

**Promising Practices:  
Transition to U.S. Workforce**  
Pima Community College

Transition to U.S. Workforce is a program for highly skilled immigrants and refugees who are able to speak, read and write English at an intermediate level or higher and have either some college or career/professional background from their country of origin. Currently, the program is on an as-needed basis using a workshop model. Workshops focus on introducing U.S. job culture and practices for working in the U.S., including writing and practicing a job-related biography elevator speech, writing a cover letter and resume, practice interviewing, and learning about U.S. laws as they apply to employees and employers.

**Name of Community College:** Pima Community College (PCC) (<https://www.pima.edu>)

**Title of Program:** Transition to U.S. Workforce

**Type of Program:** ESL, workforce training/career development

**Primary Division involved:** Adult Basic Education for College and Career (ABECC)  
<https://www.pima.edu/community/adult-basic-education/index.html>

**Key Partners:** Pima Community College's Adult Basic Education for College and Career (ABECC) began teaching the Transition to U.S. Workforce free non-credit class in July 2016 after the program was transitioned from JobPath, a non-profit workforce development organization. Other partners have included the One Stop workforce board, public libraries, and other professional and community organizations.

**Populations Served:** Immigrants and refugees, highly-skilled, English fluency.

**Immigration status required:** Lawful immigration status.

### **1. Need for Program**

Pima County has a large immigrant and refugee population. While a significant percentage have less than a high school credential, a sizable amount come with education and/or credentials from their home countries. As these individuals settle into new communities, it can take time before they are ready to enter the local workforce, whether due to language barriers, recognition of their foreign credential, or adjustment to different cultural and workplace customs. The program aims to help accelerate immigrants' and refugees' abilities to get jobs, especially jobs in their fields, by assisting with navigation of the United States' workforce and college systems and helping them understand what is needed for their education and credentials to count in the U.S. Enrollment has been declining. Even prior to the pandemic, there was a decrease in enrollments--one possible reason may have been the strong economy for jobs, and the fact that to make ends meet, many working immigrants and refugees hold multiple jobs, making time for school challenging. Since the pandemic, the program has served very small numbers of students, perhaps due to: technology and connectivity issues, the need to continue working, or caring for family members at home.

## **2. Brief Description of Program**

Transition to U.S. Workforce is for highly skilled immigrants and refugees who are able to speak, read and write English at an intermediate level or higher, and have either some college, or career/professional background from their country of origin. Currently, the program is on an as-needed basis using a workshop model. Workshops focus on introducing U.S. job culture and practices for working in the U.S. including: writing and practicing a job-related biography elevator speech, writing a cover letter and resume, practice interviewing, and learning about U.S. laws as they apply to employees and employers.

While the class had been 2-hours face-to-face weekly, the workshops are now provided as students are referred through the volunteer coordinator. The class was taught by five trained volunteer teachers. Participants continue to have access to an Immigrant Career Navigator to design a personal plan to guide them more quickly towards career pathway jobs as well as advanced educational opportunities. In the current COVID-19 virtual setting, volunteers have transitioned the workshops to online formats.

## **3. Specific Population Served**

The class is for highly skilled immigrants who are able to speak, read and write English at an intermediate level or higher; have either some college, or career/profession background from their country of origin; and be legally authorized to work in the U.S. Since the implementation of the program at Pima Community College, all participants have also been enrolled in the adult basic education program. Arizona state law makes it illegal for adult basic education programs that receive state dollars to serve anyone who is not “lawfully present,” a change that happened almost 20 years ago. Undocumented students not eligible to be served are referred to other community non-profit organizations.

## **4. Goals and Objectives**

- Systems navigation:
  - Introduce U.S. job culture and practices to be prepared to work in the US;
  - Learn about U.S. laws as they apply to employees and employers;
  - Learn about how the education system works;
  - Learn about and practice how people find jobs, including the concept and practice of networking;
  - Learn about and initiate translation and evaluation of transcripts and/or credentialing;
  - Career/skill development for entering employment and/or post-secondary education;
  - Write and practice a job-related biography elevator speech;
  - Write a cover letter and resume;
  - Practice Interview skills; and,
  - Practice advanced English language skills.

- U.S. work experience through volunteering:
  - Learn ways to connect with the desired field;
  - Explore how to gain new U.S.-based job experience; and,
  - Explore local community career options.

Ultimately, the goal is for each student to transition from the program to post-secondary education or a job. We ensure that program advisors are connected to students during their experience in Transition to U.S. Workforce to help them should continuing their education or reskilling to a new field turn out to be the right approach. ABECC and other departments within Pima Community College work closely to provide Integrated Education and Training programs, which integrate industry-recognized training and employment skills into career-contextualized coursework and can provide additional academic support and resources to guide the transition into a college program.

Students participating in an Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (IBEST) program work closely with advisors to ensure their career goals align with the academic pathway they have chosen. The advisor guides them through the process of registration, financial aid applications, and helps them co-enroll with other community partners such as One-Stop or JobPath if needed. Other students may choose to participate in an Early IBEST program, which is like IBEST, but a shorter course. Both of these programs provide highly skilled immigrants with opportunities to continue on their career pathway with additional support from Adult Education instructors and student services.

