

## Cambridge College Hosts Panel for Northern Ireland Visitors

By Kimberly Dunbar

On Tuesday, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 30 individuals from West Belfast/Greater Shankill of Northern Ireland gathered at the Cambridge College Lawrence Regional Center to listen to a panel shared ideas about business, education and the community. The College hosted the panel as part of the Trade Mission and Urban Regeneration Conference being held throughout the week in Boston and Lawrence.

The panel represented a true sampling of the Lawrence community, encompassing local organizations and individuals from both non-profits and corporations. Panelists included President Mahesh Sharma, Executive Director and founding member of the Lawrence Family Development and Education Fund Patricia Foley Karl, Head of School at Esperanza Academy Laurie Bottiger, Superintendent of Lawrence Public Schools Dr. Wilfredo Laboy, Executive Director of the Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board Frederick Carberry, and President of Northern Essex Community College Dr. David Hartleb. Each of the panelists was there to tell their organization's story and to share ideas for success.

President Sharma, who has worked with Northern Ireland for over 20 years, spoke about the unique educational opportunities which help make learning in America so successful. The differences between America and other countries included more opportunities for Americans to receive higher education in the United States, great American philanthropy when it comes to education, and the idea of continuing education. "Education is not over when you pass a certain age group," said President Sharma, adding that institutions like Cambridge College are here to offer adults these opportunities to further their education later in their lives. And the proof is in the numbers: "We are educating over 8,000 students a year," he added.

Several of the other panelists also had experience working to help educate the underprivileged populations. Patricia Foley Karl, Executive Director and founding member of the Lawrence Family Development and Education Fund, said that her mission is to strengthen families while building the community. "For 17 years, everything we have done has been about education," she said. Ms. Karl commented that building a well-educated workforce is very important. "Immigrants and newcomers need to be successful," she added, which is something that will help stabilize the community.

Dr. Wilfredo Laboy, Superintendent of Lawrence Public Schools had similar concerns about educating the community, but also its effects of the world. "Public education can strengthen the democracy, and it has served it well," said Dr. Laboy. "However, America has lost its ability to keep up with the global economy because we have not educated our youth. One of our biggest challenges is getting the students ready for this," he said, adding that the brand new state of the art high school being built in Lawrence will help remedy this problem.

President of Northern Essex community college Dr. David Hartleb also knows something about public education. “Until Community College, education was a privilege you had to earn,” he said, adding that he takes pride in his school’s open door access to education. While some view community college as easy and low-quality, Dr. Hartleb advocated that their education is about results. “Where we leave the students is much more important than where we find them,” he said.

But whether education is public or private, it is extremely important. Esperanza Academy, an independent and tuition free school, offers low income 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls 11 hours of education and three meals each day. “We are trying to break the cycle of poverty through education,” said Laurie Bottiger, Head of School at Esperanza Academy. “There isn’t one parent who doesn’t want their child to do well at school,” said Ms. Bottiger, it’s just a matter of access.

Panelist Frederick Carberry was there to talk about how he helps individuals gain this kind of access. As the Executive Director of the Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board, Mr. Carberry and his organization are key players in the economic growth of the region. “It is important to address the challenges students face when transitioning between education and the work force,” said Mr. Carberry. The Board helps expand the employment opportunities for residents and working with educational training providers to help build the community.

“The key element of success is to meet the individuals halfway,” said President Sharma, in response to an audience member’s question. “A big difference between America and Britain is our ability to provide responsive education. We at Cambridge College are here to design programs to meet the needs of students.”

After the panel spoke, the audience fired questions back, looking for an encore of advice. Whether in a classroom or in a room with an informal panel presentation, education is everywhere, and it can change a life and an entire community for the better.