

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I'm lucky enough to be joined by two guests today. Kevin Foley, Madison College Administrative Manager, and Enoch Melgarejo, Madison College Student Support Coordinator. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Kevin Foley

Thank you for having me.

Claire Darmstadter

So first would be great if you guys could just share a little bit about your educational and linguistic backgrounds and kind of how you ended up in your current position. So maybe Kevin, do you want to go first?

Kevin Foley

Yeah, definitely. Thanks, Claire. Yeah, so my name is Kevin Foley, I've worked in Madison College since 2007, so about 14 years now. It's gone by fast. We've arrived at a recession, and now a pandemic, and a lot of crazy things in between. But I've worked in a number of different roles with Madison College. I did advising for many years. And since about 2016, I've been working more in management. I'm bilingual in English and Spanish. And so I always had a passion to help you know, immigrants in our community, improve their lives through education. And I got my master's degree from UW-Milwaukee. They have like an education policy program that I completed in 2014. And so now, I help oversee a lot of the students' support staff, that help with English as a Second Language Program, and also our high school equivalency program, that we have to help adults complete their high school equivalency at Madison College.

Claire Darmstadter

And Enoch do you want to introduce yourself as well?

Enoch Melgarejo

Of course, my name is Enoch Melgarejo, I'm from México. And my background really was in computer science, but I was fortunate enough to immigrate to this country. And I mean, the very first day, I noticed the importance of learning, not only the English language but also being able to communicate with other people. I actually started working for Madison college back in 2012. And I started as a math tutor for Spanish speakers. So that was a great experience, we were working for our high school completion program called HEP that benefits migrant families and agricultural workers here in the state of Wisconsin. So after that, I took other positions. And right now I'm actually working in the ESL department, helping you know, people from all around the world, and, you know, also helping Latinos and Hispanics to actually achieve that dream of advancing their education.

Claire Darmstadter

And so like, you guys both mentioned, you have that Spanish background, but many of your students don't speak Spanish, so they don't speak English. And so it might get a little bit more

difficult to work with them or provide those services in the same manner as when you have that common language. So how do you kind of support students in the same way, or in an alternative way, when you don't have that language that's as easy to communicate with each other with? Maybe Kevin, do you want to start?

Kevin Foley

Yeah, I can start, and you know, I think human humans are incredible. And we find a way to communicate, you know, especially when, you know, people are motivated and interested to learn, you know, and people are who are coming through our doors. And so, we find a way to do our best and communicate sometimes, you know, it's, we noticed that, like, maybe just speaking something isn't always just the best thing, maybe you speak something and then you also have something written there so they have two different ways to like, receive the information, right? And sometimes, you know, people bring, you know, a spouse or a family member or a loved one to help them, you know, with some of their, especially people who are just brand new to the country. And I will say I mean, we have other staff too, who speak other languages, too. I mean, we can't cover every single language in the world, of course, but some of some of the common languages that we see in our community. We have people who can help out with those things as well.

Enoch Melgarejo

Yeah, I totally agree with Kevin, we use you know, the staff members, sometimes if I'm, you know, talking with a person that speaks French or Arabic, fortunately, we have some staff that speak the language and they're always willing to actually help the students. And we have a list of like persons where we can actually connect the student or refer the student to, and that other staff can help us with translation. But also nowadays it's very important to be able to use the tools that the internet provides. So Google Translate is actually my go-to. So normally, when I'm actually having a person that for example, speaks, I don't know, Portuguese, and I don't have anyone that can help me with that language, then we use that tool in order to communicate. And as Kevin mentioned before, also, you know, humans are like, amazing, and we always try to find, you know, sometimes even drawing. And we achieve that, you know, communication.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah for sure. And I think that's important, because I think there's kind of a negative view that we have towards Google Translate, because we know it's not always 100% correct. But it is such a great tool and it can get so much further than if we didn't have it. So I appreciate you for kind of bringing that up. So I think people who grow up as native English speakers in the US education system don't really realize how complex and bureaucratic it can be. So can you guys kind of describe some of the challenges both like outside and related to language that students may face in their pursuit of education? So whether it's credit evaluation, age limits, I know it's really difficult, especially with students with refugee backgrounds, can you just kind of talk through some of those things that people might not realize.

