

El Centro Empresarial offers bilingual training and resources to strengthen Milwaukee's Hispanic business community

Since opening its doors in 2004, El Centro Empresarial, the Hispanic Entrepreneurship Center at UW-Milwaukee, has graduated 76 area Latinos from its certificate program, with 24 graduates going on to start their own businesses. The program promotes entrepreneurship in the region's Hispanic community through bilingual training, counseling, technical assistance, and networking activities. It is the initiative of UW-Milwaukee's School of Continuing Education, which has teamed up its Small Business Development Center with the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Wisconsin and other community partners.

Situation:

Recognizing that a strong minority business community contributes to a healthy overall economy, staff at UW-Milwaukee's Small Business Development Center have pledged to promote minority owned businesses in the region. But, even as Milwaukee and neighboring Waukesha counties experience a surge in their Hispanic populations, the Center has had trouble attracting Hispanic clients to its programs. Potential students, especially those lacking English proficiency, may worry about the language and other cultural barriers they would face in university classrooms.

Response:

UW-Milwaukee's Small Business Development Center launched its Hispanic entrepreneurship center, El Centro Empresarial, in 2004. There, aspiring Hispanic entrepreneurs can receive bilingual training, technical assistance, and networking opportunities to help them either start a new business or expand an existing one. They can choose from a wide-ranging series of courses, workshops, and seminars that suit their particular needs – or they may elect to work toward a Bilingual Entrepreneurship Certificate, an 11-week program that combines coursework, individual coaching, and business plan development. The certificate program also offers participants the chance to communicate in Spanish with bankers, accountants, lawyers, and advertisers, all in one place. El Centro instructors represent a diverse cross section of experienced business people and corporate educators.

Numerous community partners have collaborated with the Small Business Development Center to make the El Centro initiative a success. They include the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Wisconsin; Northshore Bank; The Helen Bader Foundation Coaching Program; United Water; Wisconsin Restaurant Association; Wisconsin Women Business Initiative; and many others.

Impacts:

El Centro clients regularly express their satisfaction with the program, and many, in fact, have recommended that the university expand it. As of June 2006, El Centro has issued

entrepreneurial certificates to 76 clients, all of whom have graduated from the program with sound business plans. Graduates have gone on to put 24 new businesses into operation and expand the operations of seven existing businesses. Companies involved with El Centro have created more than 20 new jobs in the Hispanic community.

Furthermore, El Centro's efforts to bring attention to the issues confronting the Hispanic business community have led to favorable publicity in the local media. Notably, the program has been featured on local radio and television, and in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, *el Conquistador*, *Aqui Magazine*, and *The Business Journal of Milwaukee*.

Success Story:

Dionisia Olmos, Bernabe Gonzalez, and Deborah Luna— respectively, the CEO, president and vice president of Mi Casa Mortgage—all graduated from the El Centro Empresarial program. They say that the strategic plan they developed through El Centro was pivotal in helping them secure the financing they needed for their business's expansion: from two locations to six Milwaukee locations, all in Hispanic neighborhoods.

Luna appreciates that El Centro's classes alerted her to some of the pitfalls of expanding a business. She says the courses "provide a wealth of information and are led by a seasoned, knowledgeable instructor ... [who] did a spectacular job getting us to think about potential obstacles. He prepared us for the reality behind our vision."

Mi Casa clients are first time home buyers and often first generation Americans. In just over a year in business, Mi Casa Mortgage generated over \$10 million in loans and helped over 100 clients secure home financing. Its success plays a role in the broader success of Milwaukee's Hispanic community.

Contact: Nelson Soler, Program Director, El Centro Empresarial, UW-Milwaukee School of Continuing Education; phone 414-227-3105; Nsoler@uwm.edu

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