

Training Immigrants in the Culture and Language of the Workplace

When immigrants arrive in the U.S. and look for work, they must learn new culture and workplace norms. Many also need assistance with their language skills. Northern Virginia Community College's Office of Workforce Development—known as NOVA Workforce—supports these students, as well as international students, through its American Culture and Language Institute (ACLI).

In an effort to better serve the educational and career needs of NOVA's immigrant students, ACLI is implementing a new Part-Time English as a Second Language (ESL) Program called Career Readiness, which will offer workforce-contextualized English classes for students at high-beginning through intermediate ESL levels. Subject matter experts from NOVA's Workforce Credentials program—a state grant program for Virginia residents in industry-specific certification courses—will interact with ESL students through guest lectures, interviews, and noncredit Workforce Credentials classes.

The intent of the new effort is to assist in transitioning Part-Time Program students from contextualized ESL to sector-specific content instruction. Optional Support ESL classes such as grammar, pronunciation, and a learning lab provide supplementary, “soft skill” instruction to promote students' persistence and prepare them for the workforce.

ACLI also offers tailored workplace training in collaboration with local businesses to develop their employees' language skills and improve productivity. These services are provided at NOVA campuses and at the workplace. In both the Part-Time ESL and ESL for the Workplace programs, ACLI staff have accelerated the use of data to evaluate, redesign, and tailor curriculum to improve training and target student and employer needs more effectively.

ACLI Highlights at a Glance

- Pathways from part-time ESL to workforce credentials
- Focus on cultural differences and acclimation
- Customized workplace training
- Post-course student surveys that inform program redesign

Key Goals

- Prepare students for successful transition into an associate degree or a workforce credential program
- Develop students' workforce and communication skills to become productive community members
- Prepare students to move from lower- to higher-paying jobs

Program Description and Background

ACLI evolved out of noncredit ESL programs that NOVA established in the mid-1980s. These programs were operated independently at different campuses until 2009, when the college established a task force to coordinate all ESL programs and create a core set of noncredit courses to be taught on five NOVA campuses.

ACLI comprises an Intensive English Program and a Part-Time Program that provide instruction in the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). ACLI also offers specialty courses in test preparation and current events for higher-level students. The Intensive English Program prepares local immigrant residents (long-time and recent arrivals) and international students for college-level classes and associate degrees. The Part-Time Program prepares local students for future careers and improves their social skills in English.

ACLI has served more than 32,000 students since 2009. The average ACLI student spends two semesters in the program. As of spring 2017, the majority of ACLI's 1,274 students

