Welcome to Pima Community College Perspectives, a look on how education enriches our community. And now, here’s your host, Nina Trasoff.

Nina Trasoff: Hello, and welcome to Pima Community College Perspectives. I am Nina Trasoff, and I’m really delighted you chose to join us for this half-hour conversation. Our topic today is "Adult Education, An Investment in the Future." And it truly is an investment, not just in the individual who’s benefitting from the education, but for our community as a whole. That’s part of what we’ll be talking about. Joining me today as co-host is Rachelle Howell, who is Assistant Vice Chancellor at Pima Community College. Welcome, Rachelle.

Rachelle Howell: Thank you.

Nina Trasoff: And our special guest for this segment is Regina Suits, who is part of Pima Community College’s Adult Education Leadership Team. Regina, I’m so delighted that you could join us.

Regina Suits: Thank you.

Nina Trasoff: Let’s start by talking about what Adult Education is, because there are a lot of misperceptions of exactly what that means.

Regina Suits: Um, yeah. Adult Education is the educational system for the population that is below the high school level in either reading, math, or language. So it’s for folks who, um, are going back to school or coming to school for the first time trying to increase their skills.

Nina Trasoff: And they tend to be, is it 16 and over?

Regina Suits: It’s 16 or older, and we have students all the way from 16 to, you know, what I like to say a lot of times, 116.

Nina Trasoff: Okay, then. [chuckling] No, actually, I know that you have a lot of truly older students, and some of it is Continuing Ed, which is enrichment kinds of things. But a lot of people are coming to Pima because they felt the lack of not having a—a high school diploma. And you are one of the primary resources for that.

Regina Suits: Yeah, Adult Education really is an academic system. It’s a sys—system for people to come back into, um, you know, increase their skills so that they can move, um, on to a job or on to post-secondary or on to Pima.
(Trasoff) So why do people care? Why should the community care if somebody’s dropped out of co—uh, high school for whatever reason? And I know there are many reasons that I hope you’ll share with us. What, why should the community as a whole care about this individual?

(Suit) Well, many times, people don’t drop out as an option; uh, it’s not their choice. They may be, uh, they may have to drop out for economic reasons; their parents may pull them from school; um, there may be abuse or substance abuse problems; um, they might be afraid. Uh, there’s a lot of reasons. Uh, many times, uh, people are home-schooled, so the parents make a conscious choice to keep them home. And the GED is an option for them to move forward, to get a credential, to go on to college, to go on to university, to go on to, even, the military, they need to have a GED. So, um, our students really are not one type of student.

(Trasoff) Really does run the gamut, doesn’t it?

(Suit) It does.

(Trasoff) Rachelle, what’s the economic impact on the community as a whole of these students?

(Howell) Well it—it’s, it’s huge. Or, not only is it huge for the individuals that go through the system, but it—it’s, the lack, those individuals who do not go through the system, the lack of economic impact that they have is disheartening. The average individual who does achieve a GED or this credential earns, on average, between $8,000 $9,000 additional, uh, income per year. And you multiply that by the number of students that go through just the system here in Pima County, through Pima Community College Adult Education, and the numbers get staggering, uh, in a hurry. We saw almost 6300 Adult Ed students, uh, in the last fiscal year, 2009-2010.

(Trasoff) Wow.

(Howell) Yeah, it’s—it’s a large number, and, but, there are more waiting. We have over a thousand who are just waiting to get into the program right now. Because of budget cuts, we have fewer classes than what we were able to offer. So the demand, the demand is extremely high. And those individuals that come out the other end certainly are able to earn, uh, a higher wage than they would be able to earn otherwise and/or go on to achieve even higher education, which then just skyrockets their income up even, even that much more.

(Trasoff) And we’ll be talking with a young man who took advantage of this, uh, in the second portion of this program. But you talked about the program cuts. And, to me, some of this seems a little “penny-wise, pound-foolish.” Because when you look at, not just the positive impact of individuals who get their GEDs and how much more they earn, therefore, how much more they contribute, but the negative side of those who don’t can tend, not always, but can tend to be more of a drain on society because of special services that are needed.

(Howard) That—that’s, that’s true, definitely. Individuals that don’t achieve this credential of GED or, or achieve other types of, of education that help them move forward like this, often wind up in poverty. They do wind up, uh, they do tend to wind up, uh, accessing social services, which does drain our, uh,
our community coffers. There’s just no two ways about it. And if you look at last year’s statistics, there were about 3300 students that dropped out locally—excuse me, not—not last year, in ’08. About 3300 students that—that dropped out.

