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Supporting Multilingual Learners in Community Colleges:

Lessons From City Colleges of Chicago

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CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER
Teachers College, Columbia University

The Community College Research Center (CCRC), Teachers College, Columbia University, has been a leader in the field of community college research and reform for 30 years. Our work provides a foundation for innovations in policy and practice that help give every community college student the best chance of success.

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Inside This Report

Community colleges serve a diverse student population in terms of age, racial and ethnic background, and education level, but relatively little is known about those who are in the process of developing English language proficiency and what motivates them to enroll. It is difficult even to estimate the number of community college students learning English as an additional language—whom we refer to as multilingual learners (MLs) in this report—given the variety of definitions for MLs and the absence of federally required identification or data-reporting policies for this population. In contexts with sizable immigrant communities, however, they likely comprise a substantial portion of the student body. Closing the knowledge gap around MLs' characteristics, goals, and needs is therefore critical to ensuring the success of all community college students. To that end, we conducted a three-year, mixed-methods study to explore policies and practices impacting MLs at City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), a seven-college district with a highly diverse student population.

CCC supports MLs' language and literacy development through a variety of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English courses, which tend to enroll students with different characteristics and goals. In comparing the district's noncredit adult education (AE) ESL and credit ESL courses, we found that the former enrolled higher proportions of Hispanic students, students 24 years and older, and students born outside the United States. The latter, meanwhile, enrolled higher proportions of Asian students and younger students. Due to the fact that not all colleges offered both credit and noncredit ESL, it is important not to overinterpret the differences in demographic profiles of credit and noncredit ESL students across the district as a whole—the differences could be attributable to demographic differences in the communities that each college served.

Not surprisingly, given their diverse academic backgrounds and goals, we found lower attainment of progression and completion milestones among AE ESL students at CCC compared with all students in the district's credit programs. On average, AE ESL students persisted from fall to spring at a rate of 57% and from fall to fall at a rate of 29%; in comparison, the fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall persistence rates for all students in CCC credit programs were 64% and 38%, respectively. By the time of our study, CCC had already embarked on large-scale reforms to its AE ESL offerings, operating within federal and state policy constraints. In the credit division, there were small-scale and faculty-led initiatives to support MLs pursuing degrees, professional credentials, and transfer. In this report, we describe these efforts and highlight policy and practice considerations for community colleges working to improve MLs' experiences and outcomes. We also explore the heterogeneity of MLs at the college, filling a gap in the literature, which contains few studies delving deeply into this diversity.

Introduction

For a wide variety of people learning English in the United States—whom we call multilingual learners (MLs)[1] in this report—community colleges provide access to key educational programs. These include adult education English as a Second Language (AE ESL) programs, such as beginning through advanced ESL and integrated English literacy and civics education (IELCE), as well as credit-bearing ESL programs that prepare students for entry into college-level coursework. In addition, MLs may enroll in high school diploma courses, career and technical education (CTE) preparation certificate programs, two-year degree programs, and transfer degree pathways to four-year colleges and universities (Huerta et al., 2019; Suh, 2016; Teranishi et al., 2011). Although community colleges are widely recognized for serving a diverse student population in terms of age, racial and ethnic background, and education level (Kisker et al., 2023; Ma & Baum, 2016), far less is understood about the growing population of students who are navigating community college programs while developing English language proficiency (Getz et al., 2023) and the factors that motivate their enrollment (Almon, 2015; Razfar & Simon, 2011). In part, this limited understanding stems from the difficulty of studying this population: Students learning English as an additional language are not consistently identified across institutions, definitions and labels vary widely, and no federal policies require their systematic identification or data reporting (Getz et al., 2023). Moreover, research indicates that barriers to access and persistence disproportionately impede multilingual students' postsecondary success (David & Kanno, 2021; Hodara, 2015; Jiang, 2021; Kanno & Cromley, 2013; Mokher et al., 2021; Razfar & Simon, 2011; Rodriguez et al., 2019).[2]

In this report, we describe research activities and findings from a three-year, mixed-methods exploratory study that examined policies and practices impacting MLs enrolled at City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), a seven-college district located in the country's third-largest city. This project aimed to characterize MLs in terms of their personal and educational backgrounds and college goals and examine their program enrollment patterns and academic progress. It also sought to explore institutional policies and practices related to MLs' enrollment and experiences in literacy-based courses, such as credit-bearing and AE ESL. Lastly, the project explored the perspectives of college administrators, faculty, and staff on MLs, language development, and supports and challenges for MLs as they navigate educational pathways.

Because CCC has a large and diverse ML population and a variety of program offerings designed to meet their needs, this report offers insights for community college practitioners, policymakers, and researchers about the goals and backgrounds of MLs in different programs; the experiences of MLs as they are understood by administrators, staff, instructors, and students; promising approaches to serving this population; and remaining challenges. This project is also aligned with CCC's institutional learning agenda, which aims to establish external research partnerships that generate information CCC can use to improve policy and practice.

This report begins with a discussion of MLs in community colleges, followed by a description of the research setting and activities. We then present descriptive analyses of student characteristics and select academic outcomes for AE ESL students, as well as qualitative findings. We conclude with considerations for policy and practice. A policy brief from this project examines AE policies and practices (Deutsch & Raufman, forthcoming), and a policy report explores MLs' transition from AE ESL to credit programs (Raufman et al., forthcoming).

MLs in Community Colleges

MLs in community colleges include adults with a range of educational backgrounds and numbers of years living in the United States. Some enroll in tuition-free, open-access, non-college-credit-bearing ESL courses—also known as AE ESL courses—for a variety of personal, career, and academic goals, including naturalization or citizenship purposes (Hsiao, 2016), improving community and personal communication (Dunn Shiffman, 2019), seeking employment (Kamışlı, 2023), and preparing for CTE or academic programs that require a minimum level of English language proficiency (Becker, 2011). Others enroll directly in credit-bearing, tuition-based academic programs, which may include ESL courses geared toward preparing students for transfer and degree pathways. No reliable estimates of the number of MLs enrolled in CCC or community colleges nationally are available (beyond enrollment figures for ESL and foreign language GED preparation courses, which only capture a subset of MLs), but in contexts like Chicago with sizable immigrant populations, it is reasonable to assume they constitute a large proportion of students.

Some MLs at community colleges have studied in U.S. public high schools, where they were classified as "English learners," the federal designation for students in K-12 schools in need of English language support. Some of these students have limited formal education in the United States or elsewhere and thus need both academic and English language learning support, as is the case with a subset of other students who arrive in the U.S. after high school. Some have graduated from high schools in other countries, and some have earned bachelor's or graduate degrees in their home countries. A small number of MLs have international student visas that allow them to study in the United States before returning to their countries of origin (Bergey et al., 2018; Scherer & Stadd, 2023; Suh et al., 2020).

Community colleges provide advantages relative to some other institutions in serving the English language learning and other needs of MLs. Their instructional infrastructure (e.g., instructors, classrooms, curriculum development) enables them to offer a range of ESL courses to support students with various goals and English proficiency levels. Additionally, students enrolled in ESL at community colleges are in proximity to (if not already enrolled in) postsecondary education and training opportunities that may improve their economic prospects, as well as a range of student services to help them persist in college.

But there are also challenges that community colleges face in their efforts to effectively and equitably serve MLs. These include designing programs to meet the varying needs of this population in ways that do not marginalize them or unnecessarily delay their progress toward their goals. These programs may need to recruit and orient students who, in some instances, know very little about U.S. higher education in general and community colleges in particular. Community colleges must also place MLs into appropriate initial courses; advise them as they clarify their diverse goals and progress through various paths to achieve them; and provide academic, financial, and personal support for students who may face profound challenges.

Finally, AE ESL programs must develop curriculum, pedagogy, and professional development initiatives for faculty to ensure that instruction is challenging, meaningful, relevant, engaging, and based on coherent theories and research on language development. (The accompanying text box summarizes predominant conceptions of language, language learning, and language teaching and how they have changed over time.)

Diverse Approaches to Teaching ESL

Language, language learning, and language teaching have been viewed in fundamentally different ways over the years, both by researchers of second language development and by language educators (Bunch, 2022; Valdés et al., 2014; van Lier, 2004; VanPatten, Keating, & Wulff, 2020). While it is beyond the scope of this report to trace the ways in which instructors, administrators, student support professionals, and students themselves invoke these various conceptions, it is important to recognize that programs and instruction for MLs in community colleges are built, consciously or not, on assumptions about what language is, how it develops, and how that development is best supported.

As several helpful overviews have outlined (Atkinson, 2011; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Valdés et al., 2014; van Lier, 2004; VanPatten, Williams, et al., 2025), early instructional approaches viewed language as a set of formal properties (grammar, word parts, vocabulary) to be learned through careful translation from students' "first" languages to their "second" or through drill and repetition. Behavioral theories in psychology in the 1970s led to language teaching as a series of repetitive drills believed to eventually stamp language into learners' minds. In the 1980s, views of language began emphasizing the cognitive processes needed to develop "grammatical competence" through input in the target language, opportunities for error correction, interaction with other speakers so that the learner could modify their output, and the teaching of cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies.

The 1990s and early 2000s marked the rise of approaches to language and language development that emphasized "communicative competence" rather than grammatical competence and privileged language socialization and the development of disciplinary practices over the mastery of discrete linguistic features as the primary goal of language instruction. In these more recent framings, which continue to be influential today, language is a tool for social interaction that develops through participation in joint activities with others rather than primarily by building grammatical structures through explicit instruction or controlled interaction (Atkinson, 2011; Block, 2003; Bunch, 2013; Walqui et al., 2025). Most recently, "critical" or "raciolinguistic" approaches have emphasized the role of race, class, gender, and power in language, language development, and language teaching (Flores & Rosa, 2015). This critical framing—which, for example, posits that the "appropriateness" of the language used by racially minoritized people is not merely a linguistic judgment but also an ideological one—has important implications for teaching and supporting MLs in community colleges.

