Juan Caicedo came to the United States from Colombia in 1989 with the dream of one day working in America as an architect. It seemed a realistic dream. He’d attended college and held a degree in architecture from the Foundation University of America in Bogotá. Instead, he found himself washing dishes at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. He worked at Burger King, too. He remembers watching businesspeople come and go, thinking, “Someday, I will be one of them.”

It wouldn’t happen on his first stint in the States; immigration troubles eventually forced Caicedo to return to Colombia without a degree. He re-entered the country a few years later determined to succeed. In 1999, after working at several restaurants and a junkyard in New York City, Caicedo enrolled in Westchester Community College (WCC) in Valhalla, N.Y. “I took ESL classes and spent lots of time in the library and at the tutoring center,” he recalls.

He soon earned an associate degree in civil technology and went on to the New York Institute of Technology for his bachelor’s in architecture. Today he works for an architecture firm in Connecticut.
A History of Helping

WCC, like many community colleges across the country, has a reputation as a friend of the immigrant population. Its latest initiative—the Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE)—aims to underscore the significance of immigrant education through community colleges, professional organizations, and higher education in general.

Teresita Wisell, CCCIE’s director, is creating a blueprint that will provide assistance and mentoring to community colleges looking to expand programs for immigrant learners. “With baby boomers leaving the workforce during the next decade, we need a skilled workforce,” says Wisell. “Community colleges are effective places for immigrants to get the start they need.”

The CCCIE will be housed in the college’s new Gateway Center, which is slated to open in the spring of 2010, along with the college’s modern-language program, its English language learners (ESL) program, and a new entrepreneurial center. Wisell has already recruited a blue-ribbon panel of 14 community college experts to provide advice on what services to offer the school’s immigrant population. She’s asked panel members to speak about immigrant education issues and contribute to a Web site showcasing best practices.

Cross-Country Effort

WCC is just one of several community colleges across the country that provide services tailored to immigrant learners. The majority of colleges offer basic ESL classes, but many programs strive to do more than simply breach the language barrier. The most successful programs teach important job skills with a focus on helping students land jobs in lucrative career fields.

Luzerne County Community College (LCCC) is located in Nanticoke, Pa., home to one of the nation’s fastest-growing Latino populations. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that jobs requiring higher education will grow by 22 percent between 2002 and 2012—nearly double the rate of non-college jobs. To help ESL students prepare, LCCC created the Achieving College Education (ACE) club. The program, launched earlier this year, is targeted at high-intermediate and advanced ESL students and teaches computer literacy and communication skills through the use of technology.

“We provide students with necessary college skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and computer technology in a college setting,” says Peter Balsamo, chief GED examiner and director of the academy for culture and language at LCCC, and a CCCIE blue-ribbon panel member. “Skilled immigrants come to this country with education and training from their home countries, but are often forced to take jobs for which they are overqualified while learning English.”

A highly qualified workforce is critical to the survival of our country and society.
—Heidi Adamson

The San Diego Community College District (SDCCD) runs an Immigrant Professional Transfer Academy. The academy serves students who have at least a bachelor’s degree from another country. In a series of eight free three-hour workshops, students learn about the U.S. educational system, opportunities available at colleges and graduate schools, and job prospects. Participants receive help defining their goals and developing career action plans.

“A lot of what we discuss is about appropriateness,” says Sheyla Castillo, SDCCD counselor for continuing education. “For instance, in some countries it’s appropriate to send a photo and information about your spouse and children along with your résumé when applying for a job. When you come here, you don’t automatically know what’s right and what isn’t.”

Castillo has witnessed her share of success stories at SDCCD: the engineering student who was later hired as a network technician for the same school district; the Brazilian architect and accountant who met in the academy and started their own design firm; and the nutritionist from Mexico who became a community health educator at a California state university.

Similar efforts are under way at Alamo Community Colleges (ACC) in San Antonio, where educators insist immigrant students have the skills to be successful; they just need someone to help open the right doors.

“I refer to this group of immigrants as the workforce that’s most left behind,” says Balsamo. "We want to help students overcome any apprehension about attending college. We’re going to help them with their career prospects. It’s ESL for Employment Prospects. Its goal is to help immigrants with their career prospects.”

LCCC has hired a consultant to determine best practices at other colleges and replicate them. Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) in Annandale, Va., also is assisting immigrants with their career prospects. Its ESL for Employment Program teaches job-search and interview skills to non-native English speakers, provides résumé assistance, and encourages students to practice “workplace English.” When the class ends, students are invited to a job fair with local employers.

“A highly qualified workforce is critical to the survival of our country and our society,” says Heidi Adamson, director of the academy for culture and language at NOVA and a CCCIE blue-ribbon panel member. “Skilled immigrants come to this country with education and training from their home countries, but are often forced to take jobs for which they are overqualified while learning English.”

The highlighted 10 states offer in-state tuition for undocumented immigrant learners, predicated upon high school graduation and some years of physical residency.
Legal Battles

Despite the progress being made, lingering legal issues could keep a sizable portion of the immigrant population from taking the next step in their careers. The Urban Institute estimates that 26 percent of the 34.5 million foreign-born people in this country are undocumented. That status prohibits them from enrolling in college programs in three states: North Carolina, Alabama, and South Carolina. Alaska, Colorado, Georgia, and Virginia have legislation pending that would place similar restrictions on undocumented students.