

Case Study Summary
Northern Virginia Community College's
American Dream Team *ESL for Employment Initiative*
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Contact Information

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Program Summary

Increasingly in many communities across America – urban, suburban, and rural communities as well - the voice of the poor speaks limited English with a foreign accent. As one of the nation's top new-immigrant gateways for the past decade, Northern Virginia's experience can guide other regions in responding to this challenge through an innovative community-based initiative that prepares intermediate-level adult ESL participants for better-paying careers.

In early 2008, after securing a one-time \$4,000 matching scholarship grant awarded by NOVA's President, NOVA and a 12-church network of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) coordinators jointly announced plans to pilot a new "ESL for Employment" course at a host church in Northern Virginia. This pilot course attracted 19 registrants - all with documentation to work in the U.S. - 17 of who successfully completed the 3-month course. While honoring their achievements at a special event in late April 2008, NOVA's President, Dr. Robert Templin, Jr., announced NOVA's vision to launch a region-wide American Dream Team initiative. In his keynote address, Dr. Templin described the college's community-based approach: "*NOVA plans to work in partnership with churches and nonprofits in a relay team to help adult ESOL participants achieve their career and educational goals.*"

NOVA's American Dream Team *ESL for Employment* program enrolls intermediate-level ESL participants from dozens of community-based ESL programs into 60-hour non-credit ESL for Employment courses. The course curriculum, developed by NOVA following the pilot, helps participants master the English language and cultural competencies needed for many entry-level, career track jobs, plus the language and cultural competencies needed to succeed in a job search process. Throughout the course, participants are exposed to volunteers from the business community who reinforce the instructor's message, are introduced to participating employers in a special job fair, and receive ongoing support services to secure new jobs and enroll in additional career education programs at NOVA and area nonprofit workforce development providers. Funding partners have awarded grants to NOVA's American Dream Team initiative that cover the program's staff infrastructure and direct costs, including a 50% matching

scholarships so that the course tuition is more affordable to low and moderate-income participants.

Target Audiences

NOVA's program bridges the career development needs of intermediate level English speaking adults from low to moderate income households with the staffing needs of area employers who need motivated English-proficient entry-level workers for career track jobs. During the intake process, NOVA staff screen all applicants to ensure that they are eligible to work in the U.S.

NOVA promotes its *ESL for Employment* course offerings by distributing flyers and making presentations to the target audience of adult ESL participants with high-intermediate language abilities and a goal to advance their careers and earnings. The college leverages referral relationships through three primary channels:

1. **NOVA's ESL Programs:** NOVA enrolls an estimated 2,000 participants each year in high-intermediate programs. Our survey of current students in these classes indicates that three-quarters are interested in employment-focused ESL courses, and 31% report wages of \$9/hour or less
2. **Church-Based ESOL Programs:** NOVA has referral relationships with three Church-Based ESOL Programs – Church-Based ESOL, Catholic Charities' Hogar Hispano, and ESL and Immigrant Ministries (ESLIM), which represent approximately 40 church ESOL programs collectively serving 6,000 annual adult ESOL participants
3. **WIA One-Stop Job Centers:** SkillSource's 5 one-stop job centers in 3 Northern Virginia counties serve 14,000 job-seekers each year. Elsewhere in Northern Virginia, the Arlington Employment Center and Alexandria JobLink serve thousands more. NOVA has also established a candidate referral relationship with the Department of Employment Services in Washington, D.C. Each of these WIA-affiliated one-stop job center networks has signed letters of support to refer candidates.

NOVA and its project partner, the Dulles Regional Chamber of Commerce have identified and recruited an initial "American Dream Team" comprised of employers that are committed to recruiting successful graduates of our programs. We identify employers whose hiring needs generally match the target audience, offer starting wages of \$11 and above (plus benefits), and that also provide career advancement, training and/or tuition assistance so that entry-level new hires can advance their careers beyond their "starter" jobs. These employers will be invited to participate in tailored job fair events at the conclusion of each class, in which they will conduct quick screening interviews with each graduate. Listed below are initial employers that signed formal letters of support:

- Cardinal Bank
- Chevy Chase Bank
- Fairfax Co. Public Schools Transportation Department (school bus drivers)
- Inova Health System
- Virginia Hospital Center
- B. F. Saul Hotels

- Cox Communications

In addition to these founding American Dream Team employers, NOVA and the Dulles Regional Chamber of Commerce will continue to recruit new employers into this network. The Chamber will invite participating employers through its Workforce Development Committee, events, publications and direct member outreach.

Goals, Objectives and Outcomes

NOVA's ESL for Employment programs are designed to achieve the following service volumes and outcomes for 2008-09:

Service Volume: 150-200 low/moderate-income Northern Virginia residents will enroll in employment-focused ESL programs.

1. 80% of enrolled participants will demonstrate learning gains and complete their ESL course.
2. Two-thirds of program graduates will secure new jobs or enroll in additional skills training within 3-6 months of completing the program.
3. Newly-employed graduates will increase their hourly wages by 20%.

By achieving these outcomes, NOVA and its partners will immediately launch over 100 low-moderate income program graduates towards long-term self-sufficiency, increasing average annual earnings of newly-employed graduates by an estimated \$4,000 each. By introducing affordable career training options, NOVA will also help participants access affordable job training at NOVA or with a participating nonprofit program to accelerate long-term career and wage advancement.

In the Fall 2008 semester, NOVA enrolled approximately 50 *ESL for Employment* participants in 5 course sections, and achieved its targeted successful completion rate of 80%. Enrollment in the Spring 2009 semester is underway, with 8 course sections that are expected to enroll over 100 participants.

Collaboration

NOVA has gathered 19 formal letters of support from external partner organizations for this initiative, and established many more informal working relationships. To recruit participants, NOVA has established referral relationships with ESL providers and other community organizations that collectively serve 20,000 participants. These include faith-based ESL programs, social service agencies, one-stop job centers, and others.

Through a close alliance with the Dulles Regional Chamber of Commerce, NOVA has access to its 950 members to establish recruiting and volunteer relationships, along with numerous other employers with whom NOVA enjoys a direct relationship.

NOVA's funding partners cover staffing, direct program costs and fund a 50% matching scholarship. Current funding partners include:

- Fairfax County's Consolidated Community Funding Pool
- The Wal-Mart Workforce Economic Opportunity Initiative
- The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation

- The Virginia Community College System

Challenges

NOVA's American Dream Team *ESL for Employment* program faces challenges common to all new community training initiatives: marketing and creating public awareness; building program management systems; relationship-building with partners, volunteers and referral programs; and sustainability funding. In particular, for a college that has traditionally offered courses, but not outcomes-driven job search support services, NOVA's project team has had to dramatically shift its management and operating culture, which is ongoing. Finally, the economic/hiring environment in Fall of 2008 shifted dramatically since the initial pilot earlier in the year, and the current offerings, with many partner employers laying off staff or instituting hiring freezes. As a result, the project team has devoted considerably more time to developing new employer relationships to temporarily replace those affected by the downturn.

Sustainability

The majority of NOVA's grant funding is annually-renewable, provided that the program achieves progress in meeting its target outcome. We also leverage significant in-kind resources from partner organizations, which reduces the ongoing cash funding requirements. One major grant will provide ample resources to fully-launch and evaluate this initiative over its first 2 years, while additional sustaining revenues streams are developed from regional foundations, churches, and employers. After two years, if a funding gap remains, the project team expects to bridge the gap by asking the College leadership to absorb some personnel costs and/or reducing the classes or the project scope accordingly.