



9-1-2007

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#### Recommended Citation

Lukwago, Susan (2007) "The Mini United Nations Adult School in Southwest Kansas," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 35: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1179>

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# The Mini United Nations Adult School in Southwest Kansas

Susan Lukwago

Traveling down Kansas Avenue towards downtown Liberal at about 5:30 p.m. on Monday through Thursday, one might wonder what happens in the little building at the corner 10th and Kansas. Travel past the same place on a Sunday afternoon from about 3:30 p.m. on, and the same question may arise: What goes on in there? In both instances, the two parking lots are full, and there are cars on the streets. If it is April through October, the bicycle rack is full too.

What is going on in that building? It is the Colvin Adult Learning Center (CALC) at its busiest. It is an exciting school where adults from different cultures, age groups, and different countries come together to address their educational weaknesses in order to work towards their life goals. During the weekday, the parking lot and Center are full of English as a Second Language (ESL) and General Educational Development (GED) students, and, on the weekend, there are Citizenship Skills students.

CALC enjoys an excellent reputation in the community due to its history of providing quality instruction and assistance in making productive adults who can function in this community. The adults who are there enjoy camaraderie because they come for similar reasons. It is a joy to see individuals CALC help and hold each other accountable.

However, inherent in having a multigenerational, multicultural, international student body is the problem of meeting the needs of those who come through our doors while providing the required standardized curriculum. Furthermore, learners not only have to relate to each other, they have to relate to their teachers too.

Our teachers have different backgrounds with the common desire to help adults meet their educational goals. This common desire goes a long way towards shaping the students' experience at our center as they quickly form attachments to their first instructor. In many instances, when it is time for the students to move up to another class due to the progress they have made, they do not want to leave behind their family composed of fellow students and teacher. It is a problem we have to address as some students choose to stop coming to school rather than change classroom.

These and other similar situations are what we deal with each day. In fact, it would not be a regular day at the center if some challenging circumstance did not come up. This might cause one – especially if one is the director – to long for calm days. However, if one has a passion to work with individuals from different cultures or has a pas-

sion to simply help those who need a second chance to achieve their goals, then adult basic education (ABE) in a diverse community is one of the places where this is possible. One just has to remain open to challenges and to solutions that is not often seen in traditional schools. This article will present who we are, some of the challenges and problems that we face, and how we address them.

## Brief History and Description of the Community

CALC is located in Liberal, Kansas. The center is part of Seward County Community College (SCCC). Seward County is in the far southwest corner of Kansas bordering Oklahoma and Texas. The 2005 county census population estimate was 23,274, of whom 50.4% were persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, a 3.3% increase from 2000 and a 19% increase from 1990. (See Table 1.) The majority of the growth was new immigrants to the county.

The primary industries in our community are agriculture and oil processing. In the agricultural industry, we primarily grow corn, wheat, and soybeans. We also have large cattle and hog farms. The two largest employers of our students are beef processing and pork processing plants. Southwest Kansas, Oklahoma, and the Texas Panhandle areas also have a significant number of oil and gas fields and employ about 10% of our community in that industry.

## History of the Center

The adult learning center opened in 1982 with a focus on Adult Basic Education. The founder, Douglas Radohl, was a visionary who recruited and trained volunteers to tutor students who needed help in earning a Kansas State High School Diploma (KSHSD) or increasing their English Language proficiency. The adult education program quickly grew, and soon there was a waiting list of students needing tutors. The staff presented this problem to the administration of our sponsoring agency, SCCC, and the dream of a separate adult learning center was born.

In 1993, the Colvin family, who are the proprietors of High Plains Pizza Hut, donated the corporate offices they had recently vacated in downtown Liberal to SCCC to be used for adult education, a generous gift that became the Colvin Adult Learning Center. With the move downtown and the passage of time, more students came to this central location, and an increasing number of them were interested in ESL. Directors and staff came and went, and the programs grew from 20 or 30 students per year to 200 to 300 per year. The growth peaked at 896 participants in 2002 shortly after CALC applied for and received funding from the Kansas Board of Regents (KBOR), necessitating a stronger focus on accountability and a willingness on the part of the institution to make a number of important changes. One of these changes was drawing a distinction between different types of students: Those who enroll and attend orientation are called “learners”; and those who complete the 12 hours of orientation and attend classes where they receive instruction are called “participants”.

