

Translating Opportunity

Improving Postsecondary Pathways for Multilingual Learners of English

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An initiative of WestEd and Student-Ready Strategies

In collaboration with Texas Success Center

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Multilingual Learners of English (MLEs) are integral to the fabric of the United States, yet are often marginalized, misunderstood, and underserved in our postsecondary system. Understanding the current postsecondary landscape for MLEs in our country is needed to successfully serve this population with effective and equitable policies, programs, and structures.

WestEd and Student-Ready Strategies set out to explore several questions about the postsecondary experiences of MLEs within the United States.

- What do we know about the postsecondary MLE population?
- What are the postsecondary outcomes for MLEs?
- What federal, state, and institutional policies impact MLEs in postsecondary?
- What postsecondary program structures, designs, and practices impact MLEs?
- Which supports do postsecondary MLEs, faculty, and staff need?

To address these questions, our research team collected data from four sources: interviews, analysis of ESL course maps, review of current literature, and a 50-state policy scan of policies in place for MLEs, both K–12 and postsecondary. The data—and, more importantly, the gaps in that data—spawned many conversations, ideas, and questions for further research. From this study, three conclusions prevail that are critical to the discussion of MLEs and the next steps to support their postsecondary endeavors.

ESL programs provide support and instruction that are essential to ensuring MLEs have the opportunity to achieve their postsecondary education goals AND there is great room for improvement in these programs. While current postsecondary outcomes for MLEs are unacceptable, we advocate for redesign and reform, not for the elimination of these essential programs.

The lack of consistent definitions and data significantly hinders reform efforts. The MLE population is incredibly complex, and these complexities must be considered in determining what intentional changes or additions should be made to policies, structures, and practices. Without common definitions for the various sub-populations that comprise MLEs in the postsecondary space, it will continue to be difficult to collect and analyze data that could inform this important work.

Despite these complexities, there is enough evidence to support certain improvements.

These include

- gathering and using information on the student experience from MLEs, including those not enrolled in ESL programs, to identify and address barriers and amplify effective practices;
- making intentional efforts to develop partnerships aimed at increasing alignment and developing clear pathways spanning from Adult Education ESL programs, college ESL programs, and academic programs of study;
- examining the length of ESL course sequences and using evidence to identify where they can be shortened and simplified to maximize student success and building pathways into opportunities for students to engage with college content and programs that align with their interests and goals;
- improving placement practices by using multiple measures, validating practices with evidence, and making assessments easily accessible and free; and
- developing holistic supports aimed at improving the entire MLE student experience.

Purpose

In postsecondary education, Multilingual Learners of English (MLEs) span race, age, income, immigration status, education, and geographical location. They range from young adults with U.S. high school diplomas to recent immigrants with varied educational backgrounds. They live in large urban settings and small rural communities. What they share, though, is a determination to further their education.

Jiménez-Castellanos et al. describe MLEs in the K–12 system as being “triple-segregated” by race, income, and language (2017). We would add that in postsecondary education, this population is further marginalized by two additional factors. First, the programs intended to serve MLEs are spread across multiple sectors that are not always well-aligned and coordinated. Second, there is a lack of data about these students and the systems that serve them. In our educational systems, what is not counted and measured is invisible.

Additionally, dedicated and committed professionals serve these students in a variety of contexts as teachers, advisors, and advocates. While these individuals have deep expertise, they are often themselves marginalized through a lack of resources and siloed within institutions and systems. Such experts need to be empowered to work with researchers and institutional and policy experts to enact change if a way is to be found that better serves these students.

The purpose of this paper is to increase awareness and understanding of postsecondary pathways for MLEs in the United States. MLEs play an important role in U.S. society yet are underserved in our postsecondary systems. We encourage readers to look at the data presented in this paper in the spirit of learning and broadening perspectives and to engage in respectful discussions that will help us respect and improve collectively.

We, as the team of authors, acknowledge that our intention in this paper is to advocate for improving postsecondary opportunities for MLEs. We attempt to provide an objective summary of our findings, and, at the same time, be transparent when we express our opinions about those findings. For further information about the positionality of our team, see the [Who We Are](#) section.

What's in a name?

There are numerous terms for students who are in the process of developing their English language skills. English Learners (ELs) is the most used term in research, policy, and practice. However, there is increasing criticism of the term, as it focuses on a deficit characteristic and defines students in terms of their English acquisition. We have decided to use the term Multilingual Learner of English (MLE) instead to signal a more asset-based perspective that recognizes the asset of multilingualism and to recognize the fact that multilingual learners might be learning a language other than English. When referencing a policy or data source, we use the terms used by the source.

In different sites, programs serving MLEs might be called by a variety of terms including **English as a Second Language (ESL)**, **English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)**, and **English for Academic Purposes (EAP)**. For the sake of brevity, we use *ESL* for all programs unless referencing a specific program or course title. We also refer to *ESL students* as denoting those enrolled in an ESL course or program. We differentiate between **Adult Education (AE)** and community college programs as appropriate.

Three Students Share Their Stories

These student stories give a face and voice to the issues presented in this paper and remind us of our real purpose—to create environments that make it possible for students like these to achieve their goals.



As an adult, **Dorna Moghadeci** immigrated to the United States around eight years ago. She had good conversational English skills and a degree in teaching English from her home country of Iran. She worked in retail for several years before deciding to become a nurse. Dorna had to figure out how to attend college in the United States. “I was so scared. I didn’t feel like I could do it.” Despite her English verbal skills, she worried they would not be good enough. “It’s so embarrassing. What if I can’t speak English? What if people make fun of my accent? What if I don’t understand it?” Dorna took three ESL courses at Cypress College in California. Her ESL professor helped build her confidence and improve her writing skills. She learned the importance of communicating with her instructors and asking for help when necessary. She also took non-ESL, credit-bearing courses at the same time. Having completed these prerequisites, she transferred to West Coast University to pursue a bachelor’s degree in nursing. She has maintained a 4.0 GPA, but it has not been easy. “Even now, listening and writing are very hard. I have to translate everything into Farsi. It’s getting easier. It’s not as hard as before, but it’s still difficult. When a professor says something, maybe other people get it right away, but for me, it takes me a longer time to process, to get it. If they [other students] need two hours to study, it takes me 10 hours.”



Aichatou Seydou and her family came to the U.S. from Niger two years ago. She knew very little English but wanted to go to college. She was admitted to the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) but chose to enter the City University of New York Language Immersion Program (CLIP) first. She says that her three semesters in CLIP helped her learn the basics of grammar and speaking English. Aichatou liked CLIP and found it helpful, but also talked about the challenge of the intense 25-hour/week program. “You have to be very, very strong to be a CLIP student. But it was really helpful for me because I got to meet with people, make friends.” This was especially helpful in developing communication skills. “You have to meet with

people and talk in order to learn a new language.” After completing CLIP, Aichatou took a placement test to determine her ability levels at BMCC. She remembered being very nervous about taking the placement test, but a professor encouraged her by saying, “I know you’ve got this. You are a strong student.” Aichatou placed in BMCC’s highest-level ESL course, Intensive Reading and Writing, which she says helped her in her writing process. “It really helped me . . . They focus more about the way that you write your paper, to know the structure about writing essays, to prepare you for your credit classes.” She is now taking English Composition and several other non-ESL courses such as mathematics, chemistry, psychology, nutrition, and speech.



Yohannes Tade received instruction in English in his high school in Ethiopia, but he said his English was still limited. “I wouldn’t say [I was] fluent because the quality of my education was not that great . . . When I first joined [my ESL class], I could barely pronounce a bunch of words.” Yohannes says the instruction in English was helpful, but more importantly, it was a safe place. “Everything was confusing when I first moved out here. Having that group of ESL students helped me . . . I thought, okay, I’m not here alone. I had other classes I was taking, most of them [other students] were native to the States. It was a culture shock. It was nice to be in an environment [in ESL classes] where I can express myself and then actually have more in common with people who are from all over the place.” He started at Cypress College in California without a specific goal except to earn a degree but learned about the Radiology program from another student and decided it was a good fit with his interests. Yohannes earned four [Guided Pathways ESL Milestone Certificates](#) for completing his ESL courses along with a prerequisite course for his pathway. The recognition came as a surprise to Yohannes, but he appreciated the acknowledgment of his work. “Any recognition you get helps you for the future, kind of gives you motivation.” Coursework continues to be challenging as he still translates concepts into his native language of Amharic. “To be honest with you, you just have to put in the work.” Yohannes will finish his program in the spring of 2024 when he hopes to get a job in radiology.

Overview

Initially, our research focused on MLEs attending community colleges but quickly expanded to include Adult Education (AE) because these programs play an important role as on-ramps into certificate and degree programs. While AE serves many students who do not intend to seek further education, our priority is understanding the pathways for MLEs who wish to matriculate into certificate or degree programs. We did not include four-year institutions in our research, other than the extent to which state and system policies incorporate them. While four-year institutions serve MLEs, this is a relatively small subgroup of the MLE population, and we chose to focus on the sectors with the greatest potential for impact.

Key Findings

This study is comprised of a combination of methodologies, consisting of a national policy scan, literature review, interviews with stakeholders, and a course map analysis. The full summaries of each data source are included as Appendices. The following findings are drawn from across the data sources as identified by the coding provided with the results (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Evidence Sources for Findings

CM – Course Map Analysis
I – Interviews
LR – Literature Review
PS – Policy Scan

What do we know about the postsecondary MLE population?

1. The lack of consistent definitions and data collection makes it difficult to quantify and understand the MLE population. (CM, I, LR, PS)
2. The population of MLEs in postsecondary education has diverse educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. (I, LR)
3. The size of the postsecondary MLE population is difficult to assess, but it is significant in many sites and is likely increasing. (LR)

What are the postsecondary outcomes for MLEs?

4. A minority of ESL students complete college-level English. (I, LR)
5. Factors impacting success include the length of course sequences, course integration, and instructional practices, but much is not known, including the impact of programs on different sub-populations and the outcomes of MLEs who do not enroll in ESL courses. (I, LR, CM)
6. ESL programs play a critical role in creating access to postsecondary education and supporting student success. (I)

What federal, state, and institutional policies impact MLEs in postsecondary?

7. State policies related to ESL programs often appear in the context of workforce development or adult education rather than postsecondary education. (CM, PS)
8. States that have adopted policies to reform developmental education have mostly exempted ESL programs and students. (CM, PS)
9. Placement practices are not consistent and do not have a strong evidence base. (LR, CM, PS)
10. Many MLE policies and structures in K–12 do not align with postsecondary education’s approach to admissions, testing, and placement. (LR, PS)

What postsecondary program structures, designs, and practices impact MLEs?

11. Programs need to be tailored to fit the needs of the local population. (I, PS)
12. Program structures vary widely. (CM, I, LR, PS)
13. The alignment between AE ESL and college programs is complex and inconsistent. (CM, I, LR, PS)
14. There is little structured support for MLEs outside of ESL programs. (I)

Which supports do postsecondary MLEs, faculty, and staff need?

15. Relationships with faculty, advisors, staff, and each other are a critical aspect of the student experience. (I, LR)
16. ESL and non-ESL faculty and staff need training and professional communities. (I)
17. Deficit-based language and attitudes are embedded in the system. (I, CM)

Call To Action

What's at Stake?

The three student stories describe how hard students work to succeed. We expect students to work hard, and we cannot completely remove the challenge of pursuing an education in a non-native language. But what we can and must do is ensure that students like Dorna, Aichatou, and Yohannes do not face unnecessary systemic barriers to achieving their goals.

This is a moral imperative. As educators and educational systems, we are responsible for creating programs that maximize the potential for students to achieve their goals. One state official participating in our study said, “Our colleges’ mission is to take students where they are; leaving out a population of students goes against that mission.”

This is a practical necessity. We need a well-educated workforce that reflects our diverse society. We need nurses who speak Farsi and teachers who reflect and resonate with the increasingly multilingual student population. We need these remarkable students in schools, healthcare facilities, laboratories, businesses, and public offices. A college president in Texas stressed the importance of the MLE population to economic development, stating that, “It is absolutely critical that we prepare for demographic shifts . . . They [the students] don’t have time to wait.”

This is an opportunity. Some of this work may take decades, especially given the limited resources available in adult education and community college spaces. However, this paper demonstrates there is much that we can do to improve the experiences and outcomes of MLEs soon. We should capitalize on the improvements that we can make from existing evidence and simultaneously work to understand and find solutions to the more complex challenges.

It is possible to establish pathways and practices that provide Multilingual Learners of English (1) access to postsecondary opportunities, (2) effective learning opportunities, and (3) positive and empowering experiences that result in increased completion of certificates and degrees.

Stakeholders throughout the field—Adult Education and college educators, institutional leaders, policymakers, service providers, equity advocates, researchers, and funders—can collectively take action to make progress toward that goal.

What is Next?

Our team plans to establish a vibrant community of diverse stakeholders dedicated to improving postsecondary opportunities for MLEs. This community will

- communicate a sense of urgency through case-making and awareness-building;
- create opportunities to identify, share and learn from innovative practices;
- establish principles for effective, evidence-based policies and practices;
- identify priorities for building an evidence base for policies and practices; and
- support institutions to act on the evidence.

See [Act Now](#) following the Discussion of Findings for recommendations of actions that you can take.

Join the Conversation

[Receive updates on Translating Learning.](#)

[Suggest resources or programs of which we should be aware or give feedback on this paper.](#)

Discussion of Findings

This section summarizes the evidence from across the multifaceted data sources. The methodology for each portion of the study is included in the Appendices along with more detailed discussions of the findings by data type.

What do we know about the postsecondary MLE population?

Key Findings

Finding #1. The lack of consistent definitions and data collection makes it difficult to quantify and understand the MLE population. (CM, I, LR, PS)

Finding #2. The population of MLEs in postsecondary education has diverse educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. (I, LR)

Finding #3. The size of the postsecondary MLE population is difficult to assess, but it is significant in many sites and is likely increasing. (LR)

Definitions

In postsecondary education, there are no common terms, definitions, or data collection processes for MLEs, making it very difficult to quantify the size of the population or understand the intersectional identities of the students within the population. This contrasts with K–12 where federal policies, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), explicitly define which students are designated as English Learners (EL). Each respective Department of Education for all 50 states references, in some manner, the federal policy that led to their comprehensive MLE state-level policy. These federal policies include the Civil Rights Act of 1964, ESSA, and No Child Left Behind.

While there are no common postsecondary MLE definitions, these informal categories are used in research and appeared in our interviews.

- **First-generation Americans/Immigrants:** Individuals who immigrated as adults ranging from those with advanced degrees in their home countries to people whose early education was disrupted by war, dislocation, or economic hardship. Their knowledge of English varies widely.
- **Generation 1.5:** Students who came to the U.S. as children, had some U.S.-based schooling ranging from months to years, and received ESL instruction in the K–12 system. Many no longer need ESL instruction in postsecondary, while others continue in ESL programs. After they leave K–12, tracking their status is not consistent.
- **U.S.-born students with a home language other than English (second generation):** Little information exists about this sub-population in postsecondary education. This group is rarely mentioned in interviews or the literature, but many state and institutional definitions of MLEs include all students whose “native language” is not English, without consideration of their country of origin. A question to be explored is if and how postsecondary institutions identify these students and whether these students participate in ESL programs in significant numbers.
- **International or foreign students (F-1):** Students coming to the U.S. specifically to attend college. Several programs we examined indicate that this sub-population makes up a significant portion of their ESL enrollments, although not all F-1 students enroll in ESL.

Postsecondary Data

Along with a lack of common definitions, there is a lack of postsecondary data. This is partly driven by the lack of federal definitions, requirements for data collection, or funding to support data collection. This lack of data is well-documented in the literature, along with

discussions about the challenges around data that hinder research on MLEs in postsecondary (Kanno & Harklau, 2012; Núñez et al., 2016). The result is a much larger research base on MLEs in K–12 than in postsecondary education.

Another result is much of what is known about the postsecondary MLE population must be extrapolated from K–12 data or individual sites. Since K–12 and postsecondary education systems and definitions are not aligned, extrapolation from K–12 data may not accurately represent the postsecondary population. One must also be careful when comparing data between postsecondary sites since definitions and data collection vary so much.