Now, they may not have chosen to drop out, as we spoke about a moment ago. There are many reasons why these 3300 students stopped going to high school. But if even half of those students earned a diploma or a GED, their combined increased earnings per year would be somewhere in the range of $13-$18 million, um, uh—uh, in terms of the—the money in their pockets. But then you take that and you extrapolate economic impact, locally. Um, by the time they’re, you know, they’re middle-aged, they’re going to be spending, um, $42 million more on home purchases than what they would otherwise be able to afford without the credential. They’re going to spend $2 million more on vehicle purchases.

(Trasoff) This is as a whole?

(Howell) As a whole, yep, half, you know, half of these 3300 individuals. Think about the impact on property taxes; think about the impact on sales tax.

(Trasoff) And again, the converse of that is, and I don’t have the statistics on top of mind, but the prison population is of people who do not have high school diplomas is—is overwhelming; they’re very, very high statistics. And that is an economic drain, um, not to mention a human drain on society. But the funding was jeopardized, and I know that the $3 million-$4 million dollars in cuts that happened were jeopardizing almost $12 million in federal matching funds. But Regina, the College rallied, and the community rallied and found a way around that. Would you explain that?

(Suitt) Sure. So, um, as you mentioned, the, um, appropriations for Adult Education, GED Testing and Family Literacy was zeroed out in the 2011 budget. Um, and so community leaders, um, the Chancellor, Chancellor, uh, Flores, really, um, stepped up and took the lead and, um, worked with the Arizona Department of Education’s Director, Karen Liersch. And they, um, um, basically asked permission to see if our, uh, stimulus funds could be used to make up the state match to receive those federal dollars. So it was kind of an exception that was made.

Um, and the—and then the Chancellors, both, um, Pima College and then Rio Salado College stepped up. They put some of that money, they directed it to Adult Education and GED services so that we could receive the federal money and, really, save Adult Education in the state of Arizona. In, uh, April, um, students were so overwhelmed, really, uh, with this, with the Chancellor, what the Chancellor had done, that they went and recognized him at the Board of Governors meeting. And so the call was kind of put out to come, uh, to the meeting, and probably 200-250 students showed up with handmade banners, um, and applause, and, and really thanking Chancellor Flores for his leadership for the, not just us in Pima County, but really, for the entire state.

(Trasoff) That’s so important, and I’m glad Dr. Flores received that recognition. But I think the community needs to care about it, not just once because it’s a warm and fuzzy, but because it really has an economic impact on our community. Um, lay out a little bit for me, Regina, would you? Who are our students? Who are your students?
(Sutt) Well, it’s about a 60%-40% female-to-male. So we have, you know, nearly 60%, uh, females attend our programs. I think it kind of reflects similar to the College. Uh, the majority of our students are parents, um, and research tells us that, uh, parents are the first and best teachers children have. And so, investing in parents, in a way, is a way to invest in children. So we have, um, um, students in our Family Literacy Program; uh, we serve nearly 200 families a year in our Family Literacy Program. We have, uh—uh, a program for refugees. These are folks who are required to attend English classes and get—and get jobs, because they’ve, um, you know, received “refugee” status in our country. Um, we served nearly 700 refugees last year from around the world. We have a Workplace program, where, uh, companies pay to have English classes, um, on-site at their companies. Um, but the bulk of our program, our core programming of Basic Literacy and GED Prep and English, um, was over 5,000 students.

(Trasoff) And you also have a project for basic education and life skills for adults with developmental--

(Sutt) [interrupting] Right, the Project RAISE.

(Trasoff) Tell me about that.

(Sutt) It’s our Education and Life Skills program for developmentally disabled, um, adults. So they come in and learn technology skills and life skills, um, and art. They have a really great art program, um, as well as Project RAISE, and it’s a highly-recognized model program for that population.

(Trasoff) It sounds so wide-spread. Is it available on campuses throughout the community?

(Sutt) There’s three Learning Centers, three main learning centers, and then there’s various community, um, classes as well. So there’s, uh, classes in schools; there are classes in, in the jail; there are classes in neighborhood centers. Um, um, but the bulk of our programming happens at the three learning centers. That’s Eastside Learning Center, on Alvernon and 22nd. There’s El Río Learning Center, which is right next to the golf course on Speedway. And there’s El Pueblo Liberty Learning Center, um, on 6th and Irvington.