## Description of the Center Today

As mentioned above, in 2001, CALC contracted with KBOR to provide ABE classes, GED testing for students earning a KSHSD, standards-based programs in Adult Secondary Education (ASE), Citizenship Preparation classes, and ESL. Today CALC offers classes all day long on Mondays through Thursdays, and on Friday mornings. Civics Education is integrated into all the classes. The Citizenship

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**Table 1**  
**Population and Demographics of Seward County, 1980–2005**

**Table 1.1**

Population and Ethnicity	Year			
	1980	1990	2000	2005*
Total Population	17,071	18,743	22,510	23,274
Ethnicity (% of Population)				
White	84.9%	77.4%	65.4%	91.5%
American Indian and Alaskan	0.6%	0.9%	0.8%	0.8%
Asian	0.7%	2.3%	2.9%	2.9%
Hawaiian and Other Pacific	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.2%
Reporting Two or More Races	**	**	3.3%	0.8%
Other race	9.2%	13.9%	23.7%	0.0%
Total Percentage	100	100	100	100

Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau and Institute for Policy & Social Research.

\* Population estimate.

\*\* Not collected this year.

**Table 1.2**

Population, Ethnicity, Origin, Language, and Education	Year			
	1980	1990	2000	2005*
Ethnicity (% of Population)				
White, not Hispanic	89.5%	69.4%	49.6%	42.8%
Hispanic or Latino	9.2%	18.2%	42.1%	50.4%
Total Percentage	98.7%	87.6%	91.7%	93.2%
Origin (% of Population)				
Foreign-born Persons	n.a.	11.4%	27.4%	n.a.
Language				
Language Other than English Spoken at Home (% of Population ages 5+ years)	n.a.	26.8%	41.2%	n.a.
Education				
High School Graduate (% of Population ages 25+)	n.a.	69.8%	63.7%	n.a.

Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau and Institute for Policy & Social Research.

\* Population estimate.

**Table 2**  
**Number and Percentage of Participants by Ethnicity, Fiscal Years (FY) 2002–2007**

Ethnicity	Fiscal Year											
	FY 02		FY 03		FY 04		FY 05		FY 06		FY 07*	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
White, not Hispanic	82	9.2	41	5.5	47	7.3	49	7.4	39	7.1	20	4.5
Black	18	2.0	5	0.7	6	0.9	3	0.5	9	1.6	7	1.6
American Indian and Alaskan	4	0.4	2	0.4	4	0.6	2	0.3	4	0.7	1	0.2
Asian	48	5.4	37	5.0	27	4.2	24	3.6	14	2.6	15	3.4
Hawaiian and Other Pacific	6	0.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	0.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
Hispanic or Latino	738	82.4	659	88.6	560	87.0	579	87.9	483	88.0	397	90.2
Total	896		744		644		659		549		440	

\* July 1, 2006 to April, 2007.

Preparation classes are provided on Saturdays and Sundays. There are five full-time staff and nine part-time staff in Liberal.

In 2004, we recognized a need to provide ABE in Hugoton, a small town in Stevens County. Hugoton is only 40 miles away from Liberal. Dr. Self, the Superintendent of Hugoton Unified School District and his staff were extremely supportive of these programs and now host ASE and ESL in Hugoton. The number of learners has steadily grown, as has the diversity. In Hugoton, there are four part-time instructors, including a part-time program coordinator.

Our center's data show that the change in ethnic diversity between 2002-2007 has been dramatic, mirroring the change in the community's diversity. (See Table 2.) Though the information from the 1980s and 1990s is not included in this table, interviews with staff during those years reveal that when the center started in the early 1980s, the majority of our students were White and not Hispanic. They were there for assistance with earning their KSHSD. A smaller number needed ESL services. In the mid-1990s, Seward County, and particularly Liberal, had an influx of refugees, and the proportion of Vietnamese, Laotian, Somali, and Cuban learners increased at the center. However, as the refugees got acculturated to life in the United States, they left Liberal for more favorable locations to live. In 2000, a new manufacturer moved into the area and needed many employees with Kansas State High School Diplomas, and CALC had an unusually large number of adults coming to school for the diploma in Fiscal Year (FY) 2000 and FY 2001.

In recent years, the number of new immigrants coming into our community has increased as the beef and pork processing plants expand. Many of these workers and those who work in the oil field industry are men who have unpredictable schedules, making it difficult for them to come to school daily. However, their wives and girlfriends do attend ESL and other classes, many with perfect attendance records. Those women who have children tend to take classes in the morning and early afternoon while their children are at school, but for those mothers who need classes in the later afternoon and

evening, the center offers free childcare for those ages four through twelve.

