

Addressing barriers to education in the Latino community

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By **Terri Mrosko**

In Northeast Ohio and across the nation, graduation rates remain low for underserved populations that are facing language and other barriers in pursuit of post-secondary education. The Latino population is one such group.

In November, Remington College held a community forum to announce its partnership with the Hispanic support groups Esperanza Inc. and El Centro and the Cuyahoga County's Department of Education & Economic Development to address the underserved group.

Beth Dawson, director of workforce development at Remington College, said that these non-traditional students face multiple challenges. From economic to language-based obstacles and a lack of proficiency in core subjects, Latino students often struggle to find a college or university to cater to their specific needs.

"Remington College campuses across the country have always served the non-traditional learners. The Hispanic population is growing in our region, and statistics show that educational attainment is poor," Dawson said. High school graduation rates in Cuyahoga County hover around 40 percent for all students. Graduation rates for Latino students are at 30 percent, according to local statistics.

Most importantly, this "quiet crisis" in Latino education has long-term consequences for the region, especially as it continues to lose population. Victor Ruiz, executive director at Esperanza, said that the Cleveland workforce depends on home-grown talent. Just six short years from now, 60 percent of the jobs will require a post-secondary education.



(From left to right) Beth Dawson, director of workforce development, Remington College; Jessica Cartagena, community outreach specialist, Remington College; Melanie Rodriguez, Remington College dental assisting student; Luis Santiago, Remington College medical assisting student; Justin Bibb, special assistant for education and economic development, Cuyahoga County Executive's Office; Jonathan Perez, Remington College graduate; and Victor Ruiz, executive director, Esperanza at the Remington College Community Outreach Forum.

Dawson said that she was surprised to learn from Ruiz that the biggest barrier to Latino education is the breakdown of the family. At Remington, it is not unusual to see family members taking classes and graduating together, she said.

“Our message to the community, as well as to those who are willing and eager to partner with us, is to find an educational environment that will support a student’s unique needs. We have a very deliberate intention in engaging and empowering people, starting with the Hispanic community. We want them to get involved and invest in their own educational success,” Dawson stated.

The plan is to continue to work with community leaders and partnership groups to remove all barriers to post-secondary learning. The initiative is to reach all non-traditional learners who may not otherwise be afforded an opportunity for higher education. Students in the Latino community need to know that they have options for academic success and beyond, Dawson said.

Student success stories abound

The program is producing student success stories already. Seven of the first eight students taking the GED through Remington’s program passed it. Students are a part of a leadership team that continues to spread a positive message to the community.

Jonathan Pérez completed the dental assisting program at Remington College after failing to find the right environment at a couple of other area schools. Even though there was a large Hispanic population at his high school, he left with low self-esteem and feeling that he didn’t deserve to do well in school. Although he graduated from high school with honors, Pérez said he never felt supported academically until he enrolled at Remington.

“It was a better situation and smaller environment. Everyone was supportive,” he said. Today Pérez is currently attending Cuyahoga Community College and will complete his bachelor’s degree at Cleveland State University. It’s something that he wouldn’t have felt confident doing without the positive experience and support from his current employer.

His message to other Latino students is to go beyond your dreams and do not settle. Don’t be satisfied if it’s not what you truly want or desire, he said.

“I’m big on goal setting now. Education opens up a lot of doors,” Pérez said. “Find others who are willing to look out for your best interests.”