Diversity of Language, Identity, and Characteristics

For published data on the linguistic diversity of MLEs, we must turn to the K–12 sector. The National Center for Education Statistics report on the K–12 sector in fall of 2017 indicates the most reported home languages of English Language Learners/ELLs (as defined by NCES) are, in order, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, English, and Vietnamese. The inclusion of English may indicate that students are living in multilingual homes, another indication of the linguistic complexity of the population. Five other languages were identified as the home language of over 30,000 students each. Spanish is the predominant language, comprising 74.8 percent of the ELL population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

The interviews verify that linguistic diversity persists into postsecondary. Of the ten AE and postsecondary programs we examined, nine reported routinely serving students with at least four different home languages from several different countries; the exception was a program designed specifically for Spanish-speaking students. Personnel from Houston Community College in Texas report that their program serves students from more than 80 countries with approximately 30 home languages. LaGuardia Community College in New York serves students from 133 countries with 62 home languages (LaGuardia Community College, 2022).

Interviewees also talked about the diverse educational backgrounds of MLE students which include U.S. high school graduates, students who graduated high school or earned advanced degrees in other countries, and students with little secondary education. Some programs allow students to get credit for prior educational attainment in other countries, but practices vary, and barriers exist. A faculty member described a Ukrainian refugee with a master's degree who was unable to get the transcripts necessary to apply their credits to a program in a U.S. college.

We found no published large-scale data on the racial identities of postsecondary MLEs, but it is widely accepted that they are predominantly people of color. Again, K–12 data provides some insights. In the fall of 2017, 76.5 percent of ELL students in K–12 were Hispanic, representing 3.8 million students. Asian students made up 10.7 percent of the ELL population,

White 6.6 percent, and Black 4.3 percent (NCES, 2020). Again, caution should be exercised given that K–12 data is not necessarily representative of the postsecondary context, but we believe it does provide evidence of the overall diversity of the MLE population.

According to Núñez et al. (2016), MLEs in postsecondary are more likely to be first-generation college students and come from low socioeconomic backgrounds than their non-MLE counterparts. They have more responsibilities than many college students because they are more likely to be employed full-time, support dependents, and enroll part-time (Núñez et al., 2016).

A recent study conducted by the Institute of Educational Science found that AE ESL students are typically older and choose to take ESL courses to improve their everyday English literacy skills to enhance employment prospects and prepare for further postsecondary education (Larson, 2023).

Population Size

Given the lack of national data, common definitions, and the diversity of the population, it was not feasible to assess the size of the postsecondary MLE population. However, there is a strong consensus among researchers that MLEs are one of the fastest-growing populations in K–12, and, by extension, numbers are likely increasing in higher education (Raufman, 2019). The following data provide snapshots of different sub-populations.

- In the fall of 2015, 50 percent of City University of New York (CUNY) students were non-native English speakers, the terminology used in the report (City University of New York, 2016).
- IPUMS census data for 2021 reported that 23,000 undergraduate students in the U.S. “did not speak English at all” and 142,729 undergraduates speak English “but not well” (Ruggles et al., 2023).
- A 2022 Open Doors report found that there were 948,519 international students enrolled in the U.S. in 2021/22 (Open Doors, 2022).
- In 2020/21, the National Association of State Directors of Adult Education reported 299,556 English Language Acquisition (ELA) students enrolled in AE programs in 2020/21 (NASDAE, 2022).

Untapped Potential

“Including immigrant adults more fully in credentialing initiatives would help fill gaps in the labor force, expand local economies, and add to local tax revenues”

(BATALOVA & FIX, 2022, P. 1).

The Migration Policy Institute provides insights into the population of immigrants who could benefit from postsecondary education in the U.S. The study found that 21 percent of the adults (ages 16 to 64) without postsecondary credentials are immigrants—23.9 million people. Of these, 15.8 million are legally present in the U.S. which makes them eligible for federal and state programs supporting credential attainment. English language development was identified as one of four key barriers to upskilling and earning credentials (Batalova & Fix, 2022).

The interviews demonstrated that trends in ESL enrollment are difficult to predict especially given the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on MLE enrollment. Several programs reported decreases in enrollment in recent years. In addition to the pandemic, possible factors contributing to these declines may include the impact of the American political climate, policy on foreign students and immigration, and changes in college placement policies. Other programs report large increases in enrollment, especially among first-generation Americans, and some report that they are getting close to pre-pandemic numbers. Two AE faculty in different states anecdotally report that they see more students wanting to pursue a certificate or degree compared to the past.

It is also important to note that not all MLEs enroll in ESL programs, which means they are not identified or counted in any systematic way. Some students may prefer this “invisibility.” Interviewees noted that students sometimes feel stigmatized when identified as English Learners. However, this lack of data makes it even more difficult to study the students’ needs, experiences, and outcomes. This will be discussed further under findings related to program structures.

For more information on our findings

Policy Scan

- Federal definitions of MLEs in K–12 and AE
- Examples of state postsecondary definitions

Literature Review

- Labels used in K–12 and postsecondary education
- Further details on sub-populations, demographics, and transition from K–12 to postsecondary

What are Postsecondary Outcomes for MLEs?

Key Findings

Finding #4. A minority of ESL students complete college-level English. (I, LR)

Finding #5. Factors impacting success include the length of course sequences, course integration, and instructional practices, but much is not known, including the impact of programs on different sub-populations and the outcomes of MLEs who do not enroll in ESL courses. (I, LR)

Finding #6. ESL programs play a critical role in creating access to postsecondary education and supporting student success. (I)

Outcomes

The research base on the experiences and academic outcomes for MLEs in higher education is also limited. In an analysis of the national data source, the National Educational Longitudinal Study, Kanno and Cromley (2013) found that within 2 years of graduation from a U.S. high school, approximately 50 percent of MLEs had not enrolled in college and only 18 percent advanced to four-year colleges. This study also found that within eight years of graduation, 12 percent of MLEs in the sample had attained a bachelor's degree, compared to 32 percent of monolingual English speakers and 25 percent of English-proficient Language Minority students.

Rodriguez et al. (2019), found that 34 percent of degree-seeking ESL students successfully completed college-level English within six years. A study of Latino ESL students in community college found that 55 percent did not advance one level beyond their first ESL course and only

7.3 percent of students who had declared a goal of transferring ever enrolled in college-level English, even though this course is a requirement for transfer (Rafzar & Simon, 2011).

A statewide study in California found that among U.S. high school graduates, 42 percent of MLEs who were directly placed in non-ESL pathways completed college-level English in three years compared to 24 percent of students who were placed in ESL pathways. The rate of success was over 80 percent in three years for students who attended a California high school regardless of whether they attended the high school for one, two, three, or four years (The RP Group, 2020).

Many studies focus on the completion of college-level English because it is an important milestone toward obtaining a degree. This metric does have limitations in that college-level English is not usually required for workforce certificates, and, even for degree-seeking students, it is only a leading indicator of degree completion.

Another metric of interest is credit accumulation. Hodara (2015) found that students who enrolled in ESL courses accumulated fewer credits in the first two years of college than MLEs who were not in ESL pathways. However, she also found that enrollment in ESL courses increased credit accumulation for foreign-born students who attended the local high school.

Promising Practices

Research indicates that structural changes in course sequences by smoothing transitions and improving instructional practices have the potential to improve the student experience and outcomes.

Multiple studies have found that integrating courses, such as combining reading and writing to shorten and simplify sequences, has been shown to improve outcomes for ESL students (The RP Group, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2019). These findings, along with studies cited previously regarding higher success rates for students placed into shorter sequences, generally indicate that shortening and simplifying sequences increases student outcomes. Our interview findings show that many systems and institutions are acting upon these research findings. Since the data on outcomes presented above predates many of these changes, the impacts are not yet known.

Kibler et al. (2011) advocate for a framework of structural changes based on moving away from “deficit to resource perspectives” (p. 204) to “conceptualize students as life-long learners whose linguistic skills develop in response to challenging yet supportive academic

environments” (p. 206). They identify four areas in which community colleges can redesign their programs, policies, and coursework to better meet the needs of MLEs:

1. supporting academic transitions into community colleges
2. integrating language and academic content
3. providing accelerated access to college-level, mainstream academic curriculum
4. promoting informed student decision-making (p. 206)

Factors other than course sequences and programmatic structures also impact student success. Instructors who utilized students’ home languages, provided opportunities for collaboration, and were cognizant of the language patterns within their classrooms showed higher rates of academic success than those in more traditional ESL courses (Harrison & Shi, 2016).

Another study found that when MLE instructors focused on helping students develop a positive sense of belonging and community, the positive effects were significant and led to higher academic success (Garza et al., 2021). This finding is consistent with a nearly ten-year-old study of 13 community colleges, which discovered that participating in learning communities had a positive effect on MLEs’ perceptions of their learning outcomes, leading to higher academic outcomes (Smith, 2010).

Many Unknowns

Despite the studies’ disappointing findings, ESL programs play an important role in increasing access to postsecondary education. Aichatou Seydou, one of the students whose profile is featured in this study, arrived in the United States knowing no English and was enrolled in college-level courses within two years thanks to the combined support of the CUNY CLIP and Borough of Manhattan Community College programs. While this is anecdotal evidence, it demonstrates the importance of on-ramps that assist students in developing academic English. The researchers interviewed for this paper, several of whom authored the previously cited studies, all agreed that support for English language development benefits a significant number of students.

Researchers and faculty interviewed commented on the parallels between the findings on ESL course sequences and earlier findings about developmental education placement practices and sequences. We would add that we see parallels in the deficit attitudes and assumptions made about students. Certainly, many of the lessons from developmental

education reform can be applied to ESL programs, but there is one major difference.

Experts are not calling for the elimination of all ESL courses.

In interviews with researchers and practitioners, they suggest that while placement practices can be improved and sequences can be shortened, simplified, and more targeted, they also warn against oversimplifying complex problems. Several interviewees cautioned readers against simply copying and pasting a few sentences from this paper to justify eliminating ESL programs, leaving MLEs with even less support than they already have. We recognize that this is a legitimate concern and urge readers to avoid falling into this pitfall.

Why does this matter?

The current outcomes for MLEs demand change. Change efforts are most effective when they take place in an atmosphere of trust. Stakeholders must work together in good faith to find the balance between the need to know more and inaction. As institutions act and share their learnings, the field can collectively refine and build upon what we currently know about effective practices.

States, systems, and institutions try this:

Begin any change effort by building a shared understanding of the population to be served, current policies, structures, practices, and outcomes. Use this as an opportunity to build relationships and trust among people in different roles.

For more information on our findings

Literature Review

- [Additional research on outcomes](#)

What Federal, State, and Institutional Policies Impact MLEs in Postsecondary?

Key Findings

Finding #7. State policy related to ESL programs often appears in the context of workforce development or Adult Education rather than postsecondary education. (CM, PS)

Finding #8. States that have adopted policies to reform developmental education have mostly exempted MLE programs and students. (CM, PS)

Finding #9. Placement practices are not consistent and do not have a strong evidence base. (LR, CM, PS)

Finding #10. Many MLE policies and structures in K–12 do not align with postsecondary education’s approach to admissions, testing, and placement. (LR, PS)

Variation in Regulation

Depending on their academic goals, MLEs can pursue a variety of postsecondary pathways, including programs in AE, community college, and four-year college. AE programs are federally funded and are subject to extensive federal policies. This federal funding is one reason that ESL programming has proliferated in workforce and AE agencies. ESL programs in community colleges and four-year colleges are largely unregulated and unfunded by the federal or state governments.

Over the past decade, much research has been conducted around the shortcomings of the traditional system of sequential, noncredit developmental education in the context of mathematics and English (Jaggars & Bickerstaff, 2018). This has led an increasing number of states to establish policies that eliminate or replace the traditional approach to developmental education and grant students more control over the courses they take. These policies define how students enter and are supported in college-level gateway math and English courses which are required for most degrees. As a result, these reforms impact every degree-seeking student.

Most of these policies specifically either ignore or exclude ESL courses and MLE students from these reforms. One exception is California's AB705. This legislation contains [language](#) regarding ESL crafted in collaboration with ESL faculty and includes policy regarding access to college-level English. Another exception is the University System of Georgia. David and Kanno (2021) state that the system's developmental education reforms have led to drastically shortening and even eliminating ESL programs.

Harklau and Batson (2023) believe that this exclusion has unintended consequences. In an examination of how organizations prominent in the developmental education reform movement promoted English monolingualism as normative, they state, "Their [the reform organizations'] 'language-blind' perspective contributes to and exacerbates an already unequal playing field for multilingual students in U.S. higher education, where multilingualism is implicitly stigmatized and treated as a liability" (Harklau & Batson, 2023, pp. 17–18).

Variation in Placement

Community colleges largely develop their own placement policies and practices, whereas AE programs are constrained by federal policy, which limits what and how assessments can be used. This section will concentrate on community college placement practices, which differ greatly between and within community college states and systems (Raufman et al., 2019).

Many colleges use placement tests to either require or recommend that students enroll in ESL courses. ACCUPLACER® ESL was the most used assessment for placement in our interview sample, with the Combined English Language Skills Assessment (CELSA) and locally developed tests also being used.

Although research shows that these tests are poorly validated and are frequently used as a sole measure (Núñez et al., 2016), faculty and program directors interviewed for this paper expressed general confidence in the placement measures used at their institutions. Better information on effective placement was identified as one of the most critical needs by system representatives.

Some college programs use multiple measures such as high school records, writing samples, student profiles, self-assessments, and interviews. Some states require the use of multiple measures although the policies tend to allow great latitude. The scan of institutional policy for who is required to undergo ESL placement revealed that institutions tend to be expansive in their categorization of MLEs, requiring many students to take – and at some institutions, pay for – placement testing. College programs represented in our interviews reported that testing was free, but a scan of several community college websites revealed that fees for testing are common, although we are unable to say what percentage of colleges charge fees. Fees for this limited scan ranged from \$10 to \$280 with most in the range of \$10 to \$45. The most common practice was that the first test was free, with a fee for retesting.

How colleges determine if a student should take a placement test also varies. One system requires any student with ESL courses on their high school transcripts, students who received more than six months of instruction in a high school in a non-English speaking country, and foreign students to take the ACCUPLACER ESL. Other institutions rely on self-reported information. In some colleges, placements are required; in others, it is only recommended.

The actual placement cut-off scores can also be quite complicated. Figure 2 is from the Course Maps Analysis and shows the various cut-off scores for continuing education and college ESL courses at one institution based on four different assessments. Each score range indicates a course placement. This example raises several concerns. First, there are overlaps in ranges; for example one range for the BEST Plus is 453 - 484 and the next range is > 453. This may mean that advisors are making individual decisions about placing students.

Figure 2. Placement Cut-Off Scores at College A

BEST Plus	BEST Literacy	ELAR	CASAS Assessment
88 - 361	0 - 20	910 - 929	Reading 0 - 249+
88 - 452	0 - 40	930 and above	Math 0 - 225
362 - 427	21 - 52	940 and above	Math 226 - 236+
428 - 452	41 - 78		
452 - 564	53 - 63		
453 - 484	64 - 67		
> 453	> 53		
> 564	53 - 67 w. 60 or below		
525 - 564	40 - 64		
> 525	> 60		
	< 67		

A second problem is the sheer number of the different cut-off scores with some very narrow bands. The BEST Literacy has eleven different bands of cut-off scores with the narrowest band having a range of four points. Finally, the complexity of the cut-off scores makes it harder for advisors to use effectively and less transparent to students. See the full course map in Appendix B to see how these cut-off scores correspond to actual courses.

Furthermore, Scott-Clayton et al. (2014) found that when a student is only able to use the results of one high-stakes test to demonstrate proficiency, students are often misplaced. This finding relates to developmental education placement; however, it raises important questions about placement practices for the MLE population. This issue is particularly salient when the placement cut-score bands selected by the institution are small, as in this example. Our concerns are compounded by the phenomenon described in the policy scan, in which institutions have broad definitions of who must take this high-stakes test.

Why does this matter?

Inequitable treatment and outcomes can result from variation in practices. While standardization should not always be the goal, the reason for the variation should be examined. Some practices, such as testing fees or overly complex processes and sequences, are a barrier in and of themselves. Placement is typically one of a student's first interactions with a program or institution that impacts their entire postsecondary trajectory. To ensure that the process successfully serves students, it must be evidence-based and continually evaluated.

States, systems try this:

Collect and analyze data on placement practices and engage stakeholders in discussions about why differences exist and how they impact students.