All of these approaches can be found in community college ESL classes today, and there may be times and places where each of them is warranted. What is important is for instructors and programs to be intentional about their goals and approaches, and to consider the implications of each for supporting the educational goals of multilingual learners beyond the language classroom.

Research Setting

CCC, the public community college system in Chicago, consists of seven colleges, five satellite campuses, numerous off-site locations, and partnerships with a variety of community-based organizations and government and corporate entities. CCC (n.d.-a) aims to be "the city's most accessible higher education engine of socioeconomic mobility and racial equity—empowering all Chicagoans to take part in building a stronger and more just city." CCC is Illinois's largest community college system, with more than 4,000 faculty and staff serving 62,043 students during the 2023–24 academic year (43,862 in credit programs and 18,181 in AE programs). Over half (52%) of these students identified as Latino, 26% as Black, 12% as White, 6% as Asian, and 3% as multiracial (Illinois Community College Board, 2025). CCC has experienced robust enrollment growth in recent years, including an increase of more than 9% from the 2023–24 academic year to the 2024–25 academic year (CCC, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b). Chicago has a storied history of immigration, welcoming immigrants and refugees from around the world, including recent arrivals, asylum seekers, and migrants from Venezuela, Ukraine, and other countries.

CCC and the Racial and Ethnic Diversity of Chicago

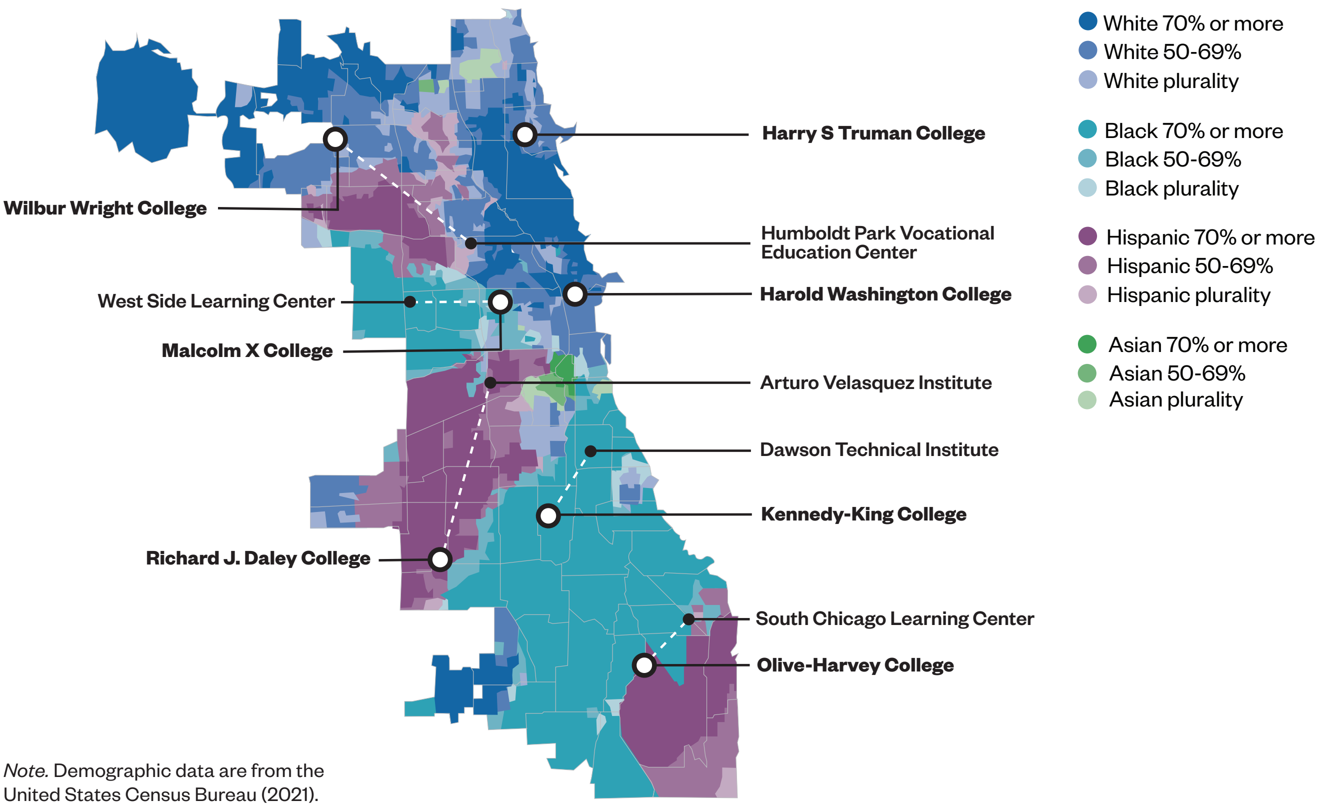
Chicago is one of the country's most segregated cities by race and ethnicity (Logan & Stults, 2021). Its racial and ethnic enclaves have been well documented and have resulted in the geographic clustering of residents, many of whose first language is not English (Hirsch, 2021; Holli & Jones, 1995; Moore, 2016). This segregation contributes to differences in the demographic composition of the CCC colleges' student bodies. Residential and enrollment patterns are not static, however. They have evolved as the share of Chicago's Latino population has grown and the share of its Black population has declined (Pendall, 2018). Additionally, the demographic characteristics of the AE ESL population are impacted by shifting immigration patterns. Figure 1 maps the location of CCC colleges and the city's racial and ethnic segregation.

The majority of Chicago's Black population lives in neighborhoods on the city's South Side. Kennedy-King College and Olive-Harvey College, both located on the South Side, each enroll a majority of Black students. Similar relationships exist between the racial makeup of Malcolm X College and Richard J. Daley College and their respective neighborhoods. The correspondence between college location and racial makeup is less salient in the central business district and on the North Side, where most of Chicago's White population lives. White students are underrepresented at CCC relative to their proportion of the city's population. Thus, Harold Washington College, Wilbur Wright College, and Harry S Truman College draw from the growing Latino population. Table 1 provides the racial and ethnic profiles of each college, including students in both credit and AE programs.

The racial and ethnic diversity and multilingualism of Chicago are reflected in the student body of CCC. Certain student characteristics, however, vary substantially by division of enrollment.

Figure 1.

Map of CCC Colleges and Surrounding Areas by Race and Ethnicity



Note. Demographic data are from the United States Census Bureau (2021).

Table 1.

Student Race and Ethnicity by College, 2023–24 Fiscal Year

College	Enrollment	Percent enrollment by race/ethnicity				
		Asian	Black	Latino	White	Other
Richard J. Daley College	9,786	1%	9%	78%	10%	2%
Kennedy-King College	4,487	1%	65%	27%	2%	4%
Olive-Harvey College	4,587	1%	65%	28%	2%	4%
Harry S Truman College	10,719	14%	17%	47%	17%	4%
Harold Washington College	8,446	7%	32%	42%	12%	7%
Wilbur Wright College	12,002	6%	6%	62%	22%	3%
Malcolm X College	12,016	3%	34%	52%	7%	4%
Total	**62,043**	**6%**	**26%**	**52%**	**12%**	**4%**

Note. Data reflect unduplicated headcounts for the 2024 fiscal year, which corresponds to July 1, 2023–June 30, 2024 (Illinois Community College Board, 2025). “Other” includes the following racial/ethnic categories: Native American, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern or North African, two or more races, U.S. nonresident, and all other or no indication.

CCC's Academic Divisions

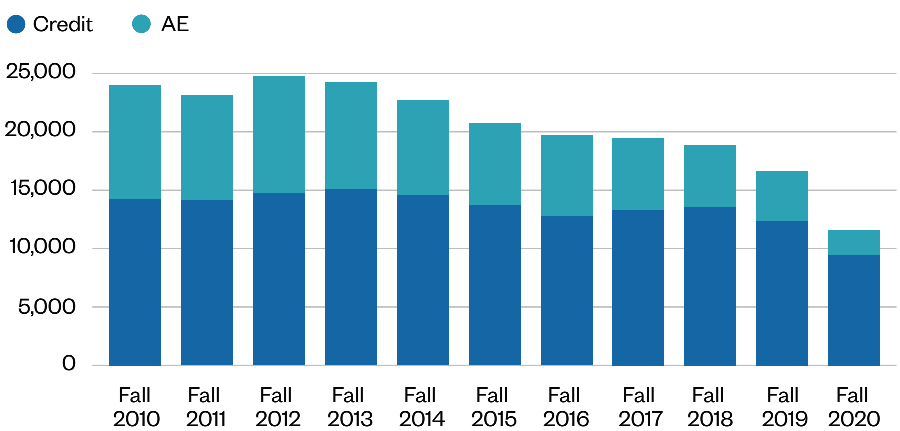
CCC has three divisions (credit, AE, and continuing education) and multiple programs within each. Our analysis focused on the AE and credit divisions. CCC's AE division offers free, noncredit courses and includes ESL courses and a high school equivalency (HSE) program that prepares students to take the GED or HiSET test. Credit offerings include over 200 academic programs across 14 focus areas (e.g., business, professional services, and finance; health services; manufacturing; education and child development; baccalaureate transfer), which confer certificates and associate degrees.

When we began this study in 2019, CCC, like most community college districts, had been experiencing declines in enrollment since 2011 (Jenkins & Fink, 2020). Those declines accelerated during the pandemic. Figure 2 shows CCC's credit and AE enrollments from 2010 to 2020. From 2010 to 2019, before the onset of the pandemic, overall enrollment in these two divisions declined 31% percent. In AE and AE ESL, the declines were 56% percent and 46% percent, respectively. As mentioned, overall CCC enrollment is recovering and was up 9% from spring 2023 to spring 2024 (CCC, 2024b). Additionally, in spring 2024, CCC saw a 16% increase in AE enrollment compared with spring 2023.

