

# ProMatch Case Study

**Successful Practices and Possible Expansion  
Strategies for English Language Learners**

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# ProMatch Case Study

## Successful Practices and Strategies to Serve English Learners

Funded by the Silicon Valley Community Foundation and in collaboration with the North Valley Workforce Investment Board (NOVA), WestEd conducted a case study of ProMatch, the Silicon Valley chapter of Experience Unlimited, to learn how and why the program's networking and job search services were successful, and whether they could be improved, expanded and/or replicated to better serve English language learners (ELLs). A diverse population of non-native English speakers and ELLs lives in the region, and one estimate expects immigrants and their children to account for Silicon Valley's total workforce growth in the next 20 years (Casner-Lotto, 2011). Identifying successful strategies that build both language and workforce development skills is important to the long-term economic competitiveness of industries across the region and the well-being of individuals, families and communities.

### Overview: Experience Unlimited and ProMatch

Experience Unlimited (EU) is a no-fee job search program sponsored by the California Employment Development Department (EDD) that provides unemployed or under-employed professionals with peer-to-peer support and networking opportunities to help them find and secure their next job (EDD, 2013). Most EU members are mid- to upper-level executives and mid-career professionals who have lost their jobs due to downsizing, mergers or other corporate disruptions. EU members share their knowledge, skills and professional contacts from prior employment experiences to support one another, while also building and honing job search skills and confidence to move steadily forward in their job search.

EU was founded in 1958 and is offered in approximately 20 locations across the state. Each EU chapter is coordinated under the general guidance of an EDD staff. Program participation is voluntary and self-directed, and individual chapters function as member-run programs. Specific program opportunities depend on members' expertise, dedication to self-directed action, a 16-hour monthly service commitment, and structured and informal activities that provide mutual support. EDD provides space, resources such as computers and printers and, at a minimum, support from one staff person who may also be responsible for additional programs.

Through member-led efforts, EU chapters typically offer services including: job readiness and job search workshops; resume and interview preparation; access to online job listings,

resume banks, and CalJOBS (California’s online job search tool); skills enhancement meetings and peer-managed teams; informational speakers, and more. Employers find EU a resource for highly-skilled professional, technical and managerial job candidates.

### *Literature on Job Clubs*

EU follows a job club program model. Networking is an essential program element and is considered a successful strategy because it helps individuals tap social capital, motivation and mobility (Granovetter 1974). While research on job clubs offers mixed evidence for their effectiveness (Klerman et. al 2012; Brooks et. al 2001), models have proven effective for older job seekers (Gray 1983) and with certain welfare participants (Azrin, et. al.,

1980). Research on immigrant and minority populations, such as English language learners, shows networks can provide community, and work at different levels as resources (Elliot and Sims 2001; Frenandez and Fernandez-Mateo 2006). Other research shows networks can also be limiting and constrained by self-replication, creating barriers that keep immigrants and disadvantaged populations in niches or within certain industries and jobs (Waldinger 2003).

*“...**job clubs** operated by FBOs, CBOs and public workforce agencies are alike in many ways, with all of them emphasizing the critical importance of: (1) networking during the job search; (2) offering ongoing peer support and sharing of similar experiences among participants; and (3) providing instruction and guidance on the basics of the job search process (e.g., elevator pitches, resume development, job interview practice)”*

*-Trutko et al 2014*

### **ProMatch: A Unique EU Chapter**

ProMatch is a chapter of EU offered in collaboration with NOVA, the Workforce Investment Board serving northern Santa Clara County. Like other EU chapters, it is directed and run by its members. Jobseekers attend an orientation and self-select to participate in the group. Members are motivated to use and expand their personal and professional networks, and the program facilitates members’ access to connections, resources, information, education and encouragement to support their proactive job search efforts.

The program includes:

- Professional networking with ProMatch alumni and others, to increase job search opportunities
- Workshops on networking, interviewing techniques, and resume writing skills
- *Success Teams* to add accountability and support to the job search process
- Guest speakers
- Career coaching by professionals
- Facilitation and presentation skills enhancement activities

- Positive leaderships ability enhancement activities
- Opportunities to practice management skills by volunteering for leadership positions with ProMatch
- Access to job openings and information about employers who are hiring.

