

Case Study – Mitchell Levinson (Bard)

Background

The TLS project CultureConnect: Life, Learning, Language (LLL) was founded under the name Rhinebeck Connections at Chancellor Livingston Elementary School in Rhinebeck twelve years ago in the fall semester of 2005. The Rhinebeck-based community-nonprofit CultureConnect, which started the LLL program, promoted a vision for social inclusion and legal support for immigrant families new to the Hudson Valley and subsequently academic support for students learning English as a Second Language. This was a vision shared by the founders of the TLS project. Using an original curriculum created by former LLL program coordinator, Dr. Wendy Brisley PhD., tutors meet with ESL students for homework support, language building exercises, and mentorship. The primary goal is to increase students' academic and social confidence by helping them gain proficiency in English.

As more families from Latin America, Eastern Europe, and China have immigrated to communities around Bard Annandale, the demand for language services, legal guidance, and English as a Second Language (ESL) tutoring has increased. CultureConnect: Life, Learning, and Language (LLL) partners with two local elementary schools to provide a support network of teachers, family advocates, and tutors to meet these demands. In the classroom, over 50 CultureConnect tutors from Bard Annandale and local high schools and colleges meet with ESL students—whom we call English Language Learners (ELL)—for biweekly, after-school tutoring sessions. Most families participating in the LLL program have recently moved to the Hudson Valley in Upstate New York. ELL students are in pre-K through fourth grade. The majority speak Spanish as their first language. However, a growing number of families are joining who speak Russian, Georgian, and Mandarin.

For legal advocacy, CultureConnect links families to translators, organizes informational sessions on the rights of undocumented immigrants, and provides a sanctuary for students and their families who are threatened by deportation. By supporting both students and their families, CultureConnect: LLL broadly works towards developing supportive, comfortable, and inclusive communities in Red Hook and Rhinebeck.

Team/Recruitment

LLL's structure, which includes administration, scheduling, and curriculum, has more or less stayed the same since I became a leader in the program. Lily Chavez ['20] and I are Co-heads of the TLS project. Laura Selicaro works with both CultureConnect (the nonprofit) and LLL (the TLS project) as the program coordinator. Bard student volunteer tutors make up the bulk of LLL. The structure shifted in terms of administrative work this semester. Since LLL's new program coordinator began working this semester, Lily and I as co-heads have taken on new responsibilities related to background checks and training of tutors.

As I stated before, while Laura is the new program coordinator, Wendy Brisley served as program coordinator for over 10 years. The program coordinator has myriad duties. In the schools, the program coordinator ensures each student is excelling in the program. In debriefs after each tutoring session, the program coordinator leads a discussion among college and high school tutors about what they observed: 'sweet moments', periods of tension, activities that worked and did not work, and areas of potential improvement for activities. We also discuss upcoming events and new initiatives in the program. The program coordinator also ensures that families know about any events such as potlucks and know-your-rights sessions.

The program coordinator delegates tasks from the CultureConnect board to Bard students through the Co-Heads. Here's one such example of how the interaction between the program coordinator and Bard students has changed; whereas last year, CultureConnect completed the background check with the information submitted by students, this year, student tutors must complete background checks in their own time. Co-Heads receive emails about reminding students of their obligation to complete background checks. The Co-Heads and program coordinator have also historically collaborated on improving the program, ideas about end-of-the-year-parties for volunteers, and specific situations about students and families who have joined and left the program. There are also two program assistants, one in Red Hook and one in Rhinebeck. They help recruit tutors and implement programming.

The TLS program has been instrumental in LLL. They helped incubate the project in its nascent stages. I have come to Paul Marienthal and Micki Strawinski for advice about pedagogy and dealing with students who misbehave. Lily and I also workshop LLL in all TLS retreats. At the Get Engaged Conference, members of the CCE as well as campus coordinators from around the Bard Network helped me reconsider the way LLL collaborates with other projects in the Bard community. The conference was instrumental in helping me network in and around Bard's civic engagement community.

Each semester, Lily and I recruit Bard students to the program. We sat at tables in the Campus Center and Kline at Bard Annandale and asked students if they are interested in joining the program. After four or five days of recruiting with around 50 to 60 names of interested tutors, the program coordinator, Lily, and I lead training sessions for new tutors. (This year we received 100 names). Training sessions include detailed descriptions of the project's day-to-day activities, history, pedagogy, curriculum, the students and families of the program, and logistics.

Growth and Sustainability

CultureConnect: LLL conducts after-school programming four times per week from 3:00 to 5:00 pm. Every Monday and Thursday, we are in Red Hook. Tuesdays and Fridays, we are in Rhinebeck. Programming goes as follows: the program coordinator, program assistants, and high school tutors meet with ELLs in the cafeteria for snack and break. When Bard tutors come around 3:15, we go outside for a play-period. At 3:50, the program coordinator separates ELLs by grade, and tutors bring students to designated classrooms. Tutors work with students on their homework. When finished, ELLs work with tutors on ESL based activities. During this time, the program and assistant coordinators, as well as co-heads, walk around to observe each classroom and facilitate when needed. At 4:45, everybody cleans up, and tutors bring ELLs to their parents.

Occasional activities include cultural and science days. Because many of the ELLs are of Mexican families, we often celebrate Mexican holidays by doing arts and crafts and leading educational sessions about them. For example, during the week of Dia De Los Muertos ("The Day of the Dead"), we led activities in both schools to make paper flowers for the families' ofrendas (the table where food and decorations lie in honor of ancestors). In Rhinebeck, we brought an educator to talk about the holiday. In the past two years, we have collaborated with the CCE and other science educators to teach our students about topics related to STEM. Last year, Michael Kuckyr taught the concept of energy by giving our ELLs tools and instructions to make all different types of energy—such as turning on a light using pennies and sandpaper.