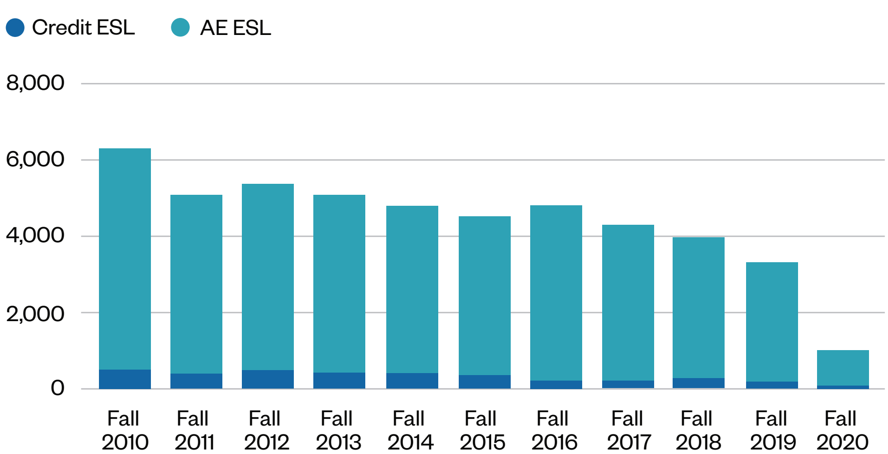
Figure 2.

Enrollment in CCC's Credit and AE Divisions, Fall 2010–Fall 2020

A. Overall enrollment by division



B. ESL enrollment by division



Method

This study set out to address the following research aims:

- Describe MLs at CCC in terms of their personal backgrounds, educational histories, and college goals.
- Analyze their enrollment patterns and progression through course sequences, including ESL, developmental English, and college composition.
- Investigate how institutional policies, practices, and the perspectives of administrators, faculty, and staff shape MLs' educational pathways, learning experiences, and access to supports.

Given the study's coincidence with the COVID-19 pandemic, we also observed some of the effects of the pandemic on CCC MLs, instructors, and staff, and on the delivery of courses and student services. While not the central focus of our study, the COVID-19 context presented a rapidly changing backdrop, with transitions to remote learning and back to in-person learning; enrollment decline and growth; challenges to typical processes in testing, enrollment, and student outreach; and adaptations to CCC's supports for MLs and other students.

Research Sites

We conducted fieldwork at four colleges in the district. With input from CCC administrators, we selected these colleges because they varied in geography, student characteristics, enrollment, and programmatic offerings. At each college, we focused on AE and credit ESL, developmental English, and college-level composition.

The courses we studied at each research site are presented in Table 2. AE ESL consisted of a free sequence of up to six courses and required testing to determine initial placement, measure improvement in English proficiency, and allow progression through the sequence. Credit ESL likewise required testing for initial placement into a three-course series that was a prerequisite for college composition; it required students to pay tuition. Students could also enroll in traditional or corequisite developmental English courses or college composition courses based on the results of a placement test. Notably, one site offered credit ESL courses in a department that had close ties to the English department but no AE ESL. Two sites offered AE ESL but no credit ESL, and one site offered both AE and credit ESL. All colleges offered introductory and advanced English courses.

Table 2.
Language and Literacy Course Offerings at Participating Colleges

Research site	AE ESL	Credit ESL	College composition and developmental English
College A		X	X
College B	X		X
College C	X	X	X
College D	X		X

At the time of the study, students' initial placement for AE ESL was determined by their score on the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) Life and Work Reading assessment and, at times, additional criteria as determined by the college. CASAS was also used to measure skill gains.[3] Placement for credit ESL, developmental English, and college composition was determined by students' scores on the Reading-to-Write English Placement Test, which was developed by credit division faculty, implemented district-wide in 2017, and updated in 2024 (CCC, n.d.-b). The exam includes a short reading passage, multiple-choice questions, and an essay prompt. According to administrators at the two colleges that offered credit ESL at the time of our study, the test included a box students were asked to check to indicate if "English is not my first language." Students who checked this box had their exams scored not by English faculty, who scored all of the other exams, but rather by credit ESL faculty, who presumably had more expertise in assessing language development.

Research Activities

We used a mixed-methods research design to pursue the project's goals. This design consisted of fieldwork (i.e., interviews, focus groups, and observations), an online student survey, and analysis of student-level administrative data collected by the district. Fieldwork, most notably, was affected by the pandemic; we were slated to begin in-person data collection in March 2020 but shifted to remote fieldwork.

Fieldwork. We conducted virtual fieldwork from 2020 to 2022 to learn about the CCC and colleges' contexts as well as policies and practices relevant to MLs, including instructional and support services. We interviewed 68 CCC staff (including college counselors, transition support specialists, front-desk intake staff, etc.), faculty (in AE ESL, credit ESL, developmental and credit English, and other areas), and administrators (district administrators, college presidents and vice presidents, deans and associate deans, and other college administrators), and we conducted individual and focus group interviews with 30 ML students. (See Table 3.) We also reviewed dozens of program and policy documents and conducted six remote class observations (in one corequisite credit English class, one credit ESL class, and four noncredit AE ESL classes of varying levels). Most of our qualitative data were collected between April 2020 and November 2021. Due to the pandemic, all interviews and classroom observations were conducted on Zoom.

Table 3.
Interview Participants

Division	Administrator	Staff	Instructor	Student	Total
AE	11[a]	3	8	14[b]	36
Credit	20	7	19	16[c]	62
Total	**31**	**10**	**27**	**30**	**98**

[a] Administrators with multiple roles were counted in the division where their primary role was housed at the time of data collection.

[b] All AE students we spoke to were enrolled in AE ESL courses at the time of data collection.

[c] Eight students were enrolled in college-level English courses, and eight students were enrolled in credit ESL courses at the time of data collection.

Administrative data. The research team examined CCC student-level administrative data for the academic years 2010–11 to 2020–21. (Most of the analyses presented in this report exclude data from 2020–21, given the effects of the pandemic on enrollment and the composition of students.) The sample includes all first-time students enrolling in the AE and credit divisions in the fall term at any CCC college during those years—a total of 225,806 students. The sample excludes high school students enrolled in concurrent or dual credit programs. We used the full administrative dataset to analyze student characteristics and used subsamples (e.g., AE ESL students) to analyze academic outcomes, including course placement, course enrollment, persistence, and credential attainment. Most of the analyses presented in this report focus on AE ESL students, who represent the majority of identifiable MLs in our sample (43,999 students in the academic years 2010–11 to 2020–21, compared with 3,731 students in credit ESL). Given that the credit ESL population is relatively small, the program is not offered systemwide, and progression measures comparable to those available for AE ESL students are lacking, it is difficult to offer meaningful outcome estimates for this group.

Student survey. We administered an online survey to a sample of students drawn from all seven CCC colleges in spring 2021 to gather information on students' academic experiences in college and their academic and personal background, including their life circumstances, linguistic histories, and academic and professional goals. The survey was distributed to 5,441 students, and 952 responded, for an overall response rate of 18%. Among the respondents, 445 were enrolled in AE ESL, 121 in credit ESL, and 386 in non-ESL credit courses.[4] (Due to the low response rate and variation in response rate by college, findings cannot necessarily be applied to the CCC student population as a whole.)

Findings From Descriptive Analyses

In this section, we describe the characteristics of CCC students in our administrative dataset and select academic outcomes of AE ESL students. After describing the analytic sample, we present data on various measures from our sample, including initial course placement and enrollment (i.e., into one of six levels), enrollment persistence, proficiency gains, percentage of AE ESL students who ever took a credit course (i.e., transition to credit programs), and percentage of AE ESL students who earned a credential. Where relevant, we compare AE ESL students to Adult Basic and Secondary Education (i.e., GED/HSE) or other students. There are important limitations to our data, including inconsistent testing data (missing test scores and a change in the test administered) and institutional practices of grouping AE ESL students in multilevel courses (which is more efficient from a provider perspective but limits what we can infer from any student's course enrollment).

It is important to examine the academic outcomes of AE ESL students; however, it is challenging to do so for a number of reasons. First, AE ESL does not have a summative credential (like an associate degree) that students can attain, so typical measures of progress toward a credential (e.g., credit accumulation) are less applicable. Second, AE ESL students often focus on their own interpretation of the usefulness of the classes they enroll in and do not necessarily aspire to progress to the highest level of the sequence. Students drop in and out of these free educational programs, again making traditional measures of progression and persistence difficult to apply. Third, federal and state AE ESL program administrators primarily focus on a single outcome, measurable skill gains as determined by pre- and post-tests. On the one hand, test results are the most consistent and widely used measure of language proficiency in the AE ESL field. On the other hand, they are limited in that they do not measure the full range of productive and receptive language and literacy skills. Thus, while analyses of academic outcomes for most student populations have certain weaknesses and limitations, AE ESL is a particularly complex program to analyze.

Student Characteristics

Drawing on administrative records from 2010–11 to 2020–21, we compared the demographic characteristics of students who enrolled in CCC’s credit and AE divisions. The results are presented in Table 4. Higher proportions of Hispanic students, students 24 years and older, and students born outside the United States were represented in AE programs overall and in AE ESL in particular. CCC’s credit ESL programs had a significantly larger percentage of students who were Asian (46%) compared with AE ESL programs (where 13% of students were Asian). Moreover, credit ESL students were younger than AE ESL students (mean age 26 versus 34). This difference could be attributable to more traditional-age international MLs (likely on student visas) enrolling in credit ESL at CCC before transferring to a four-year institution, although it is important to remember that most colleges in our sample offered only credit ESL or AE ESL, so some of the demographic differences between students in credit ESL and AE ESL could be attributable to demographic differences in the communities that each college served.

The academic outcomes presented next draw on AE ESL data from the 2010–11 to 2019–20 academic years.

