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INTS 4937
May 9, 2003

Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning

Background

The Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning is a Denver-based non-profit organization, which provides ESL classes and cross-cultural training to refugees and others. Since Denver is becoming increasingly multicultural due to many refugees living currently in Denver, there is a growing need for cultural bridging to prevent problems that often arise as a result of different nationalities, languages and cultures. The Spring Institute is one of several refugee organizations located in Denver, which believes that bridging between cultures is a way to remove some of the barriers that diversity places on individuals. Furthermore, the Spring Institute believes this can be best achieved by teaching refugees how to communicate effectively in English and how to work with each other and within the new society.

History

The Spring Institute was founded in 1979, and began as a program for teaching English to international students. It was not until 1984 that the Institute began to work with refugees after having received a grant from the government. In 1980 many refugees came to the United States from Southeast Asia and as a result, the U.S. government requested help for the newcomers. The Spring Institute responded to this request and expanded its program to include refugees, thus broadening its vision.

Mission

The mission of the Spring Institute is to contribute to peace in the world through greater understanding of cultural differences. The Vice-President and the Director of Educational Services at the Spring Institute, Barbara Sample, is one of many people at the Institute who believe that cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences should not be a barrier to understanding and cooperation between people of different nationalities. The people of different cultures can interact with each other but that requires skill, which is exactly what the Spring Institute provides. It teaches people how to work and communicate with each other while minimizing linguistic and cultural barriers.

Funding

Some of the organizations that work with the Spring Institute to provide funding for the ESL and other programs are the Colorado Trust, the Denver Foundation, the Department of Health and Human Services, and what Barbara Sample calls a “fee for service”(Personal Interview, 2003). Very often the Spring Institute works with other entities or companies that have employees whose second language is English. “Fee for service” means that a company pays for ESL classes so that its employees can attend. Also, the Institute sometimes offers cross-cultural training for the supervisors of such companies.

Program Overview

The Spring Institute offers free services to refugees through a variety of programs. They include English language training (ESL); WorkStyles program, which prepares individuals for success in today's economic and social environment; English for Driver Education, which focuses on communication skills used in a Driver Education Permit Course; and the most recent one, English Language Training and Technical Assistance project, which helps various refugee programs in assessing their effectiveness while identifying any areas of service need.

There are several ways to look at the workings of the Spring Institute. This paper focuses on one of the Institute's larger components, the ESL program. Since the goals of this program as well as its accomplishments are also reflected in other services offered by the Institute (for example, English for Driver Ed and ESL both serve the same general purpose, which is to provide effective communication and greater understanding across cultures), focusing on ESL gives an accurate portrayal of the Institute's objectives, and a broader understanding of the overall progress of the Institute.

Projects

English as a Second Language training shares the same main objective as the rest of the projects at the Spring Institute, which is to demonstrate that national, cultural, and ethnic differences need not be barriers to understanding and cooperation. The ESL program specifically focuses on life skills and self-sufficiency, two critical factors in refugees' adjustment to a new culture. ESL classes meet two days a week for two hours each and they cover topics such as transportation, health, housing, employment, community services, and consumer economics. In addition, classes address cross-cultural issues faced by refugees in American society and how to overcome them in order to be more successful in the community. Since classes focus on "survival skills," they provide enough knowledge of English to accomplish basic tasks, and therefore help refugees become self-sufficient and confident.

The Spring Institute offers English classes to people from all over the world. The countries include Russia, Vietnam, the Former Yugoslavia, Mexico, Cambodia, Iran, as well as Ethiopia and Eritrea where the majority of female refugees are illiterate. As a result of this large diversity, the task of providing adequate language instruction can be challenging. This is why the Spring Institute also offers special training for its teachers and administrators so that they can develop a better understanding of different cultures, as well as different levels of language proficiency.

