

# Arizona Daily Star

## Nonprofit JobPath to expand its reach with \$1M in American Rescue Plan funds

By [Nicole Ludden](#) Jul 18, 2021 Updated Jul 19, 2021

When Eric Magnuson moved to Tucson from the East Coast in 2018, he was looking for a fresh start to his education.

After graduating the top of his class in high school, Magnuson took general classes at the University of Baltimore, but never found something that piqued his interest.

Magnuson decided to take up welding and went for his associate's degree at Pima Community College. He fell in love with the trade.

But two semesters in, the federal student aid Magnuson depended on to pay tuition fell through. Living on his own while working a part-time job waiting tables to pay the bills, Magnuson faced the harsh reality that he may not be able to afford school anymore.

After visiting the financial aid office to seek help, he enrolled in a program called **JobPath**, a local nonprofit that provides financial assistance to students seeking two-year associate's degrees or industry certifications.

The nonprofit provided him the funds to help pay for tuition and welding supplies, and Magnuson stayed enrolled, eventually earning his degree in May 2021.

“They basically showed me that they could give me a chunk of money, bought me all new welding supplies, as well as gave me the funds to get through school,” he said. “It was literally the reason I was able to continue my education.”

The JobPath program was founded by the Pima County Interfaith Council in 1998. Now its own, separate nonprofit entity, the program continues to provide supplementary funds to Pima County students.

But after 23 years, the workforce development program is bolstering its operations — with the help of \$1.75 million in

funding from the county — to reach hundreds of more students this year.

The county allocated JobPath \$1 million in funds from the American Rescue Plan, which was signed into law by President Joe Biden on March 11 to facilitate economic recovery from the pandemic. The other \$750,000 was budgeted from the county's general fund.

Including private and public donations and \$185,000 from the city of Tucson, JobPath is operating under its largest budget ever this year at \$2.3 million. Last fiscal year, the program enrolled 378 students. This year, the goal is to provide assistance to 670 students while hiring more staff to get the job done.

## Barriers to education

In 1998, the Pima County Interfaith Council initiated the program by asking thousands of residents the same question: “What’s keeping you from having a better income?”

The answer, JobPath's CEO Ana Greif says, wasn't a lack of education programs for high-earning jobs, but a lack of access to them.

Low-income earners often accept low-paying jobs out of high school, she explains, and taking the step into higher level education can create a nearly impossible balance of working to fund one's education and cost of living while finding the time to attend classes.

"There're so many barriers to being able to access education," Greif said. "If you have a job that has irregular hours, where you get your new schedule every week, how are you going to schedule a class that has the same hours every week for an entire semester?"

JobPath provides a yearly sum of money that students can draw from for school-related expenses such as tuition, textbooks and exam fees, but the funds can also be used for costs such as child care, rent and car payments.

The nonprofit accepts applications from Pima County residents 18 or older with a high school degree or equivalency in the “low-income” or lower designation identified by the county’s HUD criteria, which looks at a family’s income compared to the median family income for the area.

After assessing income information, each student gets an individualized financial plan with funds they can draw on throughout the year. Parents seeking higher education can receive aid to pay for day care while they attend class, and if one’s car breaks down on the way to school, the funds can cover that, too.

“We work with students every single day to make sure that if they run into one of these barriers, we help them find a way around it,” Greif said. “Many times, it’s as simple as just writing a check to pay for some parts at AutoZone. It sounds so simple, and yet there’s just so few students that have access to this kind of support.”

But the program only works with students in programs intended to wield high-paying jobs under the categories of applied technology, information technology and health professions.

Pima County has historically provided the majority of JobPath's funding, which is contingent on the program implementing an average hourly wage of \$16 for eventual employment of participants.

Of the 95 graduates of JobPath last fiscal year, the average wage among them after completing the program was \$24.72 an hour, according to the program's latest economic report.

But the influx of cash in both county general funds and American Rescue Plan dollars is igniting an expansion of the program intended to eventually help a thousand students a year land high paying jobs.

## **COVID-19 relief bolsters efforts**

Sarah Henderson, JobPath's programs operations manager, says for a long time, the program's been "kind of level."

“We were supporting basically the same number of students every year, there wasn’t necessarily a lot of growth,” she said. “But we were always there consistently helping students.”

While the American Rescue Plan dollars will supplement future students’ education while ramping up the program, last fiscal year, the county allocated JobPath \$750,000 in CARES Act funds, which went toward students already enrolled in the program.

Magnuson, who worked as a waiter to supplement his education and the high-cost of welding equipment, went unemployed for three months as the pandemic stymied restaurants’ operations.

“I sent (JobPath) basically every bill I could find, and they essentially paid my bills for three months,” he said. “They were absolutely a lifesaver and kept me from totally draining my savings”

Throughout the pandemic, many of the hands-on manufacturing and health programs JobPath supports have gone remote, and the

nonprofit has given out 50 laptops and helped over 100 students taking class from home with internet payments.

Regardless, about 15 JobPath students had to delay their graduation due to a lack of available classes.

The planned growth of JobPath from this year's influx of cash, Henderson says, is a continuation of pandemic recovery.

“A big push for this growth we're experiencing now did stem from COVID. There're a lot of people that are unemployed, single parents have been really affected,” she said. “That's one of the major impetus for us to grow and why Pima County is investing in as much as they are. I think they see that value, and that we truly can help students get to that next level so they're able to get into these careers.”

The county is asking JobPath to eventually serve 1,000 students a year, but the program is initiating its growth with the goal of serving 670 throughout the next year.

Henderson says JobPath will achieve this by expanding the program's reach so it's "not this well-kept secret anymore." Staff members plan to expand JobPath's presence at PCC campuses while reaching out to more educational partners and employers to get the word out.

The new funds will also go toward hiring four new student success coaches, who work one-on-one with JobPath students, as well as a workforce readiness manager, who will work directly with potential employers to make sure students are ready to transition to the workforce.

But with the growth being funded by a single federal disbursement, the challenge is sustaining JobPath's prosperity without the influx of funds promised in the future. Greif hopes the program will be able to prove its worth, warranting the Board of Supervisors to approve more funding in the future.

“My goal is to make JobPath absolutely indispensable to our community,” she said. “We’re not making quite as big of an impact as we need to. With this increased funding, we will make a much larger dent in this problem. Every dollar that’s invested in JobPath is returned many-fold in decreased public assistance and increased tax revenue.”

With an associate’s degree under his belt, Magnuson plans on returning to PCC to build up his welding certifications and to eventually move back to the East Coast to make a career out of his talent. For now, he’s selling his own artistic welding designs.

“It’s allowed me to do a bunch of side projects at home. I have my own welder, and I’m kind of building up a clientele base,” he said. “It’s been life changing.”