Table 4.
Student Characteristics of CCC Sample, Academic Years 2010-11 to 2020-21

Characteristic	Student type				
	All CCC	Credit	Credit ESL	AE	AE ESL
Gender					
Women	57%	57%	55%	51%	58%
Race/ethnicity					
American Indian	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Asian	7%	6%	46%	8%	13%
Black	32%	36%	16%	25%	6%
Hawaiian/Pacific Island	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Hispanic	42%	36%	19%	53%	64%
Multiracial non-Hispanic	2%	2%	1%	0%	0%
Not specified	2%	2%	3%	0%	0%
White	16%	17%	15%	13%	17%
Age					
Mean age	25	23	23	31	34
Age 24 or older	38%	25%	34%	46%	81%
Country of origin					
United States	53%	71%	18%	17%	4%
Non-U.S.	20%	11%	61%	39%	59%
Not reported	27%	18%	21%	44%	37%
Sample size	**225,806**	**154,108**	**3,731**	**77,876**	**43,999**

Note. Credit student totals include credit ESL students, and AE student totals include AE ESL students. Sums may exceed totals in instances where students are simultaneously enrolled in adult education and credit-bearing courses.

Initial AE ESL Placement

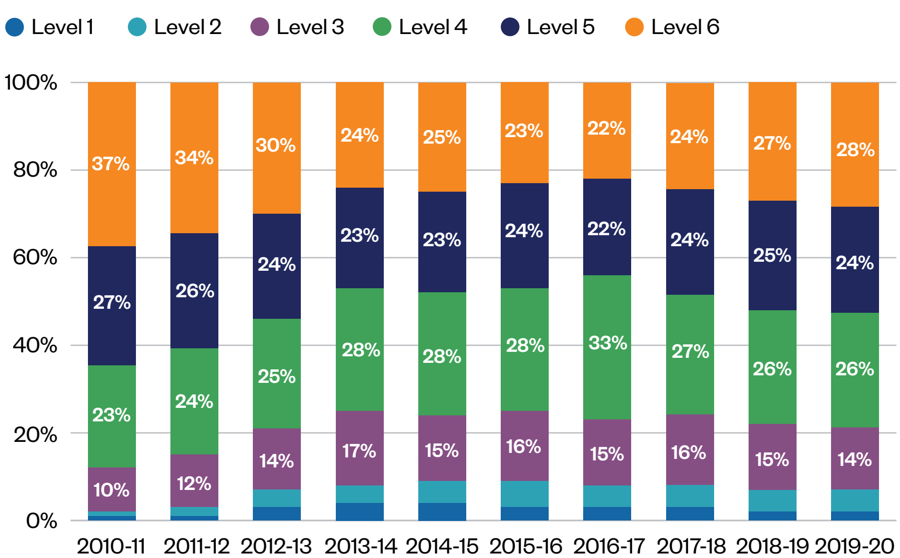
We determined initial placement into AE ESL by identifying the range into which each student's first placement test score fell. There were six score ranges that corresponded to the six levels of AE ESL. Table 5 lists each AE ESL level, course, and corresponding CASAS score range. During our analysis window, CCC used the BEST (Basic English Skills Test) and CASAS tests for placement purposes. BEST was phased out around 2013, and as a result, the majority of initial placements in this analysis are based on CASAS scores.

On average, 79% of students placed into Levels 4 to 6 from 2010–11 to 2019–20. Very few students received an initial placement in Levels 1 or 2. Figure 3 shows the distribution of students' initial placement scores over 10 years.

Table 5.
AE ESL Levels and Courses

Level	Course name	CASAS score
Level 1	ESL Beginning Literacy	< 180
Level 2	ESL Low Beginning	181–190
Level 3	ESL High Beginning	191–200
Level 4	ESL Low Intermediate	201–210
Level 5	ESL High Intermediate	211–220
Level 6	ESL Advanced	221–235

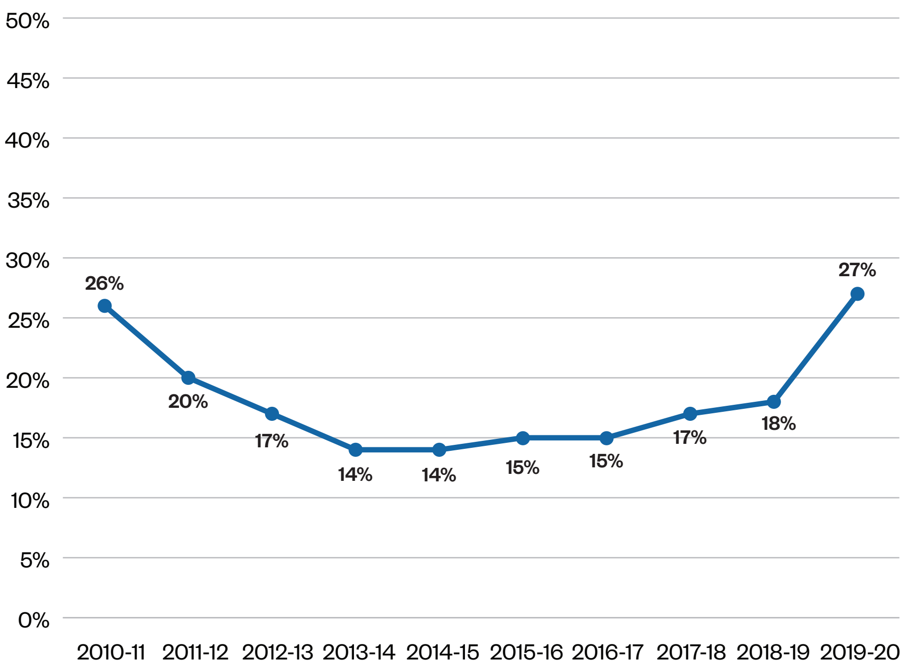
Figure 3.
Initial AE ESL Placement by Academic Year



Initial AE ESL Course Enrollment

Initial course enrollment is determined by the AE ESL course (i.e., Level 1–6) in which a student enrolls after taking the placement test. Our analysis includes course enrollment in the same term in which students were initially tested. We found that a large proportion of students did not enroll in the course in which they were placed. As shown in Figure 4, over our analysis window, on average, 18% of AE ESL students enrolled in the course corresponding to the ESL level in which they were placed, with the percentage increasing in the pre-pandemic years. Administrators we interviewed attributed this lack of correspondence between initial placement and initial enrollment to several factors. Many AE staff and instructors reported that the CASAS test, which primarily measured reading proficiency, tended to place students higher than what they believed was appropriate.[5] For this reason, and due to the fact that the AE ESL courses covered reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, it was common for AE programs to adjust students' placements, sometimes after administering an additional assessment. Additionally, due to lower AE ESL enrollments at some colleges, some AE ESL programs offered multilevel courses, which appear in the administrative data as a particular level course (e.g., Level 2, which accounts for roughly half of all AE ESL initial course enrollments during the study period) but in actuality enrolled students who placed into various ESL levels. Our data do not allow us to measure the magnitude of the effects of these practices on initial enrollment, but they appear to be significant.

Figure 4.
Percentage of AE ESL Students Who Enrolled in the Course in Which They Were Initially Placed



Enrollment Persistence in AE ESL

We examined AE ESL students' persistence by tracking the percentages of fall-term enrollees who stayed enrolled through the following spring and the following fall. Over our analysis window, on average, AE ESL students in our sample persisted from fall to spring at a rate of 57% and from fall to fall at a rate of 29%. In comparison, the fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall persistence rates were 64% and 38%, respectively, for all students enrolled in CCC credit programs. College faculty and staff reported that AE ESL students were more likely to enroll for short periods to bolster their English language and literacy skills without intending to finish the course sequence or pursue further postsecondary education. As a result, term-to-term persistence may be a less reliable benchmark of academic progress for AE ESL students than for credential-seeking students enrolled in credit programs.

AE ESL Proficiency Gains

There are several ways to track students' proficiency and progression in AE ESL. Most providers report pre-test and post-test results as required by state and federal regulators (i.e., CASAS score at the start of a course, as measured by initial placement or the post-test of the previous course, compared with CASAS score at the end of the course). Proficiency and progression may also be measured by passing a course and enrolling in the next course in the sequence, respectively. Our ability to rely on this second measure of proficiency and progression was hampered by the availability of multilevel AE ESL courses at CCC colleges during our analysis window. Though a student may have received a passing grade for a given course, it is possible that their subsequent course enrollment did not change because they were enrolled in a multilevel course.

We limited our analysis of proficiency gains to students with an initial placement score and at least one subsequent test score in the same term, a sample of nearly 12,000 students. Specifically, we examined the percentage of students who made a level gain (i.e., achieved a post-test score that was high enough to move to the next level in the course sequence). We found that between 2010 and 2019, on average, 22% of students made one or more level gains in one academic year and that this percentage was relatively stable. These students, on average, progressed 1.28 levels. When we tracked students for three academic years, the percentage of students making one or more level gains increased to 28%; these students progressed 1.42 levels on average. Internal analyses conducted by CCC indicate that these proficiency gains have materially improved in the post-pandemic period.

AE ESL Students' Transitions to Credit Coursework

We examined whether AE ESL students ever enrolled in a credit course at CCC to estimate the proportion of students who may have continued their postsecondary education beyond AE. Notably, this outcome does not necessarily constitute pursuit of a credit program. We found that 4.9% of AE ESL students enrolled in a credit course at some point during their time at CCC. By comparison, this figure is 8.1% for AE GED students and 5.9% for all AE students. In our policy report (Raufman et al., forthcoming), we explore CCC's efforts to increase the number of AE ESL students transitioning to credit programs and support them in doing so, as well as the challenges that remain.

AE ESL Credential Completion

We measured the percentage of AE ESL students who earned an associate degree or certificate from CCC within six years of their first enrollment.[6] We found that 2.9% of AE ESL students earned any credential: 0.5% earned an associate degree, and 2.4% earned a certificate. In comparison, 1.7% of AE GED students earned any credential within six years.

