

Helping Skilled Immigrants and Refugees Transition to Jobs

Many immigrants and refugees new to the United States are highly skilled in professional and technical fields thanks to education and training they received in their countries of origin. 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 credentials, or adjustment to different cultural and workplace customs.

Pima Community College (PCC) in Tucson, Arizona, tackles this dilemma through its Transition to Jobs program. Begun in 2013 in partnership with JobPath, a local nonprofit workforce development organization, Transition to Jobs provides support for immigrant and refugee residents of Tucson and Pima County who need assistance transitioning to college-level education and job-training programs that lead to a living wage. Run by a dedicated team of experienced volunteers, the program features an Immigrant College and Career Navigator who advises students on aspects of job readiness and college knowledge that specifically apply to immigrants.

Key Goals

Systems navigation

- Introduce U.S. job culture and practices
- Learn about and practice how people find jobs
- Learn about and initiate translation of transcripts and evaluation of credentials

Career and skill development

- Write and practice a job-related “elevator speech”
- Write a cover letter and resume
- Practice interview skills and advanced English language skills
- Transition into postsecondary education or jobs

U.S. work experience through volunteering

- Learn ways to connect with the desired field
- Explore how to gain new U.S.-based job experience

TRANSITION TO JOBS HIGHLIGHTS AT A GLANCE

- Retired professionals coach students
- Small class size
- Networking focus
- Immigrant College and Career Navigator



A majority of colleges responding to CCCIE's *National Survey on Increasing Opportunities for New Americans at Community Colleges* reported a need for more training and advisory services to support career re-entry for foreign-trained professionals. PCC's Transition to Jobs program offers a low-cost and replicable approach to assisting foreign-educated immigrant students navigate college services and prepare for skilled jobs.

Program Description and Background

Pima Community College's Transition to Jobs program is housed in the Adult Basic Education for College and Career (ABECC) division. It aims to accelerate immigrants' abilities to get jobs—especially in their fields—by assisting with navigation of U.S. systems and helping immigrants understand what is needed for their education and credentials to count in the U.S. PCC's ABECC division assumed responsibility for the Transition to Jobs program from JobPath in 2016.

Transition to Jobs is a class for highly skilled adult immigrants and refugees who are able to speak, read, and write English at an intermediate level or higher. They must have a certificate or college degree from another country and be legally authorized to work in the U.S. Most participants are already PCC students.

Two Pima staff, an Immigrant College and Career Navigator and a Volunteer Coordinator, train and oversee a small team of volunteer coaches—experienced retirees who want to help immigrants and refugees transition into their careers as easily and swiftly as possible. Transition to Jobs is a free noncredit program. Participants are recruited from ESL classes and by word of mouth. Weekly two-hour classes use an easily replicable curriculum that focuses on introducing U.S. job culture. This includes writing and practicing a job-related

IMMIGRANT COLLEGE AND CAREER NAVIGATOR

The college and career navigators in PCC's ABECC division provide classroom instruction, one-on-one consultation, and referrals to support services to help students transition successfully into appropriate job training or college programs. The Immigrant Navigator helps English-language learners develop college and career readiness skills and refers students to services that will support their long-term success, such as the Transition to Jobs class or Pima County's One-Stop Career Center. The Immigrant Navigator serves as a resource on aspects of job readiness and college knowledge that are unique to or more complex for immigrants.

biographic “elevator speech;” writing a cover letter and resume; practicing interviewing; and learning about U.S. employment laws. Because of small class sizes (10-12 students and three volunteer coaches), participants receive individualized instruction and immediate feedback.

Why It Works

PCC offers four 10-week sessions (one per academic quarter) of Transition to Jobs. Classes are held on Fridays so they will not conflict with Monday-Thursday ESL classes. The college plans to offer night classes to increase accessibility for people who work during the day. Participants work with PCC staff to design a personal plan to guide them more quickly toward jobs and advanced educational opportunities.