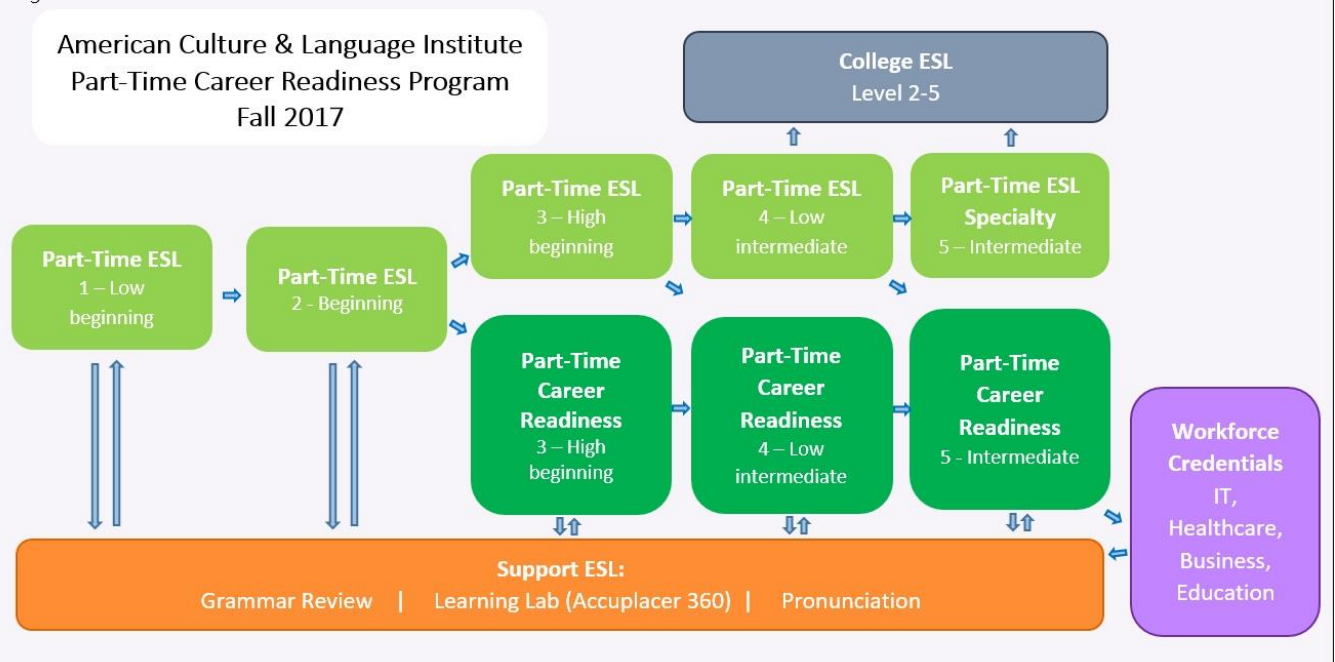
were local residents who emigrated from more than 75 countries. International F-1 visa students represented 27 percent of ACLI participants. Approximately 41 percent of ACLI students are enrolled full-time and are high school graduates seeking associate degrees from NOVA. The other 59 percent are enrolled part-time and are seeking to improve their workplace English skills or enter workforce credential programs.

Data-driven Program Design

ACLI staff and administrators use the results of regularly administered student surveys to evaluate program outcomes and guide any program changes. This includes the redesign of the Part-Time Program in 2017, which now includes pathways between part-time ESL and workforce credential programs.

A key data point that influenced the redesign came from survey questions asking students about their current employment and their desired future employment. Survey results in both fall 2016 and spring 2017 showed a distinct trend for students currently employed in low-paying jobs (e.g., childcare, food service) wanting to move into high-paying, high-demand jobs (e.g., IT, healthcare, business).

Figure 1



Cynthia Hatch, the ESL & TESOL Program Developer and Instructional Designer for ACLI, said that, after reviewing the survey data and in response to employer needs, it was clear “there was a definite pathway from our ESL programs into our workforce programs. It’s incumbent upon us to capitalize on that interest and help students get where they want to go.”

Figure 1 illustrates the multiple entry and exit points for ACLI students in the redesigned Part-Time Program. Each of the five levels takes approximately 100 hours to complete during an academic year. Students may take Part-Time ESL classes at any of five different skill levels (low-beginning to intermediate) and either continue to College ESL or shift into Career Readiness classes (starting at the high-beginning level, i.e., level 3), which lead to Workforce Credentials courses in education, IT, healthcare, and business/management. Career Readiness classes provide a “reality check” so that students can be confident about their eventual Workforce Credentials choices.

Support ESL classes for ACLI students usually begin two weeks after the Part-Time ESL and Career Readiness classes, and last for eight weeks. Support ESL classes take 20 hours to complete.

Challenges

The largest challenge facing international and immigrant students is the fact that ACLI is a self-funded program, funded through student tuition. These students cannot use Pell Grants or other financial aid to pay for ACLI ESL classes. In an effort to remain affordable, ACLI has kept tuition increases to a minimum and remains competitive with other community college-based ESL programs. However, if NOVA could secure grant funding for ESL students—which it seeks occasionally—it

ACLI Data Collection

NOVA conducts midterm, end-of-term, and annual surveys of current and former ACLI students. Surveys were initially conducted in-person on paper, while later surveys were conducted online via an email link sent to students and facilitated by ESL instructors.

