

# The Advanced ESL Transfer Academy

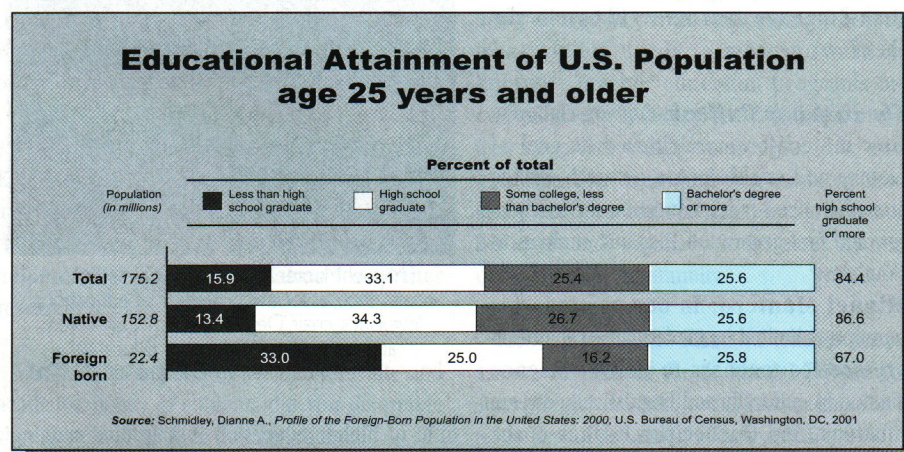
by Sheyla Castillo and Anthony E. Beebe

English as a Second Language (ESL) classes represent the largest component of adult education. Nationally, about 2 million students are in ESL classes, representing 40 percent of adult education enrollments. Many times, the waiting lists for admission into ESL classes exceed the numbers enrolled.

A unique aspect of adult education is that virtually all ESL students are immigrants. Like our ancestors, these immigrants came from around the world to start a new life in the United States. They join us with great diversity, including the full range of literacy and educational levels.

Over the years, the primary focus of ESL instruction has been educating students who are illiterate or undereducated in any language. In San Diego, Calif., one of the largest border cities, this type of instruction is essential for developing the local work force and integrating immigrants into society as productive citizens.

The educational attainment of the U.S. population, aged 25 years and older, for the year 2000 is presented in Figure 1. As the figure indicates, the percentage of foreign-born citizens who have less than a high school education is 33 percent, compared to 13.4 percent for native-born.



The need for ESL instruction for undereducated immigrants is clear and convincing. However, there is a different need for educated immigrants. These students come to us highly literate in their own language and are educated in their native country at the bachelor's, master's, or doctorate levels.

As can also be seen in Figure 1, the percentage of foreign-born citizens with bachelor's degrees or higher is 25.8 percent. Interestingly, this is slightly higher than U.S. native-born citizens with higher education degrees.

The point here is that there is a higher-level ESL student group with a different background and educational need than limited-literacy ESL students. This is particularly true given the body of evidence showing a direct correlation between prior educational attainment and English-language acquisition. There is also a need for a different kind of student services for these students.

San Diego Continuing Education has recognized this and has developed an Advanced ESL Transfer Academy specifically oriented to prior literate ESL students. The academy is an individualized student services program designed to promote the education and employment transition of advanced ESL students. To enter the program, students must have

at least a bachelor's degree from another country.

The range of students who have entered the program has been astonishing and includes lawyers, architects, nurses, medical doctors, chemists and nutritionists. What these students have in common is that they cannot speak English but, other than that, they bring tremendous experience, knowledge and professionalism.

The Advanced ESL Transfer Academy is a series of eight three-hour workshops to help these professionals learn about the U.S. educa-

tion system, the opportunities available to them in colleges and graduate schools and job prospects. Through the academy, students define their goals and outline steps necessary to achieve these goals. In the process, they learn the proper format for creating a résumé, writing an application essay, searching and interviewing for jobs, networking, and so on. They also learn what is expected of them as students or working professionals. They learn about local resources that prepare them for further progress, including preparation for examinations (e.g., TOEFL, GRE, and CBEST) and how to have their foreign degrees evaluated for graduate studies in the U.S.

Students leave the workshop series with an educational/work force plan that outlines the steps to achieving their goals. All of the information necessary to fulfill their goals is compiled in a resource notebook that they can use immediately and in the future, keeping them on track.

Although the pragmatic information in the program is substantial, one of the most valuable aspects of the Advanced ESL Transfer Academy program is intangible — learning about the U.S. culture. Students work in interactive small groups of 10 to share their own beliefs. At the same time, they learn about culturally related American concepts.

Because of their educational level, the academy students are quickly empowered by their understanding of the U.S. system. This knowledge, along with the cohort experience and peer and counselor support, facilitates the integration of these students into the San Diego community, greatly enriching our work force and region.

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## Sample Academy Successes

- A nutritionist from México obtained a position at a local California State University as a community health educator.
- A Mexican accountant obtained his CPA credential.
- A Peruvian lawyer who was in the United States for three months obtained a position as an instructor in Adult Education.
- A Brazilian architect and a Brazilian accountant who met in the Academy started their own small business in architectural design.