Kevin Foley

Yeah, definitely. That's that I'm glad you brought this topic up. Because that's really a big part of what we do, what Enoch I do, and all the staff do at Madison College every week is really provide a welcoming, safe environment and help people understand the educational system in an easy way. That's one of the things that I've always really appreciated about Enoch is he can explain things in a way that's very easy to comprehend, for all students. But yes, sometimes that we use a lot of in like higher education, we tend to use a lot of, you know, jargon and slang and like sort of academic terminology, whether that's like talking about credits, like, what is a credit, you know, how many credits equal? How do credits equal hours? And you know, how many credits do you need to graduate? Those are, those are always questions that students have. Also, a lot of our students where they come from, they don't have to pay for education. Right? So how, what's the cost of education? And how do I go about paying for that, I think one of the biggest challenges that I see, especially when I was doing the advising, the students really get confused with the financial aid process, in filling out the FAFSA, and providing all the documentation that you need to provide in order to get financial aid. So sometimes you have to provide tax returns, and other documentation so you can get student financial aid, and just having somebody friendly, and who's bilingual, you know, could really help, you know, I think it's critical to have somebody kind of guide you through that process. And so that's why we have a lot of transition advisors who really work with the students on these exact types of issues to really help guide and support them through some of those complex processes as first time college students in the United States.

Enoch Melgarejo

Yeah, I mean, I echo Kevin, what we do in the college. Also the transition advisors, academic advisors, they are also bilingual. And we have the same methodology. I mean, if they are actually working with a student that might not be able to communicate in English, I mean, we always find a way. Sometimes we get the support of family members of that potential student and in that way we can actually explain in detail all this important information, right. I mean, financial aid is a complex process that students have to go through and they always need guidance, especially if American students struggle going through the process. Can you imagine how is going to be the struggle for immigrants that are just getting just to like the tax, you know, a process here in the US. So that's why it's important to provide that extra support to students.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, I think that thing with documents is so important, right? Like, if somebody is in a precarious situation, the first thing they're going to think is not necessarily to pick up their tax document or their school transcript. There's just not always those things that people have readily available and, you know, we require them sometimes. And so most careers don't have laws that kind of require certain degrees or certifications. So like business, it's helpful, but it's not necessarily always necessary. But education, for better or for worse, is one of those that does usually require a really specific degree or certification. And there's a really, really big need for multilingual individuals in education, especially with less commonly spoken languages. And so the individuals who can speak those languages are a really, really valuable resource. And there's not many of them. But a lot of them haven't gone through, like traditional US system pathways. So can you talk about some problems or barriers that may arise from a situation and

if there's any positions in schools that multilingual individuals can hold that don't necessarily require, like a post secondary or tertiary degree?

Kevin Foley

Oh, yeah. So I mean, most of our teachers, you know, have, like, you mentioned that, at least, you know, in our like English as a Second Language Program, or high school equivalency, you know, they, they have to go through and, and have, you know, they, they get education, they have an educational background, where they do some, you know, teaching, whether it's in practicum formats, or student teaching, and that's really important to get to get that experience. And now, I do think that we, you know, we need to do more to recruit bilingual instructors, I really see that as, sort of, yeah. I think we could use more people who have, you know, who have that skill in their toolkit. But, you know, I think a lot of our support staff come from a variety of different backgrounds. And you don't necessarily need an educational background, to get into working as a student support staff from Madison College. At first, I didn't really have that educational background, I did my undergraduate in communication and Spanish, and then I kind of did my master's degree in education. And like Enoch said before, his background was computer science, but Enoch comes from a family of educators. So he has this knack to just kind of help people he has that, that natural ability to kind of help people and explain, explain things to people and teach people. And, you know, we have other staff who don't necessarily come from that, you know, educational background, but I think the most important thing, the thing that we usually look for is, you know, that you have a passion to help other people, you know, meet their goals and, and achieve their dreams through education. So that's what we usually look for and know which I use. We sit on some inner interview committees together, so we get to interview some people and and, you know, those are the kinds of traits that we're usually looking for.

Enoch Melgarejo

Yep, I totally agree with Kevin, I mean, we look for candidates for the support staff positions that can actually help other people and have that passion to actually understand that maybe the person, just to make that step, come to our campus and look for, you know, education, learn English, complete their high school, that maybe they're actually having a hard time trying to do that. And we have to somehow help them meet at their point and then guide them through the whole process in, they have to, you know, find a friendly face a person that is going to be willing to also provide that empathy, you know, in order for them to actually be engaged with what they're about to start, in this case, you know, an educational program, whether it could be an academic program in college, an associate degree, ESL classes has completion, or just developmental classes.