Lack of Alignment to K–12

According to the policy scan, postsecondary infrastructure is not aligned with that of K–12, and there are opportunities for K–12 and higher education to integrate policy, data, and practice more intentionally and seamlessly in support of MLEs.

For example, 49 states currently include a [Seal of Biliteracy](#) as part of their K–12 diploma. The Seal of Biliteracy website states that this seal “is a statement of accomplishment for future employers and college admissions.” However, it is uncommon for college admissions or placement policies to explicitly mention or use this seal as a criterion when determining who is subject to ESL testing and coursework.

This lack of alignment extends to education data systems, making tracking students as they progress from K–12 to postsecondary education difficult or impossible. This also serves as a barrier between the AE and college systems.

Why does this matter?

When education systems are misaligned, students ultimately lose. They lose potential college credits, time, money, and motivation. Data-sharing is critical to creating systems that work for students. Data reveals where students get lost in transitions, where they experience barriers to success, and where systems lead to disparate outcomes.

States, systems try this:

Talk to experts in your institutions to identify barriers to effective data-collection and data-sharing. Gather student stories about challenges they have experienced in navigation programs across and within sectors. Use these student voices to bring stakeholders to the table and motivate change.

For more information on our findings

Policy Scan

- Specific examples of state policy language
- Discussion of quality assurance

Analysis of Course Maps

- Course maps showing placement information

What Postsecondary Program Structures, Designs, and Practices Impact MLEs?

Key Findings

Finding #11. Program structures vary widely. (CM, I, LR, PS)

Finding #12. Programs need to tailor-fit the needs of the local population. (I, PS)

Finding #13. The alignment between AE ESL and college programs is complex. (CM, I, LR, PS)

Finding #14. There is little structured support for MLEs outside of ESL programs. (I)

ESL Program Profiles

The following brief descriptions of programs provide concrete examples of how postsecondary ESL programs in public community colleges and community-based organizations serve students. The programs were chosen to represent a variety of structures and designs. We are not presenting these programs as exemplars, as making such an assessment requires further analysis that is beyond the scope of this paper. The information was provided by program representatives and program websites.

College Readiness Academy (CRA), International Institute of Minnesota (IIMN)

The CRA is an AE program designed to support immigrant MLEs to prepare for success in college. It was developed in 2015 to support students who graduated from the Institute's nursing assistance program. These students were often placed into long sequences of ESL courses, followed by pre-college reading and writing courses. CRA addresses this problem with a free program that prepares students for college through integrated instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening, study skills, and digital literacy. Students also receive navigation services, and intensive one-on-one advising that provides holistic support that continues when the students go to college. Students spend 1–3 semesters in the program depending on their level. The program was originally designed to align with a medical career pathway that can lead to a variety of healthcare careers, but was recently expanded to meet the needs of all new Americans seeking a college education in any degree field. The students can meet college-readiness standards at local colleges and earn three free college credits from Metropolitan State University. Through relationships with St. Paul College and Hennepin Technical College, CRA students can go directly into college Composition without testing (Spartz et al., 2019).

CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP), City University of New York (CUNY)

CLIP is a low-cost program for students who have been accepted to CUNY but require intensive support with English development before beginning their college program. CLIP students defer their matriculation while participating in the program. Students attend class for 5 hours a day, 5 days a week, for 14–16-week terms and may choose to repeat for multiple terms up to one year. Students who self-identify as English Learners in the CUNY application process or are identified based on high school records take the ACCUPLACER ESL to assess whether they need English language instruction. Students with English language needs can choose to enroll in ESL classes at their college or enroll in CLIP to take advantage of the intensive English language instruction and the program's low cost—\$145 for New York residents in the fall of 2023 and \$35 for public assistance recipients. Students are reassessed upon matriculation into a college and may be required to take college ESL courses as well. Post-pandemic, approximately 65 percent of CLIP students matriculate into a degree

program. The program has about 5,000 enrollments per year (3,500 unduplicated), down from 6,000 pre-pandemic.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Reading Area Community College (RACC), Pennsylvania

The Reading Area Community College EAP program coordinator says that EAP focuses on “helping students develop their communicative effectiveness in an academic context and fostering in them the understanding that their language skills will continue to develop as they advance through their college courses.” Based on this philosophy, the EAP team has made a concerted effort to decrease the number of required pre-college courses while increasing support for students in college courses.

In 2007, EAP had 12 courses. The program now has five courses with two optional Listening and Speaking courses. EAP also includes the Academic Literacy and Language (ALL) Center. This center is a critical element of the strategy to support students in ongoing English language development with professional ESL-trained tutors who provide targeted language support in college-level course content, not just in writing, but also in regular training for other disciplines. Most of the students in the EAP program have been in the U.S. for less than five years with recent increases in students who have been in the U.S. for less than two years, and seventy-five percent of students attended a U.S. high school. During the pandemic, the EAP program dropped to 75 students but has rebounded to 250 students in 2022/23, close to the pre-pandemic enrollment of 300 students.

ESL Program, Cypress College, California

The Cypress College ESL program offers six levels of credit-bearing courses, all of which are transferable to the California State University (CSU) system and are explained more fully in the Course Map Analysis. Cypress also developed a [Guided Pathways ESL Milestones Certificate](#) program to recognize students who complete major coursework while completing their English composition course. This student achievement is now recognized by a completion metric approved by the California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO): certificates of achievement. To earn a Milestone Certificate, students must complete the three highest-level ESL courses and a prerequisite course in one of ten academic pathways.

ESL for College Ready You (CRU), Amarillo College, Texas

The ESL for CRU program is an AE program providing ESL instruction for adult learners. The program works closely with community partners to recruit students and offer courses in a variety of locations. This includes a partnership with a medical service facility that provides free care for the uninsured in the community. While students have a variety of goals, the program actively encourages and supports students to pursue

postsecondary certificates and degrees. As soon as students enter the program, they begin to work with a career navigator who helps them map a career pathway. The ESL instruction integrates students' dominant languages and seeks to reinforce the students' identities. Instruction integrates speaking, listening, reading, and writing. When ready, students can enter workforce certificate programs or matriculate to Amarillo College for a degree program. The workforce programs use an I-BEST model (see Discussion of Findings for more information) and have ESL instructors embedded in courses to provide ongoing support. Students matriculating into college programs take the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) assessment. If the assessment indicates they would benefit from college-level English support, they go into a corequisite course.

Intensive English, Houston Community College, Texas

The Intensive English program serves students from over 80 countries with approximately 30 home languages. It has a self-contained "care model" that builds learning communities to foster a sense of belonging and provide holistic supports, including advising. The program offers four levels of ESL courses. Levels 1 and 2 are not eligible for financial aid. Levels 3 and 4 are eligible for financial aid, although they do not offer college credit. Levels 3 and 4 include four courses in writing, reading, grammar, and conversation that students take in cohorts. Students who place directly into Levels 3 and 4 are mostly non-native students (F-1) and recent U.S. high school graduates. The program then offers an ESL corequisite support course for students taking college-level English.

Transitional Bilingual Learning Community (TBLC), Harry S. Truman College, City Colleges of Chicago, Illinois

The TBLC is a two-semester college credit program for Spanish-speaking students who need instruction in English for success in college. A key feature of the program is its intentional design to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking students through the use of Spanish in instruction, course materials that connect to students' culture and experiences, integrated instruction that helps students make connections across courses, cultural activities, and intentional cohort-building. The program serves recent immigrants, students coming from adult education programs, and recent high school graduates. Students are selected for the program through a holistic placement process that includes a locally designed test, a student profile, and self-directed placement. Students take a College Success course along with other college courses, such as English, mathematics, and Introduction to Social Sciences. After two semesters, the students transition into the college with ongoing support from an advisor and informal mentoring from peers and faculty.

The structures of course sequences in ESL programs appear to be highly individualized. Varying types of course credits offered through different systems are one source of variation. Course types include adult education courses, continuing education courses, pre-college, and college-level courses. Within those course categories, there are distinct differences that impact the student including whether credit is offered, if the course is eligible for financial aid, and cost. The following table provides an overview of these course types.

Figure 3. Characteristics of Course Types

Course Type	Earn College Credit	Eligible for Financial Aid	Counts Towards Credit Load	Counts Towards Program of Study	Cost of Course
Adult Education	No	No	No	No	Free to students, paid for by Federal funds
Continuing Education	No	Yes	No	No	State-specific, typically lower cost than tuition
Pre-College	Yes (in some cases)	Yes	Yes	No	Tuition
College-level	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Stated tuition

Students are typically placed in different levels in both AE and college ESL programs, with the number of levels varying by program. College ESL programs have traditionally divided instruction into reading, writing, conversation, and grammar, but many colleges are now integrating courses. We discovered examples of courses that integrated reading and writing at the start of a program's sequence, followed by separate writing and reading courses near the end of the sequence. Students in these programs are not required to take every course (for example, a student may take writing but not reading).

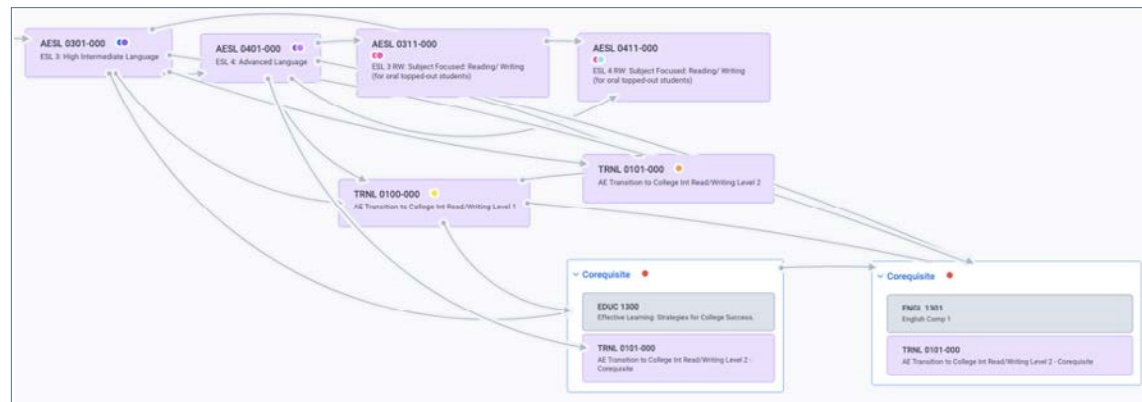
There is a trend to shorten these sequences, especially in college programs, but there continues to be a debate over how much they can be compressed. One interviewee explained that their ESL program requires the completion of 60 credits for students starting in the first course in their program sequence. The faculty recently voted to cut the program to 48 credits, a controversial proposal that passed by only one vote. Meanwhile, a college in a neighboring state offers a 12-credit program.

As part of the trend to shorten sequences, interviewees in New York, Georgia, California, New Jersey, and Texas all mentioned being strongly encouraged or required to place MLEs directly into college-level English with corequisite support. Avni and Finn (2022) found that corequisites challenge assumptions that “academic language proficiency is a prerequisite to participation in disciplinary courses” (p. 3), but express concerns that corequisite models designed for the general population are not informed by the field of language learning. The researchers argue that MLEs who can benefit from language development support should be given more consideration in corequisite design. Some colleges in our interview pool address this issue by offering specific sections of English corequisites taught by ESL instructors to provide additional language instruction for MLEs.

The course maps in Appendix B provide an excellent visualization of the variation in program structures across institutions—these variations include placement practices, the number of courses, the clarity of the pathways through the courses, organization of content, and course naming conventions.

Figure 4 illustrates the complexity in some pathways, showing one section of an AE course map from College A. There are six AE courses in the sequence, leading to a college-level English course offered with an AE corequisite. A student could take more than a dozen different pathways through those courses to eventually enroll in a college-level English course. For example, there are six options for a student after the first course with similar options after each of the following courses. Some students at this college also take a college success course, also paired with an AE corequisite, before enrolling in college-level English.

Figure 4. Course Map, College A



There is good reason for some variation across programs. Multiple interviewees stressed the importance of understanding the needs of the target population in considering the

design of an ESL program. As illustrated in the Program Profiles, student populations vary widely from site to site. Population characteristics that impact program design include:

- Cultural and linguistic backgrounds
- Educational background
- Level of English proficiency
- Time living in the United States
- Part-time/full-time enrollment
- Student goals
- Workforce opportunities and needs of the community

Why Does This Matter?

Given the importance of designing to meet the needs of the local population and community, program structures will vary. It also makes sense that those structures meet some common criteria based on evidence of the effectiveness of short, clearly defined pathways connected to students' goals. Questions to ask include:

- Are the pathways easily understood by students?
- Can students clearly see how the pathway leads to their ultimate goals, whether a certificate, associate degree, or transfer?
- Does the pathway eliminate unnecessary transition points and courses?
- Are there viable opportunities for students to demonstrate proficiency and “jump ahead” in a sequence?



Institutions try this:

Use your program's website to find and understand how to enter a program or what courses are on a pathway. Ask a student to do the same and observe them. Use the experience to determine which aspects of the website could be improved.

Alignment Across Sectors

Depending on their goals, MLE students may have to navigate multiple transitions, as shown below. Each transition is a potential barrier, and the level of alignment between programs and the professionals who provide information and guidance can significantly impact students' experiences in those transitions.

Figure 5. Types of Transitions



The alignment of adult education ESL and college programs (which may include continuing education and college-level courses) varies greatly and can be problematic. The RP Group found that 58 percent of adult education ESL students who matriculated to a California community college enrolled in noncredit courses, 27 percent enrolled in for-credit but non-transferable courses one or two levels below transfer, and 14 percent enrolled directly into college-level English. The RP Group made recommendations that adult education and community colleges create clear noncredit-to-credit pathways across ESL and English sequences to maximize student success, that community colleges increase the integration of noncredit and credit courses, and that colleges consider contextualizing ESL curriculum (Beam et al., 2019).

Issues with alignment between programs were raised in several interviews. One community college administrator praised his institution's alignment across continuing education and college courses but acknowledged a lack of coherence with AE programs. He says, "People don't see the alignment [as an issue] the way I do." He is working to address this to better assist students in navigating paths that lead to financial stability.

While the distinction between AE, continuing education, and a college program appears to be obvious on paper, the reality is far more nuanced. Because each sector has multiple levels, there may be some overlap in course content. Course titles might be the same, but the courses themselves may have different standards. Two interviewees from different sites described cross-sector competition for students as one in which the student always loses.

Some AE programs are embedded within community colleges. This can allow for greater collaboration and alignment. Pierce College ESL faculty describe how their college administration collaborated with AE ESL faculty to integrate their program more fully into the institution, as evidenced by their inclusion in institutional initiatives such as Achieving the Dream and [Guided] Pathways work. Furthermore, AE faculty and staff have worked to establish relationships with non-ESL colleagues to raise awareness of the special needs of

ESL students. These collaborative efforts by administration, faculty, and staff have resulted in an environment in which ESL students are well-supported by a variety of college services. This example demonstrates the critical role that faculty and institutional leadership play in fostering an inclusive culture.

Organizational structures can also aid in the alignment between noncredit continuing education programs and mainstream college courses. At Georgia Gwinnett College, corequisite support for college-level English, the tutoring center, and the college's continuing education English Language Institute (ELI) all fall under the purview of the Dean of Student Success. This enables him and his faculty and staff to ensure that students transition from the ELI experience to and through their college courses in a seamless and well-supported way.

The International Institute of Minnesota College Readiness Academy serves as a model for establishing pathways from a community-based AE program to college by creating agreements with colleges that allow students to enter college-level English without retesting. One of the Institute's faculty members explained that reaching these agreements required a lengthy process of building trust and mutual learning.

In some cases, however, AE may be the only option for students. For example, a rural college in New Mexico offers an AE program that has around 30 students every semester but offers no ESL instruction for students who matriculate into the college.

We found few structures that support the transition from community college to four-year institutions. One example is statewide in California where community colleges offer college-credit ESL courses that transfer to the California State University and University of California systems. There are three types of transferability for ESL courses—elective credit, general education credit, and English Composition (The RP Group, 2021).

Why does this matter?

Transition points can negatively impact students in a variety of ways. Research shows that they increase attrition. Poor alignment can result in students having to repeat coursework or being underprepared for coursework. Difficult transitions can lead to students enrolling in courses they do not need. Every course a student takes that is unnecessary or must repeat increases the cost, time, and frustration.

Institutions try this:

Ask someone who works in the ESL program to explain how students transition into or out of the program. Is it hard to explain? Ask a student to try to explain the process.