ProMatch is different from other EU chapters in a few ways. Unlike other EU chapters, all participants are automatically co-enrolled in publicly-funded (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)) workforce development services, and the program is supported by two NOVA as well as one EDD staff. In addition, ProMatch has a large and diverse membership base, which helps to make networking and group activities successful. Because of this, the networks available through its members permit broad reach and access to skills and talent that fuels the various member-directed working groups and committees. Further, a substantial majority of ProMatch participants remain engaged with the program as alumni. Collaboration with the workforce investment board and a large, active membership and alumni base offers strong program support.

Because research on job clubs reveals mixed results, and little research documents operations or outcomes for EU chapters across California, the research team chose to develop a case study featuring the ProMatch program as a way to learn more about successful practices and explore how these might be adapted to better serve the needs of English learners. The next sections of this brief present our results.

## Case Study Research Questions & Methods

This case study explored three broad questions:

- 1) *How did current members, alumni and staff perceive the value of the ProMatch program?*
- 2) *How was ProMatch similar to or different from EU sites in other locations?*
- 3) *How might the program be replicated for different English language learners?*

To answer these questions, the WestEd team gathered information from:

Individuals associated with EU programs, including ProMatch staff, individual “members” currently and previously enrolled in ProMatch, and staff from four other EU programs in areas serving a large number of English language learners. The team conducted interviews with staff, and surveyed members and alumni.

Literature and documents, including a formal review of research on job club models, data on English learners and documents.

Individuals working with English learners: In addition, the team reached out to organizations with job club models and/or who provided job-focused English language services.

## Successful Practices Important to Replication

WestEd interviewed staff at ProMatch, four EU chapters, and an organization that had recently launched job-readiness services with a similar program model to learn their perspectives on successful program elements and practices. We specifically asked them to focus on elements and practices that are critical to efforts to replicate the program.

### Program Staff Perspectives

PRACTICE/ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION
<b>Encourage participation by building and addressing the “value proposition” of how members will benefit from the EU experience.</b>	<p>Explain how the program offers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rigorous training, including: action-based job search; emotional training and support to build confidence; branding for identity (e.g., 30-second commercial, goal statements), conducting interviews, and learning/using technologies in job search</li><li>• Experience that can be included on resume while unemployed</li><li>• Community of peers going through similar experience who have valuable support/connections to offer</li><li>• Resources like space, computers, people</li></ul>
<b>Teach how to develop an individual brand.</b>	<p>Individual branding means creating identity through setting expectations and goals, identifying and highlighting experiences and skills sets, and through community support.</p>
<b>Foster relationships, networks, and communities of support.</b>	<p>Foster relationships and communities through teams and committees, service hours, workshops, and personal as well as professional networking. Be explicit about the program’s social aspect or mission, by which members have the responsibility to help each other and understand that they are part of a bigger workforce issue.</p>
<b>Promote member accountability.</b>	<p>Set high expectations for membership and promote member ownership of both the program and individual success. In addition, ProMatch imposes a term or time limit on membership that motivates members to secure work.</p>
<b>Build interpersonal and professional communication skills.</b>	<p>Communication is important at both the individual and group levels, and opportunities to build skills occur during program activities like personal branding, mock interviews, workshops, and/or through technology.</p>
<b>Make effective use of technology.</b>	<p>Larger EU chapters, in particular, incorporate new software and social media tools such as LinkedIn and online resume training to support job searches and websites for their programs.</p>

## ProMatch Member/Alumni Perspectives

With the help of ProMatch and NOVA staff, as well as members themselves, the research team also distributed surveys at an alumni and member mixer event to capture their voices.

### What did ProMatch Members and Alumni Say? (n=111)

#### *Satisfaction with ProMatch:*

- **The majority (93%) of responses were overwhelmingly positive at either “Very Satisfied” or “Satisfied”.**
- 77/111 respondents were “Very Satisfied” (69%), while 27/111 were “Satisfied” (24%).
- Only 5% (6/111) were “Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied”.