(Trasoff) And, you’ve been doing this for a while, and Adult Ed is, what, 40 years old in the state? What are some of the successes you’ve seen other than the gentleman we’ll be talking with who is a wonderful example of that.

(Sutt) Well, you know, just, um, last year, we had 1700 GED graduates. So, I mean, that’s the size of a small high school if you, if you look at that number in one year, 1700 people. One in five, nearly, in the state of Arizona, one in five high school credentials is a GED. So if you take that away, if you take the GED program away, I don’t know how it can get lower in high school diploma-attainment, but, um, in Arizona. But it’s a, it’s a large group of people. Like I said, it’s a, it’s a small high school that was graduated last year.

(Trasoff) Um, let’s go back to the economic impact. Um, Rachelle, new businesses that are coming, people thinking about relocating a business to, um, Tucson, they’re going to be looking at the workforce. So this has implications.
(Howell) It—it, it does. Without a—without a highly skilled workforce locally, Tucson has a really difficult future ahead of it, in terms of luring, uh, good, especially high-tech, types of businesses to the area. Uh, the high-tech, clean sort of businesses that, that I know we want, that we want to bring here. We have to have an educated workforce. It’s really, it really is the foundation for a stable, healthy community in so many ways that it can’t be discounted.

(Trasoff) And I would imagine that a lot of your Adult Ed students continue on with Pima to some of the amazing technical programs you offer or as a bridge into the U of A or other four-year programs.

(Howell) Yeah, and we do have a—a transition program to really help Adult Education students transition into Pima College. And I believe last year we had over 500, 582, actually; we had 582 students transition to Pima College. Um, but it’s, but Pima College isn’t the only place people transition to. They transition into work; they retain jobs; they get promotions; they go to university; they go to the military. Um, the GED, just like the diploma, really is just a first step, um, because that’s just not enough. They have to continue on to be, you know, a part of the community.

(Trasoff) Well, thank you, um, Regina Suitt, thank you very much for joining us today. It was very interesting.

(Suitt) Thank you.

(Trasoff) And, uh, we’re going to take a break. And when we come back, we’re going to be talking to David DeLeon. David is a prime example of the success of Adult Education, a young man who transitioned then into Pima Community College and has gone on to some amazing things. So we’ll be talking to David right after this break.

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(announcer) For more than 40 years, Pima Community College has helped prepare the citizens of Tucson and Pima County for good jobs and better lives for themselves and their families. We don’t do it alone. We appreciate your ongoing investment in education, especially during these extraordinarily tough times. Your tax dollars, combined with student tuition, make it possible for thousands of Southern Arizonans to get a jump-start before transferring to a university, to get the training they need to stay competitive at work, and to prepare for the jobs of tomorrow. Many of our students are seeking to restart their careers after losing their jobs, and some, their homes, during the recession. All of our students know, as you do, that the more you learn, the more you earn. We know that today’s students are often juggling work and family, as well as school. That’s why Pima offers classes at night and on weekends at six campuses, more than 180 other locations, and over the Internet. Our programs deliver education how you want it and give you the opportunity to achieve your goals at your pace. Today’s Pima Community College students will be tomorrow’s firefighters, nurses, police, teachers, and small business owners, the backbone of a safe, healthy, prosperous Tucson and Pima County. Thank you for your support as we continue to help you and your family build a better tomorrow. For more information, contact us at 206-4500, or visit us on the Web, at pima.edu. Pima Community College, Developing our Community Through Learning.
(Nina Trasoff) Welcome back to Pima Community College Perspectives. I’m Nina Trasoff, and with me is Rachelle Howell, who is Assistant Vice Chancellor of Pima Community College. And Rachelle, in the last segment we were talking a little bit about the funding that had been in jeopardy and Dr. Flores’ role in trying to save it. But the save is really a short-term solution.

(Howell) It—it really was. And I think it’s important for everyone to keep focus on that. The program, the Adult Education program, is only whole at this point through 2012. And at that point, stimulus funding will no longer be available to meet the, the matching requirement for the federal dollars. So without the, the matching, just—just the federal dollars alone that go away are $12 million. And the state of Arizona, in general, cannot afford to leave $12 million sitting on the table no matter what the program is. Uh, we need to continue to look, and we will continue to look, for options for funding Adult Education. But we need support, and we need help.