I will no longer be a co-head by the end of the semester. Thus, my long-term goals in the project are limited. One year ago, my future goals were based on the project. I wanted to reform the way our tutors dealt with misbehaving students. Over the course of a year, we

have instituted leadership-training lessons in the program that discusses creative alternatives to time-outs and reprimanding. After the Get Engaged Conference, I set a goal of meeting with all ESL related programs at Bard Annandale to collaborate. A long-term goal of the project is to prepare ELLs to graduate from their ESL education. Each year, ELLs take a series of tests to assess their proficiency in English. If they satisfy certain requirements, they attain a new status (i.e. from 'beginning' to 'commanding'). A related goal in this program is to provide the skills needed to climb the echelons of the school system and thus become proficient in the language, according to their level of education. Since the beginning of this semester, we have met and shared lesson plans, activity ideas, and pedagogical techniques. As the semester ends, I have been thinking about how to make the club more democratic in terms of giving willing volunteers further duties beyond weekly tutoring.

There are certain structures in the program and responsibilities of LLL's leadership that will keep this project sustainable. As CultureConnect's first program, LLL has created a community of families, students, and volunteers. As they have a real need for the after-school program, the families count on CultureConnect. With this institutional backing, LLL as a TLS project has the accountability to continue its efforts. With retreats and monthly reflections, TLS is also an outlet for the program to reimagine and develop its programming. Even so, much of LLL's sustainability relies on its co-heads who recruit, train, drive, oversee, write about, network, and tutor in the project. It's a commitment of between five to six hours every week. The next co-head will need to understand and commit to these responsibilities. I have been considering setting up the possibility to add new dimensions of the program such as committees that consider specific to improve the program. This more democratic system will boost volunteer stake in the project. Such an example includes committees for improving active engagement in classrooms, discussions about the needs of parents and ELLs, as well as volunteer party planning. The advent of a committee system would constitute the newest structural change to the program since becoming a co-head. Thus far, there has been no immediate change to the structure.

Advertisement

CultureConnect has a website that contains everything from LLL's history to programming. In terms of events, the CultureConnect board and LLL's program leader has direct contact with the families and schools in Red Hook and Rhinebeck. So, when LLL hosts, for example, an end-of-year potluck or know-your-rights sessions, communication happens through the upper administration of LLL and CultureConnect. Connecting to the community, I represented LLL this year at a poster board session and spoke with campus coordinators in the Bard Network and members of the community about the program. Years ago, LLL created a video that presented on the program's activities and introduced tutors and leadership. We are considering creating a new video. We also plan to use the Get Engaged Newsletter to advertise the program for recruiting.

Assessment

In terms of program structure, we have had multiple successes. With around three to four tutors per day, Bard student's engagement in LLL was once twice as low as it is today. We have recruited eight to ten Bard tutors each week for the past year. That means more tutors as resources for ELLs. We currently have over 30 Bard tutors. With the arrival of our new program coordinator, the LLL program has innovated cultural activities and the structure of playtime outside. The transition from Wendy Brisley (the former program coordinator) to Laura was, thus, quite smooth. Lily and I have also become far more integrated into CultureConnect's activities, bridging the institutional gap between CultureConnect and Bard. Starting last semester, CultureConnect has invited us to a number

of events related to other programs under their tutelage as well as to speak about the LLL program to sponsors of the nonprofit.

Participation in LLL has improved among families and students admitted to the program. Each year, LLL has received two to three more students. We currently have over 60 ELLs in the program. Though we do not have access to test scores and grades of ELLs, we have observed great improvements in our students. Since they were in second grade, the now third graders have historically rebelled against doing homework. Since we have implemented new leadership training and paired students with new tutors, certain students in third grade have been far more focused on their classroom activities and more respectful towards tutors. One student who has defied many of our expectations is a student I mentioned in my Get Engaged Conference presentation in March. Lindsey is a first grader from Red Hook but came to the program in pre-K. She excelled quickly by moving up to pre-first grade—which includes more challenging classroom activities—after one semester. She was then among a number of students who, after a little over one and a half years in the program, knew around forty more sight words (e.g. the, instead, with) than she did coming into the program.

The program's greatest challenge remains: recruitment and sustainability of the TLS project. Recruitment works on paper, but it incurs a far different set of issues when it comes to commitment. Tutors sometimes do not see that their presence is needed each week. So, when they miss a week, it disrupts the flow of LLL's administrative work (i.e. having to pair students to new tutors) as well as the expectations of our ELLs. In terms of sustainability, the TLS project must improve its engagement with volunteers so that everybody feels greater stakes in it. In the past, we have ameliorated this problem by hosting pizza and other kinds of parties for our volunteers. We continue to collect feedback about the program after each tutoring during a 10 to 15 minute debriefing period.

Conclusion

The LLL project has existed and developed since 1996. In 22 years, this project has graduated two generations of students from the program. It has created a warm community in the Hudson Valley. Communication is consistent between the families and volunteers/organizers of this program. The community has CultureConnect and Bard as established resources for everything from translation services to language tutoring. These benefits to the community make the LLL program and its benefactors a valuable resource to the community we reach.

In retrospect, I would encourage myself to reach out more to the families. Because LLL as a TLS project only works with ELLs, tutors do not hear much from the families. There is also a language barrier, as most of the families do not speak much English. But there are other ways to engage the families. In fact, it should be easy. Tutors have a passion for the children of these families. I would have encouraged myself to have developed the family engagement side so that our volunteers know the parents of the students we see every week.