The increasing proportion of participants of Hispanic descent, along with the continued influx of Somalis, Vietnamese and Laotians, has challenged us to rethink how we provide instruction at the lowest levels and to revise our curriculum. One of the changes is that the center now offers the KSHSD in Spanish, a program that is not covered by KBOR funds, but is supported by the Seward County Community College.

#### **Program Description Including Curriculum**

Included in our annual contract with the KBOR is the requirement to follow the Comprehensive Adult Education Planner, also known as the Proficiency Attainment Model (PAM). This is a research-based adult education model developed, and recently revised, at the University of Kansas (Mellard & Scanlon, 2004). The CALC implements all seven of the PAM components in our programs, which are as follows:

1. Pre-enrollment, where basic information about our program and all its components is available in print and electronically to all our staff and easily given to anyone who inquires.
2. Orientation, which is a regularly scheduled process where student who are entering the program learn details about what we provide and what is expected of them. We collect demographic information at this time, and appraisal testing is completed. At the end of orientation, we learn more about the learners' goals and place them in the appropriate class.
3. Assessment, which is a process to determine the learner's basic skills in multiple areas.
4. Prescription, which we call "conferencing", is a one-on-one private session with the learner and orientation coordinator to review assessment results and goals, develop a

- learning plan, and update the learner's permanent records;
5. Instruction, our main purpose, where we provide a variety of instructional classes as needed by the learners. Each class has a syllabus and lesson plans that reflect course content linked to the assessment.
  6. Test-taking, during which we follow the testing protocol in the Kansas Adult Education Assessment Policy (Kansas Board of Regents, 2007, July) for the formal CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Standardized Assessment System) assessments and KBOR checklists, and policies outlined in the Examiner's Manual (GED Testing Service, 2005) for the Official GED Practice Test.
  7. Transition, a process that begins in orientation with a discussion of the learners' options once they leave our program. The discussion of options and transition activities (speakers, field trips, etc.) continues throughout the learners' participation in the program (Mellard & Scanlon, 2004).

Also included in our annual contract with the KBOR is the requirement to use the CASAS. This is a system for assessing adult basic reading, math, listening, writing, and speaking skills within a functional context, and for evaluating the effectiveness of Adult Basic Education programs.

Based on the ethnicity of our participants, ESL is the largest program at CALC. Since the center is open year round, potential students are welcome to enroll for the orientations any time the facility is open. Orientations are held each month between July and October, and again in January, February, and April. Unfortunately, the time lag between sign up and orientation is sometimes a detriment to students because they want to receive the services at the time they sign up. By the time of orientation, they may have moved on to another location due to work or family issues. The center attempts to address this problem in November and December by allowing orientation sessions to be held on the condition that ten students are on the waiting list and seven of them can actually attend. At other times of the year, interested students are placed on waiting lists and are notified when the next orientation session is to be offered.

At the Liberal site, we offer ESL classes at 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m., 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m., and 5:30 p.m.-7:30 p.m. During the 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m. timeframe, we offer three different classes to accommodate the participants at the lowest, middle, and highest levels of CASAS scores in ESL. Approximately 60 participants attend classes at this time. From 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., we have two different classes for those at the lowest CASAS score-range and a multilevel higher class. About 40 students attend classes at this time. Between 5:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., we have four different ESL classes because we have the greatest number of participants at this time. Approximately 100 participants attend classes.

At the Hugoton site, we offer ESL classes at 1:15 p.m.-3:15 p.m. and 5:30 p.m.-7:30 p.m. In the former time frame, one multilevel class is offered, and about 15 women students attend then. At the latter time, two different classes, structured like the 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. class at the Liberal site, are offered. We offer classes at all these times, at both sites, in response to participants' needs like work shifts at farms, meat processing plants, and restaurants. The Hugoton staff is proud of the relationship they have slowly built with German Mennonites, which has resulted in three couples attending evening ESL classes. Sometimes the women will come together even if the men

are not able to attend. What has made this possible is the program coordinator's trustworthiness, commitment to, and respect for the Mennonite community.

Two primary texts are used in the ESL program at CALC: *Exploring English* (Harris & Rowe, 1995) and *Stand Out Standards-Based English* (Jenkins & Sabbagh, 2002). Both of these texts have teacher manuals and student workbooks for the lowest to highest levels of ESL learners. Both texts also provide CASAS correlations for all their materials. Instructors are also encouraged to supplement these texts with other materials that are potentially useful and relevant to students. CALC purchases some of these materials, like picture dictionaries and ESL newspapers. Other materials, like menus from local restaurants, local newspapers in English and Spanish, and phone books, and guest speakers are brought in based on the teacher's initiative and the composition of participants in the class. For example, in the lowest level class at 5:30 p.m., the teacher found explanations of medication and their uses in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Somali to meet the language needs of those students.

