



**SAN DIEGO  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
DISTRICT**

## **Program helps immigrants integrate into America's workforce**

"I never thought I could because I'm Mexican," said Carignan, 46.

The Immigrant-based Support program (ISP) at San Diego College of Continuing Education (SDCCE) paired with free English as a Second Language (ESL), Citizenship, and High School Diploma/Equivalency courses is helping immigrants and refugees increase their earnings and apply for college.

For 15 years, Carignan worked as a bank fraud investigator in Mexico. He holds a bachelor's degree in law from the Autonomous University of Baja California.

In 2019, he left his job to move to San Diego seeking a better future for his wife and son. Even with his college education and skills, he is not permitted to practice law in the U.S.

"I was looking for employment with a bank but could not find success for a few years," said Carignan.

As the first family member to arrive in the states, Carignan bought a used car to earn an income through Uber as a driver while taking High School Diploma/Equivalency classes at SDCCE to improve his English language fluency.

SDCCE, the noncredit college within the San Diego Community College District is one of the state's largest noncredit colleges, serving approximately 40,000 students annually, where more than half of the population identifies as immigrant-based. Students with Hispanic and Latinx roots make up 34% of the institution's population—the largest group of students served.

While a student at SDCCE Carignan joined the ISP, an on-campus program designed for adult students who are immigrants, refugees, and English learners. ISP offers referrals for free health and legal assistance, a bilingual WhatsApp group chat where students share resources with one another from job announcements to free food distribution locations, peer to peer tutoring, and a pipeline to apply for the San Diego Promise scholarship, which allows students to attend tuition-free at the district's San Diego City, Mesa, and Miramar colleges. SDCCE is the only noncredit college in the nation that provides pathways for adult students to enroll in a Promise program.

Carignan's story is common for foreign-born professionals, says SDCCE faculty member, Sheyla Castillo, an immigrant from Ecuador who alongside other faculty members advocated for the college to offer High School Diploma/Equivalency courses in Spanish 15 years ago in 2006 and later started the ISP program at SDCCE in 2019.

“There are ISP students that studied in their country and are in need of knowledge on how to use their education over here,” said Castillo. She noted among current ISP students are accountants, teachers, engineers, computer programmers and a surgeon, while in the same classroom, are adult learners that did not study at the high school level in their country and who achieve their High School Diploma/Equivalency Certification at SDCCE.

Americans view English language fluency as most important to assimilation, reported the **Cato Institute 2021 Immigration and Identity National Survey**.

Yet without access to affordable education and the skills to meet the demand of the American workforce it can be impossible for foreigners to make it in this country.

From Barrio Logan to Miramar, SDCCE offers free Citizenship, ESL, and High School Diploma/Equivalency classes, which include preparation for the GED in English and Spanish, HiSET and TASC.

“Students need people who are like them to teach them. It is such a unique and often times lonely experience to navigate another culture,” said Castillo. “When I first lived in the US, I didn’t know if my cultural context was appropriate for this country. I have felt what these students feel.”

She added that immigrant-based students become discouraged during the admissions process when applying to college due to the multistep application requirements, something that the ISP provides guidance on.

With the support of the tuition-free Promise scholarship, six ISP students transitioned to the district’s colleges in 2020 from SDCCE, and this fall, twenty-four immigrant students including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), or Dreamer students made the transition.

Fighting for his American dream, following SDCCE and transitioning to City College, Carignan is currently enrolled in the Social Work Master Track Certificate program at the University of Michigan (UOM), an accelerated pathway toward a master’s degree at UOM. He also helps lead SDCCE’s ISP as a peer mentor with Counselor Castillo.

“This was the best decision for me now going down this road in my forties. Becoming a lawyer in the US could take another four years,” said Carignan. He is learning about equity, oppression, racism, and antiracism, a pathway he will use to work as a counselor or a social worker.

“Without the mentorship of ISP, I don’t think I would have gone to college nor work in my respective field again,” said Carignan. “Now imagine someone who didn’t finish high school, who is trying to come to the US and is not a part of a community or the organization,” he asks. “The ISP is for them.”

SDCCE is still currently enrolling for the fall semester, to learn more visit, **SDCCE.EDU**.