

## Helping Adult English Language Learners Transition Into Other Educational Programs

### Background

Adult immigrants come to the United States with widely divergent educational backgrounds. Some learners come with graduate degrees—an engineer from the former Soviet Union, a Somali law professor from Egypt, or a pediatrician from Guatemala. Many immigrants come having had little or no access to education—young men from Bolivia hoping to do something better than farming and processing coca, young women hoping for education that will empower them and their families, or elder refugees from countries torn apart by war. Other immigrants come here with significant levels of education—a mechanic with a high school degree from Iraq, an elderly bureaucrat from China, or a high school graduate from Mexico.

These immigrants face many challenges and have differing expectations and goals. For example, the Somali law professor expected that he would be able to teach law at an American college; he was shocked to find that his credentials did not automatically allow him to be an attorney in this country. The Guatemalan pediatrician was aware of the process to become a credentialed doctor. She began by having her transcripts formally interpreted to see what university courses she would have to take, preparing for academic tests, and volunteering in healthcare settings.

Young men and women who have had limited access to education often initially work at low-paying, entry-level jobs. They often work two or more jobs, and when they have time, they take English classes. For these immigrants, *survival* English is an apt term; they need enough English to work and survive in their new lives. If learners are young enough (often 22 years old or younger), they can study all academic subjects in public high school. Often, however, teenagers and young adults have to work to help support themselves and their families. After gaining sufficient English literacy skills, they may participate in specific training or certification programs through their work or community, or they may pursue a GED (General Educational Development) credential and eventually pursue postsecondary education. Some older immigrants, especially those who may be financially supported by other members of their family, may stay in English classes for several years as they learn English and build a social network.

Among those immigrants who pursue postsecondary education in the United States are those who finished (or almost finished) high school in their native countries. For example, in his community English classes, the Iraqi mechanic had learned to be a fluent speaker and reader of English. He then attended classes to help him learn to write well enough to pursue a mechanics certificate at the local community college. Similarly, a high school graduate from Mexico City already had sufficient content knowledge in science, social science, and

mathematics. She only needed classes focused on development of vocabulary and standardized test-taking skills before she was able to study at a university level.

However, all ESL students, not just the above mentioned examples, can and should aspire to post-secondary education in the economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Raising the consciousness of all adult learners to the American possibilities of a college education is part of the transition services from ESL to post-secondary education provided by adult ESL and family literacy programs.

Various programs—from family literacy and workplace programs to community colleges and universities—serve the needs and goals of adult immigrants. The following section focuses specifically on assisting English language learners to meet their academic goals in post-secondary education.

### **Helping Facilitate the Transition to Postsecondary Education**

Unlike in years past, a high school diploma or its equivalent does not necessarily always guarantee an income above the poverty level. Through the late 1980s and 1990s, employment opportunities have decreased for those workers with less than some years of college education. GED (General Educational Development) credential holders and those with high school diplomas who fail to continue on to postsecondary education may experience a lower earning capacity (“Why Go Beyond the GED?,” 2004).

As adults attain higher levels of education, they are more likely to earn higher wages and hold greater personal and civic responsibility than those who do not (Dann-Messier & Kampits, 2004). Therefore, it is important that teachers are prepared to help English language learners who wish to pursue education beyond the basic English classroom. Teachers can do this by keeping up with requirements and programs at local public schools and colleges. Another way to help these learners is to give them a sense of what is required in taking various academic steps. For example, many students hear about the GED or the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) long before they have the English, academic, or test-taking skills to successfully master these examinations. Explaining the process and possible timelines for reaching specific levels helps learners set realistic short- and long-term goals.

Figure IV–6 provides a checklist of possible strategies for administrators and staff to consider when working with learners who wish to pursue postsecondary education.

