SHOP TALK # 52:
BREAKING THROUGH IN SOUTH TEXAS

Partners in South Texas are excited about their efforts to create pathways to high wage/high demand occupations for dual language learners. This collaborative approach brings four entities together:

- Workforce Solutions (funding, case management, support services)
- Jobs for the Future (funding and technical assistance)
- Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA) (funding, career counseling and support services)
- South Texas College (education and training, noncredit to credit pathways)

English language learners in the McAllen area are engaged in intensive, contextualized English and GED instruction while earning college credit on a pathway to a career in healthcare. The dual language approach makes individuals who are bilingual more marketable and appears to be a more efficient approach to education for adults who must function proficiently in both Spanish and English. Plans are currently underway for similar training in green construction jobs in plumbing, electrical, and refrigeration.

Workforce Solutions is the local workforce development network for Starr, Hidalgo, and Willacy Counties. McAllen is one of the fastest growing micropolitan statistical cities in the U.S. Micropolitan cities do not have the economic or political importance of large cities, but are nevertheless significant centers of population and production, drawing workers and shoppers from a wide local area. Because of its proximity to Mexico and as a destination for winter Texans, the area finds itself facing a growing demand for healthcare services.

Jobs for the Future (JFF) identifies, develops, and promotes new education and workforce strategies that help communities, states, and the nation to compete in a global economy. In more than 200 communities in 41 states, JFF is working to improve pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers. Breaking Through is a multi-year demonstration project to promote and strengthen the efforts of innovative community colleges focusing on strategies that create more effective pathways through pre-college and degree level programs. Breaking Through is a collaborative effort between JFF and the National Council for Workforce Education.

VIDA is a community-based, non profit agency created in 1995 as a result of efforts led by community leaders of Valley Interfaith and private industry business leaders. The impetus: to empower underserved residents of the region with the education and training needed to become self-sufficient and in tandem, to fuel the growth of existing employers and increase the new investments in the area by developing a highly skilled workforce. VIDA is a recipient of JET funds (Jobs and Education for Texans) from the Texas Comptroller’s Office.
South Texas College, located in McAllen, was created in 1993. In 1995, the Division of Developmental Studies opened two Centers for Learning Excellence where students could access academic assistance. Today, STC students spend over 50,000 hours receiving assistance each year, and the Centers employ over 80 tutors in Hidalgo and Starr Counties at five campuses. STC provides both the adult education instruction and the occupational training components for the career pathways initiative.

South Texas College realized that the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certificate alone would not provide self-sufficiency wages to its recipients, but embedded in the first semester of the Patient Care Assistant (PCA) program, it would be the first rung on the career ladder to allied health careers and family-sustaining wages. Since a high school diploma or GED was not required to participate in the CNA program, STC screened for learners with 8th grade reading levels for the first cohort of twelve. Students were simultaneously enrolled in GED preparation and CNA, with college credit held in escrow until students completed their GED work.

Intensive case management and career counseling were critical to the success of the first cohort. The outcomes thus far: 100% retention; 100% attainment of the CNA; 100% passed the medical terminology course; and GED-ready students enrolled in Anatomy and Physiology. All cohort members completed the College Readiness Academy (THEA preparation) and are currently taking courses in the PCA program. Spring 2011 includes taking the THEA or Accuplacer tests, completing GED studies, taking Technical Math, and finishing up Anatomy and Physiology. In January 2012, all twelve students will apply for placement in the LVN program, where twelve spots have been guaranteed for students who meet all admission requirements. This is a competitive opportunity, with approximately 450 applicants applying for 125 spots.

The second cohort targets students with a 6th grade level of proficiency in English and Spanish. Participants have been assessed with the BEST Plus, the TABE, and the TABE in Spanish to determine both English and Spanish proficiency levels. Students are receiving 192 hours of contextualized ESL instruction at the intermediate and advanced levels, incorporating pre-GED concepts simultaneously. 192 hours of contextualized Spanish instruction prepares students to communicate effectively with Spanish speaking patients and relatives; the instruction consists of 96 hours of Spanish medical terminology and 96 hours of introduction to the CNA program. In addition, students receive 212 hours of contextualized GED instruction and THEA preparation. All students were expected to complete the ESL and Spanish course work in October and then continue with their GED preparation through December 2010. In January 2011, the cohort was to complete the CNA course and enter the PCA program shortly thereafter.

South Texas College planned a fall regional conference to highlight the Breaking Through initiative leveraging integrated, contextualized teaching & learning programs for the ESL/GED population. The regional convening included the Rio South Texas Workplace Literacy Council, the local workforce boards, and community colleges from Laredo to Brownsville. The conference featured the model being used to address ESL, GED, and vocational training needs for the population with low literacy skills in the native language and in English.

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