Findings on Programs, Policies, and Practices for MLs Across the District

One of the goals of this study was to examine policies and practices related to MLs' enrollment and advancement in language- and literacy-based courses across the four focal colleges and in the district as a whole. We focus on policies and practices because they are malleable and can be changed in ways that enhance the experiences and outcomes of MLs. Throughout this section, we highlight how better understanding MLs' backgrounds and academic, vocational, or personal goals creates opportunities for more effective programs, policies, and practices. The following are our main findings in this area:

- CCC aimed to support the language and literacy development of MLs through a variety of instructional offerings across the college.
- The profound diversity of MLs within, across, and outside of these programs challenged instructors, administrators, and support staff to adapt their approaches.
- The district led a variety of efforts to promote students' success in AE ESL, operating within and in some cases constrained by federal and state policy.
- Small-scale and faculty-led initiatives in the credit division aimed to support MLs who seek degrees, professional credentials, and transfer.

CCC aimed to support the language and literacy development of MLs through a variety of instructional offerings across the college.

MLs at CCC could enroll in a variety of programmatic options, from beginning-level AE ESL courses to college composition and degree programs. While our study centers on programs directly tied to language and literacy development, many of our findings have broader implications for improving instruction and support for MLs—including those in content-area courses or workplace-oriented programs, where their presence may be less visible. Here, we describe the broad range of entry points and progression pathways available to MLs at CCC, including those outside of formal English language instruction.

AE ESL. As discussed above, three colleges in our sample offered AE ESL—tuition-free, noncredit courses designed to develop MLs' English language proficiency. Colleges used the CASAS, a federally approved standardized test, to determine students' initial placement within a six-course sequence. After a minimum 40-hour block of instruction, students were eligible to take a level-gains test. If they achieved what federal regulators call "measurable skill gains" on the test, they could enroll in the next course in the next term; otherwise, they would remain at the same level for another term. In addition to daytime offerings, AE ESL courses were scheduled in the evenings and on the weekends at some campuses and off-site locations to accommodate students' work schedules and other responsibilities.

Credit ESL. Two colleges in our sample offered credit ESL—tuition-bearing courses in academic departments that focused more on academic reading and writing and were intended for students interested in pursuing credit coursework or degrees and in transferring to a four-year institution. These courses were prerequisites for college composition and did not count toward degrees or transfer. Colleges determined students' initial placement into credit ESL using the Reading-to-Write English Placement Test, which was developed by CCC credit faculty and implemented district-wide in 2017. The exam included a short reading passage, multiple-choice questions, an essay prompt, and a checkbox where students were asked to indicate if "English is not my first language." Students who checked this box had their exams scored by credit ESL faculty instead of English faculty.[7]

Developmental English and college composition. MLs could enroll in developmental and transfer-level English courses upon completion of AE or credit ESL, or they could enroll directly in these courses based on the results of the Reading-to-Write English Placement Test. All CCC colleges offered two levels of developmental English courses (English 96 and 97) and college composition (English 101). English 97 was the developmental portion of a corequisite model, offered in combination with English 101. Although the curriculum of these courses was not explicitly designed to build students' proficiency in English as an additional language, the courses often included instructional activities that benefited MLs' language and literacy development and more generally built students' academic literacy skills, which are required for success in most college courses (Edgecombe et al., 2014). CCC students who wanted to earn an associate degree or transfer to a four-year institution were required to complete a credit-bearing, transfer-level English course focused on academic reading and writing.

Coursework toward an academic degree and transfer. Beyond courses intended to improve students' English language proficiency and prepare them for college-level English, MLs could also take courses in their field of study and in other academic departments to earn a certificate or degree or transfer to a four-year institution. Successful completion of subject-area courses is critical to students' ability to meet their academic goals, but sometimes MLs' ability to even enroll in those courses is predicated on successful completion of the transfer-level English courses described above.

Coursework toward a workplace credential. MLs could also enroll in CTE courses to earn certificates or degrees in career fields such as information technology, human services, manufacturing, and early childhood education. The district was eager to support workforce development, and these courses have also historically served large numbers of MLs.

The profound diversity of MLs across the college challenged instructors, administrators, and support staff to adapt their approaches.

Given the array of students coming to the institutions, the CCC colleges have implemented strategies to serve their diverse needs while working within the constraints of district- and college-level policies and programs. CCC did not have a precise measure of the number of MLs in the district, and some faculty not directly involved in its ESL programs expressed surprise when we shared our findings about the district's linguistic diversity. However, many administrators, staff, and faculty were aware of this diversity and discussed ways in which a better understanding of MLs' backgrounds was necessary to guide efforts to serve this population. Stakeholders often spoke to the complex demographics of MLs, and one college was frequently referred to as "the United Nations" due to the number of home countries and languages represented. Participants' comments were corroborated by the students who responded to our survey, which included students in ESL and non-ESL courses across the district: 65% reported speaking more than one language in their everyday lives. Our qualitative data gave us more insight into this linguistic diversity, as well as ways the district was trying to be more responsive to the needs of MLs from vastly different backgrounds.

MLs' diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds. Data from our student interviews and focus groups illustrate the vast diversity of ML students at CCC, both within and across areas of the college. We interviewed 30 MLs from 13 different countries, including one student who was "born and raised" in Chicago.[8] Of these students, eight were enrolled in credit English courses, eight in credit ESL courses, and 14 in AE ESL courses. Most were enrolled in higher-level credit or AE ESL courses (Level 4 or above) at the time of their participation. Participants across divisions varied widely in age, from recent high school graduates to a retired biochemist. Three younger students we spoke with had taken ESL courses at high schools in Chicago and were enrolled in credit ESL courses at the time of our interviews.

Each of the 30 students we spoke with shared their unique journey to CCC and the goals they hoped to accomplish while enrolled there. For example, one student had moved to Chicago from Venezuela five months prior to our interview. She was enrolled in AE ESL courses to "speak English fine, and to develop myself in this country because I intend to live here." Another student was from Spain and had a graduate degree. After finishing AE ESL courses at CCC, this student placed into credit English courses and was studying for an associate degree in child development. These two students exemplify the varied backgrounds and goals of MLs who enroll in AE and credit programs at CCC and how CCC's different instructional programs support them in their goals. One was taking free, noncredit AE ESL courses to improve her English, and the other had earned a graduate degree outside the United States and was enrolled in credit English, intending to earn an associate degree in a new field of study.

Our data also highlight the diversity of ML students at CCC in terms of prior education and employment status. Among all students who responded to our survey, 30% had attended a higher education institution before enrolling at CCC. Of those with prior higher education, 43% had earned a degree. Of AE ESL enrollees who responded to our survey, 53% had earned a bachelor's degree, and 24% had also earned a graduate or professional degree. Sixty-one percent of all respondents reported being employed part- or full-time, with slightly fewer AE ESL students (42%) than credit ESL students (47%) reporting being employed. The 30 students we interviewed generally had similar educational characteristics. At least seven had earned a graduate degree in their country of origin, but their credentials were often not recognized in the United States. Two of the seven were enrolled in credit courses (one in ESL and one in English), and the other five were enrolled in AE ESL. Unlike the survey participants, almost all of the interviewees were employed, and many discussed having a job in a field in which they wanted to advance. The majority of interview participants in both credit and AE were women, and some discussed having family obligations, such as caring for school-age children.

Our survey and interview data suggest that the educational backgrounds of AE ESL enrollees at CCC differ notably from those of credit ESL students. AE ESL respondents were less likely than credit ESL respondents to have a high school diploma (49% versus 64%). However, among those who reported previously attending college, AE ESL enrollees were more likely than their credit ESL peers to have earned a postsecondary credential (53% versus 39%). Our findings on AE ESL students' prior educational attainment are nonetheless indicative of the diverse backgrounds of MLs.[9]

Faculty, staff, and administrators' responses to MLs' diverse needs and goals. The heterogeneity in educational backgrounds among MLs in the same program can have implications for instruction and curriculum. Classes may include a substantial portion of students who need academic support to succeed in college, in addition to English language acquisition instruction, and those with solid academic skills developed in previous postsecondary settings. One adult educator explained that "every student is at a different level, even when they're in [the same AE ESL] level," so instructors try to "hit in the middle" by giving higher-level students multilevel activities, extra reading, or chances to support peers. The instructor explained that it is difficult but important to encourage and support "struggling students" while holding the attention of higher-level students who might already be familiar with the concepts being taught. While efforts to differentiate teaching and supports are critical to attending to the diversity of students in an ESL class, this example also points to the important role of placement policies and academic supports outside of class (e.g., tutoring) for students' engagement and success.

Administrators, staff, and faculty at the four colleges and the district office described MLs, especially those in AE ESL, as typically older than traditional college students and varying widely in their educational experiences. In AE, in particular, administrators, staff, and faculty noted there was a dichotomy: Many students had limited formal educational preparation in their home countries, while a small proportion had significant educational preparation (e.g., advanced degrees). Staff noted that there was a vast array of ethnic backgrounds, but many identified students from Spanish-speaking countries as the single largest group across AE and credit divisions, which aligns with our survey and administrative data. Faculty, staff, and administrators reported that many MLs were balancing work and family obligations, and many viewed multilingualism as an asset that students brought to the colleges and district.

Most AE ESL survey respondents reported wanting to improve their English proficiency and upgrade their job skills, and data from student focus groups and interviews affirm these findings. About a third of the 14 AE ESL students we spoke with had advanced degrees from their home countries and wanted to improve their English to pursue jobs in similar fields in the United States.[10] Of the survey respondents, 20% of AE ESL students reported wanting to earn an associate degree or transfer. Importantly, some students developed new goals over time: Five student interviewees started in AE ESL to improve their English and then decided to pursue credit coursework with the goal of earning a degree or transferring. Even though the percentage of AE ESL students making the transition to credit programs is small, this group represents an important pool of potential credit enrollees, especially as CCC seeks to increase its enrollments. Supporting the transition from AE to credit programs was a particular focus of district and college administrators and was aided by several initiatives, which we detail elsewhere (Raufman et al., forthcoming).