## **5. Outcomes**

From 2013 to 2018, nearly half of the Transition to U.S. Workforce graduates moved into jobs in accounting, business, chemistry, dentistry, education, human resources, international trade, microbiology, and wastewater engineering. Others enrolled in postsecondary occupational programs, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) preparation programs, volunteering, or they continued taking English-language classes. Many students repeated sessions and some even returned as volunteers to help teach others. Participants in the Transition to U.S. Workforce program have come from countries all over the world including: Bangladesh, Chile, China, Columbia Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, Russia, Spain, Syria, Togo, and Ukraine.

Students report that interviewing skills are the most difficult and helpful parts of the curriculum. Practical and applicable awareness of the U.S. hiring laws and practices help students reframe what to share during interviews and on resumes. Students appreciate both group time and in-depth one-on-one time with a volunteer teacher. One-on-one time might include resume and cover letter editing, interview practice, support with electronic job searching, and growing awareness of professional associations and opportunities in the community (to grow awareness and ability to network).

In the past, group events included mock interviews where the class participant was interviewed by two coaches who asked the top ten most commonly asked interview questions. Feedback and suggestions were given immediately to the interviewee, who was asked to incorporate it and plan to be interviewed by another two coaches the following week.

Successes have included:

- Job acquisition in the students' field
- Job acquisition not in the field, and continued work to find connections and a career pathway within the desired field
- Acceptance to post-secondary occupational programs, such as the Health Professions Opportunity Grant program at PCC for a certificate
- Moving to TOEFL preparation class and applying to a university
- Acceptance into AmeriCorps for a year of service in education/teaching field
- Moving to more advanced college transition classes and Adult Secondary Education in preparation, if basic skills, such as reading/writing in English, are needed
- Continuing in the class to build more skills

As noted, we are seeing enrollment declines in the program, and since the pandemic hit, shifting to an as-needed model was appropriate. At this time, the students working through the volunteer-led, online workshops are individual or small-group learners.

## **6. Collaboration**

Through our Immigrant Career Navigator, we ensure students can connect with community college career centers/advising and public libraries, as well as working with the Pima County OneStop Centers to assist with job search, career counseling, and training as needed for student job seekers. Volunteer teachers have helped students connect to professional organizations and resources. For example, a student in the architecture field was supported by the teachers to connect with local architect professional organizations, as well as individual architects through networking while awaiting his transcript evaluation.

## **7. Success Factors**

As pre-pandemic enrollment declined, and since moving the entire adult education program to virtual classes, it has been a challenge to recruit and connect with the small number of highly skilled immigrant participants in our program.

Prior to the pandemic, we looked to these factors for success:

- Class location and schedule – We held Transition to U.S. Workforce classes in locations where there were high numbers of ESL classes being offered, such as PCC's Refugee Education Program. Class times were based on student availability and avoided conflicts with ESL classes that the students may attend to improve their language skills.
- Volunteers and teamwork – Volunteers have served as teachers and as one-on-one career coaches in support of students. They wrote the curriculum and continually searched for resources and job leads to share with students. Volunteer teachers as part of a dedicated team including an Immigrant Career Navigator and the Volunteer Coordinator all work together to provide wrap-around services for students. Volunteer

coaches have been oriented and trained; we seek volunteers from diverse backgrounds, including social work, education, and career development/program management. A sense of team and teamworking skills are critical in the training of volunteer teachers. Volunteers reported developing relationships with students that extended beyond the classroom. Volunteers are supported through the meetings and debriefing opportunities, a monthly volunteer newsletter, and having access to Pima Community College trainings and in-services as appropriate.

- Student success and feedback – Students have said that the mock-interview practice is very helpful. They appreciate the time dedicated to practicing and polishing interview skills. They also report appreciating the one-on-one time they received. And—many of them have gotten jobs.

## **8. Challenges**

Recruitment and marketing have been difficult. Both informing the community about the class in order to bring in qualified students as well as finding the right number for student-to-volunteer ratios have been challenging and we continue to work toward balance. It is a struggle to find a schedule that works for students and does not interfere with other ESL classes that students may benefit from.

Another challenge for advisors is continuing to stay knowledgeable and assist students in having transcripts translated and credentials evaluated. Most students are not aware of the processes or costs, nor do they understand that their experience in their home countries is potentially valuable and important to obtaining a job within their field. Teachers and the Immigrant Career Navigator help calm frustrations and fears regarding time and costs for these processes. Managing expectations can be challenging.

The requirements placed on our Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)-funded adult education program also at times create barriers to involvement, such as the requirement for standardized testing. Some potential students had English language skills already and thus did not need our ESL program embedded within the adult education division.

The skills to be an online student, along with the access to technology, are also barriers that are currently limiting student engagement program-wide, as we weather restrictions in face-to-face programming because of the pandemic. That said, simplifying to an online workshop model has created a simple mobile program that can potentially erase the barrier of distance and location. Once we return to face-to-face we will continue offering online versions, as well as face-to-face and hybrid offerings of the workshops to continue to provide access.

## **9. Funding and Sustainability**

The program has been supported through a blend of funding sources, including county-designated funds, local philanthropy, WIOA monies, and PCC funds.

More information on the Transition to U.S. Workforce 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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