#### *Program Components that Helped ProMatchers Find a Job:*

- **Workshops received the highest percentage response (69%) for being “Very Helpful”**
- “Having a structured schedule of activities” received the second highest rating for being “Very Helpful” at approximately 57%.
- “Teams” and “Having expectations for my participation” ranked third at 52%

#### *Program Components that were “Neither Helpful nor Not Helpful” to ProMatchers:*

- **The 4-Hour a week service requirement received the highest percentage of “Neither Helpful nor not Helpful” at 23% of respondents.**
- Team Meeting (Mondays) ranked next with 14% responding and Alumni Events at 12%.

#### *Most Helpful Aspects of ProMatch for Finding Jobs:*

- “Giving me confidence as a professional. ProMatch reminded me that I am a leader capable of many things.”
- “Giving structure to my day. Being with people also in transition. I am not the only one.”
- “Participating in the programs allowed me to stay sharp and focused. Team building and consensus building was great.”
- “The program has you working to find a job. This helps keep depression less, give you the belief you are good enough”
- “Cross-Functional professional environment, practical skill-enhancing workshops, importance of reinforcing ‘preparation, practice, persistence’”



## Strategies for Supporting English Learners

### **ProMatch/EU Chapter Perspectives**

WestEd asked ProMatch and EU program staff to separately consider how their programs served English learners and/or addressed English learners' needs, and brainstorm whether and how their programs might be improved or expanded to meet needs of the diverse types of English learners in their region. We discovered that, as a voluntary program, EU chapters, including ProMatch, do not systematically gather data on members' language ability. They did report serving members who spoke a wide variety of languages, many of whom were not native English speakers.

Currently, EU chapters that serve a large population of diverse language speakers with English as their second language primarily cater to bilingual populations with higher education degrees and prior professional work experience. However, a non-native English speaker with limited English might have job experiences or educational attainment that don't translate into a recognized credential in the United States. Likewise, a higher-degreed individual with long-term unemployment and barriers concerning language or skills (e.g. with newer technology) may have significantly more difficulty participating in team meetings and group workshops.

According to ProMatch and EU chapters, some of the issues or challenges involved in adapting and/or replicating the ProMatch or EU model to serve a more diverse English language learning community included:

- The members' English language abilities
- The members' cultural knowledge and ability
- Transferability of training (professional status and knowledge), skills and degrees
- Members' comfort or confidence level with participating in program meetings and activities
- Program resources
- Existing personal and professional networks/supports

### *Practices that Support English Learners*

Examples of best practices or strategies that ProMatch and EU chapters used to support their bilingual members to be successful in the program varied depending on program design and resources. EU chapters were primarily concerned with cultural competency and communication among high-skilled, college degree or higher, bilingual job seekers. In general, a small staff of 1 to 3 people made adjustments to the EU chapter activities to better accommodate the needs of their member population.

### **How EU Chapters Currently Support Bilingual Professional Members**

- Staff responded to feedback or questions for clarification after classes/workshops.
- Staff took extra time “unpacking how to communicate” for ELLs, to include not only language but also body language and cultural understanding within the U.S. and working world.
- Staff provided extra support and encouragement, and adapted activities to include a member’s first language (e.g., allowing members to complete work in their native language first).
- Staff provided ESL classes or offered referrals to English language help.
- Staff encouraged members to look for English language resources.
- Staff or members created areas where English learners felt comfortable practicing conversational English for improvement.
- Bilingual members or speakers sometimes took initiative or volunteered to help others.

The research team culled interview data to develop the following list of suggestions for ways ProMatch and EU programs might be adapted to support a broader range of English learners, including strategies that might expand services.

#### *Suggested Strategies for Adapting ProMatch/EU Practices to Support ELL Populations:*

- Assess members’ language competency and target interventions to distinguish between English language and other skill development needs and to better plan ways to meet specific ESL needs or other related fluency/language competency requirements
- Find ways to bridge languages (e.g., through translators, having non-native English speakers needing assistance helped by others who either speak their language or by English-speaking members)
- Provide models, mentors and helpers within the language group/culture to offer assistance
- Build members’ comfort level and confidence through affinity groups, or participation in problem-solving sessions based on common interests
- Tap into and help broaden networks through finding ways to access and merge both formal and informal networks among cultures and various language speaking populations
- Find opportunities to offer additional classes for language and communication training and to learn about cultures
- Provide access to opportunities and an environment for non-native English speakers to practice English in work-like settings