Support Outside of ESL

The research and interviews yielded very little information about students' transition out of ESL programs and into non-ESL college courses. We only found a few examples of structured, proactive support for students after they leave an ESL program.

Washington's [Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program \(I-BEST\)](#) is one example of embedded ESL support. The I-BEST model “challenges the traditional notion that students must move through a set sequence of basic education or pre-college (remedial) courses before they can start working on certificates or degrees” (Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges website). I-BEST is based on a team-teaching model, with one instructor teaching course content and the other assisting with skills development. This includes ESL instruction in some I-BEST programs. While the I-BEST model was developed in Washington, colleges in other states have adopted it, primarily for work-force programs.

[Northeast Wisconsin Technical College](#) has taken a different approach to incorporating language supports into the classroom. Spanish-speaking students serve as translators in class in a bilingual industrial maintenance program. The cohort model allows MLEs to build relationships with the student translators (Guth, 2023).

Some of the AE ESL and pre-college programs represented in our interviews have advisors or navigators who assist students in mapping out their paths and preparing for the transition to college. In some cases, these advisors work with students until they complete their degrees.

Colleges often have writing centers supporting all students across courses and some have tutors trained to support ESL students. Reading Area Community College (RACC) took this concept a step further by establishing an Academic Literacy and Language (ALL) Center to provide tutoring for MLEs in a variety of college courses. The professional tutors have TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) credentials or experience working with MLEs, as well as content expertise in a variety of disciplines, although they have limited capacity in mathematics and science. As a Hispanic Serving Institution, RACC also has bilingual tutors for many courses.

Non-ESL College Coursework

Matriculating out of an ESL program does not mean that a student's English language development ends. Researchers estimate that academic English development can take four to seven years (Hakuta et al., 2000). At the same time, interviewees and researchers make it clear that students are quite capable of succeeding in college-level courses during that development process. Rodriguez et al. (2019) found that when California colleges integrated

ESL courses with transferable-level English coursework, as opposed to non-transferable credit remedial skills, students had higher academic outcomes.

It is important to remember that completion of an ESL sequence, or even of college-level English, is not the goal of MLE students seeking a certificate or degree. Researchers call upon institutions to offer programs that help students make progress toward completion of certificates or degrees “before students lose the motivation and financial resources to do so” (Bunch & Kibler, 2015, p. 21).

A former ESL student who completed a program in Kinesiology and is preparing to transfer to a university discussed the difficulty of transitioning to non-ESL courses: “Some teachers assume everyone knows English perfectly.” The student wishes more faculty recognized and accommodated the extra time that a multilingual student may require to complete assignments and tests, sharing that, “As a student, I am trying my best.”

Other students have reported positive experiences with non-ESL courses. Three students who have progressed to non-ESL courses emphasized the value of communicating with their professors. These students described how they try to establish a relationship with their instructors early on and explain that they may require extra help. These students described the faculty as being very willing to support them.

Why does this matter?

Incorporating English language development supports, like those discussed, into courses and services could improve MLE experiences and outcomes for both students transitioning out of ESL and MLEs who do not take ESL courses. While the students we interviewed took full responsibility for communicating with their instructors, not all students feel empowered to advocate for themselves. Writing centers, for example, are very valuable, especially if they provide services from ESL professionals, but their success is dependent on the institution clearly communicating about their services and how students will benefit, as well as students having time to seek help outside of class.

Institutions try this:

Compare data on MLE outcomes and non-MLE outcomes at the course and instructor levels. Are there any discrepancies that point to inadequate supports? Conduct focus groups with MLE students to get a more complete understanding of their experiences in non-ESL coursework, such as gauging their sense of belonging and what might help to increase it.

For more information on our findings

Analysis of Course Maps

- A detailed discussion of the course maps
- Full course maps from six institutions

What Supports do Postsecondary MLEs, Faculty, and Staff Need?

Key Findings

Finding #15. Relationships with faculty, advisors, staff, and each other are a critical aspect of the student experience. (I, LR)

Finding #16. ESL and non-ESL faculty and staff need training and professional communities. (I)

Finding #17. Deficit-based language and attitudes are embedded in the system. (I, CM)

Student/Faculty Relationships

“I feel welcome and comfortable in class when teacher is friendliness, kindness, and open to students.”

—ESL STUDENT

“I feel like—I have accent so maybe people make fun of me . . . Sometimes I even get embarrassed. But I always remember what she [my ESL professor] said. She said ‘Don’t ever listen to anyone. You guys are doing something amazing.’”

—ESL STUDENT

Faculty and student interviewees all stressed the importance of developing strong relationships, creating a sense of belonging, and capitalizing on students' strengths. Program structure, departmental and institutional culture, and staffing practices can all help or hinder faculty and staff in meeting these objectives with their students. Several programs use cohorts or learning communities to help build relationships.

Many of the instructors in our sample work to connect with students' cultures, value multilingualism as an asset, use students' home language in the classroom, and assist students in navigating American culture. Student services professionals play a major role in providing wrap-around services. Advising and mentorship are especially valued. Research shows that these types of practices improve outcomes (Garza et al., 2021; Harrison & Shi, 2016; Smith, 2010).

For students, feeling welcomed and respected is very important. One student interviewed still remembers how staff and faculty welcomed her with smiles and support on her first day. She said, "It make me so happy." Students also note the importance of feeling safe from embarrassment and the fear of making mistakes. At the same time, they want faculty to correct their mistakes so they can learn from them.

Interviewees also talked about informal mentorship that occurs because of the strong relationships built between students and faculty and among students in the ESL programs. These relationships give students allies and advocates as they navigate the wider college community.

ESL Staff and Faculty

Staffing ESL programs is complicated by the different requirements for AE and college programs. Many interviewees emphasized the importance of TESOL certification, which is required in many sites. Two of the faculty interviewed discussed how their background as K–12 educators provided a strong foundation in research-based practice. AE programs and some college programs also offer training and mentoring for new faculty.

Some college programs reported challenges in finding qualified staff or are moving toward having more adjunct and part-time instructors due to budget cuts. This raises concerns for the faculty stressing the importance of building relationships with students, as this can be difficult for instructors who may only be on campus for their classes.

Student interviews strongly echo the value of having faculty available to them. One student described how meeting with her ESL instructor outside of class got her through a particularly stressful time when she considered quitting school. She added that she is more likely to build a relationship with faculty than with other students because "everyone has their own thing going on."

ESL faculty and program directors find value in professional networks. The [TESOL International Association](#) and especially state TESOL affiliates are primary sources of information and learning. Some states and systems have structures like CUNY's [ESL Discipline Council](#) and Florida's English for Academic Purposes Consortium to support college faculty learning and collaboration across institutions. These structures can also be used to include faculty in policy decisions. Some states also have literacy-resource centers that provide training and technical assistance to AE ESL teachers. Examples include the [Illinois Adult Learning Resource Center](#) and the [Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning](#) which even offers a hotline.

The National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS) reported that in 2021/22, only 22.7 percent of paid AE teachers were full-time. While this is not specific to ESL, it indicates likely staffing patterns in AE ESL and raises the question of whether part-time instructors have access to professional networks and learning opportunities. NRS also reported that in the U.S., 747 full-time AE teachers and 3,292 part-time teachers were TESOL certified (NRS, 2021).

Deficit-Based Culture

“Students’ multilingualism is often seen as a ‘problem’ facing community colleges, one that can be ‘diagnosed’ through placement tests and ‘treated’ in appropriate language courses”

(KIBLER ET AL., 2011, P. 205).

Many faculty we interviewed talked about colleagues who have deficit-based views of MLEs. The faculty spoke of non-ESL faculty who interpret a student's challenge with the English language as a lack of ability. One ESL instructor wanted her colleagues to know that “They [MLEs] don't have a deficit—if anything, they come in with the opposite, they come with more knowledge than we have because they are bilingual.” Another said the one thing she wishes she could change would be to “get our faculty on board and help them with strategies because it's really not an issue with the students. It's a lack of [faculty] knowing what training is out there, knowing how to be responsive to the students.”

Deficit views of multilingualism and ESL are also deeply ingrained in the culture of many colleges. A faculty member talked about the inequity of credit allocation. An English-speaking student earns college credit for taking a foreign language such as French—the credit may even count toward a degree—but a French-speaking student who takes an ESL course often does not receive college credit.

This deficit-based culture also shows up in course titles and descriptions. Course titles often use terms such as “basic,” “low,” “foundational,” and other deficit-based language. Course descriptions use words with similarly negative framing. Being placed into courses with deficit-based names and descriptions could potentially affect the learning mindset of these already-marginalized students, and research shows that learning mindsets play a critical role in supporting student learning and retention (Tibbetts et al., 2022). An alternative would be to simply number courses as is common practice in other course sequences such as Calculus.

Website language is also quite telling. The first line on the webpage for an ESL assessment at a college with a very large MLE population says, “Criteria for Degree and College Credit Certificate-Seeking Students With *Limited English Proficiency*.” Compare this to the first line of another institution’s page for ESL assessment which says, “Welcome, ESL Students!”

Non-ESL Staff and Faculty

Non-ESL faculty may be ill-equipped to work with MLEs. Some colleges provide training for non-ESL faculty on how to better serve MLEs but participation varies by location. This is another chance to improve MLE experiences and outcomes while also addressing the deficit-based attitudes described above. A program coordinator interviewed for this study believes it is critical to help her non-ESL colleagues understand that “our students bear the brunt of what I call the communication burden,” which means that “our students are constantly feeling that burden of having to comprehend and be comprehensible . . . That communication burden must be shared.”

Student support professionals are vital to the student experience. A student interviewee talked about how important it is for new students to get accurate information from student services which is more challenging for MLEs having to navigate language differences. The student described the staff with whom she interacted as “not very friendly.” Some of the program directors interviewed mentioned they conduct training to help advisors explain ESL options in an asset-based way. Since advising is critical in helping students navigate pathways and transitions, this may be an area for increased attention.

Why does this matter?

Institutional culture is not expressed in a mission statement. It is expressed in the policies, structures, and practices of the institution; the language of its communications; the way that different groups are represented in leadership; and how resources are distributed. An institution that wishes to attract and retain MLEs to see them thrive and succeed must build a culture that welcomes, supports, and respects the students and the people who serve them.

Institutions try this:

Examine institutional structures and practices to determine how well ESL faculty, staff, and MLE students are represented in areas such as the allocation of professional development resources, leadership positions, communications, and systems of recognition. Ask students about their experiences.

For more information on our findings

Literature Review

- Further details on the research on instructional practices

Analysis of Course Maps

- A detailed discussion of the course maps
- Full course maps from six institutions

Act Now

Stakeholders in a variety of roles can take action immediately to increase their own understanding and raise awareness among colleagues and partners. Suggestions for action are provided below.

Figure 6. Stakeholder Action List

Group	Suggested actions
Faculty, Student Support Professionals, Institutional Researchers	<p>Build understanding of your local MLE population—demographics; goals; and educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Examine who goes into ESL courses and who does not.</p> <p>Establish safe avenues for students to share their experiences, especially in navigating transition points. Get input from students who do and do not experience success.</p> <p>Build understanding of your local AE ESL pathways to-and-through college completion and establish relationships and trust across sectors and roles. Also examine the pathways of MLEs who do not enroll in ESL.</p>
Administrators	<p>Signal that MLEs are valued, and improving their experiences and outcomes is a priority. Examine whether your institutional mission and strategic plan need to be adjusted to reflect this priority.</p> <p>Empower MLE students and ESL faculty and staff to be full participants in the campus community and have a seat at the table for decision-making.</p> <p>Examine ESL sections of college websites and ensure welcoming, asset-based, jargon-free language that is easily translated into other languages is used consistently.</p> <p>Support faculty and staff to collaborate on examining the current pathways and data on student experience and outcomes.</p> <p>Provide professional development to administrators, faculty, and staff to understand how best to adjust practices to support MLEs and recognize multilingualism as the asset it is.</p>
State/System Leaders	<p>Conduct economic analyses to illustrate the benefits of supporting MLE attainment of postsecondary credentials and collect data to better understand the characteristics of the MLE population.</p> <p>Increase data-sharing and transparency across sectors.</p> <p>Support and provide incentives for institutions to examine and improve pathways.</p> <p>Conduct state/system projects to collect data on pathways, placement, and student outcomes as they progress through the pathways.</p>

Group	Suggested actions
Researchers	<p>Work with institutions, states, and systems to make research accessible, actionable, and responsive to the people doing the work.</p> <p>Help elevate the student experience in research and implementation supports.</p> <p>Collaborate with faculty and institutions to identify priorities for future research.</p>
Equity Advocates	<p>Raise the visibility of MLEs and build urgency around improving postsecondary opportunities for this population.</p> <p>Empower MLEs to be included in discussions and decision-making.</p> <p>Identify how to facilitate and encourage other actors to take the actions listed above.</p>
Funders	<p>Increase your understanding of the MLE population and consider how they fit into your strategic priorities.</p> <p>Encourage partners and grantees to consider how projects and initiatives impact MLEs.</p> <p>Designate funding for MLE programs, policy, and research.</p>

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Appendix A: Interview Methodology

Interviewees were chosen to represent a variety of roles and contexts. ESL faculty, program directors, students, community college administrators, system representatives from ten states, and leading researchers in the field were among those interviewed. The ten states represented were California, Georgia, Florida, Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Texas, and Washington. The table below shows the roles of interviewees, as well as the total number of participants in each group.

Figure A1. Interviewees by Role

Role	Number
Students	14
ESL faculty	8
ESL program coordinators/directors	5
Community college administrators	3
State or system representatives	6
Researchers	4

Interviewees in professional positions were identified through our professional networks and from recommendations of people with whom we spoke. Others were selected from publicly available information. The pool of interviewees skews toward those who might be considered leaders in the field or, at the very least, are proactive and visible within their professional communities, which is a limitation of this approach. We spoke with two people from the same institution in several cases because the original contact chose to include a colleague.

Interviewees were told that their names and institutions would not be used without their permission. We provided this assurance to increase the likelihood that people would be honest in their comments. Where institutions are mentioned in the paper, the information is either public or has been verified by the interviewee.

Students from Cypress College and the Borough of Manhattan Community College were interviewed at the invitation of faculty members. Three students agreed to provide detailed profiles for our study. Pierce College in Washington also provided videotaped student interviews and written responses to questions about their experiences. Because of the nature of the recruitment, student participants are likely to be successful in their ESL programs and have had positive experiences while in them. The students were all first-generation Americans from ten different countries.

Appendix B: Analysis of Course Maps

Introduction to Course Mapping

Course mapping is a process that uses systems thinking to physically visualize an entire system. When used together in higher education, systems thinking and course mapping can mobilize higher education professionals to design an effective programmatic approach for addressing and eliminating inequities. An examination of course maps from six institutions is included to provide readers with concrete examples of the variation in ESL pathways.

Course Mapping Details

Course maps convert discrete lists of courses, placement criteria, and course data into a single interactive image that clearly shows the ESL pathways that students navigate at an institution. Course maps have three key components:

- **Courses** are the building blocks of a course map. Each course on a map is visually represented with a box, which is color-coded to denote course type.
- **Sequences** are established by the prerequisites for each of the courses on the map. They are visually represented with arrows pointing from the prerequisite course to the subsequent courses.
- **Placement** is an important component of the system. On a course map, placement is shown by creating a key with each placement score band or range and then linking each placement band to the required first course with a color-coded “eye” symbol.

The maps depict the student’s path through the courses using course names, numbers, and descriptions provided by the institutions. They can also be used locally to identify and address barriers in the pathways. Simple maps indicate a system that has been well-designed to assist students in enrolling and completing courses. More complex maps depict a system that is difficult for students to navigate, difficult for advisors to guide students through, and cumbersome for faculty to reform. Such maps aid in the understanding of on-the-ground practices across institutions.

Methodology

We designed a data template to request information on course identification, classification, enrollment, sequencing, and placement to create the maps. We collaborated with a state

systems partner to identify postsecondary institutions that serve many multilingual students and we also recruited institutions through our interviews. We shared the data template and explained the intended deliverables: a visual map of their ESL/ESOL pathways and a memo about the map that they could share with internal stakeholders.

We received information from six colleges in three states. We mapped the course pathways using this information. Each map used the same color key to identify types of courses.

We reviewed the ESL websites for each institution while creating the course maps to determine placement processes, including the cost of testing for students.

