

TICKET TO A DREAM

Adult schools set foreign-born students on the path to citizenship

By Gail Allyn Short

Yesenia Quintanilla arrived in the United States for the first time from her native El Salvador in 1989 to live with her mother in Los Angeles. A decade later, she enrolled at Fresno Adult School to earn her high school diploma. The mother of two continued to pursue her education by enrolling in the school's English as a Second Language program.

"That's when one of the office assistants told me that I could get my citizenship, too," she says.

Fresno Adult School offers a citizenship course for anyone interested in becoming a U.S. citizen.

Quintanilla was curious. She remembered seeing long lines of people waiting to cast their ballots in Los Angeles, and she longed to be a voter like them.

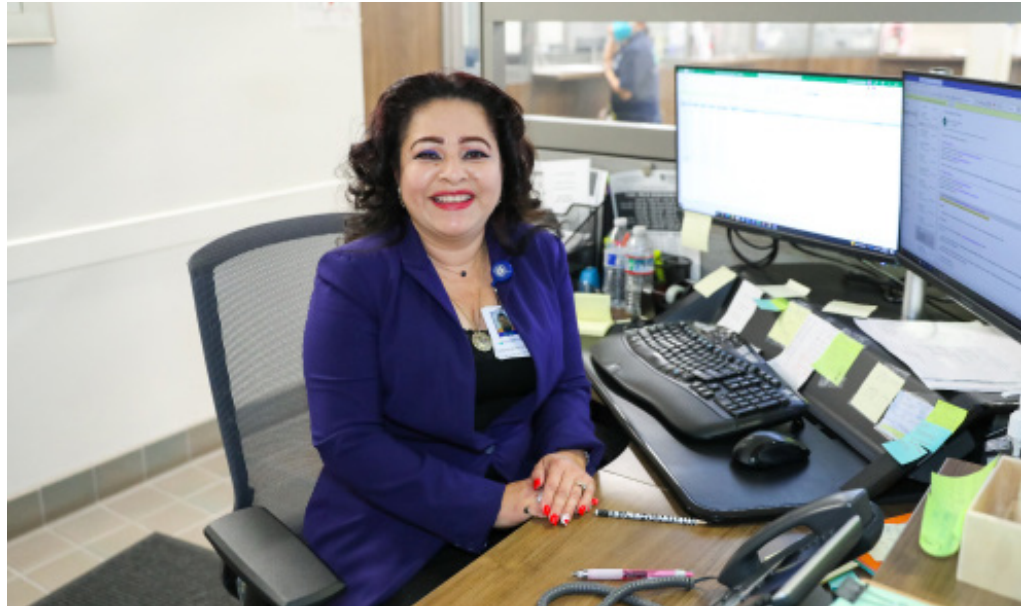
"She told me what the next steps were to become a voter, so I said, 'Send me information about the class,'" Quintanilla recalls.

Fresno Adult School's citizenship course gives foreign-born individuals like Quintanilla an overview of American government and U.S. history. They also learn how to complete the 20-page application for citizenship and about the citizenship test and naturalization interview administered by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Like the Fresno program, Clovis Adult School in Clovis also offers a free, joint ESL-citizenship program.

Joann Beshansky, department chairwoman of the Clovis Adult School ESL Citizenship program, says that among the topics she covers is the election process.

"I help them understand that once you become a citizen, if you don't vote, you're violating your rights and your



Yesenia Quintanilla, a native of El Salvador, became a naturalized U.S. citizen, thanks to Fresno Adult School helping her on the path to citizenship. She now works at the adult school. Photo by Claire Takahashi.

responsibility to the country," she says. "It doesn't matter who you vote for. You vote to have your voice heard."

Beshansky also teaches students how to memorize key dates and facts in American history and the U.S. government.

"And I always tell them, now you can help your children with their social studies lessons," she adds. "That's important because it empowers them."

Quintanilla says she frequently discussed what she learned in class with her children.

"I taught my son, and we would read together. Now, he knows about history," she says.

Beshansky, a naturalized citizen since 2008 from the Philippines, says she often shares her personal experiences about the naturalization process. She even plays "interviewer" to help her students practice for their interview.

For three years, Quintanilla attended the citizenship class at her own pace, and even

became a volunteer teaching assistant and translator.

Then in 2018, Quintanilla realized her dream to become a naturalized U.S. citizen. She now works in the Fresno Adult School's front office.

"If I hadn't had this class, I wouldn't have passed that test because it's hard," she says. "Being a citizen, you can become anything. It can help you to get a better job and more opportunities so you can help your family. It gives you a ticket to your dreams."



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FINDING A PATHWAY

Adult schools give students a way to pursue healthcare careers

By Gail Allyn Short

When Shireen Franco was a freshman at California State University, Fresno, she intended to become a teacher. But after working with children at a summer job, she began having doubts.

“I came to realize that teaching wasn’t the best career choice for me,” Franco says.

“I had nurses in my family. My grandma was a nurse. My stepdad is a nurse,” she says. “So that’s when I thought about pursuing nursing.”

Her family, however, worried about the tuition. What if she spent money at a four-year university to major in nursing only to discover she did not like that profession either?

So Franco enrolled in Fresno Adult School to become a certified nursing assistant (CNA) through the school’s Career Technical Education (CTE) program.

“I decided to go that route to make sure I enjoyed it and that nursing was something that I’d want to pursue,” she says.

Fresno Adult School is part of the Fresno Unified School District, which is a member of the State Center Adult Education Consortium.

Franco credits her instructors at Fresno Adult School for teaching her the fundamentals of patient care.

“They taught us lifting techniques, and how to move patients properly,” she says. “We learned there were certain ways we had to do the beds. It was all very detailed oriented.”