## English Language Service Provider Perspectives

WestEd also contacted organizations that provide workforce education and training and/or English Language instruction to test the feasibility of implementing the best practice strategies suggested by ProMatch and EU chapters. We contacted two adult schools and two organizations providing job readiness/job search and other support services to diverse groups of lower-income, low-skilled English learners. The program staff we spoke with helped the research team identify at least two types of English language learners (ELLs) who seek services from their programs:

- 1) The English language learner (ELL) with some language ability and training, who may have partly learned English in the US, and who has job experiences which may or may not translate well in the current job market, and who needs further help with language skills and, possibly, technical skills; and
- 2) The entry-level, English as a Second Language learner (ESL) who might be monolingual in their native language or have very limited English language abilities, who is more likely to have limited educational attainment and work in low-skilled occupations, and who needs a greater investment of time and support to develop English language and technical skills.

The organizations we spoke with identified considerations that affect how they serve English learners, which primarily focused on issues that could affect program funding, member participation, and program design.

CONSIDERATION	DESCRIPTION
<b>Programming for English language learners (particularly those with lower language skills) is expensive.</b>	Serving English learners with low English language or technical skills takes resources and often depends on trends, theories, and materials which funders support – which can make programming unstable. Extra time, resources, and commitment is needed to tailor strategies for English learners’ needs.
<b>Documentation status affects ELL participation in programs.</b>	For adult-immigrant populations, legal or right to work status could affect whether or not individuals are comfortable participating or self-select out of programs.
<b>English language learners may not fully understand program aims or their own responsibilities within the program.</b>	Because of language or cultural barriers, program participants may not fully understand what is either expected of or intended for them.

## English Language Service Provider Practices

We asked the organizations to identify successful practices that would need to be in place to replicate their programs. Their program models were primarily designed to serve

specific ELL populations and their needs. In general, the programs allocated more staff to provide services than did EU chapters, and did not run on a peer-supported or participant-led model. However, some program activities resembled those that could be found in job clubs.

### **How English Language/Job Services Organizations Support English Learners**

- Familiarize participants with available work/language options, help them to establish career goals, and transition participants through entire job search processes from start to finish.
- Encourage program participation and help participants to build self-esteem and confidence through trusted relationships with counselors and through accountability for achieving individual goals.
- Provide comfortable, informal opportunities for participants to access services such as legal or financial help.
- Offer incentives that benefit participants and help with retention, such as child care, food, and financial assistance (stipends, scholarships).
- Reach out to English learners' communities for program outreach, networks, and job opportunities.
- Providing ESL courses or access to courses and resources either through partnerships or other service providers.
- Promote volunteering as a way to learn about a field or gain work experience.
- While not built into these organizations' models, they recognized that networking happened during formally scheduled groups/classes and informally as a result of friendships, and considered it important for building language, job seeking, and emotional support.

The research team also asked these organizations to respond to the strategies that ProMatch and EU chapters suggested could enhance practices to serve English learners. Their advice for extending the ProMatch or EU practices to serve other levels of English language learners (beyond the bilingual professional) included the following ideas.

#### *Suggested Best Practices for Job Club Type Programs Serving ELL Populations:*

**Be flexible in trying different program models and strategies that work with varying levels of English language learners.**

Conduct research on models and strategies, be willing to try new models and see if they work. If they don't work, try something else.

**Program success and replication depends on a strong and "robust" team and program structure, including staff members, coordinators, directors, transition advisors or counselors, and other liaisons, such as translators.**

While some of the organizations worked with volunteers, a strong, knowledgeable and experienced team of permanent staff members carried the program model and services to participants. An experienced and strong staff also provided consistency not only within

the program, but also with respect to delivering information and supporting processes concerning participants.

**Be aware of and responsible for different levels of English speakers in your populations and their language, emotional, and employment needs, as well as needs to access to other support services.**

For lower-skilled English learners, it is important to be aware of areas of work where they could possibly secure positions, such as within their native language/cultural networks where their native language is an asset, or with small businesses willing to employ English-limited employees. Program staff must be responsible for understanding cultural and language barriers, body language and emotions and interpreting as well as translating these. In addition to language and job search responsibilities, important support such as legal and financial literacy are also essential to helping English language learners with job searches.

