

# **Accelerating Academic Literacy: The Commanding English Program for Immigrant Students**

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## **Abstract**

*The University of Minnesota is helping provide greater college access for students from immigrant families who must learn to negotiate a new culture and language as well as manage lives often marked by poverty and under-funded urban schools. In the University's Commanding English program, immigrant high school students study both at their high school and on campus, using advanced coursework that includes immigration literature. Students become familiar with the college environment and build the confidence to consider postsecondary education.*

American higher education faces what some policymakers call the “perfect storm” of demographic change: growing numbers of students of color in K-12 schools, yet increasing achievement gaps with their white counterparts, persistent racial disparities, and increasing college tuition costs, all coupled with growing demand for a more diverse workforce equipped with a postsecondary education (Minnesota College Access Network 2006).

These challenges to college access are being played out in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a Midwestern city with a growing immigrant population, which adds a multi-lingual challenge to the mix. An influx of refugees from Southeast Asia in the 1980s, followed by East African migration in the mid-1990s, and a growing Latino community has transformed a historically white community and its public schools. Data from 2006 shows K-12 enrollment as 40% Black, 30% White, 17% Hispanic, 9% Asian and 5% Native American (Minneapolis Public Schools 2008). The percentage of students participating in postsecondary options in Minnesota, however, does not mirror the school-district profile. College students remain predominantly White (87%) with only 7% Asian, 4% Black, and 2% Hispanic (MMEP 2006).

Correcting the postsecondary imbalance in Minnesota will require attention to providing greater college access for students from immigrant families. The challenges, however, are extensive. In addition to battling the effects of underemployment or unemployment, poverty and urban schools with strained resources, newcomers to the United States also must learn how to negotiate a new culture, make up an education that has often been interrupted, juggle family responsibilities, and learn about the paths to college. These multilingual students have the additional demands of their new language which can impact test scores, impact the ability to read college material, and reduce a student's access to college preparation coursework. Standard English

Language Learner courses are often skills-based and are not targeted for college preparation while mainstream advanced placement courses do not provide concurrent support to multilingual students and can be silencing spaces (Harklau 1994, 1999; Lee 2001; Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, and Clewel 2000; Valdes 2001).

## **Addressing the Problem: The Commanding English Program**

In the early 1990s, University of Minnesota administrators in what was then the General College (for students who did not meet admission criteria but who showed potential for doing university work), the directors of the University's Upward Bound program, and staff of the campus Commanding English Program (designed to equip freshman ESL students for university learning) met to discuss how to encourage more Hmong, then the most populous Southeast Asian refugee community in the metro area, to attend college. A partnership was established between Edison High School, the Hmong magnet school in Minneapolis, and the University of Minnesota, located just a few miles away.

As part of the new collaboration, Hmong students enrolled in the University's Commanding English program as a cohort, as part of the state's Postsecondary Education Options program, which funds college classes for qualified high school juniors and seniors. The partnership continues to use courses from the Commanding English Program for first-year college students and is taught by University faculty both at the high school and on campus.

In the late 1990s, a new immigrant group in Minnesota was drawing the attention of educators, and by 1998 the Commanding English program began a second partnership with Roosevelt High School, the newly-designated magnet for this new population from Somalia. In 2004, the principal at Washburn High School in south Minneapolis requested a similar program in response to its own growing population of multilingual students (Somali, Latino, and Southeast Asian).

Thus, at the present time, Commanding English runs these three high school partnerships in addition to its regular college program for University of Minnesota freshmen. Since 1990, these partnerships have served more than five hundred immigrant students from Minneapolis Public Schools. Originally predominantly Hmong, the student body is now a mix of Southeast Asian, East African, and Chicano/Latino students. Some are recent arrivals in the United States; others are second-generation Minnesotans from home families where English is not the dominant language.

The Commanding English college curriculum with its courses in writing, immigration literature, and academic reading fills the "academic literacy" gap by offering advanced coursework in ways that appropriately challenge and support multilingual students in developing discipline-related academic language proficiency. By offering courses both in the high school and on the University of Minnesota campus, the program also

fosters a college identity, or as one student described it “a jumpstart in what to expect in college.” (Christensen et al. 2005; Murie and Thompson 2001).

The value for first-generation immigrants is having a program that both acknowledges the academic aspirations of students as well as provides explicit instruction and practice in doing college-level work. The program builds on the strengths of students: their cultural capital as multilingual, multicultural students; the desire to be taken seriously as college-bound; and the community support and value placed on education. For second-generation students, whose fluency in English may mask more hidden academic literacy/language needs (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal 1999; Roberge 2002; ICAS 2002), this program also offers important exposure to ways of reading and writing college material.

To qualify for the Commanding English program, high school students must be multilingual; have a grade point average of 3.0 or strong teacher recommendation; and pass an entrance test that consists of a reading passage, comprehension questions, and a choice of essay questions based on the reading. Students must demonstrate enough fluency to be able to read, comprehend, and express ideas in writing without struggling heavily with language issues. All students must be juniors or seniors and under the age of twenty-two to qualify for funding.

