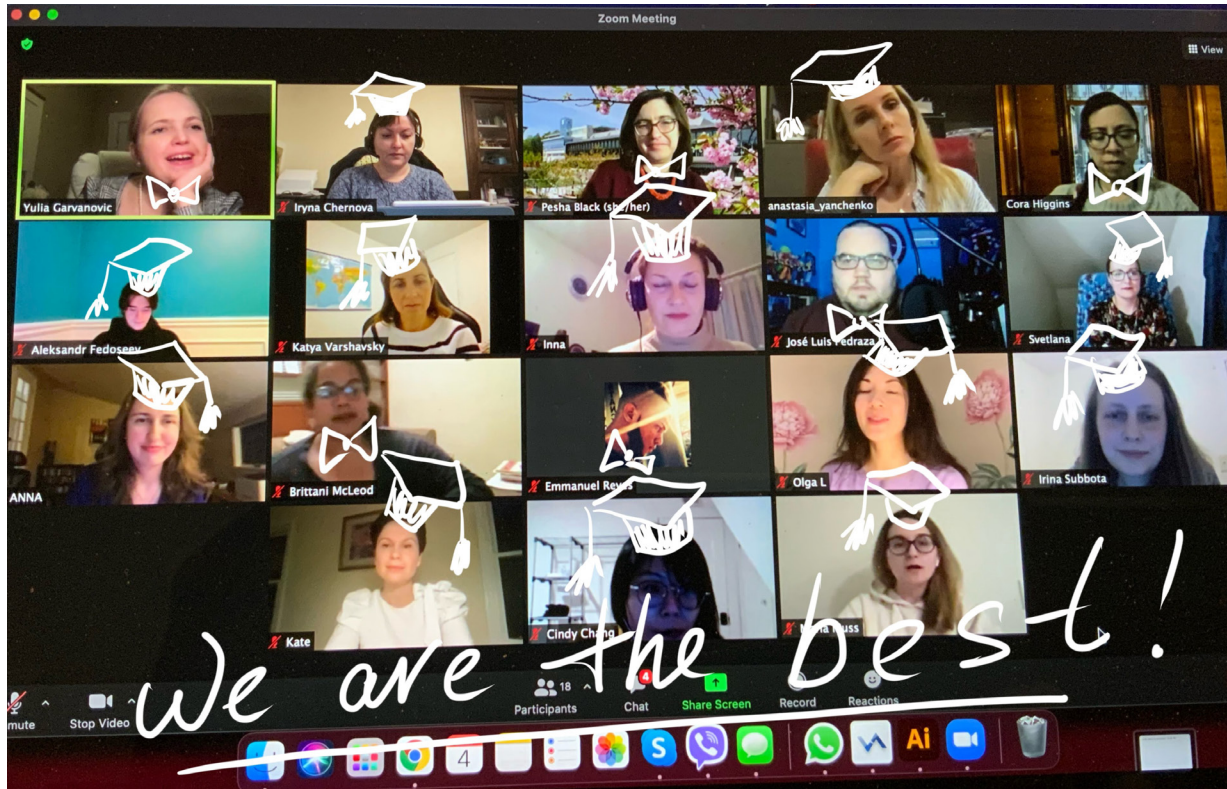


REMOTE ESOL CASE STUDY:

Supporting Independent Learning From A Distance

Holyoke Community College
Holyoke, Ludlow, and Springfield, Massachusetts



ESOL Program: Ludlow area and Springfield Adult Learning Centers

Website: www.hcc.edu/courses-and-programs/adult-education

Reach: Urban/Suburban

Number of ESOL students served per year: 300–350

Student population:

Immigrants and refugees who speak 36 home languages, most of whom speak Arabic, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, or Vietnamese

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Photo: *Holyoke Community College Remote Accelerated Career ESOL class students*

Program Description

Holyoke Community College (HCC) operates beginning to advanced ESOL programs in Springfield and Ludlow, Massachusetts, and ESOL workforce development courses ([Nurse Aide/Home Health Aide/ESOL](#), [Culinary & Hospitality/ESOL](#), and [Accelerated Career English](#)) in Holyoke. Ordinarily, students are drawn from 16 Western Massachusetts communities (in 2020–2021, remote and online classes attracted students from 55 Massachusetts communities), representing 45 countries and speaking about 36 languages. In-person classes typically meet 7–9 hours/week or 9–10.5 hours/week, three days a week, for 12–14 weeks each trimester. Beginning in Fall 2020, HCC added a pay-for-performance ESOL program, funded by Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The staff of 28 includes four full-time teachers, three benefitted advisors, and two technology support staff. The annual budget ranges from approximately \$1.03 million to \$1.2 million.

