

# BREAKING BARRIERS

## Creating a College Pathway for Latinx, Spanish-Speaking Early Learning Providers

by Dawn Hendricks

Our early learning educator community often does not reflect the rich and diverse tapestry of the communities it serves. The lack of teacher diversity is evident in K-12 classrooms as well as in the early learning workforce. In K-12 classrooms, 79 percent of teachers are white, non-Hispanic, 9.7 percent are Hispanic, 6.7 percent are Black and 2 percent are Asian (Schaeffer, 2020). Yet, the students are 47 percent white, non-Hispanic, 27 percent Hispanic and 15 percent Black. As we look specifically at early learning (birth-age 5), the demographics of the teacher workforce are more reflective of the children in their programs, with nearly 40 percent of early learning staff identified as a person of color (Whitebrook et al., 2018). However, early learning staff of color and those that are culturally and linguistically diverse may lack the resources and time to pursue a higher education certificate or degree.

Higher education institutions have an important role to play in recruitment of potential teachers and shaping our future educators to better reflect our nation's communities to meet goals of diversity, equity and inclusion. In Oregon,



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Hendricks recently led development of a two-year associate's degree in early childhood education and family studies, completely available in Spanish and all online. She focuses on providing culturally and linguistically responsive teacher education to meet the diverse needs of today's early childhood workforce.

as with many states across the nation, there has been a recent push for early learning providers to begin earning college credits, not just community-based training hours, in an effort to encourage them to start their journey along a college pathway. However, for providers who do not have academic levels of verbal and written English skills, this has been a challenge. For example, the federally funded Head Start programs are simultaneously tasked with ensuring that their preschool teachers have at minimum an associate's degree in Early Childhood Education while also requiring that teaching staff respect, reflect, and promote children's home language development. This requirement, while laudable, has often made it challenging for Head Start programs to hire linguistically diverse teaching staff who also have the required degrees.

In 2016, a local Head Start program in Oregon reached out to our college to inquire if we could provide a course, on-site, for their Spanish-speaking staff who needed college credit hours. A full-time faculty member at the college and Spanish speaker, readily agreed and began offering a language and literacy development course in Spanish to teacher assistants on Friday mornings in the break room of the local Head Start. Soon, word spread that the college was able to offer ECE courses in Spanish, and requests started coming in from other organizations, including local Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies and Community Action Organizations.

Over the next several years, interest in the Spanish language ECE courses continued to grow. When the Oregon Department of Education announced a grant opportunity, Grow Your Own Teacher Pathway, to diversify the teaching pipeline, we asked ourselves, "What if we proposed to develop our entire A.A.S. in early childhood education and

family studies in Spanish? Would they fund that?” With our hopes high, but our expectations realistic, we submitted our grant proposal in Fall 2020. Much to our surprise and excitement, we were notified just a couple of months later that our proposal had been selected and fully funded. Now, came the tricky part—how to create our entire A.A.S. degree in early childhood education and family studies in Spanish in the six months allotted for curriculum development in the grant timeline!

As we conceptualized the program, we knew that we wanted to eliminate as many barriers as possible for the students to successfully complete the degree. The first barrier we focused on was the language barrier. We wanted to put all of the required courses, including general education courses such as math and writing, into Spanish, in addition to the ECE courses. Fortunately, our colleagues across the college in the other departments were very supportive of this work and began developing the needed courses in Spanish. In some cases, the full-time faculty in those departments were bilingual and had the capacity to develop the Spanish-language courses while in other instances adjunct faculty were recruited and hired to assist in development.

Mi nombre es Cristina García y estoy por terminar el A.A. en educación infantil y estudios familiares en español. Este es un programa que el colegio brindo en mi propio idioma, que me dio la oportunidad de crecer en el campo profesional, obteniendo las herramientas y conocimientos para yo seguir trabajando en lo que es mi pasión, los niños, y donde yo tuve más entendimiento porque es en mi idioma materno, con el cual yo me siento más cómoda. Yo siempre quería estudiar, pero el idioma me lo impedía poniéndome una barrera y estos programas me quito esa barrera brindándome la oportunidad de estudiar y tener las mismas oportunidades que tienen los demás.