In the program students study chapters of ethnic history and develop a project in immigration history research. They read immigration literature, draft and revise papers on issues in education, and sit side-by-side with college students in a social science class at the University. Students graduate from high school with seven to eighteen credits on a University of Minnesota transcript.

## **Program Success**

A recent study of the program by the College of Education and Human Development included surveys and interviews with current students, instructors, and alumni as well as an analysis of graduation rates of program participants. It revealed both strong support for the program and significant college achievement by the students. While it was not possible to track all participating students, especially those who chose to attend colleges other than the University of Minnesota, of the students from 1999-2006 who enrolled at the University 81 percent are either actively enrolled, have graduated, or have transferred and graduated from another institution. Of the sixty seniors who completed the program in the spring of 2007, 100 percent had specific college plans for the fall.

The alumni survey revealed that nine out of ten respondents would recommend the program and felt it helped them make the transition to college. Students and alumni commented positively on the academic rigor of the program, the experience of being on campus, the sense of belonging they developed as a cohort, the relevance of the curriculum, and the confidence they gained from taking college courses.

## **Strengths and Challenges of Commanding English**

The almost twenty-year history of the Commanding English high school partnerships and the recent assessment highlight several key strengths and ongoing challenges.

***Confidence to go on to college.*** This emerged as a primary strength of the program. When students were asked specifically whether the Commanding English Program influenced their decision to go to college 80 percent of the alumni and 74 percent of the graduating seniors said, “Yes.” One student noted that “although I was born in America, I have found the program to be extremely useful because my parents have no educational background at all. Without the help of the program, I would not be able to understand the rigorous demands of college coursework.”

***Academic literacy.*** Students noted gains in academic literacy, including how to quote from sources, build a thesis, revise, take notes, and read critically. Almost half of the respondents listed writing as one of the “most important” benefits of the program. Learning time management skills was also cited, including the ability to “make personal responsible academic decisions along with being able to set priorities,...exactly what we need to succeed in college” (alumni survey).

***Multicultural course content and voice.*** Students appreciated the content of the courses, particularly in immigration literature and anthropology. “As an immigrant, the books we read and the classmates and the instructor helped me realize that I’m not so alone in this new world,” reported a student. Related to the multicultural content of the courses, students commented on having a voice in class discussion because the topics were familiar to them.

***Sense of community.*** The small class size (fifteen to twenty students) and sense of belonging, along with the academic focus and close attention from teachers, helped students to gain confidence. This sense of cohort, of belonging to a “college group,” stood out in all of the interviews.

***College applications and admissions.*** While it is not a formal component, the Commanding English program gives seniors access to teachers and administrators at the university who can give advice about colleges, contact appropriate offices when there are questions, write recommendation letters, and offer encouragement as students navigate the admission process. Having a transcript with seven to eighteen university credits on it is an obvious additional benefit to students as they apply to college.

While these are many program strengths, Commanding English also faces ongoing challenges, both for students and teachers.

***Logistics.*** During the spring semester, students come to campus two to four afternoons a week, which not only inhibits their participation in after-school activities but also can be a logistical challenge as students navigate transportation to the university, on-campus parking, and after-school work and family responsibilities. For university

faculty, the classes taught at the high school offer the same logistical demands of added transportation to the school, teaching in classrooms that may have less media and blackboard space than on campus, and students' limited access to technology and word processing. Teaching in a high school presents extra work for university faculty that has to be acknowledged.

***Student and teacher stress.*** For some students, the academic demands of the program become heavy, and the stress of doing college work while in high school outweighs the advantages of the program. Conversations with students who opt not to complete the program repeatedly suggest overwhelming family and personal issues, a need to work or babysit for family after school, or simply a desire not to continue with the workloads of these college courses. Students who earn low grades in the program are also counseled to consider the impact of this on a collegiate record and are advised against taking the second year.

For the instructors in the program, the tensions of doing college work with high school students are also visible. Explaining attendance policies, grading standards, expectations for class discussion, time management and the more autonomous role students play in college requires the teachers to give more direction and be more explicit in guiding the class. There is a lot of “going the extra mile” for students, but at the same time an appreciation of the impact the teachers have on the lives of these students.

***Recruitment.*** Recruiting high school students for the program remains one of the top challenges. Should the program aim for the top multilingual students in the school, or focus on the motivated newcomer who is still learning English but has strong academic potential? Is AP English a better fit for the second-generation student for whom English is no longer a challenge, but for whom the academic literacy and exposure to college classes is vital? Choosing a cohort is complicated: some students with lower English skills or grades are admitted and there is often remarkable progress. However, it is important to find balance, and this is a tension inherent in any postsecondary work with first-generation college students. There is no one test score or predictor of success.

There are inevitable tensions in doing college work with high school students, some of whom are still impacted by language constraints. But it is powerful to pull a group of students together with the message that they are college-bound, to offer a curriculum that is taught in ways that make explicit some of the academic expectations of college work, and to do this with content that connects students to the worlds around them.

Overall, the University of Minnesota's Commanding English Program provides a positive gateway to higher education and prepares students for the rigor of college coursework, filling a much-needed gap in the advanced-placement curriculum.

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