

Bridging Policy and Practice: Opportunities for Community College Providers of Adult Education ESL

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Community college adult education ESL services are a primary source of English language education for multilingual learners (MLs). MLs enter these ESL programs with diverse language and academic needs and goals. However, existing federal policies and factors such as inadequate funding and heavy administrative burdens can make it difficult for providers to support the full range of MLs' goals, including laying the path to employment, postsecondary education, or citizenship, or just learning English for everyday use. The research presented below highlights federal, state, and institutional-level policy considerations to improve adult education ESL program access and outcomes.

Who Are Multilingual Learners in Community Colleges?

- Immigrants, refugees, and U.S.-educated students learning English
- Internationally trained professionals who are recredentialing
- Adults with limited formal education seeking literacy and job training

Policy Context: How Adult Education Is Structured



Federal Oversight:

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) administers adult education under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title II.



Funding Flow:

The federal government provides states about 80% of adult education funding, with a 25% state match. State adult education program agencies allocate funds to local providers, including community colleges, K-12 systems, and community-based organizations.



Accountability System:

Providers track outcomes such as Measurable Skill Gains (MSGs) typically via pre-/post-tests. Metrics emphasize workforce entry and credential attainment, which are sometimes misaligned with learner goals.

Study Overview and Research Activities

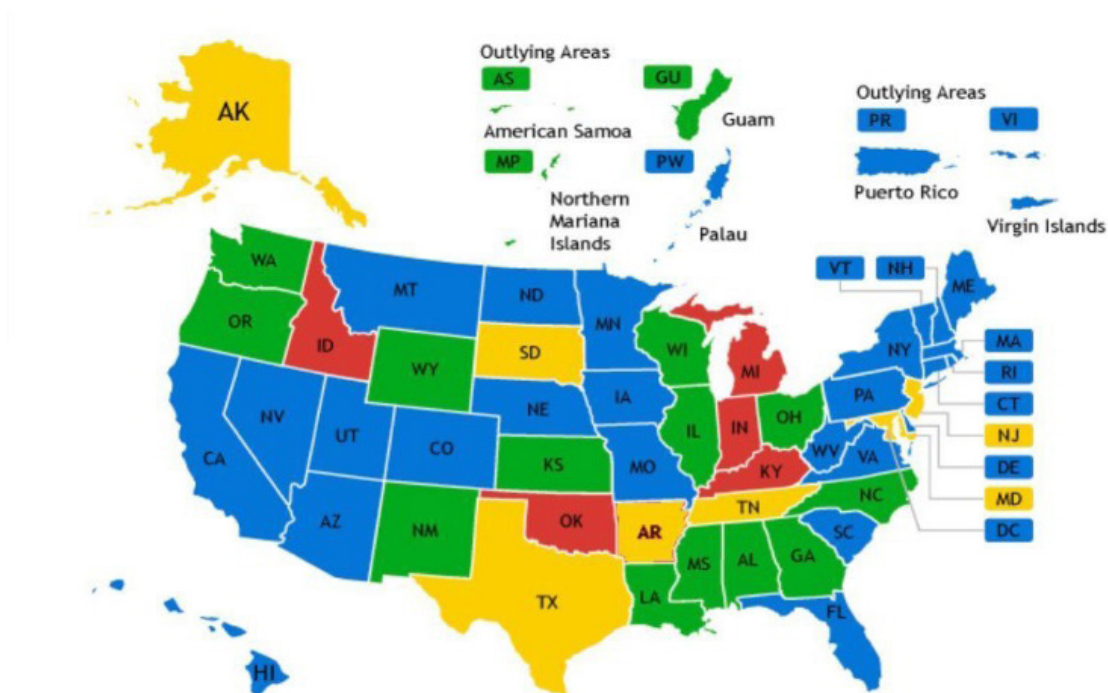
Design: Analysis of the national policy landscape of adult education ESL

Data: 28 interviews with state and federal officials, providers, and advocates, plus a policy document analysis

Focus: How adult education policies shape community colleges' ability to support MLs' diverse goals

State-Administered Adult Education Program Agencies

In 13 U.S. states, adult education is administered through community and technical college systems, and community colleges make up a large share of adult education providers nationally, including within states where it is administered through state departments of labor, K-12 systems, or other entities.



State Agency Types

Technical and Adult Education	05
Department of Labor	07
Community, Technical College or	16
State Education Agency	29

U.S. Department of Education

Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education
Division of Adult Education and Literacy
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Research Takeaways From Federal and State Policy Analysis

Community colleges provide free or low-cost adult education ESL courses and support services for MLs. Instructional and support infrastructure help MLs persist.

- Tailored supports for students include coaching and career navigation.
- Additional funding from sources such as the Perkins and Strong Workforce programs assists integrated education and training (IET) and career-focused programs.
- Community college partnerships with other adult education ESL providers fill service gaps.

Community colleges may struggle to support MLs from diverse backgrounds through the highly regulated adult education system.

- Students in adult education ESL have varied goals. The lengthy ESL course sequence often slows progression into an occupational training or academic pathway.
- High-stakes assessments that determine if a student can move on to the next level in the ESL class sequence serve a gatekeeping function.

The link between adult education ESL and postsecondary education workforce pathways remains weak despite policy incentives and institutional efforts.

- Community colleges have developed different career pathway models to expand access: (1) bridge courses, (2) concurrent enrollment in ESL and technical classes (IET model), and (3) I-BEST Model (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training).
- Reforms such as Bridge, IET, and I-BEST show promise but have not been widely adopted.
- Rigid divisions between credit and noncredit programs make integration difficult.
- Funding shortfalls and administrative burdens limit innovation and equity.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

1. **Expand** adult education ESL funding and support services for MLs.
2. **Promote** flexible pathway models such as Bridge, IET, and co-enrollment.
3. **Reform** placement and MSG metrics to reflect broader student goals.
4. **Support** faculty development on ML needs, trauma-informed teaching, and cultural responsiveness.
5. **Strengthen** partnerships between community-based organizations and community colleges to improve outreach and transitions.

Discussion Starters



How can community colleges enhance adult education ESL programs to better support MLs?



How can community colleges improve transitions from adult education ESL to credit programs?



What policy changes could improve student persistence and transitions?