Notable, Innovative Practices

The remote ESOL program model entails personalized [Independent learning](#) that develops metacognition, incorporates student choice, connects to students' goals, and requires demonstration of learning. At Level 2 students opt into month-long modules based on their goals and interests, such as US citizenship, nurse aide exploration and prep, and career and education goals. Teachers support students through one-on-one meetings. Two dedicated technology coaches support students and teachers. They also run a remote basic computer class using NorthStar Digital Literacy curriculum via Zoom. Advisors seek to develop strong relationships with students. They support student persistence in various ways including connecting students with community resources, and supporting students' engagement with a career center, work readiness, career pathway planning, job search, and job placement.

Remote ESOL Program Design

The team has arrived at the program design based on teacher input, student input, significant experimentation by teachers in the spring and fall of 2020, and the experience they have gained since the start of the pandemic. All levels use a class website as the landing page from which students can go to Zoom for synchronous classes and Google Classroom for homework and independent learning, with links for office hours and independent learning options. Beginner/high-beginner levels have class websites, use Zoom or WhatsApp for synchronous work, and WhatsApp, Remind or TalkingPoints, and email for communication. Teachers are sensitive to students' comfort level with different technologies and have found that small-group meetings seem to be most effective for the beginning-level students. Fully enrolled classes of 16 students are subdivided into small groups of five to 10 students, who meet by Zoom. For literacy students, the groupings may be even smaller, with one teacher meeting with only two of her students by WhatsApp to provide targeted support. Class websites also have links to reading material, exercises, videos, and other resources for independent learning.

Intermediate and advanced levels have class websites, use Zoom for synchronous classes, Google Classroom for homework, and Remind and WhatsApp for communication and community-building. Teachers meet by Zoom with the full class several times per week for synchronous classes. Independent asynchronous work includes homework and independent learning, which is linked to student choice and goals. All levels are also supported by advisors who take attendance in classes, help troubleshoot any technical difficulties that students might have, and meet regularly one-on-one with students.

Student Onboarding and Persistence Supports

Student onboarding and persistence support through two advisors has become more important with remote classes. After the pandemic, the team has been very intentional about onboarding and getting students comfortable with technology and tools before the beginning of classes. The program director is involved in registration and orientation for each class. There is an orientation to advising to ensure that students meet their advisors and are familiar with their classes and with various class and community resources. There are separate sessions for digital skills, with the goal that students be able to access classes and email, to start building a sense of comfort and community even before classes begin.

There are two advisors for the core ESOL programs, one each supporting classes in Ludlow and Springfield. They are responsible for developing and maintaining relationships with students and providing resources to support persistence. They are also responsible for advising students about career and education pathways and employment strategies, as well as helping with job searches.

Advisors take attendance in classes and assist any students who might be having issues with technology, leaving the teacher free to conduct the class. This has also been useful to help identify students who are missing classes as well as understanding the difficulties students have with technology. Students receive a monthly letter about their attendance that their advisors discuss with them. Attendance interactions provide an opportunity for advisors to build relationships with students through regular conversation.

Advisors meet one-on-one with students and also hold weekly office hours for students. They communicate regularly with students, using Remind to share newsletters and announcements every week, using Google Voice for two-way communication with students, and, in some cases, also using WhatsApp. Advisors also play an important role in celebrating success: for instance, by mailing greeting cards or handwritten notes on occasions.

With the increasing reliance on technology, two dedicated technology coaches to support students and teachers were added late in 2020. These coaches hold open office hours, follow up with students referred for support by their teachers or advisors, and, beginning in Spring, 2021, are running a remote basic computer class using NorthStar Digital Literacy curriculum via Zoom. Technology coaches were added so that advisors could refocus their energy on advising work.

