

Speaking Up for Special Students

ALTELLA advocates for ELLs with cognitive disabilities

Cha Kai Yang and Miguel Hernandez Bolanos are thrilled to be working at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. It is a dream job for 22-year-old Bolanos, a lifelong Badger fan. Yang, 19, says the best part is earning a paycheck.

Yang and Bolanos participate in a community-based program through West High School that finds gainful employment for people with disabilities. They work together at WIDA, a project at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Fortunately for these young men, they have been identified and supported as English language learners (ELLs) with significant cognitive disabilities—a K-12 population in the U.S. largely overlooked by the academic assessment community.

Yang’s native language is Hmong; Bolanos, who lives in a Spanish-speaking home and understands some English, mostly uses sign language to communicate.

“Most ELLs like Cha Kai and Miguel end up in special education, where many teachers don’t have backgrounds in English language development. Likewise, English language teachers generally don’t have special ed training,” says Laurene Christensen, a principal investigator at WCER. Once students with cognitive impairments get placed into special education classes due to the language barrier, Christensen says they typically never exit these services, so any chance of English language development falls by the wayside.

Federal law requires each state to assess the language proficiency of ELLs with significant cognitive impairments. However, many states have never performed these assessments due to a lack of research on this special population of students.

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Cha Kai Yang, left, and Miguel Hernandez Bolanos are part of the ALTELLA team, a WCER project helping states develop assessments for English language learners with significant cognitive disabilities.

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Enter ALTELLA, the Alternate English Language Learning Assessment project launched by WCER this year to ensure that these underserved learners receive the English language instruction they are entitled to by law.

ALTELLA is a partnership between WCER and state education departments in five states—Arizona, Michigan, Minnesota, South Carolina and West Virginia—funded by a \$1.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to the Arizona Department of Education. ALTELLA’s mission is to research how educators instruct and accommodate ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities to help states develop their own English language assessment tools for this overlooked subgroup of students.

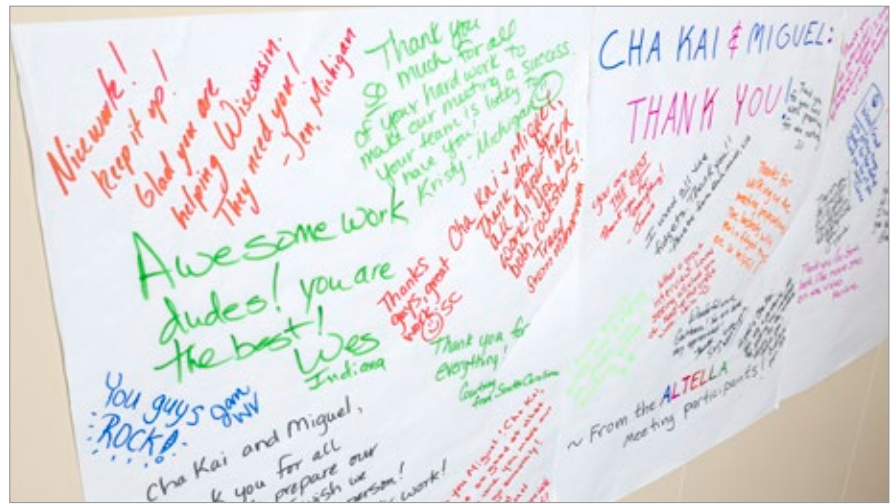
“We are all trying to work together to learn more about this small group of cognitively challenged English learners who have fallen through the cracks because they need to be learning English in school, too,” says Christensen, also ALTELLA’s project director.

To that end, ALTELLA staff has conducted nearly 80 classroom observations and teacher interviews in seven states. Their goal is to observe 100 classrooms before the project ends Sept. 30.

Although still collecting data, one ALTELLA researcher shared some preliminary findings. “We’ve discovered that in the mainstream school setting, these students are rarely supported in learning English, yet get instruction in English,” says Melissa Gholson, an assessment expert for special student populations. Teachers may think these students are unable to process information due to a very severe cognitive impairment, when they simply can’t understand the teacher’s language.

Gholson says trying to determine who these students are is one of the biggest challenges. “Of the seven states we have observed, we have found no formal policies on how these students are identified.” Without a proper definition, the learning needs of these special students cannot be met, write ALTELLA researchers in a brief.

Teacher Aimee Seiler understands this identification problem all too well. All of her second- through fifth-grade students at the Newcomers Center in Kentwood, Mich., have been in the U.S. for less than a year, and none of them speak English.



Colleagues show their appreciation to Cha Kai and Miguel for all they do to support WIDA and ALTELLA staff every day.

Seiler believes she has three students with significant cognitive disabilities, but there is no way to know. “One student has failure to progress. While I suspect he might be cognitively impaired, no one can interpret Swahili for an IQ test, so I can’t really assess him.” She is hopeful that the ALTELLA project will help inform a proper assessment before this student transitions into a general education setting.

Yang and Bolanos are important members of the ALTELLA team. For 10 hours a week, these valued employees assist the WIDA and ALTELLA staff with various office tasks, such as scanning and shredding documents, delivering mail, watering plants, preparing meeting materials and sending out thank-you cards.

“They are fast workers and are becoming very independent,” says Fatima Rivera, a WIDA client services specialist. “We give them work, and they give back to us tenfold with their great work ethic and attitude.”

The end goal is always to get students jobs, says Blake Hamann, a special education assistant with the Madison Metropolitan School District and job coach helping Yang and Bolanos transition into adult community living. “Sometimes our students start out as volunteers to get used to employer expectations. But we believe they should receive full pay and full employment, like anyone else.”

