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Project Shine

By Tom Kerr

THEY STILL MIGHT NOT understand the language or culture, but for years many U.S. immigrants have adapted their former way of life in an effort to stake their claim for a share of the American Dream.

However, these days earning American citizenship is harder than ever, and the process is even more difficult for older adults trying to become U.S. citizens.

But a special intergenerational program is helping to facilitate the naturalization process by having college students assist elderly immigrants and refugees. Project Shine is a national directive that helps older adults learn English and other skills they will need to gain citizenship.

While the major focus of the directive is to help immigrants prepare for the Immigration and Naturalization Service interview, the program also benefits the students who become involved through federal work-study programs or courses that integrate the service project into their curriculum.

Currently, colleges in four cities across the nation host the program: Temple University, in Philadelphia, PA; University of New Mexico, and the Technical Vocational Institute, in Albuquerque; Northeastern University and Roxbury Community College, in Boston, MA; and City College of San Francisco and San Francisco State University, in San Francisco, CA.

In the first year of Project Shine, 220 bilingual and native English-speaking college students, 600 elderly immigrants and refugees, 30 faculty and 25 community partner sites participated in the program. It is funded through the Learn and Serve America program of the Corporation for National Service, in Washington, DC.

Project Shine evolved from a similar program at Temple, according to Project Shine national director Claudia Weisburd, PhD. "Prior to Project Shine, Temple started other English language programs for citizenship; but now that we are a nation-

al program, we are better equipped to offer more contributions to older adults seeking citizenship."

Dr. Weisburd, who directs the Project Shine program at Temple through the Center for Intergenerational Learning at the university, said 2 million legal immigrants currently are awaiting their citizenship qualification in the United States. The huge back-up primarily is due to cuts in welfare and benefits for foreign residents, which has spurred more immigrants to seek citizenship.

"There has been a lot of anxiety for these people in the last few years," she said, "especially in trying to get into English as a Second Language [ESL] courses. If these people can't get into these courses, they can't get into citizenship classes."

Learning English as a second language is particularly difficult for older adults, Dr. Weisburd said. Lawful U.S. residents who are 55 and have lived in the states for 15 years or more or those over 50 who have been here at least 20 years may take their interviews and tests in their native language.

However, for many others learning to speak English is a requirement. While Project Shine tries to recruit bilingual students, all students are encouraged to participate.

"About half of our students know another language," she said. "Obviously, it's easier for these students to help their elderly learners; but those students who only speak English also can teach by pointing, naming, sign language and actions. You would be surprised how quickly people can begin to learn through these methods."

Students learn to work with people from many cultures and backgrounds, including Cambodian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Haitian, Dominican, Somali, Ukrainian, Russian and Mexican.

Students who participate in the program gain experience that they can use in future careers such as anthropology, African-American studies, education, ESL, Latin American studies, political science, psychology, urban studies and women's studies.

They commit to a minimum of two

An intergenerational program matches college students with elderly immigrants to facilitate their naturalization process.

hours per week for an academic year. However, approximately 80 percent of the students contribute at least four hours a week to the program, according to Dr. Weisburd.

Aside from getting a better understanding of culture, Project Shine students also benefit from the intergenerational experience.

"It's a very good opportunity to work with the older population," the national director reported. "In terms of U.S. demographics, the older adult population is growing at a high rate, so we feel it's very beneficial for the younger people in preparing for the future. The students are becoming sensitized to the needs of older adults, learning about their physical aspects and what type of materials they can use in helping them learn."

The students come to understand that even frail and infirm people have a lot to give, she said. In addition, they learn about other cultures and various ways of life, "which are advantageous regardless of your field of study."

Participation in the program by allied health students is particularly welcomed, Dr. Weisburd noted. "There are a lot of motor skills and physical conditioning aspects that these students could see here, and some people have problems with memory and money management."

For more information about Project Shine, contact Claudia Weisburd at (215) 204-6709 or by e-mail at cweisbur@astro.ocis.temple.edu.

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