Instruction

The program always focuses on student-centered classroom instruction that is communicative and rigorous, supported by culturally responsive learning communities where students support each other.

With increasing emphasis on remote learning, teachers have a dual focus: making a conscious effort to incorporate more scaffolding, collaborative learning, student engagement, and community-building in remote synchronous classrooms; and developing approaches for asynchronous learning, including reading, writing, and project work, additional practice, independent activities, flipped classroom-style activities, and book clubs.

Asynchronous work includes homework and independent learning. [Independent learning](#) involves metacognition, incorporates student choice, is goal-connected, and requires demonstration of learning. Teachers continue to experiment, adapt, and develop options for small-group and independent work, including forms for demonstrating and logging learning, and developing mechanisms for students to integrate independent work into class by sharing or presenting.

Independent learning is organized differently at each level, beginning at level 2:

At Level 2, independent learning is linked to small groups based on goals and interests of students. Students opt into month-long modules based on goals and interests. Choices might include U.S. citizenship, nurse's aide exploration and prep, reading and writing strategies, and career and education goals. Each small group is assigned independent work linked to its focus. In addition, teachers meet one-on-one with students.

At Level 3, independent learning is based on student choice and involves an independent study report that incorporates learning and reflection. Teachers provide students with a menu of five offerings, adding new choices periodically. Choices were introduced incrementally over the course of the fall, so every student learned to use each resource.

At Level 4, independent learning involves planning, undertaking the actual activity, maintenance of a [learning log](#), and reflection and demonstration of learning. Each week, students say what they intend to do for independent work in the coming week. In the subsequent log, they look back and say whether or not they did as they planned (changing one's mind based on new circumstances is fine!), and plan for the next week. Students are also sharing or presenting in class.

Digital Learning Supports

Holyoke Community College's library lends tablets and hotspots based on student need and has loaned 130 Chromebooks and 34 hot spots to ESOL learners. A [student web page](#) links to web pages for each class, which in turn provides all relevant links and information, including hours, schedules, checklists, homework, and resources for independent work.

An example of a [higher-level class web page](#).

Each semester, 12–16 [orientation sessions for Zoom](#) and [eight sessions for Google Classroom](#) have been organized to familiarize students with these tools and to ensure that they have a degree of comfort with the tools before the first class. In Google Classroom sessions, students are subdivided by device type (tablet/phone or computer/Chromebook) for tailored instruction. Two tech-support staff have been hired to hold open tech-help hours and basic computer classes and to troubleshoot any problems for students.

Support for Students' Basic Needs

Two advisors are charged with building and maintaining relationships with students and being the primary points of contact. They hold regular office hours — now by Zoom — with each student to assess need for different supports, including academic support, job-search support, and general case management. Using weekly newsletters (by email and on class websites), advisors connect students with college and community resources, including the food bank/pantry, mental health resources, free tax preparation, citizenship classes, and immigration legal assistance. Holyoke Community College has mobilized significant resources to support students throughout the pandemic: ESOL students have borrowed more than 130 Chromebooks, laptops, or hotspots from the library; the campus food pantry has delivered bags of food to students; and the [President's Student Emergency Fund](#) has provided monetary support to cover an ESOL student's rent when her family faced an eviction notice.

One of the advisors is a career center employee who is stationed full-time in Ludlow, and both advisors help students develop career plans, build workforce readiness skills, connect students to job search resources and help them set up accounts on JobQuest, the career center software application, to use career center resources. Monthly remote meetings of a Job Seekers' Club deepened students' knowledge of job searches, resumes, interviewing, short-term trainings, funding sources, and career center resources.

Support for Teachers and Staff

“Our larger team feels more cohesive now because we have more regular contact, even though it’s remote, and feels like that’s really strengthened our feeling . . . of collective energy.”

– Laura Porter, ESOL Instructor

The team has spent a lot of time together to determine the blend of synchronous and asynchronous lessons that works well for students at each level. Teachers and staff meet prior to the beginning of each semester for staff planning week or an ESOL Team Staff “[sharing mini-conference](#).” Staff planning week includes courses from the community college on remote instruction; meetings to plan syllabi; classes, especially to plan, share, and develop a consistent approach to independent learning, student reflection, and tracking; building class websites; and facilitating advisor–teacher collaboration.