**Figure IV–6: Transition Checklist**

1. \_\_\_ Have we established exit criteria to help us consider whether adults or families are ready to exit our program?
2. \_\_\_ Have we coordinated our efforts with outside agencies to help with non-academic needs of adult learners or families leaving our program?
3. \_\_\_ Have we coordinated our efforts with local businesses and industries to invite guest speakers, set up tours of companies, and establish job shadowing opportunities to help students select a program of study?
4. \_\_\_ Have we prepared a transition plan for each adult learner or family, including timelines for anticipated changes and outcomes?
5. \_\_\_ Have we encouraged adult learners to explore outside resources and community offerings?
6. \_\_\_ Do we help adult learners participate in internships?
7. \_\_\_ Have we incorporated world of work themes throughout our educational program?
8. \_\_\_ Do we encourage adult learners to develop personal action plans that include timetables and resources needed to obtain goals?

(Adapted from RMC Research Corporation, 2001.)

**Challenges to Effective Transitions**

While adults attaining advanced English proficiency levels in ESL classes may be considered ready to make the transition to college, they may face many academic challenges. In particular, they may need special assistance in strengthening their reading, grammar, and writing skills so they can successfully complete their college courses (Lombardo, 2004; Tacelli, 2004). They may have difficulty understanding college texts and writing college-level papers (Santos, 2004). While native English speakers have a written vocabulary of 10,000-100,000 words, English language learners will probably know only 2,000-7,000 words when they begin academic studies (Rance-Roney, 1995). Thus, specialized academic vocabulary instruction needs to be provided.

Language challenges are not the only ones that these students face. Some learners may be the first in their families to enter college and may have little understanding of college costs or how to pay for their education. They may need focused help with study skills and time management skills. They may be frustrated by institutional bureaucracy and class scheduling. Some may feel that they do not belong in college. Without assistance, these students may soon drop out (Johnson, Haas, Harrell, & Alameida, 2004).

**Features of Transition Programs**

Several successful college transition programs are featured in the February 2004, issue of *Focus on Basics*, an online publication of the National Center for the Study of Adult

Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). The main NCSALL Web site address is <http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/>. The transition programs are highlighted here as encouragement for all ESL and family literacy programs to initiate steps to develop their own transition program. The major activities of transition programs fall into three categories – awareness and orientation activities, counseling and referral services, and comprehensive programs (Alamprese, 2004).

***Awareness and Orientation Activities.*** Adult education/ESL programs often invite guest speakers to bring awareness of higher education to students. A college recruiter might make a presentation stressing the long-term financial benefits of a postsecondary education and explain matters such as costs, financial aid, and programs of study (Lombardo, 2004). The adult education practitioner might keep a supply of transition program fliers and brochures on hand and distribute them to students who have recently arrived in their classes. (See Figure IV–7). Former students might return to speak to classes, urging students to continue in postsecondary education (Dann-Messier & Kampits, 2004).

Raising awareness is often followed by a motivational field trip to a college campus for an official guided tour. Such tours serve two purposes. First, they expose students to the college culture and raise their goals to include postsecondary study (Johnson, Haas, Harrell, & Alameida, 2004). Second, they help students find their way on campus and meet with individuals they will need to consult with before and upon entering a college program. Many family literacy programs include the children of the adult students on campus tours. This helps set the expectation for the children that someday, they too will enter college (Dann-Messier & Kampits, 2004). It is important to include other family members, because they will be a major influence on whether or not adult learners persist in their program (Lieshoff, 1995).

***College Counseling and Referral Services.*** Once potential students have been oriented to college procedures and have taken tours of one or more college campuses, counseling and referral services are important to keep students' interest up and anxiety down. While still enrolled in the ESL program, students begin a one-on-one advisement process the semester before they enroll in the college. The first meeting includes a discussion of the student's goals and the development of personal action plans that include setting timelines and allocating resources needed (RMC, 2001). The student and advisor complete the initial enrollment paperwork together, and then the student takes the college entrance exam. The transition advisor in the ESL program helps with class selection and guides the student through the college registration process (Lombardo, 2004).

***Comprehensive Transitional Programs.*** In addition to providing awareness and orientation activities and offering counseling and referral services, comprehensive transition-to-college programs offer academic preparation, often with a specific focus on developing students' academic vocabularies. Programs may also offer study guides for entrance exams, writing workshops, and materials for independent study with reading and writing assignments

(Lombardo, 2004). One program adds a conversation club as a means for students to improve their oral and aural fluency (Tacelli, 2004). Upgrading math skills to include algebra may be important if it is not covered in GED preparation classes (Transitions and Math, 2004). Finally, computer skills courses are made available to ESL students through Learning Resource Centers.

