

## **A Resource for the 'Other Westchester'**

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### **Body**

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IN most ways, it was a typical groundbreaking ceremony, with local dignitaries in hard hats posing with shiny new shovels. The speeches, the posing for pictures, were all de rigueur.

But while they were there to hail the beginning of construction of **Westchester** Community College's Gateway Center, designed primarily to serve the county's immigrant population, the ceremony symbolized more than a new building. It also reflects the county's rapidly changing face.

There's no shortage of debate about immigration today, but you can't argue with the demographic facts. Hispanics make up 15.6 percent of **Westchester**'s population. In Port Chester and Sleepy Hollow, almost half the residents are Hispanic, while in Mount Kisco and Elmsford, a quarter are. Immigrants represent one fifth or more of the residents in the cities of Yonkers, White Plains, Peekskill and New Rochelle.

These numbers are based on the 2000 census; they will surely rise in 2010, in the next census. They also reflect only Hispanic residents living here; people from countries outside Latin America flock to **Westchester**, too. Twenty-two of every 100 **Westchester** residents were born in another country.

How many are documented, and how many are not? The federal, state and county governments cannot give you an accurate answer; neither can I. One thing certain is that while immigration law is federal policy, there isn't an aspect of life in this county that remains unaffected by it, including schools, hospitals, shelters and law enforcement.

Immigration affects the community college as much as any other local institution, if not more. The college teaches more than 4,000 students English as a second language; classrooms are overflowing, and parking lots are jammed on weekends. The college also offers English classes at many of its extension centers, including in Ossining, Port Chester, New Rochelle and Yonkers.

The college has long had a policy of "don't ask, don't tell" when it comes to undocumented immigrants, said Joseph N. Hankin, president of the college. He believes the new center, which is meant to provide immigrants with a comprehensive opportunity to learn about America's language, history, economy and social make-up, is in keeping with the school's mission.

"There are two Westchesters," he said. "There is the one homogeneously affluent stereotype, and **the other** is that there is a large group of individuals who are not being educated. We serve and intend to serve **the other Westchester**, the one where students wouldn't go on to college if it weren't for us."

## A Resource for the 'Other Westchester'

The center's Language Institute will offer academic content, so anyone studying English can at the same time learn computer language. All the college's academic business programs will be housed at Gateway, as well as a professional development center that will serve businesses and students.

There will be space for volunteers to help immigrants practice language skills. Services will be offered for students interested in becoming citizens or permanent residents. The center also hopes to become a clearinghouse for the many local organizations now working with immigrants.

Isabel Villar, executive director of El Centro Hispano in White Plains, which helps immigrant families, looks forward to working with the center. "I arrived here without any knowledge of English," said Ms. Villar, a native of Cuba. "I'm grateful the college has the vision to fight for the most crucial gift anyone can give: an education."

Demographic trends made the project a natural, Dr. Hankin said. Not only is there a swell of immigration, but as baby boomers retire, the need for a trained workforce will expand. "Wayne Gretzky said, 'You don't skate to where the puck is; you skate to where it's going to be,'" Dr. Hankin said.

New York State has committed \$17 million for the building, the county has pledged \$14 million, and \$9 million has been raised from private sources. The county executive, Andrew J. Spano, was one of the shovel-wielding dignitaries. His administration, of course, deals with the fallout from federal immigration law at nearly every level.

"We've got 750 people on probation who are illegal immigrants; 235 are felons," Mr. Spano said. "I can't get rid of them. So what am I going to do with someone who wants to work? We're going to help. A sick kid who comes into a clinic? We're going to help. Someone who wants an education? We're going to help them. We can't solve the immigration problem, so I've chosen to help manage it."

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## Graphic

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