Con este programa me puedo desenvolver mejor profesional y personalmente, porque tuve mucho conocimiento, obtuve herramientas con las cuales yo me he estado sintiendo con más confianza para desenvolverme en mi trabajo. sabemos que todos tenemos experiencias en nuestro trabajo, pero no tenemos el documento que nos avale nuestra experiencia y este programa en español nos está dando la oportunidad de obtener el documento, el título en mi idioma.

Another barrier to address was accessibility. Most of our students are already working full-time in early learning settings, sometimes 12 hours a day, for family child care providers. In addition, they often live in remote areas that make in-person classes difficult, if not impossible to attend. To increase accessibility to all of our students, we decided to offer all of the courses online, with synchronous class meetings held via Zoom every other week. The classes met on a weekday evening or on Saturday mornings.

The third barrier to eliminate was cost. We began minimizing costs as we developed the courses. We utilized Open Education Resources, which are free, online books developed by college faculty across the nation. Some of these books were already available in Spanish and others we had to translate. For the books we translated from English into Spanish, we focused on not only translating, but ensuring the content and examples in the texts were culturally responsive and reflected the unique developmental needs and trajectories of Spanish-speaking children in the United States.



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My name is Cristina Garcia and I am finishing the A.A.S. degree in Early Childhood Education and Family Studies in Spanish, which is a program that the college offered in my own language. This has given the opportunity to grow professionally, obtaining tools and knowledge so that I can continue working with children, which is my passion. I always wanted to study, but there was a language barrier since I didn't speak English and this program took away that barrier and gave me the opportunity to study, the same as other students have.

This program has benefited me personally and professionally because I have developed knowledge, skills and also confidence. I had job experience previously, but now I have something even greater, a degree in my own language.

We also linked in articles, videos, and other media from reputable sources that were already available in Spanish. To ensure the content was reflective of the specific children, families and teachers in our communities, we visited and observed family child care providers and early learning centers to take photos and video vignettes to integrate into our course materials. The photos were illustrative examples of content such as materials and environments, while the video vignettes were used to highlight adult and child interactions and spark small and large group discussions.

Since the program's inception in Fall 2021, over 220 students have entered the program and are actively taking courses; the majority attend part-time, while balancing school and work. Our students are migrant and seasonal Head Start classroom staff, family child care providers, and other not-for-profit early learning staff who work

with Latinx, Spanish-speaking children and families. As interest in the program grew, we knew that we had to offer more than just the coursework in Spanish; we needed to also offer wraparound student support services in Spanish. During the second phase of the grant in 2022, we focused on increasing our capacity college-wide to fully serve our Latinx students; hiring bilingual, bicultural staff in the admissions/recruitment, financial aid, advising, and peer tutoring departments, as well as a teaching and learning navigator specifically focused on serving our education and early childhood education students. With these structures in place, we have witnessed a much higher than average retention and completion rate.

Our first cohort of students graduated in June 2023, earning an A.A.S. degree in educación infantil y estudios familiares. Another cohort has completed their

Hola mi nombre es Marisol Pena Montes y soy estudiante del Colegio Comunitario de Clackamas. Cuando era niña mi mamá me preguntaba que dice a qui, lee esto y siempre pedía que leyeran lo que ella tenía o preguntaba y decía es que no se leer. Ella me conto que su papá dijo que era sorda y muda para que no lo obligaran a que ella fuera a la escuela. Mi madre siempre se esforzó para que yo estudiara, en mi país solo estudie hasta la preparatoria.

Emigré a este país donde y siempre quise continuar con mis estudios, pero la lengua era una barrera, pregunte en muchos colegios y siempre era aprende inglés, empecé a ir a la escuela de inglés, pero por falta de tiempo las abandone. Pasaron varios años. Y un día un comentario de una persona me abrió la espinita porque me dijo parece que van a ofrecer clases en español para obtener un asociado, esto me hizo averiguar en donde estaban ofreciendo clases de educación temprana. Por fin!

