

ADVANCING RETAIL INITIATIVE: LESSONS LEARNED

OVERVIEW

The UnidosUS Advancing Retail Workers Initiative supports organizations and programs that help individuals start or advance on a career path in the customer service or retail sectors.

With support from the Walmart Foundation, UnidosUS funded four community-based organizations (Affiliates) from June 1, 2017 to March 31, 2018, to implement workforce development training programs as part of this Initiative.

UnidosUS provided each Affiliate with a \$45,000 grant

Grantees:

- PODER (Chicago, Illinois)
- Hispanic Unity of Florida (Hollywood, Florida)
- YWCA El Paso del Norte Region (El Paso, Texas)
- El Barrio/The Centers for Families and Children (Cleveland, Ohio)

Program Design: The four programs varied in length from 50 to 140 hours of instruction. Coursework was provided during a two- to four-week period with classes being held three to eight hours per day.

Affiliates created their own curricula based on guidance from UnidosUS and materials from various organizations such as the National Retail Federation, National Institute for Literacy (Equipped for the Future framework), and other existing job readiness and life skills curricula. Modules varied between programs but included job readiness, soft skills, and hard skills such as: sales strategies, cash handling, customer service, and computer/retail software skills.

Employer Partnerships: Affiliates engaged a variety of employers throughout the program including banks/credit unions, hotels, restaurants, retail giants, healthcare providers, and staffing agencies. Employer partners participated in networking events, conducted mock interviews, delivered class presentations, and provided guidance on maintaining program coursework aligned to competencies needed for the job.

Target Population: Program participants consisted mostly of underemployed/unemployed Latino immigrants with limited work experience in the United States seeking jobs with higher wages and a career pathway. Together the four programs enrolled 202 participants. Demographic breakdown is below.

Age

18-24 years old	17.8%
25-45 years old	45.5%
46-65 years old	26.2%
66+ years old	4.0%
Not reported	6.9%

Race/Ethnicity

Hispanic/Latino	65.3%
Black/African American	24.8%
White	6.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%
Other or Not Reported	2.5%

Gender

Female	80%
Male	20%

Certifications: Upon program completion, participants were able to test for industry-recognized certifications from organizations such as the National Retail Federation Foundation and Telephone Doctor. In addition, all four Affiliates offered certificates of completion.

Program Outcomes: Participants entered employment with wages averaging \$11.05/hour, which represented a mean hourly wage increase of \$6.50/hour.

AFFILIATE HIGHLIGHTS

Each Affiliate implemented their program based on their community’s needs and local job market demands. To do so, they employed several key strategies highlighted below.

Program Highlight: Blended Learning Pilot

PODER in Chicago, Illinois implemented a four-week customer service course that incorporated contextualized English instruction. Through this grant, PODER piloted a blended learning model to increase student recruitment and retention.

Approach

- Class met in-person on Saturdays only.
- Participants completed assignments during the week at their own convenience through a web-based platform and online videos.

Results

- More in-class time for group projects and discussions.
- More time to practice English vocabulary at home and in class.
- Stronger recruitment and retention.

Program Highlight: Certifications

El Barrio in Cleveland, Ohio implemented a four-week course, for which participants selected a Customer Service or Hospitality track. The program offered various stackable credentials to enhance participant job placement opportunities.

Approach

- Offered up to eight national and regionally recognized certifications.
- Proctored some tests on-site and offered financial assistance for exam costs.

Results

- Higher participant motivation and retention.
- Stronger employer confidence in hiring participants.
- Higher wages generated for participants.

Program Highlight: Tailoring Instruction

Hispanic Unity of Florida in Hollywood, Florida implemented a two-week customer service and sales course. The program tailored instruction for cohorts composed of recent immigrants who possessed home-country work experience but little experience in the US.

Approach

- Emphasized cultural nuances faced on the job.
- Leveraged participants’ home country work experience through in-class discussions.
- Educated employers on participants’ work experience and culture.

Results

- Higher participant confidence and understanding of U.S. workplace expectations.
- Enhanced learning experience.
- Strengthened employer relationships.