At the Liberal site, students can enroll for orientation all year round to earn the KSHSD. Orientation is held at the beginning of each month. Pretesting occurs on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, while official testing is done on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Those who need it then have opportunities for instruction just like in the ESL program: 9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.; 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.; and 5:30-7:30 p.m. One class is offered at each of those times. The curriculum consists of the texts and workbooks in all the subject areas, supplemented by computer programs. Instructors are encouraged to use other materials that they have found to be useful to participants as they work to earn their diploma. The program in Hugoton is similarly structured although instruction is only offered from 5:30-7:30 p.m.

As mentioned earlier, the center offers testing and instruction as needed to earn the KSHSD in Spanish. This program was started in 2005 in response to the increasing number of students who were well-educated in their South American countries of origin but needed to earn a high school diploma that would be recognized in the United States in order to work in their chosen field. However, several of the students who participate in this program also choose to enroll in the ESL program. Again, increasing English Language proficiency can only improve their chances of success in the United States. This program graduates approximately 20 students a year.

Civics education is included in all of the programs. With the majority of our students either being new immigrants to the country or not having completed school to the twelfth grade, there is a need for civics education. Using the *Master Teacher* newspaper, our two local English newspapers (*Southwest Daily Times* and *The Liberal Light*), our local Spanish newspaper (*Los Tiempos*), scheduled visits from our county elections staff, police officers, and EMS staff, we make sure our participants receive the civics education and life skills they need to function as adults in our community and in this country.

To support the diverse cultures and ethnic groups, part of the civics education includes discussions on respect for differences. Some of our students dress differently than others. Our female Muslim participants dress conservatively with their whole bodies covered. On the other hand, some of our younger participants, no matter what ethnicity, dress in such a manner as to express their perceived uniqueness. What our center does during orientation is to explain the basic dress code, emphasizing the importance of respect and individuality.

Classroom discussions about different cultures, including bringing in pictures and food, are always a hit. In fact, one of the events we held to celebrate CALC's 25th anniversary was to have participants bring in food from their culture. We invited the community to come and sample the culinary highlights. Participants explained their food and their country of origin. This was our highest attended event so far. Respecting participants and letting them talk and listen has gone a long way towards addressing diversity and is very educational.

CALC has offered a program to prepare participants to apply for United States citizenship for 12 years. The program is offered on Saturdays and Sundays so participants who are in either of our other programs or who work during the week are able to attend. The program also implements the PAM model and uses a standardized curriculum: *Citizenship: Ready for the Interview*, which includes a student book and audio CD's (Weintraub, 2002); and *Citizenship Q & A: Practice Questions and Answers on U.S. History and Government*, an audiotape (New Readers Press, 2002). The coordinator/teacher of this program has been in this position for over 14 years and has an excellent success rate (85% or better) for participants achieving citizenship skills and for going on to pass the U.S. Citizenship Interview (99%). There is almost always a waiting list for these classes since they are offered by only one person and offered only four times a year. However, this is the other program in which the outcome is tangible and the "graduating classes" have representatives from all ethnicities in the southwest Kansas region. Table 3 has further information based on center data about the participants in the center's programs over the years.

### Management Issues

Managing an adult learning center in a multicultural community is like running a miniature United Nations. There are many stakeholders from different cultures. Our primary funding, including that for civics education, comes from the Kansas Board Of Regents (KBOR). We are also generously supported by our sponsoring organization, SCCC. They provide both cash support and in-kind support. Hence CALC is accountable to both KBOR and SCCC.

CALC's staff "pays" into the center by what they do not make in salaries. The staff is majority female (66%), but culturally mixed. We have three African Americans, six white Hispanic Americans, and six white non-Hispanic staff members. They are stakeholders (account-

ability in both directions) too. Though usually a good thing, being presented with 15 different opinions about how to best serve the learners can be challenging to navigate.

The learners, especially those who go on to be participants, have opinions about which instructors they like and what would work best for them as participants. The center does quarterly classroom surveys, and participants are highly encouraged to respond in English to both the objective and qualitative questions. However, because we are more interested in hearing at length from them rather than in simply having a few words, participants may also respond in their native languages, and we have the comments translated into English. This process provides valuable feedback for managing the center.