(Trasoff) And, you know, this is for a particularly important program, because it really impacts individual lives and the economic foundation for our community.

(Howell) It does.

(Trasoff) And we have a wonderful example of that who is joining us now, David DeLeon. He is 32 years old, he was born in Manuel, and he was a straight-A student his first two years when his family was down here and he went to Canyon Del Oro High School here in Tucson. But in 1994, at the end of his sophomore year, he dropped out of high school after his parents, or while his parents were going through a pretty rough divorce. And David’s family life became unstructured; he hung out with the wrong people, made some bad decisions. And unfortunately, it’s not that unfamiliar a story. It happens to young people in this society. But, David, you really have turned your life around in a very spectacular way. I’m delighted you could join us. Uh, David DeLeon, tell us a little bit about you and how you first became involved with Pima Community College Adult Ed.

(David DeLeon) Okay. [clears throat] Well basically, I was at a point in my life, I think I was about 23, 24 years old. Um, I had dropped out of school and been working, you know, different jobs, didn’t really know what I wanted to do in my life. And I remember being, um, working a construction job near the El Rio Learning Center. And I remember holding, you know, a fire hose, to be able to keep the dirt down for the tractors when they were moving dirt. And in my mind-- I always had an active mind, very active-- and I thought, “Wow,” you know, “is this what I wanna do with my life?” You know, and it really hit me. I said, “Well, where do I begin? Where do I start?” You know, I want to make that change in my life.

Um, I had kind of, at that point in my life, I didn’t have a high value on education or realize, you know, how it could, um, change your life or affect your life. And it was starting to change in my mind at that point. So on the way home one day, I stopped by the El Rio Learning Center and I said, “Let me see what this place is all about.” Kinda started asking them questions, saying, you know, “I want to do something. How do I do it?” That’s really where it started, and that’s really where, you know, walking through the doors gave me kinda the first look at, or, you know, the first step in where I was trying to go.
(Trasoff) And so they helped you prepare for and then pass your GED?

(DeLeon) Well, um, fortunately, after all those years, it had been about eight years since I had been in school, um, I didn't really lose anything. I went in there and kind of took an assessment test, um, you know, and pretty much, um, scored at the top levels of all those. They said, "You really don't need to prepare for anything; you can pass this test." I was still unsure of myself at that point. I said, "I haven't been in school for eight years. You know? I'm not sure." So when I took a practice test, it's different from the assessment test, and basically, you know, scored very high on that as well.

So went in there, took the practice test, got my GED. And what kind of opened the doors into having a part-time job there was, uh, um, the teacher that gave me, um, the assessment test, was Maria Acevedo, there. And she kind of came to me afterwards and said, "Wow," you know, "you've done really well on these tests. I'm just wondering if you'd be interested in volunteering here, you know, maybe helping other students or tutoring or doing these kinds of things." And I was a little, I don't know, hesitant, skeptical, at first. And I said, "You know, I'm trying to work this full-time job." And, you know, um, it took about, took some time to think about it, and I said, "You know what? I'm gonna do this." You know, so I called her, and I said, "You know, I'm gonna, I want to help you out. I—I want to get involved here, and see what I can do." So that's what kind of, um, you know, led me in that direction as well.

(Trasoff) Rachelle, I look at a young man like this who has had such amazing potential that could have just been lost. And you know, construction work is wonderful work, but you obviously had things in your mind that you wanted to do that were different than that. You didn't know what they were yet.

(DeLeon) Yeah.

(Trasoff) And that's when you started taking some of the classes there, and you got into computer engineering and programming?

(DeLeon) Mmm-hmm. Yeah, so, [clears throat] um, after I got my GED, then it basically was, I enrolled in Pima, and I— I knew I wanted to do something with computers. I've always had, you know, a passion for computers no matter what it was, whether it was the Internet... I remember when, you know, uh, DVDs first came out. That was exciting to me. I remember when, you know, you could actually burn a CD, and wow, you can make this mixed compilation and mp3s. And it really amazed me, and I was always intrigued by it, and I always had a passion for it. And really, that's what-- that passion sparked everything. That passion sparked the direction I wanted to go, which was computer engineering. That passion sparked the direction in where I am now and in the exact industry and field that I work in; that's where it started.