Teachers take leadership in developing specific approaches and using technology tools, and then share with other teachers. Examples of topics that some of the teachers have focused on include “Five Components of Remote Learning Model” and “Planning and Running an Effective Small Group Session.” Teachers can also take the opportunity to [reflect](#) on their experience. They are paid prep on both synchronous and asynchronous class time, as well as an additional 1.5 hours weekly for “student support.”

Partnerships

The ESOL program has a strong formal partnership with the MassHire career center in Holyoke, which also enables a MassHire staff member to work full-time as a student advisor and enables students to use systems and services at the career center for job search and workforce readiness.

At the end of every semester, an event is organized to introduce advanced ESOL students to ‘next steps’ opportunities for further education, incorporating alumni from the ESOL program who have gone on to further education and training; partner representatives; and partner videos featuring Transition to College programs, Academic ESL, grant-funded college certificate programs, such as Community Health Worker and Early Childhood, and short-term training programs, among others. Additionally, advisors host student meetings with partners, such as [Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts](#) for citizenship classes; [EforAll Holyoke](#) for a local entrepreneurship business accelerator; the YMCA; and the Attorney General’s Office for topics including landlord/tenant issues, healthcare access, and water safety (in light of immigrant drownings in Western Massachusetts in the recent past).

Leadership

“Our director built into every staff meeting time to convene with teachers at our level ...so that we can be sharing resources and ideas and best practices.”

– Susan Reade, ESOL Instructor

The program director is actively engaged in leading her team. She makes it a point to be involved in student orientation to classes and, over the past year, in conducting orientation to Zoom and Google Classroom, since online and remote teaching are so critical. The program director has a very collaborative and team-oriented style of leadership, with regular team meetings every week, extended sessions at the beginning of every semester for shared planning, and time after each semester for reflection and sharing. She has also been supportive of the teachers experimenting with new approaches and gathering input from their students on the appropriate and best methods for engaging them in a remote and online teaching environment.

Indicators of Effectiveness

The program has maintained a high level of continuity after COVID and a high level of student engagement with advisors and teachers, attracting students from an additional 29 communities outside the region by word of mouth. As compared to face-to-face attendance last year, attendance in synchronous offerings on Zoom is higher this year and has been exceeding 80 percent. In addition, more than 80 percent of students were engaged with advisors in December, 2020. In a survey completed by more than 130 students, 72 percent said they learned a lot in Zoom classes and 77 percent indicated that they enjoyed their homework and learned from it. In an April, 2021, survey about modality preferences for Fall, 2021, which was ongoing at the time of writing, 72 percent of the students preferred online learning over in-person classes.

At the end of the 2021 academic year, the program will have year-end standardized assessments and Level Completion Projects, a new initiative in which students are working on either capstone projects or portfolios.



ABOUT THE REMOTE ADULT ESOL PROJECT

This case study is part of the Remote Adult ESOL¹ (English for Speakers of Other Languages) Project led by World Education, Inc. The project's goal is to document and disseminate viable remote adult ESOL program models and practices so that ESOL instruction can be done at scale efficiently and effectively in a variety of settings. The impetus for the project was to identify strategies for meeting the current interest and unmet demand as well as meeting potential demand prompted by English language requirements for U.S. citizenship under immigration reform. During winter and spring of 2021, the project investigated selected ESOL programs' and learners' needs, experiences, and promising instructional and learner support practices that rely predominantly on technology-rich strategies and tools deployed remotely.

This case study is one of eight full program profiles selected for its innovative program design and promising practices. The eight case studies of programs from across the U.S. are complemented by:

- *Policy and Practice Brief* that presents policy considerations and recommendations;
- *Creating Equitable Access to Remote ESOL and Supports in Multiple Contexts and for Distinct Populations and Purposes*, a cross-case analysis of remote adult ESOL delivery through the lens of the varied organizational settings in which they operate and the supports needed to engage distinct ESOL populations; and
- *Promising Remote ESOL Practices*, a document that highlights specific practices and innovations of selected, nominated programs from onboarding to instruction, digital skills development, and student and teacher supports.

¹ We use the term English for Speakers of Other Languages or ESOL rather than English as a Second Language (ESL) out of recognition that many English Learners already speak more than one language, just not English.