Entry into college is only a beginning step for students. The ultimate goal of transition programs is to help adult learners reach a professional level of employment. Therefore, ESL programs have established contact management systems to track students who have moved on to college. Some ESL programs begin the transitioning process two and a half years before students go on to college, and some follow students throughout their college programs (Rao, 2004).

### **Maintaining Transition Services**


In order for ESL transition-to-college programs to survive, strong cooperation and support of ESL teachers is essential. Equally important is a strong collaboration between the ESL program (either community-based or within the college) and the college. ESL programs and their college partners communicate in many ways, such as:

- Exchanging program newsletters
- Presenting sessions at each other's in-service trainings for instructors
- Holding one-on-one conversations during site visits with various department officers
- Becoming familiar with the content of each other's courses
- Tracking changes in personnel
- Keeping each other informed about program activities and concerns (Lombardo, 2004).


### **Conclusion**

Establishing and maintaining successful transitions from ESL to college programs is hard work and can be time consuming. Relationships with collaborators must be initiated and sustained, and students' progress must be monitored. A system of evaluation and assessment of the transition program is necessary for improvement and sustainability (Dann-Messier & Kampits, 2004). However, the rewards are promising. As English language learners enter college better prepared to handle the social and academic challenges, fewer will drop out or withdraw, and more will succeed.

Figure IV-7: Sample Recruitment Flyer



**University of Altagay**  
and  
**Canexi Adult Education Programs**  
Present a joint program




## College 101 – Introduction to College

**Prepare for your college career with confidence while still participating in your adult education/ESL program**

- Tour the campus
- Meet and be advised by key staff
  - ⇒ Financial Aid
  - ⇒ Registration & Admissions
  - ⇒ Library & Computer Labs
  - ⇒ Career Counseling Center

**College 101 is designed specifically for adult English language learners. You will receive services designed for your particular needs. Learn:**

- How college courses are structured
- How to apply for financial aid
- How to take care of personal needs




*"I never dreamed I would attend college. Now I feel like I belong here, and I will succeed!"*

**College 101 Program includes**

- Workshops on study skills
- Flexible advising
- Assignment of a student mentor
- Access to one-on-one tutoring
- Special courses to prepare you for college entry

**Who is eligible?**

- Placement in advanced level ESL
- Near attainment or completed GED
- Evidence of successful achievement on TABE



*"I had so many reasons not to attend. This program helped me figure out solutions to many of my problems."*

**For more information**

- Visit [www.ual.edu/college\\_101](http://www.ual.edu/college_101)
- Call Amy Tan at (502) 123-1234
- E-mail [amy.tan@ual.edu](mailto:amy.tan@ual.edu)

(Adapted from University of Wisconsin—River Falls, 2004)

### Resources for Transition to College

- Beyond the GED: Making Conscious Choices about the GED and Your Future is a NCSALL publication providing lesson plans and materials for the GED classroom. Go to [http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/teach/beyond\\_ged.pdf](http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/teach/beyond_ged.pdf)
- Massachusetts' Curriculum Frameworks on page 81 provides a section on math needed for postsecondary education. Go to [www.doe.mass.edu/acls/frameworks/mathnum.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/acls/frameworks/mathnum.pdf)
- LINCS Health and Literacy Special Collection provides information for students interested in transitioning into a health career. Go to [www.worlded.org/us/health/lincs](http://www.worlded.org/us/health/lincs)
- LINCS Science & Numeracy Special Collection provides drill and practice on math skills. Go to <http://literacynet.org/sciencelincs> and click on A+Math. For science related links, click on Explore Science.
- "Getting Through College: Voices of Low-Income and Minority Students in New England" offers information on financial aid. Go to [www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov) (ERIC No. ED451770).
- Join the National ABE-to-College Transition Network beginning in June, 2004. This network will support ABE staff, programs, and states in establishing and strengthening ABE-to-college transition services through technical assistance, professional development, collegial sharing, and advocacy. Join the network by going to [www.collegetransition.org](http://www.collegetransition.org)

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