Findings

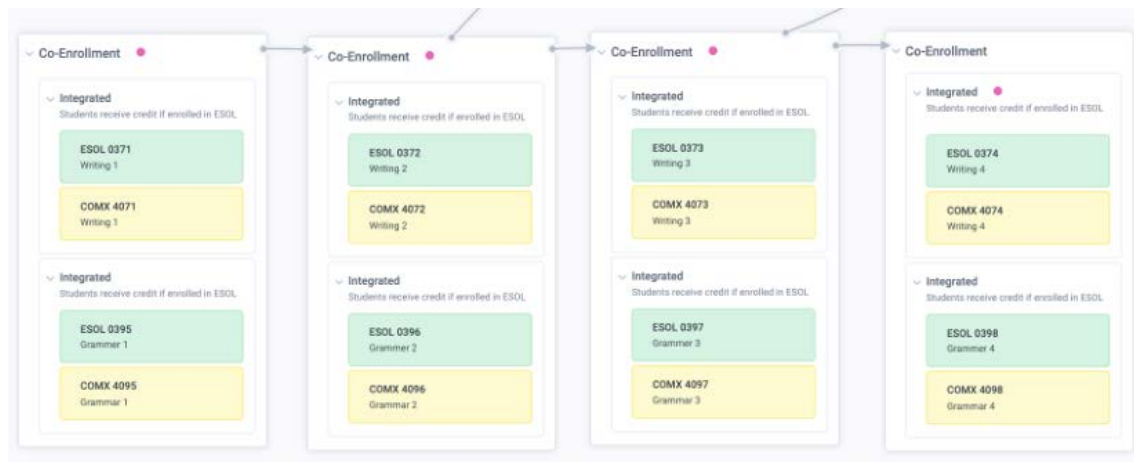
Adult education courses, continuing education courses, pre-college, and college-level courses were among the courses reported in these datasets. There are distinct differences between those course categories that affect the student. Some courses are college-level and transferable. Some only count for continuing education units. Some courses do not count toward a credential or degree. Figure 3 provides an overview of these course types.

One institution offers enrollment-integrated courses to students, which means that students can be enrolled in either continuing education or an academic program. This strategy is known as “mirroring.” That is, a degree-seeking student receives college credit for the same course in which other students only receive continuing education credit. College credit students pay tuition, whereas continuing education students take the course for free. This is distinct from subject-based integration, such as the integrated reading and writing courses mentioned in the interview findings.

While many traditional, college-level courses combine grammar, reading, and writing, the ESL courses we mapped demonstrated that this is not always the case. Not only are these courses distinct, but they are frequently divided into designated levels (e.g., Grammar 1, 2, 3, and 4). This results in an even longer sequence of courses for MLE students.

Figure B1 depicts a small portion of a larger pathway at one college and visually demonstrates that students must be co-enrolled in separate writing and grammar courses in the same semester. Students may need to take up to four semesters before progressing to the college-level English course. This example also demonstrates how the college-level courses (the top box in each pair shown in green) are mirrored with the continuing education courses (the bottom box in each pair shown in yellow). This means students are taking the same courses, with some receiving—and paying for—college credit that applies to a degree and others receiving continuing education credit at no cost.

Figure B1. College A Course Map That Includes Co-Enrollment Requirements, as Well as a Mirroring Structure



College Credit ESL Courses

Cypress College in California has been a leader in establishing college-level ESL courses that allow students to earn transferable college credit. The first three courses in the program transfer as elective credit and the next two, ESL 108 C and ESL 109 C, fulfill general education requirements for C2 Humanities for both California State University (CSU) transfer and Cypress College degrees. The last course in the sequence, ESL 110 C, is equivalent to English composition and fulfills the Written Communication requirement for degrees and transfer to both CSU (CSU A2) and the University of California (IGETC 1A). Students may choose to take additional noncredit courses through North Orange Continuing Education.

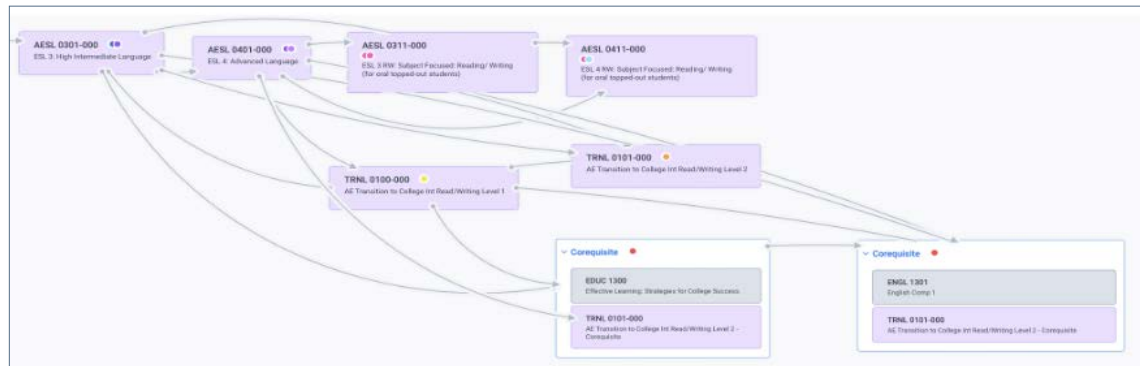
There are not always clear pathways connecting the various course types. Students who enroll in AE, for example, frequently do not have a connected pathway into pre-college or college-level courses.

Long sequences are also displayed in all three categories on the maps. The most extensive included 16 sequential ESL courses in an adult education pathway. According to the information provided by the college, these courses were not linked to college-level courses in any way, leaving students without a clear path to credit-bearing enrollment.

Alternatively, some maps include only one or two pre-college courses on the academic pathway with no information on whether these courses connect to a college-level course. One institution provided transferable college credit for six of its ESL courses that are part of a sequential pathway.

Figure B2 illustrates the complexity in some pathways. This example shows one section of an AE course map from College A. There are six stand-alone AE courses in this portion of the sequence, leading to a college-level English course which includes an AE corequisite support course. On this map, a student could take more than a dozen different courses. There are multiple pathways a student could take to eventually enroll in a college-level English course. For example, there are six options for a student after the first course with similar options after each of the following courses. Some students at this college also take a college success course paired with an AE corequisite course before enrolling in college-level English.

Figure B2. AE Course Map



These complex, long pathways raise concerns because there is strong evidence that longer sequences of courses increase the likelihood of students dropping out for a variety of personal, professional, or academic factors (Bailey et al., 2010). Furthermore, students' English development varies widely, necessitating the need for multiple entry points into postsecondary pathways for MLEs. Understanding the trade-off between minimizing sequence length and providing adequate support for language development is an urgent challenge.

A review of course maps revealed that course titles frequently use terms like “basic,” “low,” “foundational,” and other deficit-based language. Words with similarly negative framing were used in course descriptions. According to the literature review, MLEs in postsecondary are more likely to be first-generation and come from low socioeconomic backgrounds than their non-MLE counterparts (Núñez et al., 2016). Being placed into courses with deficit-based names and descriptions may have an impact on these already-marginalized students' learning mindsets, and research shows that learning mindsets play a critical role in supporting student learning and retention (Tibbetts et al., 2022). These deficit titles and descriptions, as well as the pervasive deficit mindset of faculty and staff identified in interviews, is a substantial concern for our team.

Students are often subject to stringent placement policies, as evidenced by other sections of this paper. The literature review summarizes research related to ESL placement and reveals significant differences between colleges in placement tests used and the cut scores associated with the tests.

A search of the placement websites of the colleges that submitted course information showed that most students must take a test to determine course placement. Scott-Clayton et al. (2014) discovered that when a student is only able to demonstrate proficiency using the results of one high-stakes test, students are frequently placed incorrectly. This finding relates to developmental education placement but raises important questions about placement for the MLE population that must be investigated. This is especially important when the placement cut-score bands selected by the institution are small, as in the example shown below. Additionally, this is exacerbated by the phenomenon described in the policy scan, in which institutions have broad definitions of who is required to take this high-stakes exam.

Figure B3 shows the various cut-off scores from four different assessments for placement into continuing education and college ESL courses at one institution. This example raises several concerns. First, there are overlaps in ranges; for example one range for the BEST Plus is 453 - 484 and the next range is > 453. This may mean that advisors are making individual decisions about placing students. A second problem is the sheer number of the different cut-offs with some very narrow bands. The figure shows that one assessment, the BEST Literacy, has eleven different bands of cut-off scores with the narrowest band having a range of four points. Finally, the complexity of the cut-off scores makes it harder for advisors to use effectively and less transparent to students. See the full course map at the end of this section to see how these cut-off scores correspond to actual courses.

Figure B3. Placement Cut-Off Scores at College A

BEST Plus	BEST Literacy	ELAR	CASAS Assessment
88 - 361	0 - 20	910 - 929	Reading 0 - 249+
88 - 452	0 - 40	930 and above	Math 0 - 225
362 - 427	21 - 52	940 and above	Math 226 - 236+
428 - 452	41 - 78		
452 - 564	53 - 63		
453 - 484	64 - 67		
> 453	> 53		

BEST Plus	BEST Literacy	ELAR	CASAS Assessment
> 564	53 - 67 w. 60 or below		
525 - 564	40 - 64		
> 525	> 60		
	< 67		

During our review of placement websites, we discovered that students may be required to pay for the placement tests, posing a financial barrier to course enrollment. One of the colleges in our course mapping sample, for example, charges students \$280 to take one ESL placement test. The others in the sample do not charge students a fee. A search of community college placement websites in one state reveals that some colleges charge fees for placement testing, some of which are much lower than the example provided (e.g., \$10–\$45). Some only charge students who take the exam online. Furthermore, some of these colleges refer students to outside testing agencies where tests can be more than \$100 and must be returned to the institution for evaluation. However, the most common practice is charging students a fee for each additional re-examination.

Areas for Further Exploration

The small number of course maps completed for this paper indicates a clear need for more research into ESL pathways.

More Institutional Participation

Because of the number of institutions that provided data for the developmental mapping project, we were able to glean critical information about the scope of the challenges. To better understand the breadth and depth of the issues involved, it is imperative to develop a critical mass of ESL maps, in collaboration with diverse institution types.

Equity and Progression Maps

One critical factor missing from the course maps is the students. While the course maps depict the pathways as they have been designed, they do not show how students are moving through those pathways or where they exit them. To address ESL pathway challenges more deeply, we must first understand progression patterns.

A progression and equity map overlays the course map with disaggregated data such as race/ethnicity, age, and first-generation status to show students' course enrollment and

course success. This more sophisticated map provides critical information about student outcomes in the ESL/ESOL sequences.

Visually, progression and equity maps are completed by adding detail to the arrows connecting courses on a course map, showing, for example, how many White, Black, Latine, and Indigenous students progressed from one course to the next. Of course, students do not always follow these sequences as expected and prescribed, so additional elements are added to the map to represent different types of movements in the system.

Progression and equity mapping is a critical next step in achieving equitable student success and serves as a very tangible tool for institutions. Leaders must be able to see the system and the different experiences of students marginalized within it to identify and address the systemic barriers. Understanding student progression through ESL/ESOL pathways is essential for deploying strategic solutions.

The course maps developed for this project are displayed on the following pages. The community colleges that volunteered their course information are diverse—with large and small, rural and urban—campuses spread across three states. One is in the western United States, four in the south, and one in the northeast. These institutions have different student populations and needs, as evidenced by the differences in the program offerings for MLE students.

Course Maps

Figures B5 - B15 are course maps from six institutions. It is difficult to understand the full complexity of the information in these static images, however, readers can use the following links to visit the Plectica website where you can view and interact with the course maps.

When you follow the links, the maps may be zoomed out. If this is the case, select the “+” button in the bottom right corner. This will help you zoom in to see the maps. You can also click and drag your mouse in the blank areas to move around on the maps. As these are view-only links, you will not be able to move the boxes, so feel free to navigate around the map as you wish.

College A - <https://www.plectica.com/maps/3ECIMV170>

College B - <https://www.plectica.com/maps/C6N4SCJEY>

College C - <https://www.plectica.com/maps/ACOOWUO6F>

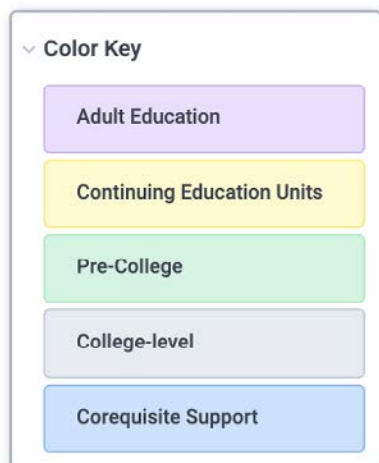
College D - <https://www.plectica.com/maps/P74ZAV9Q4>

College E - <https://www.plectica.com/maps/UGEU1VCP>

College F - <https://www.plectica.com/maps/EZN31H42N>

Each box in the course map represents a course. These boxes are color-coded to represent each course type, as shown in Figure B4.

Figure B4. Color Key



Arrows from one course to another indicate that the first course is a prerequisite for the second. An eye icon inside a course box refers to placement criteria. The color of the eye matches to a legend on the map to show which placement scores are associated with a particular course. On the website, you can click on the eye icon to show which placement scores are associated with the course. White boxes provide additional notes on placement, course descriptions, or information on the dataset provided by the institution.

Key features of each course map are summarized below.

College A: Figures B5 – B6

Figure B5 shows the pathways for the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program which offers college-level courses mirrored with continuing education programs. This pathway demonstrates the separation of Oral Communication, Reading and Vocabulary, Writing, and Grammar into four different sequences, each with four courses. There are also two additional courses for Advanced American Pronunciation and Business Communication for Non-Native Speakers. It is unclear from the data if these are requirements. All these courses would be taken before a student goes into college-level English.

Figure B5. College A: ESOL Course Pathway

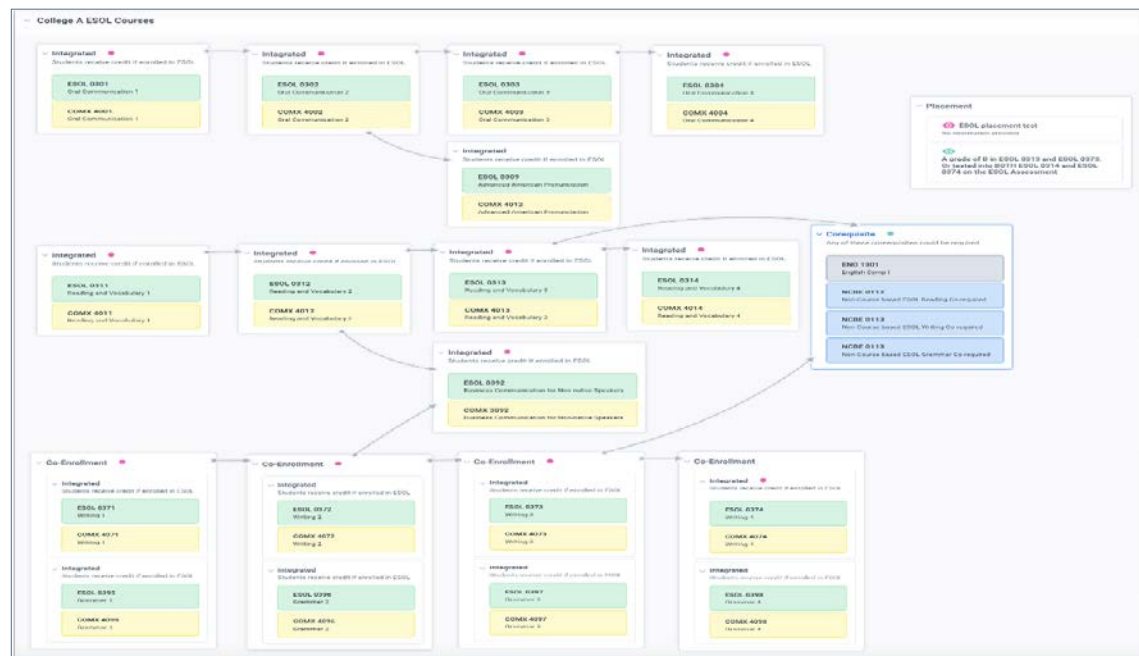
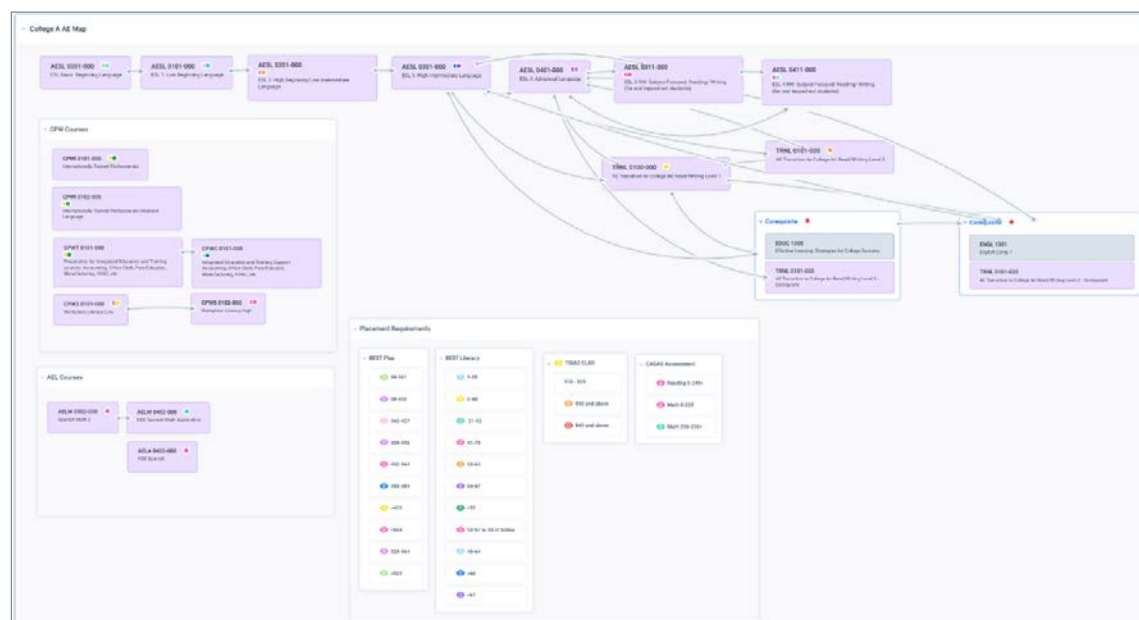