Meanwhile, among credit ESL students who participated in our survey, about 45% wanted to earn an associate degree, and 70% wanted to transfer to a four-year institution. The higher percentage of credit ESL students who wanted to earn a degree or transfer compared with AE ESL students is not surprising, given their decision to enroll in the credit division.[11] Student interview data also illustrated this point. We spoke to eight MLs in credit ESL and eight MLs in credit English; these students were already on a degree pathway, and most were interested in completing an associate degree or transferring to a four-year university. One college in our sample made an effort to gather information on students' goals and degree intentions through a student survey to improve its program offerings and supports. Additionally, staff and faculty across sites discussed strategies to inform MLs of various programs and courses that might best fit their goals through formal academic advising, informal instructor advice, staff presentations, or campus events.

In the following sections, we describe targeted efforts in both AE ESL and the credit division to better respond to the diverse needs of MLs at CCC.

The AE ESL program worked to promote students' success within federal and state policy constraints.

While AE ESL students at CCC have diverse backgrounds and goals, AE is a fairly rigid and highly regulated system, requiring providers to comply with federal and state requirements. College and district administrators at CCC attempted to provide a responsive and flexible learning environment for diverse students within the structures and regulations of AE.

Unlike credit ESL programs, which are housed in colleges' academic departments, AE is administered nationally by the federal government and typically jointly funded by federal and state dollars. AE providers can be community colleges, community-based organizations, K-12 systems, or other entities that offer coursework in ESL and adult basic education. Importantly, AE students are required to take federally approved placement exams and assessments to measure improvements in their English language proficiency (i.e., measurable skill gains), and providers must report student testing rates and measurable skill gains data to state and federal agencies as part of the AE performance accountability system.

CCC administrators across the district described similar program goals for MLs in AE programs, including improving students' lives through education and economic mobility, preparing students to transition into credit-bearing courses for academic and career advancement, providing students with quality language learning experiences, and meeting the diverse individual and community needs at each college. As a result, the district engaged in multiple efforts to, on the one hand, enhance the quality and consistency of AE ESL courses and testing processes and, on the other hand, provide a student-centered learning environment that is responsive to the diverse goals and needs of the AE ESL population. Balancing compliance and responsiveness at times presented challenges.

Federal and state policies on initial AE ESL placement and measurement of skill gains were prescriptive and required significant administrative commitment. The tension between responsiveness and compliance was perhaps most visible in the district's efforts to balance accountability, efficiency, and accuracy when testing and placing AE ESL students. At the time of the research, the district used the CASAS test for initial placement and measurement of skill gains. (It now uses CASAS STEPS.) This test was among the limited choices of federally and state-approved assessments and offered a cost-, time-, and resource-efficient measure of certain language skills. However, relying on a test that primarily focuses on reading comprehension made it challenging to get an accurate snapshot of the full spectrum of students' language and literacy skills.

Instructors, administrators, and staff across the district reported campus and district-wide efforts to more accurately and efficiently place AE ESL students and measure skill gains. For example, the three colleges in our sample that offer AE programs devised homegrown measures to supplement student scores on the CASAS test and—according to staff, instructors, and administrators—more accurately place students into ESL courses. These "screeners," as they were called, ranged from formalized writing and speaking assessments to informal oral interactions with office staff and administrators. Colleges offering formal and consistent screeners reported more confidence in their placement procedures, but the screening placed considerable demands on office staff, administrators, and instructors. It is likely that administering additional, more comprehensive federally approved assessments would also present staffing and resource demands, as well as impose a considerable cost to the district. The district recognized the challenges with assessment, and administrators piloted a more comprehensive federally approved placement exam, the Test of Adult Basic Education Complete Language Assessment System–English (TABE CLAS-E), in hopes of at least partially addressing the limitations of the existing testing system. Due to the rollout of CASAS STEPS, which was considered more rigorous and better aligned to AE ESL content standards, the district decided not to adopt the TABE CLAS-E assessment.

As described above, students also took the CASAS test to measure skill gains and advance to higher levels of ESL. District policy (informed by CASAS guidelines) required AE ESL students to retest after completing a recommended 70–100 hours (and a minimum 40 hours) of instruction, as determined by attendance records submitted by instructors. To streamline and improve the process of testing students' level gains, CCC implemented a process in which AE instructors were prompted via email to send students who had completed 40 instructional hours to the testing center to complete the level gains test during class. This approach improved the consistency and efficiency of measurable skill gains testing and increased testing rates, ensuring that ESL programs were meeting state and federal policy requirements. However, some instructors found this approach to testing to be disruptive to their classes and students' learning, and some staff and faculty reported that it was particularly difficult for students taking courses outside of business hours or at satellite campuses to take advantage of the system, as nearly all testing centers were on main campuses and closed by 5:00 p.m.

According to an internal CCC analysis, the percentage of students who made measurable skill gains under this new testing system increased almost 24% (from 23.9% to 29.6%), or 5.7 percentage points, from 2018 to 2019. Notably, this growth was not disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic despite transitions to remote learning and testing, enrollment, and student outreach processes. The most recently available data from CCC show that the percentage of students making measurable skill gains was approximately 36% in 2023 and 38% in 2024.

AE ESL curriculum and instruction attempted to balance standardization and flexibility. In 2018, CCC's AE program entered a corrective action plan as required by the Illinois Community College Board due to concerns about low numbers of students meeting the measurable skill gains benchmarks. The district's efforts to address this issue coincided with the start of our study. Through the corrective action plan, CCC focused on standardizing student learning outcomes, textbooks, and ESL course offerings in line with new state ESL content standards. District administrators oversaw efforts to provide instructors with standards-aligned "course shells," developed by AE faculty, for each of the six AE ESL levels through a new online learning management system. They also sought to support instructors whose instruction was predominantly focused on grammar to move toward a more communicative approach to language teaching that emphasizes interaction, communication, and the practical use of language skills in real-life contexts. To aid this process, they adopted a new textbook that emphasized a communicative approach. Even with this push toward standardization, instructors, administrators, and students reported that there was a high degree of autonomy and variance in what and how ESL students were taught.

AE ESL instructors, known at CCC as "adult educators," reported having a variety of backgrounds and levels of experience in language education and were required to be part-time (i.e., they could teach up to 24 hours per week). CCC improved ESL instructors' access to instructional resources by building and disseminating syllabi, course materials, and activities through the new learning management system and a separate repository of resources for ESL teachers. Additionally, the Illinois Community College Board offered opportunities for adult educators to complete their required 12 hours of professional development, including three new professional development pathways aligned with ESL content standards to earn in-house credentials as a Standards Proficient Instructor, Specialist, or Master Teacher. CCC aimed for all adult educators to achieve the Standards Proficient Instructor credential.

We interviewed AE ESL instructors as district-led improvement efforts were underway. They reported a wide range of instructional goals and practices, including building students' vocabulary, reading comprehension, and essay writing skills; teaching English to meet students' personal needs outside of class; preparing students to pass the credit program English placement exam; and preparing students for college success more broadly. This variation in goals and practices did not appear to be operating at cross-purposes with district efforts to standardize certain course features. Rather, it reflected the eclectic backgrounds and motivations of CCC adult educators. Also notable were the nonacademic goals that adult educators prioritized. These included building community and friendships among students, teaching students how to navigate technology, teaching life skills, introducing students to American culture, and connecting students with college supports and services. Adult educators viewed these relationships, skills, and knowledge as important to students' English language learning. An overwhelming majority of the AE ESL students we interviewed reported positive experiences in their ESL courses and appreciation for their ESL instructors.

Responses to the district's improvement efforts varied among adult educators. One instructor noted that the district's focus on alignment with ESL content standards had created a more "academic push" in their ESL courses, resulting in an increased emphasis on writing across all ESL levels. This new focus on writing was especially pertinent for students seeking to transition into the credit division, who would have to take the writing-focused credit English placement exam. Nonetheless, adult educators we spoke with took advantage of the leeway they had to innovate in the ways they thought would best support their students. For example, instructors developed original materials, adapted required curriculum materials, and structured instructional activities to continue meeting students' individual goals and needs in each class.

CCC also took an innovative approach by developing two new course levels within Adult Basic Education to provide additional free English language acquisition coursework for students who had tested out of or completed the six levels of ESL but still required instructional support in academic English. One of the two courses was designed as a transition course for students interested in transferring to credit programs, with a focus on the academic writing and reading skills needed to place into the introductory college-level English course. The other course, English Language Arts for English Learners, was designed to help students who did not plan to transfer to a credit program to further improve their English skills. Similar to other AE courses, students could repeat each course up to four times; campus and district staff explained that this policy provided students with extended access to free English language support coursework. We did not examine the effectiveness of the transition course in our study, but research on developmental education suggests caution may be warranted when extending course sequences, as long sequences are associated with higher rates of attrition and lower enrollment in and completion of introductory college-level English (and math) courses (Bailey et al., 2010). Preliminary findings on ESL corequisite courses, in which students enroll simultaneously in introductory college-level English and a language support course, have shown promise (Hernández et al., 2022).

AE supports and services outside of classrooms were expanding, with varied implications for MLs' diverse needs and goals. Across the district, administrators, faculty, staff, and students reported a growing array of supports and services for AE students and efforts to be more inclusive of AE students by promoting the availability of these supports. However, few of these services were designed specifically to support AE ESL students as they navigate administrative processes, language acquisition, academic success, and general well-being.

AE students at CCC had access to the wider campus facilities and supports (e.g., wellness centers, libraries, technology support, food pantries) as well as tutoring and academic support centers, reading and writing centers, career centers, and other campus facilities and services that were more typically utilized by students in credit programs. Administrators and district leaders reported low numbers of AE students taking advantage of these campus services. While some of the AE ESL students we surveyed and interviewed reported use of and positive experiences with supports such as one-on-one tutoring and the food pantry, very few reported meeting with advisors or academic counselors, and an even smaller number reported using the library, pool, gym, or technology support. Survey data reinforced these findings, as AE ESL students reported low use of support services, both in general and compared with non-ESL credit students. This low utilization of college services is not unique to AE students; findings suggest that community college students are generally unaware of or face barriers to using such support services (Cheche, 2024).