**Having at least one individual within the team who can provide individualized support and build trusted relationships is important.**

Three types of positions were critical in supporting relations with and among various groups of English language learners: 1) teachers, 2) counselors, and 3) transition advisors or case managers.

**Ensure that ELLs are incorporated and engaged in activities.**

Ensuring that ELL students are engaged, communicating, and part of the processes is vital to their language success and growth.

**Recognize and mitigate barriers that are preventing English language learners' successes with English language skills and job search attainment.**

While targeting support for technical and employability skill training, for example, realize that diverse ELLs might have limited knowledge of and access to technology. For employability skills, communication impediments need to be addressed.

## Lessons and Implications

The perspectives and recommendations offered by staff and members of ProMatch and EU chapters, and staff at English language/job services organizations provide valuable insights into practices that help to meet the needs of the populations they serve.

- We found three distinct populations of English learner job-seekers are served by these organizations: ProMatch and other EU chapters serve a bilingual professional job-seeking population, while English language /job services organizations work with individuals who either have English language ability and

job experiences that may not easily transfer to their current situations, or entry-level English language and technical skills.

- The two groups of organizations run different types of program models (i.e., a self-directed job club type model vs. a case management type model). While program design and staffing structures are different, some variation of practices that are adapted specifically to support English language learners – such as encouraging networking and opportunities to practice applied English language skills, can be found across all programs.

Similarities in the practices implemented to serve English learners across all programs suggests that the best practices identified by ProMatch and other EU chapters and presented in this report can help inform strategies to more effectively serve English learner job-seekers.

Based on information provided in interview and survey data, and summarized in this report, the research team developed the following list of strategies and suggestions that can help inform program design and practices to meet English language and job search needs of English learners and other populations.

### **Suggestions for Job Club Type Programs Serving Bilingual Professionals**

- Develop a team or workshop structure geared toward the needs of English learner members. For example:
  - Consider how outreach and orientation may be improved to encourage participation by English learners.
  - Conduct meetings, workshops, and other activities at a slower pace for ELLs to assess for comprehension in native language and in English.
  - Tap into translation help through EU staff, members, and or volunteers.
  - Make more active use of members' talents, networks and communities to develop supports for English learners.
- Collaborate more intentionally with providers of English language instruction.
- Don't rely on teaching ESL skills alone: incorporate a comprehension-based applied approach through activities such as mock interviews that offer practice and experience with diverse situations and settings (e.g. phone interview, online).
- Treat the "30-second commercial" or personal brand statement as an employer's first way of assessing and becoming accustomed to the member's language ability. Make sure it is honed grammatically.

- Explore ways to leverage the value placed in volunteering, and place English language learners in natural work settings (or those that simulate them) to enhance their ability to practice language skills.
- Partner with Workforce Investment Boards and County or City offices providing workforce and economic development services, as well as other stakeholders in the workforce development system.

### **Suggestions for Organizations Providing English Language Services**

- Explore strategies that more intentionally build self-directed networking and peer-supported job search and skill-building opportunities into program offerings.
  - Build opportunities for networking and self-directed activities into program design.
  - Build participants' comfort level and confidence in owning elements of the program by organizing affinity groups or opportunities to participate in problem-solving sessions based on common interests.
  - Facilitate work of program participants with leadership skills to initiate program activities (as does ProMatch).
  - Provide bilingual models, mentors and helpers within/from the language group/culture to offer assistance.
  - Develop an active alumni network.
- Tap into and help broaden networks through finding ways to access and merge both formal and informal networks among cultures and various language-speaking populations.
- Provide access to opportunities and an environment for non-native English speakers to practice English in work-like settings.
  - Incorporate career awareness and skill-building opportunities through volunteering or internships.
  - Find opportunities to offer additional experiences to learn about cultures.
- Invest in and offer supports that build program participants' digital literacy, specifically in the context of job search skills.
- Partner with Workforce Investment Boards and County or City offices providing workforce and economic development services, as well as other stakeholders in the workforce development system.

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