

Providing Immigrants A Springboard into the Workforce

Portland Community College (PCC), in Portland, Oregon, is a state leader in developing and implementing integrated education and training programs. The college's innovative **Adult Basic Skills (ABS) Career Pathways** program offers non-native English speakers, immigrants, GED students, and developmental education students an accelerated path to build their academic, language, and job skills concurrently. Students take a contextualized academic skill-building support course in tandem with their college classes to earn a Career Pathways credential, usually in just 6 to 9 months. ABS Career Pathways are part of PCC's broader Career Pathways program featuring 50 Career Pathways and leading to over 25 degrees. The White House has recognized **PCC Career Pathways** as one of the nation's top training models for student success and workforce development.

The importance of identifying career pathways for immigrants and English-language learners was a key finding from CCCIE's **National Survey on Increasing Opportunities for New Americans**. CCCIE member colleges are looking for ways to improve their capacity to prepare immigrant students to meet local workforce requirements and strengthen job-related training and support. Portland Community College's experience offers other colleges a look at how to structure a model program.

Key Goals of ABS Career Pathways:

- Offer accelerated models that increase students' college completion, skill development, and career options
- Increase equity, access, and diversity in the program
- Increase economic mobility for students of color, low-income and underprepared students, non-native English speakers/ immigrants and their children



ABS Career Pathways Highlights at a Glance

- Alignment with local employers' needs
- Designated career coaches
- Quarterly statewide best-practices meetings
- Evolving learning communities and peer mentoring



Program Description and Background

The college has provided vocational English as a second language (VESL) trainings in the Portland metro area since 2001. Until 2009, these VESL Career Pathways were a noncredit integrated education and skills training model that prepared students for immediate entry into employment. In an effort to increase opportunities for immigrants and non-native English speakers to progress in their career pathways, with multiple options to enter and exit college, the noncredit options were transformed into credit ABS Career Pathways.

PCC's ABS Career Pathways offer students short-term career pathways in accounting, computer application systems, customer service, and other fields that prepare them for employment in high-growth, high-demand industry sectors while also providing a steppingstone to an associate degree, bachelor's degree, and beyond. They also increase student access, because ABS Career Pathways certificates are eligible for financial aid when they are part of a student's longer career pathway and intent to complete a one-year certificate or an associate degree.

PCC's ABS Career Pathways are specifically designed to meet the needs of non-native English speakers who may have a breadth of education and experience in their native country, but need to develop their English communication skills, earn industry-relevant credentials, and/or learn how to apply their skills and knowledge within the context of the local workforce and community. They allow students to take credit career and technical education (CTE) courses without having to

meet the college's reading and writing prerequisites because they are simultaneously enrolled in a contextualized remediation course. It relieves students of the burden of having to complete courses in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), adult basic education, or developmental education prior to beginning their Career Pathways program—a process that can be expensive and time consuming, placing students at greater risk of dropping out. This model helps students simultaneously master employer-requested skills and contextualized academic content in a timely and efficient way, while also earning an industry-recognized college certificate.



Fodé

Many years ago, Fodé had escaped Liberia as a refugee after his father was killed in a civil war. He came to the U.S. for a better life, but could only find work as a deli clerk—until he was able to gain the trade skills he needed from PCC to go after his dream job as an electrician. Fodé tested into PCC's broader Career Pathways program, which supports immigrants at all levels of English communication skills and helps them translate their skills and expertise into U.S. careers quickly. [Read more.](#)

Working with Employers

The college aligns its efforts with the local workforce board and uses data from the state employment department to identify trends in occupations and industries. It looks at current job opportunities and invites employers to discuss what is needed to develop new training programs. PCC convenes a range of industry partners (e.g., healthcare employers such as hospitals, county health department,



Batula

A refugee from Somalia, Batula immigrated to the U.S. at age 15, learning to read and accessing formalized education for the first time. She knew she needed to increase her computer and office skills to get the job she wanted, so she enrolled in the [ABS Computer Applications and Office Systems Career Pathways](#) program. She received funding from several sources to complete her certificate including [Training Unemployment Insurance](#), [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\)](#), and a stipend from Bank of America. After successfully completing the Basic Computer Career Pathways certificate with a 3.81 GPA and a coveted internship, Batula continued her college education. She excelled in additional Computer Applications classes at PCC and completed her one-year certificate and Associates degree. She has transferred to a university, where she is pursuing her Bachelors in Social Work.

small clinics, and nonprofit organizations) to consider current workforce needs and skills gaps, as well as career progression within the industry to assist incumbent workers.

