

Translating Opportunity

Improving Postsecondary Pathways for Multilingual Learners of English

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Amy Getz, Vanessa Keadle, Guillermo Lopez
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An initiative of WestEd and Student-Ready Strategies

In collaboration with Texas Success Center

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WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit agency that conducts and applies research, develops evidence-based solutions, and provides services and resources in the realms of education, human development, and related fields, with the end goal of improving outcomes and ensuring equity for individuals from infancy through adulthood.

Student-Ready Strategies (SRS) is a consulting and technical assistance organization envisioning a world in which colleges and universities believe that all students can succeed and purposely evolve to ensure they do. SRS plans and problem-solves with state, regional, and institutional partners as they evolve to ensure the success of diverse students with complex lives. Learn more at studentreadystrategies.com.

The **Texas Success Center**, a member of the national Student Success Center Network, designs and manages the coherent, statewide framework for action and supports the 50 community college districts in Texas as they evaluate, align, and integrate their work to increase student success through [Talent Strong Texas Pathways](#).

Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates, and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, students of color, and veterans. Ascendium's work identifies, validates, and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system, and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit ascendiumphilanthropy.org.

Summary of Findings

Multilingual learners of English (MLEs) are integral to the fabric of the United States, yet they 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 English as a second language (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 those 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 subpopulations 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; 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.

Call to Action

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, health care facilities, laboratories, businesses, and public offices. A college president in Texas stressed the importance of the MLE population to economic development: “It is absolutely critical that we prepare for demographic shifts. . . . They [students] don’t have time to wait, and Texas doesn’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.

Read the full report at [*Translating Opportunity: Improving Postsecondary Pathways for Multilingual Learners of English*](#).

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