Program Highlight: Referral Partnerships

YWCA El Paso del Norte Region in El Paso, Texas implemented a three-week customer service and sales course that incorporated job readiness and life skills components. The program engaged a diverse set of participants through their various referral partnerships with community organizations.

Approach

- Partnered with transitional living centers, domestic violence shelters, and veteran serving organizations.
- Integrated course with adult education training programs offered by partner organizations.

Results

- Engaged hard to reach individuals.
- Laid ground for future referral partnerships.

BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Employer Engagement

Best practice:

Affiliates had greater success engaging with employers when they:

- Involved employers in all stages of program development and implementation.
- Leveraged employer partnerships to secure higher wages for participants.
- Partnered with employers willing to accommodate and welcome recent immigrants.

Lesson learned: Some Affiliates struggled to build trust with new employer partners.

Recommendation: Engaging employers can be a challenge, but Affiliates can have more luck by generating employer buy-in early on, starting at the program design stage. In this way Affiliates can mold the program to fit employer talent needs, establish expectations, and build rapport early in the process.

Participant Recruitment

Best practice:

In addition to recruiting participants internally and through traditional recruitment efforts like flyers, e-mail, social media, and community events, Affiliates strengthened recruitment by:

- Establishing referral partnerships with public aid or welfare programs, other training programs, and employers seeking upskilling opportunities for current employees.
- Emphasizing word-of-mouth recruitment and family engagement.
- Promoting through media channels like: TV, radio, print (ads, constituent newsletters, newspapers).

Lesson learned: Some Affiliates struggled to recruit participants who met program and employer requirements.

Recommendation: Affiliates should make sure that recruitment efforts present transparent program information, allowing participants to decide if the program is aligned with their goals and aspirations.

- Program requirements should be clearly stated on promotional materials, such as: expected time commitment, foundational knowledge/skills needed, and English proficiency requirements.
- Promotional materials should also include baseline employer requirements, such as: educational requirements, language skills needed, and background check requirements.

Retention

Best practice:

Affiliates used relationship building as an effective retention tool. Participants who had strong relationships with case managers, instructors, and their peers were more likely to find the support they needed and complete the program successfully.

Lesson learned: Scheduling conflicts, lack of child care, lack of reliable transportation, and immediate employment needs prevented some participants from completing the program.

Recommendation: Affiliates must keep in mind that strong retention starts with effective assessment tools. By identifying and addressing participants' barriers pre-enrollment, programs can lay the foundation for higher retention. With this foundation in place, organizations can better maximize participant success through holistic supportive services during the program.

Case Management

Best practice:

Affiliates fostered effective case management by:

- Granting case managers adequate time to regularly meet one-on-one with participants by not combining the roles of case manager, career coach, and instructor.
- Employing a case manager who is a licensed social worker and is equipped with the skills and resources to help participants cope with barriers.
- Using motivational interviewing to help participants determine their goals and discover their potential.

Lesson learned: Some Affiliates found it difficult to remain in contact with participants post-graduation.

Recommendation: Outreach strategies following graduation can include text messaging, e-mails, online messaging groups, and phone calls. Additionally, Affiliates have found success in using monetary incentives as a tool, such as a matched savings program.

Job Placement

Best practice:

Affiliates strengthened job placement by:

- Hosting job fairs on site (including ones tailored for bilingual job seekers).
- Reducing participants' transportation barriers by partnering with employers in the community.
- Leveraging partnerships with employers to generate higher wages and benefits for participants.

Lesson learned: Affiliates struggled to secure job placements for participants with significant barriers to employment such as limited English proficiency, lack of a GED/high school diploma, unreliable transportation, and limited access to child care.

Recommendation: In addition to basic job readiness and job placement assistance, Affiliates can utilize three strategies for more effective job placement:

- Employ assessment tools to identify and address barriers prior to enrollment. This will help participants not only succeed in training but also successfully acquire a job upon graduation.
- Begin the job search process three weeks prior to graduation, at the latest. In this way, participants are more likely to be hired by graduation.
- Emphasize interview preparation, including preparing for group, phone, and video interviews.

To learn more about UnidosUS's Workforce Development Initiatives, contact Hiram Cortez at hcortez@unidosus.org.