Students report that interviewing skills are the most difficult and helpful parts of the curriculum. They appreciate group class time as well as in-depth one-on-one time with volunteer coaches, including

resume and cover-letter editing, mock interviews, support with electronic job searching, and learning about professional associations and networking opportunities in the community.

Regina Suitt, PCC's Vice President for Adult Basic Education, says, "We encourage participants to get some work experience by finding [a local organization or business] where they could be useful as a volunteer. It's a learning experience for them. We help them with the process, and they gain job experience and explore local career options."

ANA KARINA



Ana Karina was a participant in the Transition to Jobs program from July 2013 through September 2014. She had a background in microbiology from a degree and previous work experience in Mexico.

"Because of this class, I improved my skills," Ana Karina said. "Now I have more confidence to communicate in the regular day-to-day activities and at a professional level. I have learned about cultural protocols and community activities that have helped to update my knowledge. I have had all the support of volunteer coaches at all the steps of my job-seeking [process]."

After improving her English, Ana Karina worked as a University of Arizona Community Health Worker with a Hispanic Women's Research Project, then at Pima Community College as a Science Lab Specialist. After completing the Transition to Jobs program, Ana Karina entered training to become an Environmental and Health Specialist at the Pima County Health Department, where she is currently employed as a Communicable Disease Investigator.

Strategies for Success

The class's physical location is convenient to a large number of immigrants in ESL classes and is home to the Refugee Education Program. Class times are based on student focus group feedback to avoid conflicts with ESL classes that some participants attend.

Dedicated volunteers support students and serve both as classroom teachers and one-on-one career coaches. These three retirees have a wide range of experience, drawing from backgrounds in social work, education, and career development/program management, and are committed to participant success. They developed the curriculum, teach the class, and continually search for resources and job leads to share with students.

The Transition to Jobs team (PCC's Immigrant College and Career Navigator, Volunteer Coordinator, and coaches) meets at least biweekly to debrief, plan, and assess the progress of the class. The Immigrant Navigator also serves as an ABECC English language instructor. Coaches receive a monthly volunteer newsletter and have access to PCC training and in-service opportunities. Teamwork skills have been critical in the training of volunteer coaches.

Challenges

Managing students' expectations can be difficult, but the Transition to Jobs team helps calm their frustrations and fears. According to Suitt, "One challenge 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."

For many students, networking is a completely new concept. The volunteer coaches are invaluable in

helping students understand that finding a job may entail more than simply submitting an application.

Recruitment and marketing are challenging, in terms of informing the community about the class to attract qualified students, as well as finding the right number for student-to-volunteer ratios. PCC continues to work toward that balance by keeping participant numbers low and manageable.

Conclusion

Transition to Jobs is supported partly through county-designated funds (less than \$20,000 annually) and a local philanthropist who wants to help students overcome their financial obstacles. Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act funds

pay for PCC's Immigrant Navigator position and the college covers the Volunteer Coordinator's time. The retired volunteer coaches continue to offer a critical connection to student success. PCC plans to develop deeper relationships with community college advising and career centers, public libraries, and the county One-Stop Career Center to assist with job searches, career counseling, and training for student job seekers.

This is one in a series of case studies examining the findings of CCCIE's [National Survey on Increasing Opportunities for New Americans at Community Colleges](#), which identified steps to help community colleges improve immigrant student success, college completion rates, and career readiness.

PCC TRANSITION TO JOBS OUTCOMES

From 2013 to 2016

- **12** ten-week sessions
- **92** participants
- **Countries of origin:** Bangladesh, China, Colombia, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, Russia, Spain, Syria, Togo, Ukraine
- **45% got jobs in** accounting, business, chemistry, dentistry, education, human resources, international trade, microbiology, and wastewater engineering
- **Others are in** postsecondary occupational programs, TOEFL preparation classes, AmeriCorps, and adult secondary education programs

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Please visit <http://cccie.org/promising-practices> and click on Workforce Training/Career Development to download more information on Pima Community College's Transition to Jobs program. Explore additional resources, and subscribe to our mailing list at <http://cccie.org>.