Researcher Gholson, who worked with disadvantaged students in West Virginia for 25 years, enjoys hearing about the progress of Yang and Bolanos. “It’s the most exciting part of the ALTELLA project,” she says, “to see how students with significant cognitive impairments can be successful in the world of work and live a high-quality life.”

Publications/Findings From WCER Researchers

The Wisconsin Center for Education Research continues to make an impact on education in Wisconsin and nationwide. Here are the latest findings from WCER's highly respected researchers:

HIGHER EDUCATION

“The Effects of Doctoral Teaching Development on Early-Career STEM Scholars’ College Teaching Self-Efficacy”

To prepare future STEM faculty to teach undergraduates, more research universities are offering teaching development (TD) programs to doctoral students. Following a cohort of STEM doctoral students at three research universities from 2009 to 2013, WCER researchers Mark Connolly, You-Geon Lee and Julia Savoy examined the effects of these programs on early-career STEM scholars. Findings showed positive relationships between TD participation and participants’ college teaching self-efficacy, as well as beneficial effects for female doctoral students.



are more likely to be successful. But how do instructors learn to teach these skills? WCER's Ross Benbow, Changhee Lee and Matt Hora use social network analysis—a research approach exploring ways “social ties” shape behavior—to better understand discussions among college educators and job trainers about helping students/employees acquire these skills. Findings show educators and employers frequently discuss this topic inside and outside their colleges and businesses, and self-report that such conversations improve instruction.

“Reconsidering College Student Employability”

Do colleges provide students with necessary “employability skills”? In this working paper, WCER researchers Ross Benbow and Matt Hora investigate essential workplace skills in biotechnology and manufacturing. They found considerable variation in how different occupational communities value and conceptualize important skills, though work ethic, tech knowledge and tech ability were valued by all. Researchers argue that debates about student employability should adopt more nuanced and culturally informed views of skills, and acknowledge broader structural forces in the labor market that impact student success.



“STEM College Majors: The Role of Pre-College Engineering Courses”

A recent analysis of 2002-2012 national education longitudinal data by WCER researchers Allen Phelps, Eric Camburn and Sookweon Min examines the role high school engineering courses play in a student's choice of a STEM college major. Published in the *Journal of Pre-College Engineering Education Research*, the study finds that students who earned three credits through high school engineering and engineering technology courses were 1.6 times more likely to enroll in STEM majors. This finding persisted “even after controlling for students’ social backgrounds, academic preparation and attitudes during high school, college choice considerations and early postsecondary education experiences.”



LABOR MARKET

“Hiring as an Experiment: Reframing the Skills Shortage”

The term “skills shortage” frames the issue in economic terms of supply and demand, where labor takes on the characteristics of a commodity. If employers set job requirements too high, capable candidates may not bother to apply, or be screened out. But setting low standards may result in hiring unqualified people who fail. These hiring errors can be costly. This working paper by WCER researcher A. Nelse Grundvig suggests employers could reduce costs using an approach similar to how researchers frame a research question.



“Social Networks and Skills Instruction: A Pilot Study”

Research shows that people who master the so-called “soft” skills of teamwork, communication, self-directed learning and problem-solving



“Supply and Demand for Public School Teachers in Wisconsin”

WCER researchers Peter Goff, Bradley Carl and Minseok Yang present findings in a paper on the teacher labor market in Wisconsin. Key findings include:

- High attrition rates in low-supply positions exacerbate staffing challenges
- Emergency credentialing to fill teacher vacancies has increased dramatically in recent years
- Supply and demand must include consideration of quantity, as well as quality, but district administrators report concerns with both dimensions of teacher supply
- Widespread use of the term “teacher shortage” without consideration of the inherent complexities is unlikely to lead to sustainable policy changes



COMMUNICATION

“Using Epistemic Network Analysis to Identify Targets for Educational Interventions in Trauma Team Communication”

In a recent issue of *Surgery*, researchers from WCER and UW–Madison’s Department of Surgery identified key elements of effective communication among trauma team members. Using epistemic network analysis, a technique developed by David Williamson Shaffer and colleagues, study authors found that high-performing trauma teams use questions and acknowledgements to verify clear communication, while members of teams with poorer performance were more likely to simply state information or interpretations. These findings helped identify new strategies for training trauma teams to communicate effectively.



News

New methods to monitor STEM education

Are STEM programs working? WCER researcher Mark Connolly served on a committee of The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to answer that question. “We identified three educational goals and developed 21 indicators to measure progress,” says Connolly. Core goals include:

- Improve STEM knowledge via evidence-based teaching
- Achieve equity, diversity and inclusion with more opportunities for educational access and success
- Increase completion of STEM credentials



How do college students transition to work?

Two research studies funded by WCER’s College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) will reveal how students transition to work and life after college. Researchers Adrian H. Huerta, University of Southern California, and Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, University of California–Los Angeles, will study Latinx parents attending community college. Daniel Ginsberg of the American Anthropological Association will look at how well anthropology majors are prepared for careers.

Madison Education Partnership reveals 4-K results

The Madison Education Partnership presented its first-ever public research symposium on four-year-old kindergarten programs in the Madison area. MEP is a partnership between Madison Metropolitan School District and UW–Madison researchers that addresses challenges facing local schools, and produces relevant and cutting-edge education research. Researchers shared findings on 4K-related educational equity, family engagement, interpersonal skill development and support for homeless families.



Academic society honors Nicholas Hillman

WCER researcher Nicholas Hillman received honorary membership in the UW–Madison chapter of Phi Kappa Phi, the nation’s oldest and most prestigious honor society. He is an associate professor of educational leadership and policy analysis.



For more findings, news and events, visit: wcer.wisc.edu/news/newsletter.



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