El conseguir mi sueño significa escuchar la voz de mi madre que al lograrlo será en su memoria y de muchos niños que les niegan la educación en estos tiempos sobre todo en los países marginados y también como un ejemplo para mis hijos de que siempre se puede lograr lo que se quiere y que habrá barreras y obstáculos pero siempre habrán soluciones para todo y gracias a el Colegio Comunitario de Clackamas cumpliré mi meta que es el tener el Associate in Applied Science Educación Infantil y Estudios Familiares.

Hello. My name is Marisol Pena Montes and I am a student at Clackamas Community College. When I was a little girl, my mama would always ask me what something said and to read things for her because she did not know how to read. She told me that her father told her she was deaf and dumb and that he didn't have to send her to school. So, my mama always encouraged me to study and in my country, I was able to study until high school.

When I was older, I migrated to the United States and was not able to continue my studies because of the language barrier. I inquired about attending various colleges but was always told I had to learn the language first and start in English classes, which seemed so challenging due to a lack of time working and raising a family. Many years passed and one day a colleague told me that a college was offering Early Childhood courses in our language of Spanish.

As I achieve my dream now of earning a college degree, I can hear the voice of my mother and of many other children who were denied an education because of a lack of resources or because they lived in marginalized counties. This is also significant because this is an example to my two children that they can achieve what they want and yes, there will always be barriers but there will always also be solutions. Thank you to Clackamas Community College for helping my complete my goal of obtaining the A.A.S. in Early Childhood Education and Family Studies.

1-year certificate and are poised to continue on to their A.A.S. degree. The impact of the program can be seen in the students themselves as well as in the programs in which they work and the children and families they serve. Creation of a Spanish language ECE program is enabling the Latinx, Spanish-speaking students across our state to successfully complete teacher preparation in their primary language. Because the majority of our current students are already working in the field as family child care providers and teacher assistants, the impact on children and families has been almost immediate; the providers are immediately putting into practice what they are learning and providing high quality early childhood education programs for linguistically diverse children and families in our local area. By focusing on serving diverse current and future educators in our area and meeting them where they are, we are

developing a diverse teaching workforce, reflective of the communities in which they live and work.

## References

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Mi nombre es Esmeralda Durán. Participar en el primer programa Universitario de español en Oregon ha sido una gran experiencia. Como mujer Latina ha sido una gran oportunidad, me ha ayudado a crecer como persona y como profesional. Desde que comenzó el programa, tenía una estructura y un propósito claros, lo cual fue maravilloso. El apoyo que recibí de mi consejero y profesores fue increíble, me dieron la motivación para que continúe persiguiendo mi meta. Al igual que yo hay muchas mujeres en este país con la capacidad y motivación para crecer y difundir sus conocimientos, lamentablemente el idioma llega a ser una barrera para muchas de ellas. Tener un programa como el que ofrece Clackamas Community College me ha dado la oportunidad no solo de alcanzar mi meta y graduarme, sino que también ha aumentado mis conocimientos, lo que me ayudará a ayudar mejor a las familias en mi comunidad, para las que trabajo. Estoy feliz de que este programa en español se haya enfocado en la educación de la primera infancia, porque es el área que persigo, pero espero que en un futuro no muy lejano podamos tener más programas de español centrados en diferentes campos, para que así más latinos que se sienten mejor en su lengua materna puedan también obtener su título universitario. “La libertad no necesita alas, lo que necesita es echar raíces” Octavio Paz.



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My name is Esmeralda Duran. To participate on the first Spanish college degree program in Oregon has been a great experience. As a Latina woman it has been a great opportunity, it has helped me grow as a person and as a professional. Since the program started, it had a clear structure and purpose which was amazing. The support I received from my counselor and teachers was also incredible, it gave me the motivation to continue pursuing my goal.

Just like me there are a lot of women in this country with the capacity and motivation to grow and spread their knowledge, unfortunately language comes to be a barrier for many of them. Having a program like the one Clackamas Community College is offering, has given me the opportunity not only to reach my goal and graduate but it has also grown my knowledge, which will help me assist better the families in my community I work for. I'm happy that this Spanish program was focused on early childhood education because it's the area I pursue, but I hope that in a not to far future, we can have more Spanish programs focused on different fields, so that more Latinx that feel more comfortable in their home language can obtain their college degree too. “La Libertad no necesita alas, lo que necesita es echar raíces” Octavio Paz.