students to have less time at home. Most parents participating in the ALC need to work on a complex schedule to financially provide for their families, many times juggling multiple jobs. Some students’ work schedules change on a weekly basis (or even daily basis) making it difficult for them to attend classes regularly. Additional comments were related to the difficulty of adult learners in knowing where to find information about the center and how to obtain or finish their education.

Other responses indicated the urgent need for parents to learn English in order to help their children with their school homework, their need to communicate with school officials regarding school activities and involvement, and how they can integrate into Garden City by improving their relations with others in the community. It is important to note that, even though the school district offers general school information in different languages for non-English speaking parents, this does not apply to the children’s academic and homework assessments. The direct result is that it is difficult for the

parents to understand school assignments, class structure, and school organization—all of which are necessary if parents want to help their children succeed in school.

The main answer to question two regarding challenges at work was “language”; and not surprisingly, the majority of survey responses came from ESL students. Their need to learn and understand English is a priority in order to advance professionally in their work place and to have an opportunity to move onto a better job. It is important to note that GED students’ answers to this question revolved around improving “job-related skills”. Some comments specifically highlighted the abuse that the employees suffer from employers when workers are not proficient in English (lower wages, worst jobs assigned, no promotion, shorter or no break times).

Responses to question three related to the difficulty of “communicating with teachers”. Participants come to our center to obtain basic skills that will help them understand their children’s educational system. They commented about their frustration when attending musicals, meetings, and other types of school activities. They said, “These activities are for people that speak English or are educated people.” In the local school district, parents are required to attend school meetings. Yet, they often do not understand what is being said. Once again, the language barrier is the main obstacle for our students.

The last question asked what kind of challenges do you experience in the community. The most common answer was: “being able to understand others”. This answer describes the frustration of ESL students trying to survive in a new world and how essential it is for them to be able to communicate their ideas and feelings. Some comments related to this question revolved around the importance of speaking English when visiting the doctor’s office, health clinic, and police department or attending community activities.

The vast cultural, socioeconomical, educational, and linguistic diversity among our students presents a true challenge when we

want to provide every student with the right services. Some of our participants never received an education in their country of origin while others come with a high school diploma or higher degree. This second type of students advances quickly in their personal and educational goals; and some of them have even achieved the highest score in the state's Spanish GED. We also have students who dropped out of school 10 to 20 years ago and decided to come back as adult learners. These students have many life experiences, work, and family responsibilities with little time to waste. They often obtain the English GED in a few weeks.

There are many factors that impact adults' decision to further their education. Students want to attend classes and still keep their jobs. New immigrants face the challenge of integrating into a new society and a new culture. They must often adapt to a new learning environment in our classes that is quite different from the schools they attended in their home country. Most realize that what is being taught in our classes will improve the quality of life for themselves as well as their families. It is also important to mention the significant role change that females experience at home once they return to school while trying to adapt to a new society.

### **The Future of the Adult Learning Center**

In August 2006, when ALC moved to its new building on the campus of GCCC, our students will enter a new world: "The Community College." Some students were under the impression that college was only for White Americans and not for immigrants of other races and ethnic backgrounds. Before ALC moved to campus, the college administration initiated a public awareness campaign throughout our service area informing everyone of the move and how to get to our building. The results of this effort were that in the first two quarters at our new location the number of students doubled when compared the previous fiscal year.

Today, the ALC is providing opportunities for new participants throughout the entire community. We offer programs in the county jail and various workplaces, and even provide students with an access code so they can study at home via the Internet using the same books and curriculum as our classrooms. We continue to look for new ways we can better serve our students while strengthening our partnership with our host institution, GCCC.

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