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## Iraqi Refugees, Desperately Seeking English

**By Jennifer Gonzalez**  
**El Cajon, Calif.**



**Sandy Huffaker for The Chronicle**

***Fresh from Iraq, students at Cuyamaca College, near San Diego, crowd into classrooms for courses in English as a Second Language, crucial to their future in the United States.***

Alicia Muñoz remembers when she began to notice something unusual at Cuyamaca College. In November 2008, Ms. Muñoz, the lead instructor of English as a Second Language, was surprised to see that classes for the following spring semester were already full—odd, since ESL students usually registered late. That December, 60 students were shut out of the assessment test required for enrollment in the classes, because there were no more seats available. In fact, students had started lining up at 7 in the morning for the 1 p.m. test.


"That is when I knew something was going on," she says.

Cuyamaca, a community college just northeast of San Diego, found itself faced with a fast-growing population of Iraqi refugees who were hungry for English-language skills and desperate to sign up for classes, a prerequisite for keeping welfare benefits and essential for finding work.

San Diego County has taken a significant portion of Iraqi refugees since the United States began allowing them to immigrate en masse several years ago. According to a recent study by John R. Weeks, a demographer at San Diego State University, some 400 arrive in the county every month. At Cuyamaca the number of ESL students (at least 85 percent of whom are refugees from Iraq) has tripled since 2006, to roughly 900.

But with California's financial crisis cutting millions of dollars from the college's budget, the increase couldn't have come at a worse time.



 Sandy Huffaker for *The Chronicle*

*Alicia Muñoz (left), with Majd Haddad, a student in her highest-level English as a Second Language class at Cuyamaca College. Ms. Muñoz let in twice the normal number of students this past spring. "What could I do? The students needed the class."*

The college has had to turn away students like Hanaa Hanna, 41, who arrived in El Cajon in 2008 after fleeing Iraq with her husband and three daughters. Ms. Hanna, whose education in Iraq ended in middle school, has tried three times to enroll in an ESL class at Cuyamaca, without success.

"This is a tragedy for these individuals," says Cindy L. Miles, chancellor of the Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District, who was forced to cut \$10-million from her operating budget last year and expects to cut \$5-million more for the 2010-11 academic year. "They left a country ravaged by war and end up in an area ravaged by recession."

### **Hard Transition**

A visitor to Cuyamaca hears the chatter of Arabic everywhere as students walk across the campus or gather in groups to talk.

Most, like Ms. Hanna, are of Chaldean Christian origin, a minority group long persecuted in Iraq and, as sectarian violence has risen there, increasingly at risk of being tortured or killed.

But life in the United States can be a hard transition. Most of the refugees don't speak English, so it is difficult to find work. And even those with good language skills can't find jobs in the current economy.

As a result, the new arrivals have applied for welfare. To stay on the rolls, they must spend 32 hours a week looking for work, taking English classes, or taking other steps to improve their job skills.

Majd Haddad, 32, also an Iraqi, arrived in the El Cajon area with her family in 2008 from Jordan, where they had waited for two years for permission to resettle in another country as refugees. But shortly after their arrival, her husband died from a work-related injury he had suffered in Jordan. That left Ms. Haddad alone in a new country with two elementary-school-age children to raise.

More than a year later, Ms. Haddad still dresses in black. As she sits in the living room of her one-bedroom apartment, where a large photograph of her husband hangs on the wall, tears well up in her eyes at the mention of his name.

Though her English is good enough that this spring she tested into the highest-level ESL class offered at Cuyamaca, Ms. Haddad has been unable to find a job. A work-study position, helping Ms. Muñoz grade students in lower ESL classes, helps keep her welfare benefits intact now that she is no longer enrolled in a class herself.

Her Christian faith and her children give her reason to get up in the morning, she says. But it's also clear that attending classes at Cuyamaca and working with Ms. Muñoz make her happy. She calls the instructor her "angel."

### **'In Our Fabric'**

Cuyamaca has made a variety of changes to help the Iraqi population on the campus. Arabic-speaking counselors have been hired, and many brochures, lab manuals, and class handouts have been translated.

"We are a community college. It's in our fabric to meet the community's needs," says Ms. Miles, the chancellor. "We are not accustomed to saying no to our students, so we are trying to be strategic and do as much as we can."

One strategy has been to offer more noncredit ESL courses, which cost less to run than those with credit. Over the past three years, Cuyamaca has more than tripled the number of noncredit ESL courses it offers during the academic year, to 149, and increased summer courses to 50 from just 14.

The drawback is that the courses don't count toward associate degrees or certificates, which many of the Iraqi students want to earn.

Another way to accommodate students is to allow more of them in a class; ESL classes that typically admitted 20 students now usually have 30. It's not an ideal situation for learning, the instructors say, but they feel morally obligated to help the refugees out.

This spring, Ms. Muñoz allowed 40 students, including Ms. Haddad, to enroll in her highest-level ESL course.

"It was incredibly difficult for me," the instructor says, referring to the workload. "But what could I do? The students needed the class."

The classroom was packed so tightly one recent day that it was almost impossible to walk around. Students' desks were pushed against the walls and even the door.

This spring the college offered a new course, ESL 80, aimed at Iraqi students whose language skills are so poor that they are not even testing into the beginning-ESL class. The decision came at a price. Because of budget cuts, Ms.

Muñoz had to eliminate two other courses normally offered to ESL students—ESL for the Workplace and a computer-skills class.

Guillermo Colls, another ESL instructor at Cuyamaca, recently had to turn 20 students away from a class. "It is heartbreaking not being able to teach students who want to learn," he says. "It's the worst thing that can happen to a teacher."

Ms. Hanna, who was repeatedly shut out of for-credit classes, has taken free English-language classes at a community center for the past two years. But they are hard for her because the students' language skills vary so widely. She plans to take a summer noncredit ESL class at Cuyamaca beginning this month. And with fall registration only weeks away, she will once again try to enroll in a class that carries credit.

"I'm just full of hope," she says, through a translator.