Stakeholders from one college described recent efforts to design or adapt academic services and supports to better meet the unique needs of MLs in AE. For example, one campus had an "advancement center" that provided academic supports tailored to the diverse needs of

AE students, such as one-on-one and group tutoring for ESL courses, test preparation, and conversation cafes where students could drop in for English conversation practice with a tutor and their peers over coffee or tea.

The district also had a staff advisor role called the transition specialist to support AE ESL students who wished to transition to credit courses, earn associate degrees, and transfer to four-year universities.[12] Transition specialists were typically housed within AE departments and primarily worked with students enrolled in higher-level AE ESL and adult basic education GED courses. Some transition specialists we interviewed described outreach activities that targeted students in lower-level courses as well.

Additionally, the district offered a scholarship program for eligible students hoping to transition to credit programs that refunded half of their credit tuition costs for up to four semesters.[13] The AE division also had a career bridge program in which MLs with career goals in select fields (culinary/hospitality, early childhood education, health care, information technology, and manufacturing) and advanced English skills could complete their noncredit ESL coursework while taking tuition-free courses toward a career certificate or degree pathway.

Credit divisions were undertaking a range of small-scale efforts to support MLs in ESL and other programs.

CCC students interested in earning an associate degree or transferring to a four-year institution must complete introductory college-level English, which is not only a requirement for most degrees and transfer but also often a prerequisite for other credit coursework. Credit ESL courses, which were offered by two of the four colleges where we conducted fieldwork, focused on language and literacy support for MLs. However, outside of these courses, there were few widespread supports for MLs in the credit division, even though MLs appeared to be prevalent at CCC and often enrolled in developmental and credit English courses, as well as the many disciplinary courses CCC offered. In this section, we describe some important small-scale programs at select colleges designed to support MLs and efforts by small groups of faculty we call "ML advocates." We also describe some wider efforts to be more inclusive of MLs in the credit division, including by hiring bilingual staff and developing more robust and specialized advising.

A bilingual learning community and "sheltered" college courses offered support for MLs in credit-bearing courses. One college in our study was home to a bilingual learning community designed to support Spanish-speaking MLs in transitioning from high school or AE to credit-bearing coursework and earning a degree or certificate. Advisors, staff, and faculty affiliated with the program recruited MLs from AE through recruitment events. Instructors and leaders of the cohort-based program discussed challenging deficit ideologies about multilingualism and framing students' multilingualism as an asset through intentional recruitment efforts, orientations, and community-building events throughout the school year. Students had opportunities to strengthen their academic English and complete required college courses during the two-semester program. Students enrolled in credit ESL and a student success course in their first semester and in other disciplinary courses (e.g., sociology and music) to meet graduation and transfer requirements. Students also had access to a learning community advisor, who was a bilingual Spanish speaker who had emigrated to the United States. The advisor reported that their immigrant background was a point of commonality and a resource in communicating with and supporting students in the program. Students described feeling a strong sense of support in the learning community. One student spoke positively about the instructors and particularly appreciated the information she received from the program about transferring to pursue her goal of earning a bachelor's degree in business.

There have been efforts to scale up this program at other CCC colleges. After our data collection period, we learned about the implementation of a similar program at another college in the district. According to an internal college analysis, this small-scale cohort program has had impressive retention and completion results for MLs but is currently offered only on a limited scale.[14]

One college with credit ESL offered "sheltered" college courses—courses with specialized content built specifically for students in the process of developing English language proficiency—in art appreciation, humanities, history, and social science. These courses were taught by faculty who have credentials in both the discipline of the course and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) or linguistics and who provide content instruction and discipline-specific language support. A few faculty we interviewed spoke highly about sheltered courses and, more specifically, about the value of having content-area instructors who are also well versed in language instruction. Through this innovation, the college was able to increase access to courses students need for degrees or transfer while providing English language acquisition support.

Faculty leaders fostered innovations and called attention to MLs' needs. Three of the four colleges in our study had a faculty member serving in an unofficial ML advocate role in a department offering credit ESL or English courses. This individual was often cited by colleagues as the point person at their college on topics relating to serving MLs. At two colleges, this person taught credit ESL courses and played a leadership role on the campus. At a third college, this person taught developmental and credit English courses, had a background as an ESL instructor, and was spearheading professional development related to supporting MLs for faculty across the college, as well as leading efforts to get a credit ESL course approved at the college. These ML advocates were persistent in voicing issues relating to MLs to their department, college, and district leaders.

Unlike AE ESL instructors, many of the credit instructors at CCC were full-time or tenured faculty. Like adult educators, however, instructors in the credit division had a range of professional experience in language instruction, with some faculty teaching non-ESL courses reporting limited experience working with MLs. We heard about recent efforts to improve general faculty members' knowledge and skills around working with MLs. At one college, an ML advocate (and developmental and credit English instructor) was leading multiple initiatives geared toward enabling faculty to be more inclusive of and responsive to MLs at their college. One initiative included a set of asynchronous professional development modules, developed in-house for disciplinary faculty, called "Understanding and Supporting Multilingual Learners." The modules, which introduced topics such as MLs' backgrounds, second language acquisition, and teaching strategies, offered insights for faculty who may have had MLs in their classes but who may have been unfamiliar with their backgrounds, needs, and how best to support their success in credit coursework.

We also learned of efforts at one college to be more responsive to MLs during required portfolio assessments. Across the district, English composition, developmental English, and credit ESL courses all culminated in a portfolio assessment. Students were required to submit first and final drafts of two to five academic essays as well as a cover letter introducing the contents of their portfolio. Faculty scored student portfolios with campus-standardized rubrics, assessing both proficiency in course learning outcomes and individual student growth across the course. One instructor was exploring ways to update the college's rubrics to align with anti-racist assessment initiatives (see Inoue, 2019) to more equitably assess MLs and "make it more multicultural or not penalize students for non-native features or a nonacademic register." This ML advocate's leadership role afforded opportunities for the college to balance the uniformity of the portfolio assessment and a greater understanding of and sensitivity to assessing MLs' writing.

CCC engaged in efforts to expand MLs' access to college-wide supports and to develop ML-specific supports. Beyond instructional supports, the colleges have implemented a number of programs and services to address barriers MLs in credit programs may face in accessing tutoring, student support services, and services for international students.

Tutoring and writing centers were frequently cited by faculty, staff, and administrators as particularly helpful in supporting the improvement of MLs' academic writing proficiency. Some colleges developed supports specifically for MLs, such as a language media lab that offered access to computer-based language learning resources. Only a few interview participants enrolled in credit classes mentioned taking advantage of tutoring services; according to our survey data, 37% of credit ESL students utilized tutoring, compared with 41% of AE ESL students.

CCC also pursued initiatives to create more robust advising for MLs who were unfamiliar with U.S. higher education and could benefit from specialized support. At one college, the transition specialist was being moved from AE ESL to the credit division to ensure proximity to and understanding of credit policies and course offerings to inform the specialist's work with AE ESL students. Three colleges in our sample employed international student coordinators, who guided international students through visa paperwork and enrollment. College staff often reported challenges with verifying international diplomas and degrees in the placement process, so the international student coordinators also helped students transfer their international degrees. We also heard about more recent efforts to support undocumented students, including by creating an undocumented student services coordinator position at each college.[15] Individuals in this role supported students in navigating legal challenges, mapping academic and professional pathways, and applying for an undocumented student scholarship called the Monarch Scholarship. They also supported faculty and staff to become more knowledgeable allies for undocumented students.

Finally, since many of the services in the credit division were not specifically intended for MLs, the colleges made strides in employing more bilingual staff to help address the wide range of linguistic backgrounds and levels of English proficiency among their ML population. Administrators described recent efforts to employ more bilingual academic advisors and staff members who spoke some of the more common languages of the campus communities to help MLs navigate administrative processes, such as applying, testing, and enrolling in courses.

Stakeholders indicated that having additional multilingual staff would be beneficial, and this was corroborated by Spanish-speaking student interviewees, who shared that bilingual staff were an important resource for them.

Participants from all four colleges expressed a shared commitment to identifying the barriers MLs face in credit English and ESL courses and to enhancing the quality and accessibility of services to help MLs enter, progress through, and ultimately graduate from their credit programs.

Considerations for Policy and Practice

Our findings highlight important policy and practice considerations for community colleges seeking to improve the experiences and outcomes of MLs. Central to improvement efforts will be a better system for identifying and serving the needs of MLs outside of AE and credit ESL. Many MLs at community colleges never take ESL courses, yet they might benefit from optional supports that more carefully consider their English proficiency, academic literacy, or personal circumstances. To reach these students, community colleges may have to cast a wide net, developing policies and practices that are inclusive of, though not limited to, the needs of students in the process of improving their English language and literacy skills. Certain considerations are specific to AE ESL, which has its own accountability system that can constrain institutional behavior. But if community colleges aim to expand opportunities for AE ESL students—and empower them to pursue further postsecondary education and training—administrators will have to create easier-to-navigate and accelerated pathways between AE and credit programs. Policies and practices that frame multilingualism as an asset, prioritize and align supports to address the most pressing obstacles students face, and equip instructors and staff to support MLs have the highest potential to materially improve MLs' language skills and college success—regardless of MLs' initial division of enrollment.

To this end, we see potential in policies and practices that aim to do the following:

1. Better understand the characteristics, needs, and goals of MLs and use this knowledge to improve supports.

One notable finding from this study is the remarkable diversity of the ML population. MLs varied in their personal and academic backgrounds, present life circumstances, and college and career goals. This diversity suggests that while MLs share English language learning needs, the academic and nonacademic resources they require will inevitably vary.

To be responsive to students' diverse needs, community colleges will first need to learn more about their ML populations. This likely requires incorporating questions about language proficiency, life circumstances, and academic and career goals into existing systems for collecting information from students, such as program applications. It may also require creating new systems of data collection.

Moreover, as community colleges seek to expand the number of AE ESL students who matriculate to credential programs, they will need to better understand students' life circumstances and goals as they change over time. Staff at one college in our study administered a survey to AE ESL enrollees that inquired about their goals and aspirations. This type of information could be used to tailor the information students receive (e.g., with students who aspire to an occupational credential receiving sustained, in-class advising on career bridge programs and other pathways) and could be more frequently revisited to reflect students' evolving academic and professional goals. Such data would also be crucial to ongoing course improvement efforts, informing curricular and pedagogical changes as well as scheduling and course modalities.

