

**Promising Practices:  
Refugee Education Program**  
Pima Community College

The Refugee Education Program (REP) is a non-credit program within Pima Community College's Adult Basic Education for College and Career (ABECC), which provides English Language Training (ELT) to adult students who hold refugee status. REP offers ELT classes at three levels: Adult Emergent Reader, Low Beginning, and High Beginning. The classes are held Monday through Thursday. Each class is two hours per day.

REP also provides Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL) English for Food Handler and a Citizenship class. Typically, REP classes are all face-to-face; however, during the COVID-19 pandemic, REP classes are offered virtually to students. REP offers ELT to refugees, asylees, and Special Immigrant Visa holders who have been in the U.S. less than five years, and have been resettled in Pima County.

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

**Title of Program:** Refugee Education Program

**Type of Program:** ESL program

**Primary Division involved:** Pima Community College Adult Basic Education for College and Career.

**Key Partners:** Three Refugee Resettlement Agencies in Tucson: International Rescue Committee-Tucson, Lutheran Social Services of the South West-Tucson, and Catholic Community Services.

**Populations Served:** Refugee status, Asylee, special immigrant visa holders (in the US less than 5 years and in Pima county).

**Immigration status required:** Refugees, highly skilled persons, and ESL.

**1. Need for Program**

The Refugee Education Program (REP), located in Tucson, Pima County, Arizona, was created in 1978 to support refugees in the acquisition of the English language skills necessary for obtaining and retaining employment.

Newly arrived refugees have English skills from early-emergent literacy through advanced. The primary goal of the federal refugee resettlement program is employment as soon as possible. Improvement of English language and literacy skills allows refugees to obtain and retain employment to support themselves and their families.

REP methods and standards are consistent with Teaching English as a Second Language and informed by Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults research.

In the last fiscal year, REP served over 405 refugee students. The top seven nationalities we served were Congolese, Eritrean, Sudanese, Afghan, Syrian, Burundian, and Central African Republic.

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

REP, a non-credit program within Pima Community College (PCC) Adult Basic Education for College and Career (ABECC), provides English Language Training (ELT) to adult students who hold refugee status as defined by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. REP offers ELT classes at three levels: Adult Emergent Reader, Low Beginning, and High Beginning.

The classes are held Monday through Thursday. Each class is two hours per day. REP also provides Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL) English for Food Handler and a Citizenship class. Typically, REP classes are all face-to-face; however, during the COVID-19 pandemic, REP classes are all being offered virtually to students.

REP offers ELT to refugees, asylees, and Special Immigrant Visa holders who have been in the U.S. less than five years, and have been resettled in Pima County.

## **3. Specific Population Served**

In the fiscal year 2018, Arizona was the sixth-highest destination in the nation for refugees. In Tucson, 1,148 refugees were resettled in FY 2016 and 964 in FY 2017. That number fell to 132 in the first three months of 2018, following the federal government's decision to prohibit citizens of Somalia, Sudan, and Syria—which had been the second, third, and fourth most common countries of origin for Tucson refugees—from entering the US. The Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Pakistan, Eritrea, and Afghanistan now constitute the top countries of origin of refugees to Tucson. The need remains acute.

## **4. Goals and Objectives**

The goal of REP is to provide balanced reading, writing, listening, and speaking English Language instruction to refugees, with an emphasis on workplace language and culture in the U.S. in order to help students obtain and retain employment. The program assesses and places students in early literacy to intermediate classes with a pathway to higher English Language Acquisition for Adults (ELAA) and High School Equivalency classes. REP staff meets with employers to maintain a current employment-focused curriculum. Instructors participate in a professional learning community. Students have access to college and career navigators and a Student Success Coach.

As learners in REP improve their language skills and transition into ELAA classes, they will access a wide range of programs and supports that can help them to continue on their college and career pathways. All ELAA classes provide instruction contextualized to the Health, Business/Information Technology (IT), or Applied Technology sectors, and guide students through career exploration and workforce preparation activities.

Students with more advanced English language skills may choose to participate in one of our Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (IBEST) or Early IBEST programs, which integrate industry-recognized training and employment skills into career-contextualized coursework. In IBEST programs, learners enroll in a Career and Technical Education certificate program at the college which includes additional instructional time for basic skills development and academic support. All students complete an Employment Portfolio and participate in a job fair at the end of the program. In Early IBEST, students participate in shorter courses that

integrate industry-recognized training into the basic skills classes and are accessible to students at slightly lower skills levels. Both models are particularly good options for students coming from REP, as they provide the additional support that students typically need to successfully navigate career training, college systems, and employment readiness.

## **5. Outcomes**

REP helps students improve their language skills and understand workplace culture. They learn to communicate both orally and in writing to be able to function on the job, fill out various employment forms, and navigate workplace and college systems. Thanks to the excellent coordination with employers of refugees, REP classes respond to employer and student needs, and resettlement agency case management and job developers. Prior to the pandemic, newly arrived refugees had a job placement rate of 87 percent to 90 percent between the first 60 and 90 days after arrival. That same coordination has allowed refugees easy reentry into PCC's ABECC programs as well as its certificate and degree programs.

## **6. Collaboration**

REP collaborates closely with three Refugee Resettlement Agencies (RRAs) in Tucson: International Rescue Committee-Tucson, Lutheran Social Services of the South West-Tucson, and Catholic Community Services. Since REP is a program within PCC's ABECC, it receives in-kind support from PCC in the form of building space, facilities maintenance, use of IT and classroom equipment, IT services, and books and materials.

## **7. Success Factors**

Close cooperation with RRAs has been critical to the success of the program. REP uses Salesforce as a database to track students' attendance. This information is shared with the RRAs, thereby helping to increase attendance and retention. Job development services at resettlement agencies help REP instructors select materials necessary for students to get into the job market faster and more successfully. Navigators increase students' access to academic and community resources. Student Success Coaches work with students to pave the way for academic and career success. REP also collaborates with the Youth Mentorship Program, Intensive Employment Program, and Senior Refugee Program from RRAs to help refugees successfully navigate their new life in the U.S. and honor their own cultural contribution within the Tucson community.

## **8. Challenges**

The main challenges REP is facing is a decrease in the number of refugees arriving in Tucson due to increasingly restrictive federal policies; lack of childcare, transportation, and access to technology and WiFi; and limited digital literacy skills (especially now that classes are conducted virtually due to the pandemic). To support remote learning, REP has loaned several iPads, laptops, and Hotspots to students. Pima Community College's West Campus and Downtown Campus parking lots are equipped with WiFi for student use. REP has added tutoring hours to help students with limited digital literacy skills to access online learning. REP has offered monthly bus passes to students who have 75% or more attendance.

## **9. Funding and Sustainability**

The program is funded by the Arizona Department of Economic Security, Refugee Resettlement Program. We also are open to other grants, community partners, and funding sources to support the Refugee Education Program financially and/or in-kind.

More information on the Refugee Education Program 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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