PCC Associate Vice President for Workforce Development and Community Education Marc Goldberg says, “Local employers across different industry sectors in Portland have expressed an interest in hiring diverse applicants. This is most apparent in the healthcare field, where employers see the strong value of having multilingual and multicultural staff. We have heard from employers in other sectors the strong work ethic that immigrants bring to the workplace.”

Both Title I and Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) include an emphasis on providing education and training for individuals with limited English proficiency so that they can move into postsecondary education and jobs. This has opened up more dialogue at PCC to align with WIOA outcomes across the college and ensure that ABS Career Pathways are a viable option for students. Goldberg notes, “WIOA reinforces that our [Career Pathways] work is solid, to move lower-skilled people into middle-skill jobs and train them up.”

Strategies for Success

Academic professionals in PCC’s Career Pathways program serve as career coaches to ABS Career Pathways students, especially those who are non-native English speakers. They provide critical wrap-around support including intentional outreach, individualized assessment, assistance navigating college systems, educational planning, career

advising, job- and soft-skill development, advocacy with faculty and staff, and individualized support in finding a job and accessing WIOA services. Coaches must be culturally competent and understand what immigrant students need to navigate the college.

According to Career Pathways Director Kate Kinder, “Our Career Coaches advocate on the students’ behalf, since many students may not be comfortable with self-promotion and don’t always have access to a professional network in the field they are trying to enter. [A PCC student] with a bachelor’s degree from her home country had great accounting skills, but no experience in the States. She got interviews but people weren’t hiring her. So we started referring her to some of our employer partners who would be more apt to see the breadth of her skills and understand that developing English communication skills is a process. Our staff provided more coaching for the student on how to market herself to potential employers and she got a job. Years later, the student has advanced at her workplace, and the employer has stated she is one of the best employees he has ever hired.”

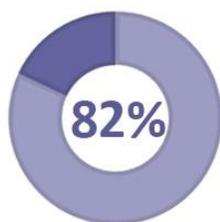
Another strategy that indirectly benefits PCC students is the quarterly convening of Career Pathways staff from across the state. Supported by Oregon’s state Career Pathways director, community college staff share best practices, along with their challenges and failures, and learn from outside speakers and national research.

A Transformative Effect

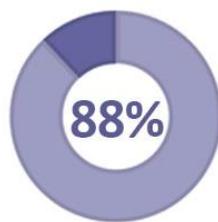
PCC’s model has a transformative effect on students. Not only do students build relevant academic, communication, and technical job skills, but the program also creates a natural learning community where students from very different backgrounds can learn from and mentor one another. The intercultural communication and learning that occurs benefits the college community, but also affects the workforce by skilling up individuals who are prepared for the jobs and ready to work on diverse teams. As Kinder says, “If conflicts arise due to differences in culture or stereotypes, students experience them in the classroom first. They learn to resolve their differences, challenge their assumptions, and have difficult conversations in a safe learning environment. These critical skills translate to any workplace.”

PCC ABS CAREER PATHWAY OUTCOMES

From 2009 to 2015,



of students completed their Career Pathways certificate



of students continued their college education and/or went to work



3.61

average GPA

Challenges

Both ABS and CTE faculty have expressed the need to be flexible with curriculum. While the syllabus provides an essential framework, specific subject matter or skill areas may require more or less time for students to master the content. Faculty have remarked that, while the learning outcome goals are the same for the ABS students, instructors may need to take different routes and approaches to ensure all students are succeeding. The use of aligned teaching teams (e.g., paired HVAC and ESOL instructors) can result in deeper, more contextualized learning for students.

Like other Oregon community colleges, PCC's Career Pathways program was able to expand their offerings and ABS Career Pathways with [Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training \(TAACCCT-1\)](#) funding from the U.S. Department of Labor. Finding financial resources to keep services at current levels is a continuing challenge. Other sources of funding include state and local foundation grants, as well as college support. The college's CTE and ABS departments cover the costs for two Career Pathways cohorts annually, while PCC general funds, grants,

state funding, and private foundation support provides career coaching and industry connections.

There are also perception issues to overcome, with some leaders in the state seeing the model as too expensive or a "boutique" approach that is not scalable, despite some research demonstrating the long-term cost savings and return on investment.

Conclusion

PCC's approach of connecting high-quality training, college certificates, industry-recognized credentials, student support services, industry demand, and multiple entry and exit points into college sets up immigrant students for success, builds their technical and soft skills, and provides a springboard into the workforce with clear paths for career and educational advancement over time.

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.

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Please visit CCCIE's [Promising Practices webpage](#) to download more information on Portland Community College's ABS Career Pathways program. Explore additional resources, and subscribe to our mailing list at <http://cccie.org>.