In just four months, Franco completed the CNA program and, with her certificate in hand, she enrolled in Fresno Adult School’s licensed vocational nursing (LVN) degree program.



Yosemite Adult School vocational students get some hands-on experience when pursuing healthcare careers. Besides learning skills, students also get the benefit of industry connections when it comes time to get a job. Photo courtesy of Tony Misner.

“In fact, I started working on my LVN prerequisites while I was still in the CNA program,” says Franco. “That way, as soon as I finished, I was able to shoot right into the LVN program without too much of a delay. The teachers were amazing, and I felt supported by them.”

Franco says she is especially appreciative that the cost of tuition for the LVN program was so affordable.

In just a year, Franco completed the LVN program and landed a job as a school nurse for the Fresno Unified School District.

While working, Franco went on to earn a registered nursing degree at Fresno City College and then a bachelor’s in nursing from Fresno Pacific University.

Today, she is a pre- and post-operative nurse at a local surgery center. She credits Fresno Adult School with giving her the skills she needed early on to work as an LVN and pursue higher education.

“I felt really prepared and confident in what I was doing,” she says. “I’m really glad about the route I took. It was the right thing for me.”



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Working Partnership: Workforce development and adult schools team up to promote job readiness

by Gail Allyn Short

Today, many job sectors are experiencing worker shortages. But filling those open positions means workers must have the education needed to qualify for those jobs.

In fact, two-thirds of jobs in the next 10 to 20 years will require some level of post-secondary training, says Tracie Scott-Contreras, Executive Director of the Workforce Development Board of Madera County.

The Workforce Development Board works with community partners to make sure local businesses have the talent pipeline to meet their needs now and in the future.

Among those partners are adult schools. They offer high school diploma and equivalency programs, career tech programs, certifications and more so graduates can successfully enter the job market.

“There are certain jobs that have huge hiring needs,” says Scott-Contreras. “Healthcare is certainly one of those. Anything in transportation and logistics or supply chain-related (jobs) are in demand, too. Hospitality and tourism-related businesses are struggling.”

The board partners specifically with adult schools and community colleges to provide affordable ways for people to train for good-paying, in-demand jobs in areas such as agriculture – including ag-tech and ag business – as well as transportation and logistics, advanced manufacturing, healthcare, retail, hospitality and tourism, and the construction trades.

“Regionally, we’re also involved in training for green energy careers and are beginning to look at occupations in water systems,” she says.



Tracie Scott-Contreras, Executive Director of the Workforce Development Board of Madera County, sees a huge need for more skilled workers. Photo by Claire Takahashi

“Many adult schools offer unique and targeted vocational and career tech education opportunities and most of them come at little or no cost to the students,” she adds.

high school diploma and high school equivalency programs, so they can qualify for jobs requiring that level of education.

“The third way that we work with adult schools is to make sure that we have strong referral processes in place for individuals who are completing programs and are ready to move into post-secondary training, vocational training, an apprenticeship or directly into the labor market,” Scott-Contreras says.

Additionally, transition specialists with the State Center Adult Education Consortium are available to help adult school graduates move on to the next step in their education or training.

“Adult schools are a wonderful resource regardless of whether you’re looking for educational assistance, job-seeking assistance or skills development,” she says. “So it’s important that people know that these programs are here for the community.”

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Tracie Scott-Contreras
Executive Director, Workforce Development Board of Madera County

The board works with adult schools in three primary areas: First, it refers English-language learners to adult schools for ESL instruction, so they will be more marketable and competitive in the labor market, she says.

Second, it connects individuals lacking a high school diploma to the adult schools’



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Keeping Up With the Times: Digital literacy skills can make all the difference for job seekers

by Anne Stokes

In today's labor market, computer skills are king. And while many assume it's only older job seekers who need to update their marketable skills, adult schools are also a welcoming place for younger workers looking to upgrade their career options.

"Many people are coming into my technology class in their 20s or 30s and they've never had a typing class," says Leroy Grider, digital literacy instructor at Fresno Adult School. "Even though they're very familiar with what they perceive to be technology, they really haven't done anything in the office technology space."

Grider points out that many employers require familiarity with software programs as well as 40- to 50-word per minute typing speeds, skills not necessarily used on social media, smartphones and tablets where many younger people get their digital experience.

In order to prepare students for the digital-savvy job market that awaits them, adult education offers a variety of professional certificates to help them land the job they want – including Microsoft Office and Google suites, project management programs such as Trello, and even introductory courses in Sequel and Lean Sigma Six – all for low or no cost.

"Students might be in service work and wanting to upgrade to something with fewer weekends and nights, something that's more 9-to-5," Grider says. "They know they need to do something to break out of a service industry type of job, but they can't quit their job to do that. We offer time shifting so they can work independently when they have the time."

Not only do digital literacy classes train students in the office tools and programs needed to advance or upgrade their careers, they also give students the opportunity to display those skills in their job search.



Digital literacy teacher Leroy Grider works with a student at Fresno Adult School. PHOTO BY Claire Takahashi

"Now's the time to get outside your comfort zone and get the skills you need to be successful."

Leroy Grider
Digital literacy teacher, Fresno Adult School

"We work on a comprehensive portfolio for each student so they have a master application, they have a resume, they have a cover letter prepared," Grider says. "Recently this year, we've added video elevator pitch. We use a free online application called Sendspark and students can video tape themselves talking about why they should get the job with a company and what they bring to the table."

Grider notes that now is a good time for those looking to change careers as most

companies are clamoring for employees due to the pandemic and the "great resignation."

"Now's the time to get outside your comfort zone and get the skills you need to be successful," he says.



For more information, on available digital literacy classes, visit www.scaeclearns.org to find a program close to you and visit www.statecenteraec.org