Figure B6 shows the AE pathway for the same college. It demonstrates different uses of AE courses with one strand of courses, labeled CPW, focused on workplace skills. This pathway would, presumably, serve non-degree seeking students. Another set of courses, labeled AEL, provides subject-specific instruction in Spanish. The third and much longer pathway is the only one that leads to college-level English through a series of nine courses. The sequence of the last six courses in this sequence is discussed in detail above.

Figure B6. College A: AE Course Pathway



College B: Figures B7 - B10

At this institution, there are only three AE courses as seen in Figure B7.

Figure B8 shows the full sequence of Continuing Education (CE) and Intensive English (IE) (college-credit ESOL courses). This figure is provided to show the links between the two types of courses. The key takeaway in this map is the non-intuitive pathways from CE to IE courses in which course numbers do not indicate a progression. For example, CE course COMG 1008 leads to ESOL 0352, but the higher numbered COMG 2070 leads to ESOL 0349.

Figure B9 provides a close-up view of the CE course sequence. The pathways are linear and easy to follow with three levels. There are separate sequences for English Language Skills, Reading and Writing, Listening and Speaking, and Practical Language Application. The latter does not lead to a college-level English course and is presumably for non-degree-seeking students.

Figure B10 shows the IE, or college-level ESOL, pathways. There are two levels of courses, each with four courses: Conversation, Reading, Composition, and Grammar. These courses lead to a college-level English course offered with an ESOL corequisite.

Figure B7. College B: AE Courses



College C: Figure B11

Figure B11 simply shows three AE (labeled ABE in the figure) courses, ABE Literacy, GED/HSE and ESL which are offered through the local county. The college does not offer any courses specifically for MLEs.

Figure B11. College C: ESL Program

College C

This college does not offer college-credit courses or co-requisites that are coded for English language learners. All ESL courses are offered in conjunction with the county's department of education.

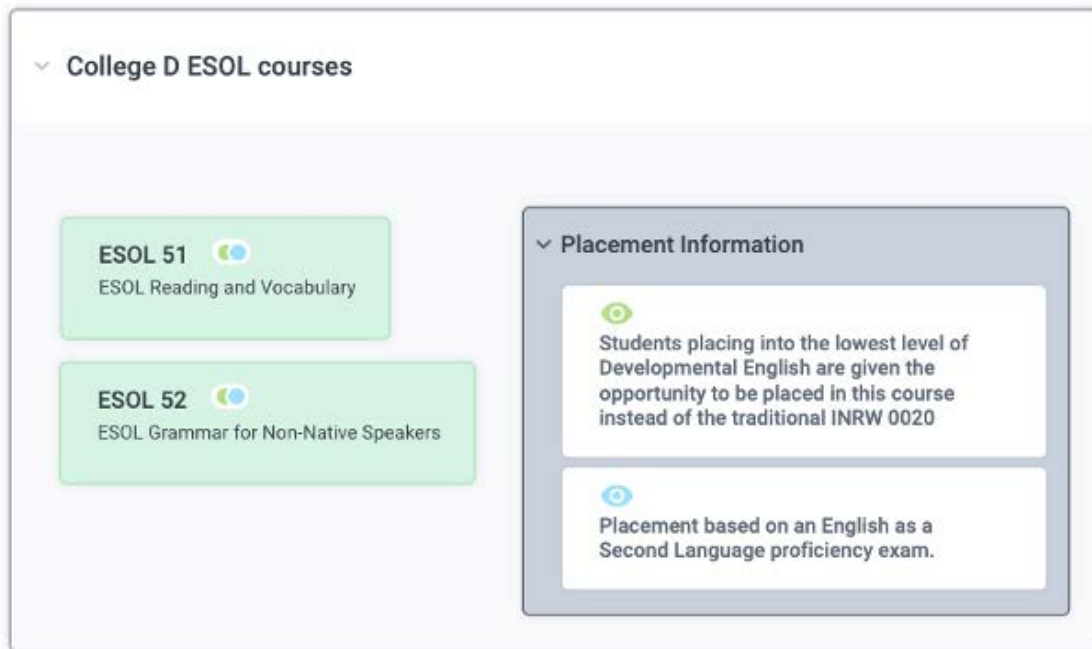
ABE Courses

- ABE Literacy
- GED/HSE
- ESL

College D: Figures B12 - B13

Figure B12 shows a very short ESOL pathway of two courses, Reading and Vocabulary, and Grammar for Non-Native Speakers. There are no arrows between the courses indicating that neither is a prerequisite for the other. It is unclear if these courses lead to college-level English, and this information was not provided by the institution.

Figure B13 shows the much longer AE pathway for the same institution. In this case, there are 16 courses in the sequence. The first 14 courses have non-specific titles paired with numbers: Foundation I, II, III; Intermediate I, II, III; Advance I, II, III; Hi-Advance I, II, III; and Passages I, II, III. The first ten of these courses must be taken sequentially. In the sequence of the last six courses, there are options for students to skip courses to jump to the final two courses, Oral Conversation and ESL Writing.

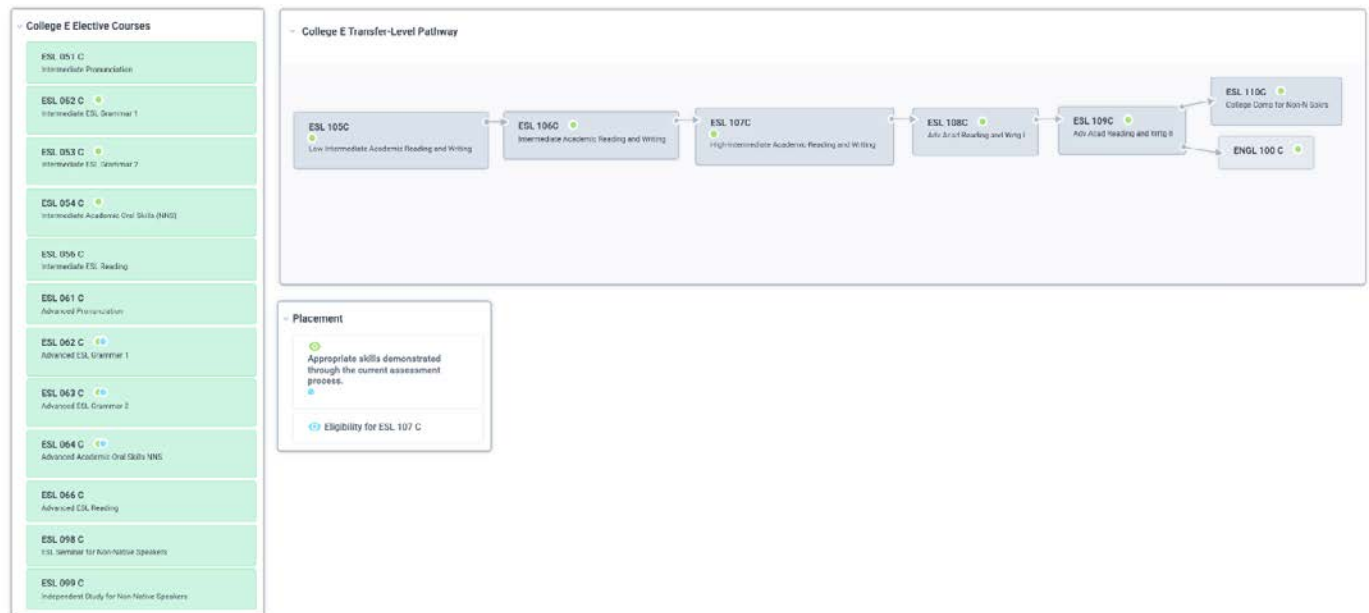




College E: Figure B14

Figure B14 shows that College E offers a set of 12 elective non-credit or pre-college ESL courses. It then offers a series of five ESL courses that are credit-bearing and transferable leading to two options for college-level English. One option is a College Composition course specifically for ESL students and the other is the mainstream College Composition course.

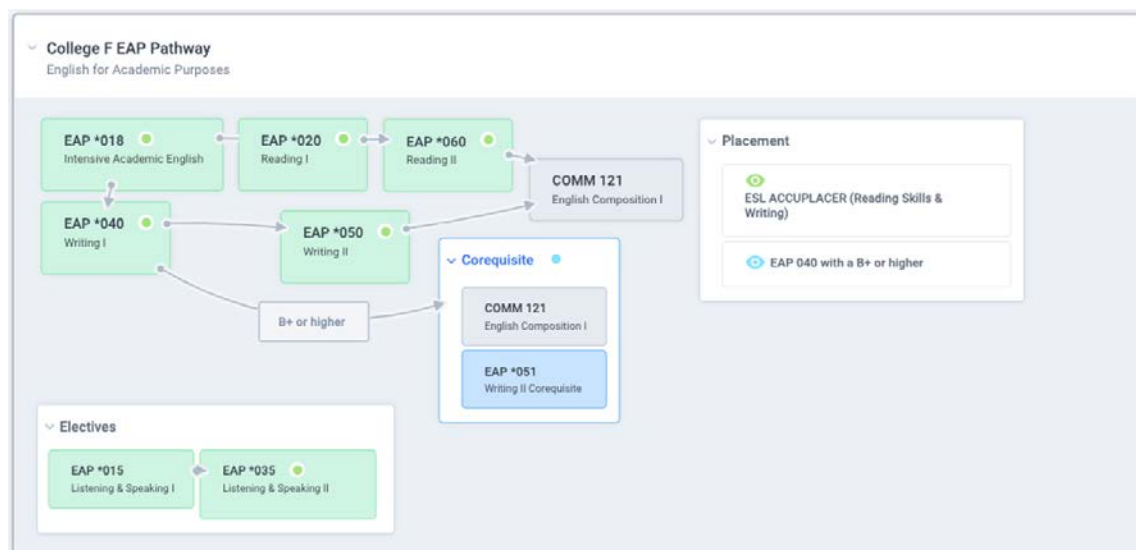
Figure B14. College E: ESL Electives and Transfer-Level Pathway



College F: Figure B15

Figure B15 shows an ESL program with the local title of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) which includes a three-course Reading sequence and a two-course Writing sequence leading to a college-level English composition course. The sequence allows students who meet certain criteria to skip courses and go into an English Composition course with an EAP corequisite. The college also offers two Listening & Speaking courses as electives.

Figure B15. College F: English for Academic Purposes Program



Appendix C: Policy Scan

This section examines policies in Adult Education (AE) and higher education that impact Multilingual Learners (MLEs) across the United States to develop an understanding of how federal, state, system, and institutional policies guide the administration of ESL programs. In this context, equitable policy can be used for a variety of purposes. Policy could be used, for example, to create a set of common definitions, establish minimum support requirements, develop standards around placement into ESL/ESOL courses, and establish rights and protections for multilingual students. This section examines state approaches to MLE policy and identifies future challenges and opportunities. The term Multilingual Learner of English is used in this paper, but when referring to a specific policy, the term contained in the policy language will be used.

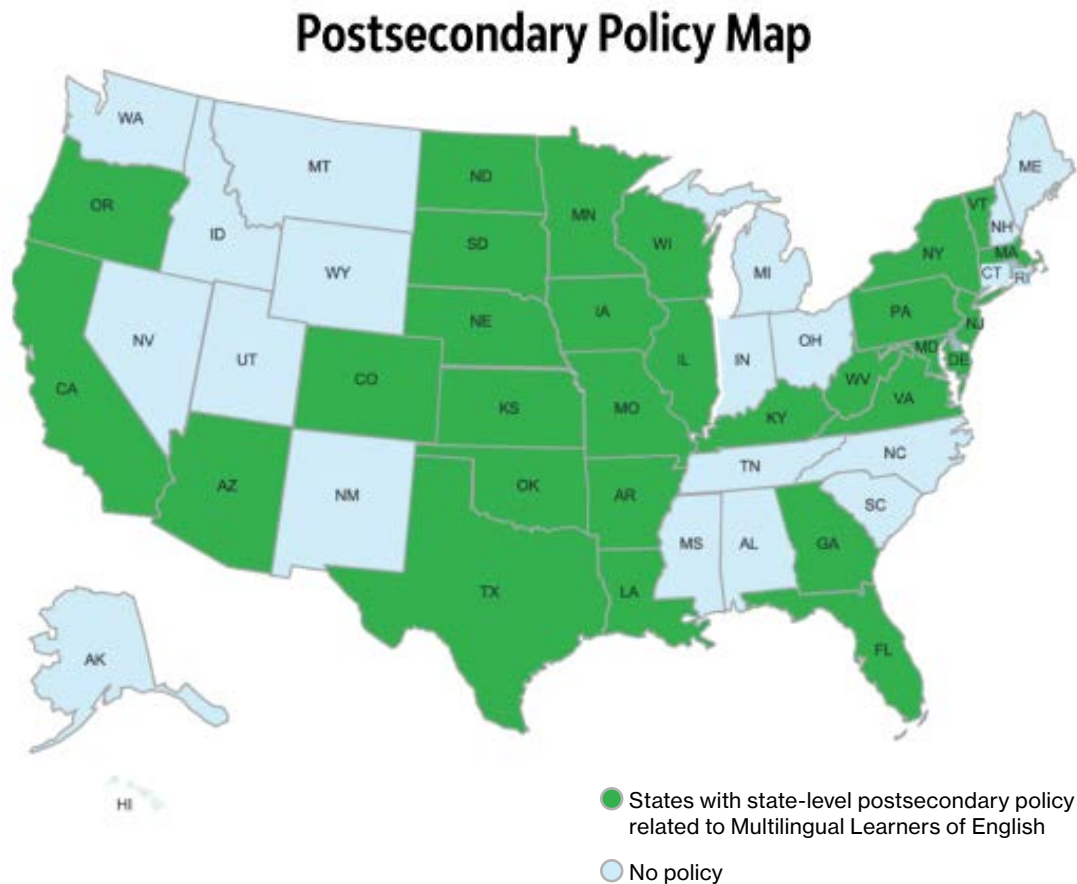
Several themes emerged during our scan of federal, state, and system postsecondary MLE-focused policy. These themes include

- State and federal MLE policy is much more prevalent in the K–12 and adult education context than in postsecondary education.
- State policy related to ESL programs often appears in the context of workforce development or adult education rather than postsecondary education.
- Postsecondary policy lacks a common definition of MLEs and there is not a commonly accepted vernacular to describe these learners and programs.
- When states do use policy to support MLEs, it is used in different ways and for different purposes.

