

**Promising Practices:
Part-Time Career Readiness Program
American Culture and Language Institute
Northern Virginia Community College**

The American Culture and Language Institute (ACLI) at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) coordinates all noncredit English as a second language (ESL) courses taught at NOVA's five campuses and serves both immigrant and international students. In 2017, ACLI created the Part-time Career Readiness program in response to a survey asking ACLI's immigrant students about their background, current employment, and their future career aspirations. The Part-Time Career Readiness program is designed to help students improve their work-related skills in English and to prepare for NOVA's workforce programs in healthcare, IT, and business.

Name of Community College: Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) (www.nvcc.edu).

Title of Program: Part-Time Career Readiness Program, American Culture and Language Institute (ACLI) (<https://www.nvcc.edu/nova-esl/acli/index.html>).

Type of Program: ESL, Intensive English, part-time career readiness, part-time life skills.

Primary Division involved: NOVA's Office of Workforce Development, known as NOVA Workforce.

Key Partners: NOVA Workforce's staff, including Student Support advisors, and information technology, business, and TESOL program managers; NOVA college-level ESL program staff; and NOVA Career Services staff.

Populations Served: Immigrant and International Students, ESL/ELL.

Immigration status required: All eligible regardless of immigration status.

1. Need for Program

The ACLI coordinates all noncredit ESL courses taught at NOVA's five campuses, serving both immigrant and international students. ACLI's Part-time Career Readiness program began in Fall 2017 as part of a program redesign in response to a survey asking ACLI's immigrant students about their background, current employment, and their future career aspirations. Eighty percent of students reported obtaining a college degree in their home countries before attending NOVA. The traditional progression from ESL to an associate degree at NOVA was not the main motivator.

In addition, 40% of students reported that they took ESL classes to improve their English skills to enter the U.S. labor force or transition from lower-paying jobs to higher-paying, high-demand jobs in the Northern Virginia region in many of the same high-demand career sectors for which NOVA Workforce offered training. Most students stated that they wanted to work in business, information technology (IT), healthcare, or education in the next five years. Employers in these

same sectors, especially IT, often struggle to find qualified candidates who can speak and write in English, according to a 2016 Society for Human Resources Management survey.

2. Brief Description of Program

The Part-Time Career Readiness courses are designed to help students improve their work-related skills in English or to prepare for NOVA Workforce's programs in healthcare, IT, and business. The Part-Time Career Readiness program offers workforce-contextualized ESL classes for students at high-beginning (a more advanced beginning ESL level) through intermediate ESL levels. Students develop skills in work-related communications via case studies, such as participating in meetings, negotiations, and interviews; and writing emails, reports, and proposals. Students' soft skills in teamwork and intercultural communication are also developed via working-across-cultures units.

In previous semesters, Career Counselors from NOVA Workforce visited Career Readiness classes to provide students with timely next steps to transition from ESL to workforce credentials classes. The intent of this effort was to assist in transitioning part-time program students from contextualized ESL to sector-specific content instruction. As of Summer 2020, NOVA Workforce's Student Support staff now provides Career Readiness students with advising services. Optional support-ESL classes such as grammar, pronunciation, and a learning lab provide supplementary, soft-skills instruction to promote students' persistence and prepare them for the workforce. Currently, we're offering just the support-ESL grammar course in response to students' needs.

The multidirectional entry and exit points of the part-time program mean that immigrant students have the flexibility to adjust the context of their ESL instruction at each semester, and support can be provided to a wider audience than ESL students. Immigrant students already in workforce credentials courses, who would benefit from additional ESL support, can take the support-ESL courses to improve their grammar, pronunciation, and learning-technology skills.

In mid-March, 2020, all instruction moved online to a remote-synchronous format. Career Readiness courses are taught via Zoom and Canvas. Anecdotally, instructors have found that student attendance has improved in the online environment.

3. Specific Population Served

The ACLI serves immigrant resident, immigrant non-resident, and international non-resident English language learners (ELLs). ACLI welcomes all students, regardless of their immigration status. As ACLI is a non-credit program with a uniform tuition structure, students without domicile pay the same rate as Virginia residents.

The majority of ACLI's 1,274 students are immigrant residents who emigrated from more than 75 countries, while F-1 international students represent 27 percent of the Institute's participants. About 41 percent of ACLI students are enrolled full-time and are high school graduates seeking associate degrees, and the other 59 percent are enrolled part-time seeking to improve their workplace English skills or enter workforce credentials programs. F-1 international students take the Intensive English Program (IEP) to prepare for college-level classes and associate degrees. Immigrant resident students can choose to take IEP, part-time Career Readiness, or part-time ESL.

The Career Readiness program serves ELLs who hope to gain employment in the United States or to transition from low-paying jobs in customer service, childcare, or food service, to higher-paying jobs in IT, healthcare, and business.

4. Goals and Objectives

The Career Readiness Program's goal is to improve ELLs' work-related skills in English so that they may: directly enter the workforce; move from lower-paying employment in customer service, childcare, or food service to higher-paying employment in IT, healthcare, and business; or begin NOVA Workforce training to prepare for jobs in IT, healthcare, or business. Students' language development is measured using pre- and post-tests. Student transfer from Career Readiness to NOVA Workforce training is tracked each semester.