We are fortunate to live and serve in an area that has many different cultures present. We hear different languages, see different attire, taste different foods, and in essence are a small international community. However, we are located in a rural area, and, as such, our resources are limited in certain areas. One of these is the lack of qualified adult basic education instructors who are willing to work part-time with no benefits and within grant budgetary parameters. Our contract with KBOR encourages a minimum Bachelor's degree to teach in our programs. However with the aforementioned constraints, this is difficult to maintain, and so only 85% of our staff have Bachelor's degrees. However, we are willing to make a compromise on this point in order to gain experienced, compassionate, and committed instructors who care about the learners not just as students but as human beings who are at a disadvantage in either not having earned a high school diploma when others in their cohort did; not having proficiency in the English; or lacking citizenship skills.

Another staffing challenge is that, at any given time, we usually have only enough staff to cover all the classes. If a teacher needs to be absent, then either the director or one of the clerks serves as a substitute. This is not ideal, but our center has not yet figured a way to configure the staffing and funding differently to build in more substitutes. Even if that were possible, at this time we do not have enough applicants from whom to select. We are actively recruiting from the public school district's pool of current and retired teachers.

CALC is fortunate to have its own building in a place that is convenient, welcoming, and comfortable for our students. Our facilities are not large enough to accommodate the number of classes needed in the evening, and so we have held some classes on our main campus.

**Table 3**  
**Participants by Program, Fiscal Years (FY) 2002–2007**

Program	Fiscal Year					
	FY 02	FY 03	FY 04	FY 05	FY 06	FY 07
Adult Basic Education	136	82	85	69	59	53
Adult Secondary Education	62	46	51	49	47	32
English as a Second Language	698	616	508	541	443	433
Citizenship	51	42	31	78	74	82

Participants have informed us that they are not as comfortable there as they are at our main building. While this may have something to do with the staff and location of our building, we are also considering holding orientation sessions on the main campus because the learners might be more comfortable having classes there if they are introduced to their respective programs there.

### Student Issues in the Classroom and Community

About 80% of our participants hear about CALC from friends or family. The majority of our participants are adults who have life issues that they bring to school with them. Our learners are spouses, parents, or caregivers for other relatives. Many have full or part-time jobs, yet they choose to come to school. Sometimes, school loses out, and attendance is only fair, two to three days of the week, rather than very good, 18 to 20 days out of the 20 possible each month. However, we try not to be just a school but a center for other resources that the participants need. We have information about obtaining medical care and housing. We provide translation and help coordinate carpools. We sometimes serve as employment counselors and provide childcare for the evening classes. Similar resources are also available for learners as well as former participants as we have found that both these groups of people are part of our best public relations.

### Other Issues

The image of CALC is mostly positive. Parts of our community are very supportive of the multicultural aspect of what the center does and support our work. However, there are other parts of the community that are strongly against undocumented immigrants and make it abundantly clear through letters to the editor, comments at public meetings, and even through refusal to put up flyers of our class schedule in their businesses' windows.

What we have done to address negativity towards the center is to show the positive effect the CALC has on the city, county, and region. Every few months we write articles for the English and Spanish language newspapers talking about something going on at the center, for example: Participants increasing their English language proficiency; earning their high school diplomas; or achieving U.S. citizenship. These are feature articles with photographs. As part of our 25th year anniversary celebration, we are holding an event each month that has participants and staff interacting with the community, most often at the center. We plan to ask all three of our local newspapers to feature participant mini-autobiographies with photographs this quarter.

### Conclusions

At CALC, learners are respectful and responsible. They are there out of choice and want to learn. The learners come from different cultures, ethnically and socioeconomically, which is challenging for our staff as there are as many reasons to be in school as there are participants. Following a standardized curriculum and supplementing it to serve all these participants takes formal teaching skills as well as an understanding of the art of teaching. If we do not pay attention to the artistic part of teaching, we lose learners. Something we have recently learned from the Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA) that will improve our retention rate is to ask the participants why they come to school and incorporate their reasons into the curriculum.

One of the challenges facing the CALC is the national conversation on immigration reform. While there are some in our community who would like to go back to the way things were when the community was more homogenous, this is no longer possible. Even here in rural southwest Kansas, we have a multicultural community, and the Colvin Adult Learning Center has a key role to play in assisting learners to become productive members of the community. Education is one of the great equalizers. We address diversity by helping this large and diverse group have a common language with which to speak with each other, while celebrating their differences.

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