2. Make it easier for MLs to access relevant academic and nonacademic support services.

Community colleges have distinct advantages in responding to ML students' needs and goals, as evidenced by the broad range of program pathways and support services offered by CCC. But our findings indicate that MLs in AE ESL in particular may lack knowledge of the program offerings and support services available to them during and after their English language instruction, despite institutional efforts to share information and ease the transition to further education and training. At CCC, as at community colleges elsewhere, it can be challenging to connect students to the supports they need when they need them. This challenge may be exacerbated for students who face language barriers or who have fewer established networks on which to draw.

Repositioning support services into or closer to instructional settings, where students spend much of their time, is one approach that may hold promise. In ESL, developmental English, or introductory college-level composition courses, this could entail the use of embedded tutors with training in language acquisition. Such courses could also incorporate lessons and assignments that focus on career exploration and result in functional products (such as academic plans, resumes, and cover letters).

Additionally, as colleges expand the provision of basic needs services (such as food, housing, and transportation support), staff who oversee referrals to these services should be co-located or otherwise working in coordination with AE divisions, whose students may be struggling economically. Communication about these services should be offered in students' predominant languages as well as English.

In addition to improving access to essential resources, colleges can strengthen ML outcomes through program development. The bilingual learning community at one CCC college is an example of a high-potential programmatic intervention for MLs. This learning community positions bilingualism as an asset, using it to familiarize and prepare MLs for the rigor of postsecondary education, and importantly, collectively build their academic momentum.

3. Equip a broader range of faculty and staff to support MLs' postsecondary success.

ESL instructors and program staff at community colleges have built rich reservoirs of expertise on ways to teach and support MLs. However, our student survey indicates that a large number of MLs are not enrolled in ESL courses. This suggests the need to develop the knowledge and skills of non-ESL instructors and staff to support the success of MLs.

Our study found promising but disparate efforts to do so, including efforts by an English department faculty member to develop professional learning resources focused on MLs' backgrounds and needs and to adapt the portfolio review process to more equitably assess MLs' academic performance. The latter example is useful for its relevance and application to specific teaching tasks, but it is also notable for its symbolic significance, which acknowledges bias embedded in assessment practices and avoids penalizing MLs for writing in a “nonacademic register.” Research has documented how such a shift potentially allows MLs to access courses and programs previously closed off to them; researchers have also argued for expanding the focus of language instruction and support to help MLs develop competencies directly relevant to their future academic goals (Bunch, 2019; Bunch et al., 2020). Our research also identified small-scale practice changes in student services divisions but few systematic efforts to increase staff knowledge and skills to better serve MLs.

4. Strengthen structural access to academic and vocational coursework.

Community colleges can play a crucial part in supporting students’ academic and economic advancement. This is especially true for MLs, who often face barriers to tuition-bearing coursework and high-paying job opportunities and who may be newcomers, refugees, or asylum-seekers. To best support MLs, community colleges should not only focus on English language and literacy coursework but also identify opportunities to inform MLs about academic and vocational programs and support them in their access to and success in these programs. At CCC, we encountered a number of such efforts. For example, the district hired full-time transition specialists to support students’ transitions from AE ESL to vocational programs and credit-bearing academic pathways. Career bridge programs allowed AE ESL students to take tuition-free courses toward career certificates or career-oriented degrees. Certain AE ESL students qualified for the Gateway Scholarship program, which refunded half of their tuition for credit courses for up to four semesters. CCC also fostered connections to community-based organizations to attract and support MLs in meeting their goals. All of these initiatives are examples of thinking beyond “language pathways” as the primary mechanism for the education of multilingual learners (e.g., the development of discrete language and literacy skills, as important as those may be) and moving toward a broader vision of the academic and professional pathways that MLs might pursue when given adequate opportunities and supports.

Conclusion

MLs remain a large and underserved population in higher education institutions nationally. Yet, remarkably little is known about these students and what it means for them to be learning English and pursuing postsecondary education in community colleges. This knowledge gap was the inspiration for this exploratory study and points to an underappreciated yet critical function of community colleges.

CCC, as a result of the state’s corrective action plan, had already embarked on large-scale reforms to its AE ESL offerings when this project began. These reforms were on top of the district’s long-standing commitment to serving Chicago’s large and vibrant immigrant communities. Our examination of the ML population and relevant CCC policies, practices, and programs—some of which were in the midst of change—yielded actionable insights that may be useful to other community colleges.

Community colleges like CCC that offer AE programs may find their largest identifiable group of MLs enrolled in AE ESL. At CCC, this group was both distinct from credit ESL students and diverse within its own ranks. AE ESL students tended to be older relative to other CCC students. The majority of MLs in AE ESL had not completed a high school diploma, according to our survey data, and may have struggled with both English and basic academic skills. A small but significant percentage of AE ESL students had strong academic preparation; some had earned postsecondary and even graduate-level credentials in their home countries. Given federal and state mandates on the structure and provision of AE ESL programs, it was challenging for CCC to be fully responsive to the range of needs and goals of AE ESL enrollees. Nonetheless, the district implemented improvements that standardized course structure and strengthened curriculum, and it offered instructor-led professional learning activities and resources.

Beyond AE ESL, our survey findings suggest that many MLs at CCC who were enrolled in credit programs chose not to take ESL, mirroring trends documented in other places with large immigrant populations, such as California and New York (Ran & Lin, 2022; Raufman et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2019). At CCC, it was unclear what kinds of English language learning support these MLs needed or were receiving in their respective programs of study. A growing cadre of CCC faculty and staff were aware of the potential gaps in support for MLs and had developed and implemented smaller scale innovations on ML teaching and learning, advising, and student services that hold promise and warrant further research.

Community colleges are particularly well positioned to serve the growing number of MLs seeking English language learning and postsecondary education. They are accessible and affordable, and, for students who begin in AE, they provide ready-made entry points to credential programs with labor market value. This study has generated findings about MLs' backgrounds, life circumstances, goals, and outcomes and documented how one district, CCC, has worked to improve the English language learning, postsecondary experiences and outcomes, and well-being of this understudied population. Much work lies ahead to identify and scale policies and practices that remove barriers and help more MLs in community colleges reach their education and life goals.

Endnotes

1. There is no federal policy or guidance for classifying language learners in adult or higher education, and states and local colleges rarely have a classification system. Therefore, in line with recent scholarship and practice, we use the term "multilingual learners" to refer to a wide range of students learning English as an additional language in community colleges, and we reserve the term "English learners" for describing students in K-12 who have been classified as such following federal, state, and district policy requirements (Kanno et al., 2024).

2. Surveying multiple community college AE ESL programs, Chisman and Crandall (2007) concluded that only 10%–18% of AE ESL students went on to enroll in credit-bearing ESL courses and less than 10% ever transitioned to credit-bearing academic programs.

3. CASAS is one of several assessments approved by the U.S. Department of Education for use in AE. The version of CASAS that CCC used during our study consists of a 60-minute computer-based, multiple-choice exam designed to measure students' reading comprehension skills. This version does not include measures of speaking, listening, or

writing proficiency. In July 2024, CASAS was updated to CASAS Reading STEPS (Student Test of English Progress and Success), which was designed to be more aligned with the state English language proficiency standards for adult education

4. In response to the survey question "Is English the first language you learned as a child?," 37% of non-ESL credit students responded "Yes." While this suggests the majority of non-ESL credit respondents first learned a language other than English, we cannot determine how many had English language learning needs at the time the survey was administered.

5. CCC's AE ESL course curriculum was aligned with the Illinois Community College Board's College and Career Readiness Standards. The CASAS Life and Work Reading test was not and therefore had the potential to misplace students. This misalignment, along with determinations that CASAS test lacked rigor, contributed to its retirement in 2024 and the launch of an updated test.

6. CCC confers two types of certificates: advanced and basic. Advanced certificates are 30–50 credit hours and can generally be completed in two to three semesters. Basic certificates are below 30 hours and can be completed in one or two semesters.

7. A small number of staff, faculty, and administrators wondered if this question led students to experience stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), wherein even asking students to self-identify that "English is not my first language" may create additional anxiety about their ability to perform on an exam meant to assess their English reading and writing.

8. The countries include China, Colombia, Ethiopia, France, India, Italy, Latvia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United States, Venezuela, and Vietnam.

9. Again, it is important to temper our interpretations with a reminder that most colleges did not offer both AE ESL and credit ESL, so some of the differences may be explained by differences in the demographics of the communities that each college served.

10. Data collection in 2023–2024 for an extension of this project revealed that Ukrainian immigrants often had advanced degrees.

11. Qualitative data also suggest that improving English through credit ESL courses in preparation for continued education is a common strategy among international students. For example, one focus group included two international students in credit ESL who both planned to transfer: one from France who intended to study design at a four-year university and one from China who hoped to transfer to the University of Chicago and pursue a degree in the medical field.

12. Of the 30 students we spoke to, five had moved from noncredit ESL at CCC to credit coursework. Of our survey respondents, 20% of AE ESL students indicated they wanted to earn an associate degree or transfer to a four-year institution.

13. Eligibility criteria for 2023–24 applicants, for example, include enrollment in at least one AE course between 2020 and 2023, eligibility for in-district tuition, a high school diploma or equivalent, and placement into college-level English or one level below college-level English.

14. College faculty cited internal research showing that the program has served 500 students since its inception. Eighty percent of participants completed the program-specific college-level courses and moved on to other college-level courses. Descriptive data suggest that program students may be more likely to continue their college education, earn an associate degree, and transfer to a four-year college than similar Spanish-speaking students not in the program.

15. House Bill 3438, passed in 2021 and enacted in the 2023–24 academic year (Illinois General Assembly, 2021), requires all public universities and community colleges in Illinois to designate a staff person to provide support for undocumented students

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