Methodology

We started the policy scan by visiting the websites of each of the 50 state agencies responsible for public higher education. Following a thorough examination of each official state website, we concluded that the following states had policies regarding EL that were accessible on their websites.

Figure C1. Postsecondary Policy Map



Some states have multiple governing bodies for their institutions of higher education. In Hawaii, for example, the University of Hawaii System Board of Regents and the University of Hawaii Community Colleges exist. The research team also discovered instances where the MLE policy language was inconsistent across multiple systems or was only present in a subset of them. For the University of Hawaii System Board of Regents, we were unable to find any policies that mention MLE learners, but the University of Hawaii Community College website briefly outlines their support and pathway for MLEs.

To ensure a thorough analysis, we supplemented our original search for state agency policies with:

- postsecondary system policies for each state;
- state statutes on English Learners, including adult education;
- state-level workforce education policies that mention support for ELs; and
- the most recent strategic reports published by the respective higher education governing bodies.

Additional efforts were made through email and phone calls to individuals listed as systems contacts for states with little or no information regarding MLE policies on their websites. They yielded no additional information that had not already been discovered through the website review.

Although the focus of this analysis was on MLEs at the college level, we also looked at K–12 policies and best practices for supporting and identifying MLEs as these policies are much more prevalent and can inform postsecondary policy and practice. The federal government has a definition of MLE in policy at the K–12 level.

We began an in-depth analysis of the policies themselves once we understood the breadth of the policies in this space. We concentrated on determining the overall purpose and topics of these policies, developing themes, and identifying challenges and opportunities.

Findings

One of the most fundamental applications of policy is to develop standard definitions of terms that can be used to guide things like programming and funding. In the case of ELs, a policy is established primarily within the K–12 and adult education spaces, with the federal government establishing its definition and states building on the federal policy.

K–12 Definitions

According to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) 20 U.S.C.A. § 7801, a secondary education policy, an English Learner (EL) is a person who possesses all the following characteristics:

- is aged 3 through 21
- is enrolled or planning to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school
- meets one of the following
 - was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English
 - is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying areas and who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency
 - is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant

- has difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language that may be sufficient to deny the individual one or more of the following
 - the ability to meet the challenging State academic standards
 - the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English
 - the opportunity to participate fully in society

Each Department of Education in each of the 50 states makes some reference to the federal policy that led to their comprehensive MLE state-level policy. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and No Child Left Behind are examples of federal policies.

It is important to note here that higher education does not have a similar federal definition or designation for MLEs.

Adult Education Definitions

The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), administered by the United States Department of Education, is authorized as Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and is administered by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE). "This program supports programs that help adults get the basic skills they need, such as reading, writing, mathematics, English language proficiency, and problem-solving, to be productive workers, family members, and citizens," according to the U.S. Department of Education website.

AEFLA is the federal government's largest investment in adult education and literacy. Adult education through WIOA can be overseen by a variety of different sectors and organizations, including K–12, higher education, workforce, and individual community colleges, complicating how AE is implemented.

States are much more likely to reference MLEs in the context of WIOA than they are in their postsecondary statutes and policies. This may be, in part, because WIOA outlines a definition for English Language Learners. The WIOA definition of English Language Learners states

The term 'English language learner' when used with respect to an eligible individual, means an eligible individual who has limited ability in reading, writing, speaking, or comprehending the English language, and (a) whose native language is a language other than English or (b) who lives in a family or community environment where a language other than English is the dominant language (The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act [WIOA], 2014).

The Kansas Board of Regents (2022) includes this definition in its Adult Education manual, section 4.1.5 English Language Acquisition Activities:

The term “English language acquisition program” means a program of instruction

- a. that is designed to help eligible individuals who are English language learners achieve competence in reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension of the English language; and
- b. that leads to
 - i. attainment of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent; and
 - ii. transition to postsecondary education and training; or
 - iii. employment.

The Maryland Division of Workforce Development and Adult Education is mandated by state labor and employment law to “assist immigrants and other individuals who are English language learners by improving their English language proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension skills.” (Maryland Code. Labor and Employment, 2018).

These examples are representative of the references to MLEs in the workforce and AE policies in many states.

Postsecondary Definitions of MLEs

The key finding of this analysis is that there is a critical lack of definition of MLEs in postsecondary education at both the federal and state levels. A few states, such as Massachusetts, include a definition of MLEs in their selective admissions policy, such as the Massachusetts Department of Education’s *Undergraduate Admissions Standards for the Massachusetts State University System and the University of Massachusetts*, which define an English Language Learner as

A student who does not speak English (or whose native language is not English) and is not currently able to perform ordinary classroom work in English, or a student who was identified as an English language learner or limited English proficient student at any point during his or her high school career.

Despite the lack of state or federal definitions, institutions that offer or require ESL courses frequently do have formal policies in place that define who is considered an MLE. These definitions typically determine who is subject to proficiency testing and/or who is automatically enrolled in an ESL course sequence.

Students’ native language is the most common identifier for MLE status. Most institutions examined in this scan require non-native English speakers to be evaluated for English proficiency. Many colleges also consider students to be MLEs if

- the student’s country of origin is outside of the United States;
- the student’s high school primarily used an instructional language that was not English; and
- the student was considered an MLE in high school, regardless of whether the student successfully completed high school.

When an institution uses multiple criteria to define MLEs, one important policy distinction emerges—whether the criteria are joined by an “or” or an “and.” In other words, if an institution uses four criteria, it matters whether students are considered MLEs if they meet just one or all four. The federal definition of secondary education requires that all conditions be met, whereas some institutions define a student as an MLE if any of the factors are met. More students will find themselves in the MLE pathway with the latter approach.

In some cases, the MLE proficiency assessment determines which ESL course level students are assigned to but does not appear to allow students to test outside of the ESL curriculum entirely. According to the ESL website of one institution, “Students admitted to [the college] whose first language is not English must contact the ESL Testing Administrator for testing and placement into the [ESL] program . . . Based on [placement test] results, students are placed into an appropriate ESL course.” There is a general trend in institutional policy that MLE definitions are broadly constructed to include all students who could potentially lack proficiency in English, and that all students flagged as MLEs must take the proficiency exam and may have to take at least one ESL course.

This creates inequities for multilingual students. Students with a home language other than English may be proficient in English. These students may be required to pay for the proficiency exam as well as take ESL classes. It is also possible that policies communicated on college websites are not actually implemented, which raises concerns about transparency and should be thoroughly investigated.

Authorization and Programming

Some states create policies to give postsecondary institutions the authority to offer ESL curricula, while others directly create ESL programming through policy.

Florida is one state that employs state law to establish authority:

English for Academic Purposes. Each Florida College System institution is authorized to provide, according to the needs of its students, instruction that provides English Language Learners with essential language and academic preparation necessary to enroll in college credit instruction in Communications. Satisfactory completion of such instruction shall be recognized by the award of units of measure called institutional credit (0100-0400 series pursuant to the Statewide Course Numbering

System EAP taxonomy) or college credit (1500-1600 series pursuant to the Statewide Course Numbering System EAP taxonomy) (Florida Rule 6A-14.030, 2017).

The North Carolina Community College System uses its [strategic plan](#) to establish and reinforce the provision of EL instruction in postsecondary education, naming these courses as a “primary offering” of the community colleges in the state.

In contrast, Ohio policy establishes a state-led program for ELs through the Department of Higher Education’s Aspire program. This program is free for English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and “provides services for individuals who need assistance acquiring the skills needed to be successful in postsecondary education, training, and employment” (Ohio Department of Higher Education, n.d.). The program is offered throughout all 88 counties in Ohio, and postsecondary institutions are among the most prevalent provider sites for the program. This program is funded through the AEFLA Title II Program mentioned above, which is why the program is free to students.

Most policies establishing ESL programs and parameters in the postsecondary context are systemic and institutional in nature. This suggests that higher education is largely in charge of creating and administering ESL programs and curricula. While this is common in the field, it should be noted due to the differences between these programs and policies.

College Admissions, Placement, and Testing

Policy is used by some states and systems to set parameters for multilingual learners in college admissions and placement processes. Applicants to Iowa’s three state universities, for example, must meet an English proficiency requirement specified by each university, in addition to the ACT or SAT.

MLE students may substitute a limited number of high school ESL courses for the high school academic courses required for admission to Massachusetts institutions.

Currently, forty-nine states include a Seal of Biliteracy as a component of their K–12 diploma. The Seal of Biliteracy website states that this seal “takes the form of a gold seal that appears on the transcript or diploma of the graduating senior and is a statement of accomplishment for future employers and college admissions” (Seal of Biliteracy, n.d.). However, despite the assertion of the Seal’s impact on admissions, it is not common for college admissions or placement policies to explicitly reference this Seal or use it as a criterion when defining who is subject to ESL testing and coursework.

Quality Assurance

The K–12 education sector has a well-established infrastructure for ensuring high-quality instruction in ESL courses. The World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) consortium contains thirty-nine U.S. states and territories, as well as two federal agencies. According to its website, WIDA is “dedicated to the research, design, and implementation of a high-quality, culturally and linguistically appropriate system to support multilingual learners in K–12 contexts.” Other organizations, such as WestEd’s own Quality Teaching for English Learners (QTEL), which is designed to improve college and career readiness, provide significant professional development opportunities for ESL teachers.

In contrast, resources related to instructional quality are sparse in the postsecondary context, and very few of the state policies we found mention quality in any significant way. The University System of Georgia is one notable exception, which requires its institutions to register ESL programs for approval.

Developmental Education

MLE references in state policy are frequently found within developmental education policies. Over the last decade, research on the shortcomings of the traditional system of sequential, noncredit remediation has proliferated. As a result, an increasing number of states have implemented policies that either eliminate or replace the traditional approach, requiring developmental courses and content to be delivered as a corequisite or allowing students to opt out of developmental coursework altogether. However, many of these policies expressly exclude ESL courses from these requirements.

For example, in 2013, Florida passed comprehensive legislation that allowed students to opt out of completing placement testing and/or taking developmental courses. However, the policy did not apply to students whose first language is not English, who can be placed in “college preparatory” noncredit courses at the discretion of the institution.

Texas passed legislation in 2017 requiring that 75 percent of developmental instruction be delivered as a corequisite, but certain ESL courses that were not linked to a developmental course were exempt. Furthermore, while the law cut funding for developmental credit hours nearly in half, it left funding for ESL courses funded at the same level and allowed institutions to continue offering up to 27 ESL credits per student using state funding.

The City University of New York’s (CUNY) system website similarly excludes zero-credit ESL/ESOL courses from its developmental education overhaul.

Instruction in English as a second language (ESL) is distinct from developmental education in English. ESL students are foreign language learners who require additional language training in English, separate from the supports for developing academic literacy and writing skills that students may get in regular developmental

English courses or interventions. OAA's guidance on eliminating zero-credit remedial courses in mathematics and English by the fall of 2022 does not apply to ESL courses. (City University of New York, n.d.).

There are many other cases of state law and system policy exempting MLEs from developmental education reforms.

California's [Assembly Bill 705](#) (2017), for example, requires EL high school graduates who are degree-seeking or transfer-level postsecondary students to enroll in college-level, transferable English courses with their high school grade point average determining whether they receive corequisite language support. This parallels the rules for non-ELS but allows for a longer timeline for completion of the English course. The Public Policy Institute of California reports that this component of the legislation drove substantial change in how community colleges assess, place, and serve ELs. AB 705 also explicitly states that, "Instruction in English as a second language (ESL) is distinct from remediation in English." California faculty contributed to the development of this language to ensure that ESL would not be equated with developmental education, thus creating differing rules for ESL courses.

Appendix D: Literature Review

This literature review explores current research on the transitions of Multilingual Learners of English (MLEs) into their first years of postsecondary education to examine persistent disparities in opportunity across postsecondary education. Due to the inconsistency of data collection and analysis methods for this population, it is difficult to fully assess the total number of MLEs, their academic outcomes, and the various supports they receive (Raufman et al., 2019). There has also been less research on instructional practices in higher education compared to K–12 (Harrison & Shi, 2016).

Methodology

We searched a variety of research databases (Google Scholar, ERIC, and JSTOR) for the following terms: English Learner, Multilingual Learner, English Language learner, language minority, English as a second language, linguistic minority, College pathways for English Learner, Outcome for English Learner postsecondary/higher education/community college, and English language learners' data. To ensure relevance and current practices, the search was largely restricted to literature published after 2010. In addition, we searched for related literature in national data repositories, including the Institute of Educational Sciences, the National Center for Educational Statistics, and the U.S. Department of Education. The search results revealed a wide range of findings related to placement, pathways, outcomes, community building, data around MLEs, instructional practices, policies, Adult Education, and ESL courses. The team then narrowed the literature that would be reviewed using an internal quality check that ensured proper alignment with the paper's goals and research questions.

Findings

Labels in Postsecondary Education

Over time, the terminology used to identify and describe MLEs has evolved. Earlier labels, such as Limited English Proficient (Tichenor, 1994) and Linguistic Minority (Kanno & Harklau, 2012), have perpetuated the notion that these students and their families lacked academic potential (Núñez et al., 2016). These labels emphasize students' English language proficiency while obscuring their complex and diverse backgrounds, which include race, ethnicity, generational status, parent level of schooling, prior schooling, various language development, and legal status (Walqui, 2000).

English Learners (ELs) or English Language Learners (ELLs) are the terms frequently used in grades K–12, both at the state and federal levels, as well as in postsecondary institutions

(Callahan, 2005; Gándara & Rumberger, 2008; Núñez et al., 2016). Students are labeled as such because they demonstrated a need for assistance in accessing English curricula.

English as a Second Language (ESL) students are a subset of MLEs who are enrolled in ESL courses within postsecondary institutions (Núñez et al., 2016). Generation 1.5 refers to students who enter higher education institutions and have completed at least some formal schooling in the United States (Raufman et al., 2019).

The Size of the Multilingual Population

Although postsecondary institutions routinely collect student demographic data, they have yet to utilize these same systems to track students' language proficiency levels (Kanno & Harklau, 2012). This lack of data collection makes estimating the size of the national population difficult, but data from specific sites provide some sense of scale. In 2003, researchers estimated that at least 25 percent of California Community College students, approximately 625,000, were MLEs and immigrants (Llosa & Bunch, 2011). While only 14 percent of MLE students in California enroll in a college ESL program, this equates to approximately 87,500 students per year (The RP Group, 2020). Approximately half of the students at City University of New York (CUNY) were identified as English Learners (City University of New York, 2016).

Some MLE sub-populations are tracked more consistently. According to the 2022 Open Doors report on enrollment trends, there were 948,519 international students enrolled in the U.S. in 2021/22, a decrease from a pre-pandemic high of 1.1 million in 2018, but an increase of 3.8 percent from 2020. According to the National Association of State Directors of Adult Education, there were 299,556 English Language Acquisition (ELA) students enrolled in AE programs in 2020/21, accounting for 42.3 percent of all students enrolled in public AE programs in the United States. In 2018/19, the pre-pandemic number of ELA students was 646,452, accounting for 50.4 percent of the total AE population.

Multilingual Learner of English Population Characteristics

Data from the K–12 sector provides some insight into the backgrounds of MLEs who have attended U.S. schools. According to one study, 37 percent of MLEs lived in poverty compared to 21 percent of all students, and 66 percent of MLEs came from families with income below 200 percent of the poverty level, compared to 37 percent of non-MLEs. MLE students also disproportionately attend low-income schools, even if their families' income is above the poverty line. Half of the MLEs attended schools in the three highest poverty deciles (Quintero, 2021). This is a concern because (1) differential poverty exposure has been shown to contribute to disparate outcomes, and (2) lower-resourced schools are less likely to provide the services that MLE students need to become proficient in English.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the most reported home languages of MLEs reported in the K–12 sector were, in order: Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, English, and Vietnamese. The inclusion of English in this list may indicate that students live in multilingual homes. Five other languages were identified as the home language of over 30,000 students. Spanish is the most-used language among K–12 MLEs, comprising 74.8 percent of the population in 2013/14 (NCES, 2022).

An Office of English Language Acquisition report examines data on home languages in K–12 from the perspective of individual states' lists of top five most common languages spoken. The report finds that fifty languages or language categories are included in at least one state's top-five list (2023). This demonstrates the diversity of languages among MLEs in K–12.

