

Immigration added to curriculum

Interest in topic grows on college campuses as it does in the nation

By Vesna Jaksic
Staff Writer

STAMFORD — As a daughter of Dominican parents, Maciel Valdez said she is familiar with some of the struggles immigrants face.

So when she enrolled in a course on immigration and globalization at the Stamford campus of the University of Connecticut this fall, Valdez said she could relate to many topics on the syllabus.

"We read stories about bilingual people, and it reminds me a lot of my mother," said Valdez, 18, a freshman who lives in Stamford. "I translate for her and pay her bills."

Valdez is one of about 20 students taking a new lecture series at UConn called "Crossing borders: Immigration, globalization and the American society." The one-credit course is attached to an English class and draws many students with international roots.



Kathleen O'Rourke/Staff photo

Maciel Valdez, 18, a freshman at the University of Connecticut at Stamford, is taking a new one-credit course on immigration and globalization. The class is popular with students who have international backgrounds, such as Valdez, whose parents are from the Dominican Republic.

As the immigrant population swells and the country continues to be divided over immigration laws, courses on the topic are increasingly making their way into classrooms in the area and

across the nation, educators said. Diverse student bodies, globalization and the media spotlight on immigration have fueled interest in the topic among university faculty, ad-
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ministrators and students.

Though only two of the students enrolled in UConn's class were born outside the United States, many are children of immigrants who grew up speaking a language other than English at home, said Hannah Moeckel-Rieke, an adjunct professor of English who teaches the new course. These students — known among educators as "generation 1½" — sometimes require additional help with their English skills, which prompted her to form the course.

Students in Moeckel-Rieke's

class get one-on-one tutoring while learning about immigration, which most can relate to because of personal experiences, she said.

"I'm hoping they learn about problems they are dealing with on a broader perspective," said Moeckel-Rieke, who was born and raised in Germany. "All of a sudden it's not just their parent having trouble with immigration, but they hear a historian talking about immigrants' struggles or an immigration lawyer saying that in the last 30 years immigration laws have been changed to keep the undocumented out but have also made it harder for immigrants to stay legal."

Freshman Yolette Florian, 20, who moved from Haiti about three years ago, said she wanted to see whether she could apply anything from the course to her life.

"I'm an immigrant so I find it interesting to learn about what

other people experienced and what I'm experiencing so I can learn from their mistakes," she said.

Some native-born Americans said they were interested in learning more about immigration after hearing the topic debated in the news.

"I guess I want to know what they will do with all the undocumented immigrants," said freshman Kelly Coughlin, 17. "Will they send them back, and how will it affect us natives and our careers?"

Sophomore Doug Lefflbine, 18, a U.S.-born American whose family has roots in Italy, Germany and Ireland, said he has learned many things.

"I'm learning people come here from all over the world, and it's such a melting pot but not everyone gets along," he said.

Though immigration courses have been taught for decades in departments such as history and sociology, interest has grown to include them under interdisciplinary studies, said Kevin Hovland, director of programs for the Office of Diversity, Equity and Global Initiatives at the Association of American Colleges and Universities, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that works to improve the quality of undergraduate liberal education.

"I would say that definitely if you look at mission statements of colleges and universities, there is new emphasis on global issues," he said.

UConn's class meets for an hour on Friday afternoons and typically includes a guest speaker. A Fairfield University professor recently compared earnings and living patterns of Jamaicans living in Toronto versus Miami. A day laborer outreach worker talked about the laborers' earnings and living conditions in Stamford. Other scheduled speakers include historians, sociologists

and lawyers.

Students took a field trip to Purchase, N.Y., to see a photography exhibit about immigrants living in Queens, N.Y. A trip to Ellis Island's immigration museum is optional. Homework has included a compare-and-contrast essay about opposing experiences of two bilingual people living in the United States. All students will be expected to write a research paper.

Stamford's global ties are strong, and the immigration lecture series is an example of how UConn has responded to this phenomenon, said Michael Ego, associate vice provost.

"The region is attracting people from all over the world, and they are now UConn students," said Ego, who last year helped create the Center for Globalization and Commerce, a partnership with the Stamford Chamber of Commerce. "So it's our responsibility to facilitate their integration into the university system."

Fifty-six students, or 4 percent of UConn Stamford's student body of 1,281, are non-resident aliens, meaning they are not U.S. citizens or permanent residents. But many more are naturalized Americans or U.S.-born Americans who are children of immigrants, UConn officials said.

Fairfield University's Terry-Ann Jones, assistant professor in the department of sociology and anthropology, started a new course called international migration in January and plans to create a course on ethnicity and identity in the Americas. Jones, who gave the lecture about Jamaicans in UConn's class, said two retirees are auditing her class on immigration.

"I think it's a reflection of the world we live in," she said. "All the issues are coming up in the media, people are more aware of these concerns and want to learn more."

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