Goals

Overall, the ESL program has been very successful and it is in great part due to the Institute's many ambitious goals and resulting accomplishments. The Spring Institute has a number of defined goals but there are five primary ones, which capture the Institute's mission and dedication. Furthermore, these goals reflect the objectives of the ESL program and its progress. The first primary goal of the Institute is to contribute to a peaceful world through greater intercultural sharing and communication among different

people. The Institute aims to demonstrate that “national, cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences need not be barriers to understanding and cooperation (ref. Spring Institute’s “expanded mission statement”). The second important goal is the value of quality. The Spring Institute set a standard for the highest possible quality in the very beginning when it was first established by four educators who strongly believed in excellent education. The third goal of the Institute is to be a learning organization. In the words of Barbara Sample, “the Institute is a two-way street.” The employers, in this case the educators, are always learning and trying to make the program better and more suitable for their diverse students. The fourth goal is communication, which is always emphasized even though it overlaps with other goals and the mission statement. Good communication is the key to success at the Spring Institute and it is practiced by its own staff as well as across cultures. The fifth goal is professional development, which is built into the entire Institute, not just the ESL program. What this means is that the teachers are given the opportunity to learn new things through instructional staff training, held once a month. In addition, there are a variety of workshops available to the staff, as well as conferences, which the employees are encouraged to attend. In summary, the pursuit of all the goals presented here is one of the critical aspects that make the Spring Institute a flourishing organization and its ESL program a success.

Key Accomplishments

Some of the most significant accomplishments of the Spring Institute evolve around the ESL program. One such accomplishment came in the mid-1980s with an initiative to describe and standardize how to talk about levels of proficiency in the adult ESL program, also known as the Mainstream English Language Training (MELT). Thanks to MELT it became possible to determine whether or not people made progress in their language study through the use of descriptors. Sample considers this standard measure of language proficiency a great accomplishment since prior to MELT there was no precise way of determining one’s level of English proficiency.

Another accomplishment of the Spring Institute was the creation of the Basic English Test, which assesses language level through oral proficiency. The test involves an interview and is able to establish how well a person can communicate in English. Just recently a new version of the test was developed which can now be used on the computer.

In addition, there are many successful writing materials that came out of the Spring Institute and were published by Oxford Press, such as Crossroads. The book is still used today, even though it came out in 1990, because it is a helpful adult ESL aid, which incorporates life skills needed to survive and thrive in the community.

Another important writing is the English Language Civics Resource Book, which expands on life skills and reaches to such areas as Medicaid and food stamps. The book is also given to the teachers to assist them in developing lessons.

The effort that is put into the ESL program is reflected in many factors ranging from quantitative to qualitative. The Institute keeps track of the numbers of refugees that go through its programs and the most recent data (from the 1990s) states that 600-700 people go through the ESL program each year. These statistics are impressive but one gets a

sense that the Spring Institute is not all about numbers, but rather about quality. Sample says that: “This [ESL] is a reciprocal process. We learn as well as people we work with learn” (Personal Interview, 2003). Moreover, the learning environment expands and flourishes because of good communication, which becomes critical especially when there are areas needing improvement. Every two weeks there are staff meetings where (through the use of reports) everybody can see what is going on and what needs to be changed. It is no surprise that the Spring Institute won the title of local Non-Profit Organization of the Year in 2002, and was nominated again this year.

Despite many accomplishments, the Institute still struggles with its international outreach. There are two programs offered by the Institute that provide English classes in Mongolia and China. These programs do not usually involve refugees but instead provide work-specific English training to the population. For example, some English classes in China are taught to the employees of oil companies.

Even though the goals of international programs are similar to those of the programs in Denver, the work abroad proves to be more challenging mainly because of the lack of resources. Currently, the program in Mongolia is no longer active and a new thrust is needed so that it can continue. A major factor is money. This is the area that still needs work since the programs themselves are good.

In conclusion, the ESL program empowers refugees and it is highly praised by those who completed their English classes at the Spring Institute. One of the primary reasons why the program receives good commendations is because the Institute does not impose unreasonable demands or high expectations on refugees. Instead, it creates an environment conducive to learning, sharing, understanding, and communicating effectively. The Spring Institute’s ESL program is a true example of facilitative empowerment based on a friendly and personal approach.

Policy Recommendations

1. The Spring Institute should give more priority and urgency to their international English programs. Full-time longer-term personnel should be sent to China and Mongolia to begin a campaign for financial resources. Certain local governments within China and Mongolia should be more informed and better educated about the importance of English classes so that their programming also can be enhanced.
2. The Institute should increase public awareness within the Rocky Mountain region of its international programs. Educating the public is one way of getting their attention, which in turn might eventually bring further funding.

References

1. Sample, Barbara. Personal Interview. 15 April. 2003
2. Krvavac, Nadja. Personal Interview. 23 April. 2003
3. The Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning. Online. Internet. 18 April. 2003. Available <http://www.springinstitute.com>
4. Handouts, pamphlets, and fliers. The Spring Institute is located at 1610 Emerson Street, Denver, CO 80218; phone number: 303-863-0188