We were unable to find any reliable large-scale datasets on the ethnicity or home language of postsecondary MLEs, emphasizing the scarcity of data on the population. Núñez et al. (2016) found that MLEs in postsecondary are more likely to be first-generation and to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than their non-MLE counterparts. They carry heavier responsibilities than many college students because they are more likely to be employed full-time, support dependents, and enroll part-time (Núñez et al., 2016). This data does not include the category of international students.

A recent study conducted by the Institute of Educational Science found that AE ESL students are typically older and select ESL courses to improve their everyday English literacy skills to enhance employment prospects and prepare for further postsecondary education (Larson, 2023).

First-Year Transition to Higher Education: ESL Pathway

Research shows that MLEs have less access to postsecondary education compared to their peers. In an analysis of National Educational Longitudinal Study data, Kanno and Cromley (2013) discovered that within two years of graduating from a U.S. high school, approximately 46.5 percent of ELLs had not enrolled in postsecondary education compared to 24.4 percent of English-monolingual (EM) students. Only 18 percent of ELLs had advanced to four-year colleges compared to 43 percent of EMs.

For those MLEs who transition into postsecondary education, Adult Education (AE) English as a Second Language (ESL) courses provide a common pathway. These courses are classified as “English Language Acquisition” programs under the Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) in the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) within the United States Department of Education. AE courses are designed specifically for MLE students who demonstrate a need for English language support and focus on the development of reading, writing, and oral communication (Hodara, 2012).

MLEs in AE programs must transfer to community colleges to pursue a degree and most certificates, and the transition is not always a smooth one. The RP Group found that 58 percent of AE ESL students who matriculated to a California community college enrolled in noncredit courses, 27 percent enrolled in for-credit but non-transferable courses one or two levels below transfer, and 14 percent enrolled directly into college-level English. To maximize student success, The RP Group recommends that adult education and community colleges create clear noncredit to credit pathways across ESL and English sequences, that community colleges increase the integration of noncredit and credit courses, and that colleges consider contextualizing ESL curriculum to align with students' life and academic goals (Beam et al., 2019).

MLEs may also enter community college or four-year programs directly. There is a wide variety of structures and designs in the various ESL courses within different institutions as demonstrated in the course map analysis. These can be noncredit and tuition-free or credit and tuition-based. Students are assigned to different ESL levels based on their English language proficiency (Eyring, 2014).

Disparities in Postsecondary Outcomes

College ESL courses designed to prepare students for college-level credit-bearing courses may take several semesters to complete, ranging from 2.3 to 4.7 on average, and are primarily focused on skill-based instruction with perceived lower levels of academic rigor (David & Kanno, 2021). A California study found that degree and transfer students enter an average of three or four levels below college-level English (Rodriguez et al., 2019).

ESL students have been shown to accumulate fewer credits in their first two years of college than MLEs who are not on ESL pathways (Hodara, 2015). However, the study's findings highlight the complexities of serving a diverse population. Hodara discovered that enrolling in ESL courses increased credit accumulation for foreign-born high school students. She hypothesizes that this was due to college–high school alignment and the fact that the local students were placed into fewer ESL courses on average.

A study of Latine ESL students in community colleges found that 55 percent of these students did not advance one level beyond their first course level. The researchers discovered that while many students who declared a goal of transferring took “mainstream” non-ESL courses, only 7.3 percent enrolled in college-level English which is a requirement for transfer, and 8.9 percent took college-level mathematics (Rafzar & Simon, 2011).

Researchers discovered that in California Community Colleges, the more levels of ESL a student must complete, the less likely they are to complete college-level English. Fifty-one percent of students starting two levels below complete college-level English in six years, but only 20 percent do so if they start five levels below. The study also discovered 14 colleges with seven levels of ESL courses (Rodriguez et al., 2019).

Researchers also looked at outcomes for MLE sub-populations. One study of United States high school graduates found 42 percent of MLEs who were directly placed in non-ESL pathways completed college-level English in three years, compared to 24 percent of students who were placed in ESL pathways (The RP Group, 2020). In Florida, MLE students who had been in ESOL programs in high school had a higher likelihood of taking and passing college-level English courses under policy changes that allowed them to enter directly into college English, rather than being placed into developmental education (Mokher et al., 2021).

In California, a study found that offering transferable ESL courses, offering direct pathways from ESL into college-level English, and integrated ESL courses significantly improved outcomes such as successful completion of college composition, credit accrual, and for some students, it also improved completion and transfer (Rodriguez et al., 2019). This study also found that by incorporating college-level course objectives and expectations into ESL pathways rather than focusing solely on skill-based development, students were better prepared for success beyond their ESL path.

Not surprisingly, MLEs also face barriers to degree completion. A study of national data found that within eight years of graduation, 12 percent of MLEs in the sample had earned a bachelor's degree, compared to 32 percent of monolingual English speakers and 25 percent of English-proficient Language Minority students (Kanno & Cromley, 2013).

Variation in Placement Practices

The assessments used to determine the language proficiency levels of MLE students vary widely across institutions and may be supplemented with other criteria such as students' previous education, educational goals, and internal recommendations from department staff (Raufman et al., 2019). ESL placement tests have not been well-validated (Núñez et al., 2016) and the extent of potential misplacement has not been thoroughly studied (Hodara, 2015). Inaccuracies in placement have a negative impact on postsecondary outcomes (Larson, 2023; Raufman et al., 2019).

Researchers have found that MLEs are frequently not given critical information about assessments used for placement and encouraged to take ESL courses with little guidance on the course sequences, the nature of the type of instruction provided, or which courses bear credit toward certificates, degrees, or transfer. Colleges underutilize aspects of the matriculation system that have the potential to learn more about this population of students and better place them based on their individual strengths and needs (Bunch & Endris, 2012).

A study of the placement process in Arizona, Massachusetts, and Minnesota found that although there was some consistency in ESL placement instruments, nearly half of the placement tests in the sample were unspecified. In Florida, Illinois, and Tennessee where the testing instruments were listed, it was found that there was no uniformity in what tests were used. As a result, students transferring from one community college ESL program to

another within the same state may encounter significantly different placement tests, placements, and academic advising within the different institutions (David & Kanno, 2021).

AE programs must use federally permitted placement exams, such as the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS), which assesses students' adult basic reading, mathematics, listening, writing, and speaking abilities. Although the CASAS reading scale score predicts enrollment in credit English or ESL courses, there is insufficient differentiation between scoring groups to be an effective predictor of MLE placement (Beam et al., 2019).

Instructional Practices for ELs at Higher Institutions

Although substantial research has shown that the instructional delivery approaches for students have an overall effect on student learning and engagement in college, studies on the specific instructional practice for MLE students at postsecondary institutions are limited (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Hern & Snell, 2013; Callahan & Chumney, 2009). One study found that instructors who utilized students' home languages, provided opportunities for collaboration, and were cognizant of the language patterns within their classrooms showed higher rates of academic success than those in more traditional ESL courses (Harrison & Shi, 2016).

Another study reported that when MLE instructors focused on helping students develop a positive sense of belonging and community, the positive effects were significant and led to higher academic success (Garza et al., 2021). This finding is consistent with the findings of another study conducted nearly a decade earlier, which found that MLE students from 13 community colleges who participated in learning communities in their classrooms had a positive effect on perceptions of their learning outcomes, leading to higher academic outcomes (Smith, 2010).

When the use of critical thinking skills was embedded within their classrooms, MLE students were more likely to engage in academic discourse, internalize teachers' pedagogical offerings, and recognize institutional supports than non-MLEs (Hartman et al., 2021). A similar study found that when students were provided opportunities for critical thinking, they reported higher levels of intent to transfer, which is consistent with previous research that has shown the positive relationship between critical thinking and community college student success (Fong et al., 2017).

Kibler et al. (2011) created a framework for "Resource-Oriented Community College Practices for U.S.-Educated Language-Minority Students" as a guide for community colleges seeking to better serve their MLE students:

1. Supporting academic transitions into community colleges
2. Integrating language and academic content
3. Providing accelerated access to college-level, mainstream academic curriculum
4. Promoting informed student decision-making (p. 206)



The researchers also describe programs that demonstrate aspects of the framework. These proposed approaches differed from traditional remedial courses encountered by MLE students in ESL or developmental English courses. Bridge and college preparation programs, learning communities, content-based language courses, linked courses, acceleration, college-level courses, advising, campus support centers, and orientation and success courses were among the programs offered. Taken together, these initiatives aim to address MLEs' language and literacy development while also promoting their academic progress (Kibler et al., 2011).

Conclusion

These findings show that students' first years of postsecondary education differ depending on whether they begin in an AE or college program. The two systems' contexts are very different, with AE programs constrained by federal policy and community colleges generally having leeway in designing ESL programs. Although some commonalities of placement exams, course trajectories, and expectations were found across community colleges, the findings confirmed that there are no uniform policies for how MLE students are labeled, placed, and supported throughout their years of postsecondary education. Many institutions have established successful pathways for students, but these are frequently isolated and based on the staff and leadership of their institutions.

Appendix E: Who We Are

Amy Getz, Senior Program Associate, WestEd

I've spent over thirty years in mathematics education, first as a high school and college instructor, then with the Charles A. Dana Center to implement postsecondary math pathways and developmental education reform, and now at WestEd. In 2022, I interviewed ESL professors Melissa Reeve and Jose Cortes from Solano Community College for a project. Over a 45-minute interview, they inspired me to learn about Multilingual Learners of English in post-secondary education. I began to think about how I could contribute to the efforts improving educational opportunities for these students. That 2022 discussion led to this paper.

While writing this paper, I read a paper by Dr. Linda Harklau and Dr. Kate Batson outlining how the developmental education reform movement essentially ignored the MLE population. As a member of that reform movement, I own that criticism. Even in our mathematics work, faculty raised concerns about the potential negative effects on MLEs, and I chose to use the fact that I wasn't an expert in ESL as an excuse to let it be someone else's problem. This is my opportunity to rectify that failure. I am a White, monolingual woman who is not an expert in the MLE population. But I can learn and advocate. I can use my professional experience with systems and my networks to support experts, including students, in developing and implementing solutions that will improve the lives of MLE students. MLEs may start in ESL, but eventually, they become students in every department, every discipline, every program—and that means we all share responsibility to serve them well.

Vanessa Keadle, Ed.D., Partner and Chief Strategy Officer, Student-Ready Strategies

I started my 16-year higher education career as a student affair professional. While working one-on-one with students to help them navigate policy and process, I developed a passion for examining institutional policy and understanding how structural barriers hinder student success, particularly for marginalized students. As my career advanced to a state higher education commission, then to a national student success non-profit, I focused my efforts on dismantling those barriers by supporting high-quality implementation of equity-focused structural reform.

In my current role as partner and Chief Strategy Officer at Student-Ready Strategies, I have the opportunity to create curricular maps for hundreds of institutions across the country. Some of the curriculum data we receive includes ESL courses, showcasing long, noncredit-bearing pathways. We were concerned about the extent to which these pathways affect

the success of multilingual learners of English, so we partnered with WestEd to dive deeper into policy and curricular pathways for MLEs that you see in this paper.

This work, in my opinion, is a moral imperative that we must address to ensure the promise of higher education is fulfilled for all in this country. As a White native English speaker, I am aware of my privileges in comparison to the MLE population. As we begin what I hope will be only the first phase of this work, I am committed to centering on the experiences of MLE students, as well as those of faculty, staff, and other community members who work to support their success.

Guillermo Lopez, Research Associate, Secondary Mathematics on English Learner and Migrant Education Services Team, WestEd

I have over 15 years of teaching experience in secondary and postsecondary institutions. My journey began as a mathematics teacher combining my passion for mathematics with the desire to help establish equitable opportunities for students who often went underserved or made invisible by our educational system. As my expertise grew, I was able to work with great educators and leaders as a district math specialist, adjunct faculty in community colleges throughout Los Angeles, and a graduate methods instructor for new teachers. Throughout each endeavor, I expanded my efforts to help recognize the true complexities, assets, and vast contributions of students who were frequently labeled or associated with a singular data point.

While helping contribute to this paper, I read a lot of literature and did a lot of research on the needs of Multilingual Learners of English. As a self-identified Latino male who grew up in Los Angeles with friends and close family members given labels such as English Learners, this paper means much more than a single publication. It allows many unheard voices to be recognized, both through our team's findings and through the additional contributions of many researchers, educational leaders, and advocates who have been doing this work for a long time. MLEs are students, like many others, who positively contribute to all classrooms, add value to postsecondary institutions in multiple ways, and ably occupy the space and opportunities they and others deserve. For these and other reasons, I chose to be part of this team and will continue to advocate for this work in hopes that more research, policy development, and conversations will help change the outcomes of MLEs across many institutions.

Appendix F: Terminology List

ACCUPLACER® English as a Second Language (ESL) Test: An assessment used by post-secondary institutions to assess the English skills of MLEs and determine placement into ESL courses. Sections include Reading Skills, Sentence-Meaning, Language Use, Listening, and WritePlacer ESL. All the sections are computer-adaptive multiple-choice tests of 20 questions except the WritePlacer, an essay test. Colleges select which sections to use.

Adult Education (AE): An educational program that provides opportunities and services to equip adults with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate effectively as citizens, workers, parents, family, and community members.

Adult Immigrants: Adults needing language instruction and learning experiences that enable them to communicate with English speakers; learn about the cultures and customs of the United States; and prepare for employment, citizenship, parenthood, and self-sufficiency.

Combined English Language Skills Assessment: A placement exam that assesses students' English language skills for placement decisions into ESL courses.

Continuing Education (CE): Education provided for adults after leaving the formal education system, typically consisting of short or part-time courses.

College-level English: An English course bearing college credit that applies toward a degree program.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP): An English language program that focuses on helping students acquire advanced competencies in academic English necessary to complete their degree. EAP programs provide language instruction for non-native speakers of English intending to earn associate or bachelor's degrees. Programs may be pre-sessional courses and courses taken alongside students' other subjects.

English Learners (ELs)/English language learners (ELLs): A term commonly used in policy and research, English Learners are "students who do not speak, read, write, or understand English well as a result of English not being their home language," according to the California Department of Education.

English language acquisition program: An instruction program designed to help eligible English language learners achieve competence in reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension of English, which leads to attaining a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent.

English as a Second Language (ESL): Instruction to enable students with limited English proficiency to learn competency-based English. These courses encompass the skills of speaking, listening, reading, writing, mathematics, decision-making, problem-solving, and preparation to participate in job-specific career and technical training. Students may use ESL instruction to gain life and employment skills, progress to career or academic programs, and become actively engaged in their communities.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL): A program designed for students whose native language is not English and who want to increase their English language skills for a specific career. Courses prepare non-native English speakers for college-level reading, writing, and oral communication.

First-generation Americans: Individuals who immigrated as adults ranging from those with advanced degrees in their home countries to people whose early education was disrupted by war, dislocation, or economic hardship. Their knowledge of English varies widely.

Generation 1.5: Students who came to the U.S. as children, had some U.S.-based schooling ranging from months to years, and received ESL instruction in the K–12 system. Many no longer need ESL instruction in postsecondary, while others continue in ESL programs. After they leave K–12, tracking their status is not consistent.

Integrated Basic Education Skills and Training (I-BEST): A program at the postsecondary level that teaches students literacy, work, and college-readiness skills using a team-teaching approach to combine college-readiness classes with regular, credit-bearing job training and academic classes.

International or foreign students (F-1): Students coming to the U.S. specifically to attend college. Several programs we examined indicate that this sub-population makes up a significant portion of their ESL enrollments.

Language Minority: A person from a home where a language other than the dominant or societal language is spoken.

Limited English Proficiency (LEP): Individuals who do not speak English as their primary language and have a limited ability to read, speak, write, or understand English.

Linguistic Minority: Any group of people constituting less than half of the population who speak a different language than most. Often used to describe groups of individuals speaking any language other than English.

Multilingual Learner of English (MLE): A term describing a group of marginalized people that are triple segregated by race, income, and language whose native language is not English.

Pre-college: An educational experience that helps students transition into college through various preparation courses. These could be in person, on campus, or online.

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL): Teaching English to non-native English speakers, individuals whose first language is not English.

U.S.-born non-English home language students: A subgroup of ML students whose “native language” is not English and whose country of origin is the United States. Also referred to as the second generation or Generation 2.0.