5. Outcomes

For the first time, ESL students now have the opportunity to transition from contextualized ESL instruction to NOVA Workforce's credentials programs. In the Career Readiness program, immigrant students can elect to focus on one of NOVA Workforce's certificate pathways in IT, healthcare, or business via a small-group project, which consists of interviews with a NOVA workforce instructor, career counselor, or an employer about the skills and knowledge employees need to be successful in class and at work. In this way, students are informed on the steps needed to attain an industry credential and secure more opportunities and professional fulfillment in the U.S. workplace.

Career Readiness has grown more than 200 percent from Fall 2017 to Fall 2019. The program has seen a 19 percent increase in student retention from high-beginning to intermediate levels. More than 80 percent of Career Readiness students successfully complete a level after two semesters.

As of Fall 2019, nine students, or 10 percent of the Spring 2019 and Summer 2019 Career Readiness cohorts, had completed Career Readiness and enrolled in NOVA Workforce training in IT, healthcare, and business. While 10 percent is not a large number, prior to Fall 2019, few, if any, ESL students had transitioned to NOVA Workforce training.

In May 2020, NOVA Workforce created a series of free webinars (DiscovFREE) promoting its programs in IT, business, and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL). The webinars consisted of a program overview presentation and a Q&A session. These webinars have been well attended by prospective students and Career Readiness students. Our hope is that the webinars will lead to additional Career Readiness students making the transition from ESL to NOVA Workforce training in IT, business, and healthcare.

6. Collaboration

Internal partnerships across NOVA's campuses are critical to ACLI's and Career Readiness' success, and there are several efforts to improve the transition of ACLI students into for-credit college-level programs or NOVA Workforce training:

- College ESL Program staff help ACLI students advance by evaluating exit-level Intensive English Program students' readiness to enter the college ESL program, via the Accuplacer exam and the bridge writing exam.

- NOVA Workforce’s Student Support staff provides career and college advising for ACLI students, including Career Readiness students, interested in pursuing credit or noncredit workforce-credentials programs. (Until June 2020, NOVA Workforce’s two career counselors played an intrinsic role in ELLs successfully transitioning from the Career Readiness program to NOVA Workforce training. However, as the career counselors’ positions were grant funded, NOVA Workforce was not able to renew them.)
- NOVA Workforce IT, business, and TESOL program managers provide specific program overviews and Q&A sessions remotely.
- [Career Connection](#), a free online career services management system operated by NOVA’s Career Services department, provides support in resume building and interview practice, as well as a job bank for local employers to hire NOVA students.

External partnerships are also important to ACLI’s success:

- Local literacy councils, public schools, and nonprofit organizations regularly refer ESL students to ACLI to continue to study English or enter college ESL.
- International entities such as the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission and universities in Turkey and Brazil have provided funding for student scholarships and faculty professional development.
- Skillsource and the Virginia CareerWorks program connect local businesses and residents with training, including ESL.

7. Success Factors

Several factors contributed to the success of the Part-Time Career Readiness redesign process:

- A curriculum committee led to both internal buy-in and success. The program utilized the ACLI Program Coordinators’ expertise to provide feedback on the appropriate pre- and post-tests to use, textbook selection, and student needs.
- ACLI staff visited part-time ESL classrooms to brief students about the new program, and advising materials were provided to explain the specific needs career readiness courses could help ESL students meet.
- Colleagues were happy to share their experiences. Networking provided valuable input on what worked or did not work in the past.

8. Challenges Faced

- As non-credit students, ACLI students cannot use Pell Grants or other financial aid to pay for ACLI ESL classes.
- ELLs’ perception of the type of English needed took time. Many students were not aware of the potential benefits of workforce-contextualized English instruction for their current and future careers, and often requested a general English class.

- Stakeholders' perceptions of the type of English needed also took time. The program briefed stakeholders across the five campuses (including instructors, program managers, and ACLI coordinators) via web-based meetings. This allowed for synchronous and asynchronous participation, and provided multiple phases for instructor input during development. The program also provided training on assessment tools to ensure that instructors graded consistently.
- IT, healthcare, and business program managers' engagement was challenging and is still a work in progress. Program managers need to realize the pipeline of students from ESL to IT, healthcare, and business.

9. Funding and Sustainability

The programs offered by ACLI are funded by student tuition. A one-semester course costs \$475. In an effort to remain affordable, ACLI has kept tuition increases to a minimum and remains competitive with other community college-based ESL programs. In 2020, NOVA Workforce implemented discounts of between 15 to 20 percent off tuition for students who studied with ACLI in Spring and Summer 2020, and for those who attended the DiscovFREE webinars. Some student tuition was funded by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

More information on the American Culture and Language Institute is included in [Working Toward An Equitable and Prosperous Future For All: How Community Colleges and Immigrants Are Changing America](#) (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). Also available on [Amazon](#).

10. Contact Information

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