SHOP TALK # 40:
El Paso Students Make a PACCT and a LEAP to Transition

Traditionally, many adult education programs have offered stand alone instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL), Adult Basic and Adult Secondary Education (ABE and ASE), and computer literacy. Often missing is the connection to postsecondary education and training.

Such was the case in El Paso when together, the San Jacinto Adult Learning Center, El Paso Community College’s Literacy Programs, and the Housing Authority of the City of El Paso began to explore ways to assist ESL and GED students searching for the “next step”. As a result, a two-phased transition initiative was born: PACCT (Personal, Academic, College, and Career Transitions) at San Jacinto and LEAP (Learn, Engage, Aspire, and Prosper) at the community college. Now, having served four cohorts of adult learners in the collaborative, individual success stories are starting to emerge and inspire.

PACCT and LEAP have become an integral part of helping adult learners step beyond adult education into the postsecondary world. The focus on four areas of readiness gives learners an opportunity to develop an understanding of postsecondary education and training and the skills needed for a successful transition. The content for PACCT/LEAP was created and designed by San Jacinto’s and EPCC’s instructors. This instructional collaboration ensures consistency and continuity from one semester to the next.

PACCT participants are recruited from students currently enrolled at San Jacinto as well as from the general community. An informational meeting and orientation assure that individuals understand expectations in terms of their becoming part of a “learning community”. The intake process includes an interview, completion of an intake form, speaking and listening skills assessment, computer skills assessment, and a writing sample. Participants must have a GED, high school diploma or the equivalent from another country, and a minimum grade equivalent reading score of 5.5 on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). Before making a final decision to participate in PACCT, students are asked to reflect on the commitment and to discuss enrollment with their families.

The first cohort of students enrolled in PACCT in the fall of 2007 and then continued with the LEAP program for a semester. Seven students then went on to El Paso Community College (EPCC) and one to the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) in the fall of 2008. The second cohort, offered to students enrolled in evening adult education classes, began in the fall of 2008. Six students continued with the LEAP courses, and two students began studies at EPCC during the fall of 2009. The third cohort began with PACCT in March 2009, completed the LEAP course in December 2009, and six will begin postsecondary studies in January 2010. Six members of the fourth cohort completed PACCT studies in November and will begin LEAP studies in January 2010.

While morning PACCT classes are dedicated to reading, writing, and math skills development Mondays through Thursdays, Fridays provide workshop activities on career
exploration, the college system, and personal and academic readiness. The College Readiness workshops are facilitated by El Paso Community College as part of the collaboration, and students are assisted in making informed decisions about the right time to begin college. The college's LEAP program takes each cohort of students forward through their transition into the college community. Former PACCT/LEAP students become mentors to currently enrolled students, and their stories are impressive. Several are shared here…

Teresa and Eva are pursuing Associate of Arts degrees in teaching and will then transfer to UTEP. Jesus will engage in studies leading toward an Associate’s degree in Applied Science to become a physical therapy assistant, and Fanny is setting her sights on an Associate of Applied Science degree in the sign language/interpreter program. Mireya is pursuing an Associate of Arts degree in communications, and Lizeth will enroll in UTEP’s master’s degree in bioinformatics.

Another success story: Angelica Garay is a thirty-one year old native of Juarez who has lived in the U.S. for five years. Angelica had completed six years of education in Mexico before enrolling in beginning English language classes at San Jacinto. Six months into the program, she completed her GED in Spanish while continuing to take ESL and computer literacy classes.

When Angelica learned about the PACCT program, she worried that her English skills were not good enough. With encouragement from the Director of the San Jacinto Program, Blanca Andrade, and Angelica’s own promising TABE scores, she was convinced to enroll. She found the PACCT curriculum difficult but helpful. She learned about her career options and how the college system works as she improved her reading, writing, and math skills.

Her self esteem grew as she completed the PACCT initiative and moved on to El Paso Community College’s LEAP program. Now, with two developmental courses behind her, Angelica is enrolled in nine credit hours of study and working as an administrative assistant to the program coordinator. She helps present workshops and encourages students just starting out. The ongoing support Angelica receives from the LEAP program strengthens her chances of continued success.

Lucinia also has a success story to share. Married with two children ages 18 and 20, Lucinia is from Honduras where she attended but did not complete university studies. After being out of school for twelve years, she looked for ESL classes as a way to continue her education. She found the return to studies difficult but received tremendous support from her family. She is now enrolled in her third semester at El Paso Community College where she hopes to obtain an Associate’s Degree. With seventeen credits completed, Lucinia is well on her way to becoming a medical lab technician.

There is no cost to the student to participate in the PACCT initiative. Students pay $39 to participate in the college’s LEAP program. The college pays the LEAP instructor’s salary. Recently, the Foundation for El Paso Community College announced the availability of scholarship funds to assist students in meeting the costs of their college courses.

For more information about PACCT, contact Blanca Andrade at bandrade@episd.org. For additional information about EPCC’s LEAP program, contact Susan Tollefson at stollefs@epcc.edu. To share your student success stories in SHOP TALK, contact Barbara Tondre-El Zorkani at btondre@earthlink.net.