Claire Darmstadter

And so although I'm familiar with some of the Madison College programs, I'm not privy to everything and I would imagine most of our listeners aren't either. So are there any programs or initiatives or scholarships, or anything you'd like to kind of highlight that Madison College is currently involved with or offers?

Kevin Foley

Yeah, that's when, when, when I start talking about some of this stuff, you know, you leave a billion things out. So it's hard to know where to start. But, you know, I think, just since I've been here, they really redid into Truax campus, first of all, back like five years ago now, and that they built a health building over there, that's brand new, that has all of our, you know, health related programs. And those programs are, are, you know, really in high demand. I mean, right now, all the nursing related programs, you know, dental medical assistant, and they built a brand new health and public safety building out at the Truax campus as well and that houses like our fire program and our criminal justice program, and a couple of other programs, but then, you know, just a year ago, or a year and a half ago, now, they built a brand new South campus on the south side of Madison. And that's where I'm at right now, on our South campus. And it's a beautiful building, they did an incredible job. And it's really a great place for people to get started at Madison College and to learn about all that we have to offer. We have we really, you know, since President Daniels has been here, they've you know, Madison College has really put a great emphasis to help these kinds of populations we're talking about, you know, they have like, something called the Work Smart program that helps low income adults basically get access to a lot of, you know, tuition dollars that will help pay for pretty much their entire schooling. There's also something called that's been in the news, a lot called Scholars of Promise, that's geared towards high school students, and that graduate with a 2.25 grade point average or higher. And there's some income eligibility requirements, but they can also get two years of college completely free of tuition, and get a lot of wraparound supports, during their college career that will really help them and you know, Madison College it is like a small community here, you know, you can, that's the thing I like about it is you can go as an employee, I can go to the cosmetology down to the barber cosmetology and get my hair cut by our by our cosmetology students. I can take my car in to get our auto students to work on maintaining my vehicle. And, you know, there's all kinds of different things that I could go get my blood pressure checked, you know, in our medical building, and so there really is a small community full of all kinds of different possibilities. And so it's really exciting.

Enoch Melgarejo

Yeah, I mean, what Kevin just said, I mean, we have different scholarships, and we even have targeted scholarships for farmworkers that need to get a GED or high school diploma. And that scholarship is not only for the actual worker, but also extends to their immediate family members. So we have opportunities and within the college, we have the three year program. We have also a really good relation with UW, and we have the liberal arts program, the transfer program where students can come and spend a two years with us taking the common classes, the common courses and then transfer all those credits to UW and if they have a good GPA, they can actually transfer to the UW Madison automatically, which is great. So that's one of our most popular programs in the college.

Claire Darmstadter

Yep, I will leave links to everything that you guys mentioned in the transcript because there are so many great resources. And finally, just to close us off, we tell little kids and adults too, that speaking more than one language is a superpower. So can each give me one reason you can

answer in English, in Spanish, in a mix of both, why we should view speaking more than one language as a superpower?

Kevin Foley

I think it just opens you up to all kinds of different possibilities. And that's the thing that's been really exciting to me is you know, Enoch and I, sometimes we go on La Movida, the Spanish radio station, to promote some of our services. And if that's the kind of opportunity I never imagined that I would have in a million years, when I was growing up, or just being exposed to different ideas and different types of people and you know, I've gotten to meet people like Enoch. Quite frankly, so it's, it's, it's really rewarding. And it really has opened up a lot of doors for me.

Enoch Melgarejo

I think it is, it is a superpower, definitely. Because you're able to reach out to more people. Sometimes, just by speaking the students' language, you're going to be able to encourage them to take that step and go back to school and continue with their education. Also, like something that happens is like sometimes kids really want to go to college, but they need someone that is able to explain to their parents the importance of this education, the importance of going to college in this in the United States. And also, it's not only about the language, it's also about the culture, you know, and right now, I think just talking about bilingualism is not enough. It's also to be bicultural as well.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, well thank you so much to both of you for all your time, your expertise. I know everybody else is really going to enjoy everything that you have to share. So thank you and have a great rest of your day.

Enoch Melgarejo

Thank you so much.