Surveys of 583 current and former students in June 2016 and May 2017 indicated:

- 83% of ACLI students took classes to improve their English skills
- 82% said ACLI classes “very much” or “somewhat” helped them meet their goals
- 78% were “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with their experience at ACLI
- 70% of students were working either full- or part-time after ACLI
- 66% were in their 20s and 60% in their first year living in the U.S. when they were in ACLI

In response to an additional question on the May 2017 survey, 64 students reported their current occupations and future career aspirations:

- 38% were employed in low-paying jobs (customer service, childcare, or food service) and 18% were employed in high-paying jobs (business, IT, healthcare, or education)
- Only 6% wanted to continue working in customer service, childcare, or food service in the next 5 years, while 71% wanted to have jobs in business, IT, healthcare, or education in the next 5 years

would improve student outcomes by allowing the continuation of their studies.

A secondary challenge facing international and resident students at NOVA is the perceived duplication of ESL programs at the college. While ACLI acts as a feeder program into College ESL, a lack of sequential-level identification across both programs often confuses prospective students. NOVA has

expedited the transition between the two programs through the use of a Bridge Writing Exam. ACLI also implemented a college-wide placement test of writing, speaking, and listening, and college-wide objective statements for each ACLI level.

Margo



Marghalai (Margo) emigrated from her native Afghanistan in 1991 and enrolled in English classes at NOVA in 2004. She came to the United States in search of the American Dream and was certain she needed to pursue English studies to get where she wanted to be.

"After coming to the U.S., I was very determined to become successful and decided to open my own daycare business. I knew I had to improve my English in order to run my business. NOVA's ESL program was essential to my success by giving me the ability to properly communicate with the children and families I work with. I have been able to provide for my family with my business and have successfully developed lasting relationships with my clients. I hope to soon continue and further my education at NOVA."

Strategies for Success:

Why It Works

Staffing: NOVA has created a new centralized staff position—ESL & TESOL Program Developer and Instructional Designer Cynthia Hatch—to evaluate and lead the Career Readiness redesign of ACLI ESL programs across five campuses. Hatch is also responsible for leading a college-wide curriculum review team.

Assessment: ACLI staff conducts thorough needs assessments via pre and post tests. They conduct a post-program assessment involving all stakeholders, such as students, instructors, and contract employers.

Professional Development: NOVA provides its ACLI instructors with ongoing professional development via annual Teacher Appreciation Days—mini-conferences with teacher trainers from NOVA Workforce's TESOL Certificate Program, instructors, and guest speakers.

Partnerships: Internal partnerships across NOVA's campuses are critical to ACLI's success, and there are several efforts to improve the transition of ACLI students into college-level programs. Staff in the for-credit College ESL program help ACLI students advance by evaluating exit-level Intensive English Program students' readiness to enter the College ESL program, via the Accuplacer Exam and a Bridge Writing Exam. NOVA Workforce's Student Success Advisors provide career and college advising for ACLI students interested in pursuing credit or noncredit workforce credential programs.

Finally, also important to ACLI's success is the number of external partners—such as local literacy councils, public schools, and nonprofit organizations—that regularly refer ESL students to ACLI to continue to study English or enter College ESL. International entities such as the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission

and universities in Turkey and Brazil have provided funding for student scholarships and faculty professional development.

Steven B. Partridge, NOVA Workforce vice president, noted, “The life cycle of educational programs is getting shorter; therefore educational institutions must constantly redesign our offerings to meet the needs of today’s diverse workforce. To ensure we develop the skills demanded by employers, we must be intentional in creating meaningful training for students and employers, while also ensuring any training we offer is both stackable and has a clear path to real-world employment

opportunities. With NOVA Workforce’s Career Readiness program, for the first time, English-language learners can transition from contextualized ESL instruction to Workforce Credentials programs, thereby providing students with a pathway to earn credentials in Northern Virginia’s high-demand sectors.”

This is the last 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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