Together: Dordt Starts Juntos Program to Serve Latino Families in the Community

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In recent years, growth in agriculture and industry has attracted a growing Latino population to Sioux Center. That has yielded new opportunities for partnership between the college and members of the community.

Last fall, Dordt partnered with Iowa State University Extension to offer its first Juntos program. Juntos, which means “together” in English, is an outreach program to new Latino neighbors that provides information and support to families attempting to navigate and understand the U.S. education system.

Sending a child to school for the first time can be an overwhelming experience, says Dordt Education Professor Mary Beth Pollema, “and you can imagine how true that is for someone who has just arrived in the United States.”

The Juntos program, facilitated by Pollema and Off-Campus and Multicultural Programs Coordinator Alexis Kreun, includes five weekly workshops that bring a family and local educators together. By building a bridge between Latino families and local schools, Juntos hopes to give students a path for their future. Seminar topics include family communication skills, ways for parents to encourage their child at home, and information on how to talk together about the future and their options for higher education.

The local Juntos program is supported by a partnership between the college and the Center for Service and Advocacy in Sioux County (CASA), a group whose vision is to bring about “transformed Northwest Iowa communities that welcome, empower, and celebrate people from all cultures.” CASA facilitates a number of initiatives in Sioux County that assist members of the community arriving from other cultures.

According to the Iowa State University extension, Latino youth are at greatest risk for dropping out of school between the 9th and 10th grades. The program seeks to help keep younger students in school, encourage educational success, and make higher education an attainable goal for graduating high school seniors.

Among those many possibilities is Dordt’s new two-year professional-technical program, Pro-Tech. Pro-Tech Director Dr. Joel Sikkema attended a Juntos gathering to talk about the program and answer families’ questions. Many of Dordt’s Spanish-speaking students also contributed by attending gatherings and assisting with activities for the younger children.

In addition to providing facilities to host Juntos, Dordt offered scholarships for students of participating families to attend Dordt’s summer IDEAS camp (Investigating, Discovering, and Excelling in Academics and Service). The camp is for high school students and gives them a chance to investigate their areas of interest at a college level.

Pollema and Kreun plan to offer the Juntos program again next year and are applying for grant money to help it grow. This year, five families attended the entire five-week program, but attendance at individual meetings was as high as 12. With the program’s first year completed, Pollema and Kreun hope to continue to build relationships between the local Latino community, the Sioux Center school district, and Dordt College.

“We anticipate that schools will notice increased participation from Latino families following the Juntos Project,” says Kreun.

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