(Trasoff) Isn't it fun to be able to be working and earning a good living in an area where you have that passion, so it's a pleasure, it's a joy?

(DeLeon) Yeah, it is.

(Trasoff) So tell me about your company.
Well, um, I— I've had it now for about five years. Um, it's called “iFusion Design Studio,” and um, we basically do complex, and, like, custom Web development for companies all across the United States. Um, we do iPhone applications, um, Droid applications, and stuff like that. Um, you know, we've had, uh, the privilege and kind of, um, to work with a lot of high-profile clients, you know, through—through other companies. We collaborate with a lot of companies that are in Southern, Central, and Northern California. So, we work with a lot of, let's say, design firms or marketing companies or SEO companies that are, kinda have their niche, but they really don't, you know, they really don't do, um, kind of programming aspect of, of development that we...

So partnering?

It's partnering, yeah.

And when you say, “we,” are you a one-person shop, or do you have people working for you now?

Um, the, on the scale of the things that we do, it's not [chuckle] it's not possible for one person to do, so, so yeah, I definitely, I have eight programmers that I work with directly. I have, um, you know, and they're all in different types of programming, like PHP, Ajax, Objective-C for the iPhone, you know, these different types of programming. And I have a few, like, freelance designers I work with, um, you know, that are here in Tucson, as well.

But Rachelle, this is, when we were talking earlier about the economic impact, this is a perfect example of somebody who found his passion and the way—ability to earn a living at his passion through Adult Education and is now providing jobs for other people.

An absolutely stellar example of, of being able to, to grow a home-grown business or create a home-grown business, and it all started with, with getting your GED. And, uh, it’s really an amazing story, David. And—and you’re employing. I mean, you are, you are a little mini-industry all, all on your own, creating your own, your own economic impact, here locally, which is, uh, outstanding.

One thing I just want to add about Adult Education is, to me, it's not even about just the opportunity. They— or, maybe “the opportunity” is not the right word. It's—it’s not just about that, you know, finding that passion. What I really found there was, you know, I was really unsure of myself when I walked through those doors. I hadn’t been in school for eight years. Even when they told me, you know, “You can pass this test,” I still didn't have that confidence. I still lacked it. So what they gave me, and I still keep in contact with a lot of people that I kind of, that kind of mentored me and really helped me to kind of, you know, create or, or, um, you know, you know who I am today. So not only was it finding that passion, but it was kinda getting the support, it was gaining the confidence, and, you know, having, you know, these kind of different, you know, mentors, you know, in the College and different places that really helped me to get focused and set the right direction in where I wanted to go.

Wow, that’s such an important aspect of it, and I know that Pima has so many really dedicated people. What pleases me is looking at the fact that you have four children, ages 2-11, which means you
are now going to be able to instill in them the confidence that your instructors at Pima instilled in you. I mean, their future’s brighter because yours is.

(DeLeon) Yeah, it’s, that’s exactly true. And when—when you really think about the impact of the, you know, of the—of the long-term, um, the long-term impact that this is going to have, it completely changed the direction of my life, and of course, naturally, it’s going to change the direction of my children’s lives, you know. I have a whole new aspect on education in general and even a whole new respect for educators in general. ‘Cause they do the roughest job, and that’s, you know, that’s, you know, getting people educated, and they’re in the business of helping people achieve their dreams and their goals. That’s their business, in my opinion, as educators. And that is, that’s, um, you know, invaluable, you know, to the entire community, so, um... [chuckles]

(Trasoff) And I—I think, in the earlier segment, um, when, uh, Regina was with us, Regina Suitt, she was talking about parents being the first educator of their kids. And you are now an educator yourself?

(DeLeon) Mmm-hmm.

(Trasoff) So that which Pima gave you, I think you’re going to be giving to your children.

(DeLeon) Of course. Yeah, I mean, [clears throat] I, what I was trying to say was I have a whole new respect for education. My kids, you know, thank goodness I’m in the situation I’m in now, you know. I have my kids, they go to, you know, private schools. I have them, you know, I’m going to give them the best education and the best head start possible. That’s the impact that education has made on me, and that’s where it’s going to, the impact is going to have on their lives.

(Trasoff) David DeLeon, thank you so much for joining us. Truly, it’s a generational impact that Pima Community College is having. Rachelle Howell, thank you, too. And I hope you’ll join us next week for the next edition of Pima Community College Perspectives.

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