

Community Colleges as Providers of Adult Education ESL: The Role of Federal Policy

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The United States faces a longstanding need for greater adult education (AE) English as a Second Language (ESL) programming. Over 18 million working-age adults—the vast majority of whom are immigrants¹—do not speak English very well or at all, including nearly 7 million without a high school credential (National Association of State Directors of Adult Education [NASDAE], 2024). Research consistently shows that English language training among adults improves earnings, health, and civic participation while also strengthening the national economy (Heller & Slungaard Mumma, 2023; Rothwell, 2020). Yet free, federally funded AE ESL programming reaches fewer than 4% of adults who could benefit from it (McHugh & Doxsee, 2018).

Community colleges are well positioned to help meet the current demand for AE ESL. In several of the country's largest states, community colleges anchor statewide adult education systems (which are heavily dependent on federal funds) and are the primary providers of AE ESL. In addition to adult education, community colleges provide both academic and workforce programs for a wide range of students. As a result, community colleges can connect English language learning with postsecondary education and employment pathways, positioning them as essential institutions for multilingual learners (MLs)—students who use more than one language and are actively developing proficiency in English—many of whom enroll in AE ESL.

Federal policy decisions in the coming years will help to determine whether community colleges are able to sustain and expand this role. Recent immigration-status restrictions issued across federal agencies exclude undocumented adults from accessing AE ESL and workforce programs, which affects some MLs served in AE ESL programs at community colleges, while proposed budget cuts and administrative transfers have created instability in AE funding and governance. This marks a significant shift in federal integration policy and limits access to services that have historically been broadly available regardless of immigration status (Hofstetter & McHugh, 2026).

This report examines the relevance of federal policy for AE ESL, focusing primarily on programs at community colleges. It is based on a targeted review of relevant literature as well as interviews we conducted with experts in AE ESL to identify pressing policy issues and to better understand the distinct role that community colleges play in delivering AE ESL programming. Our interviewees, 28 in all, included federal and state administrators of adult education (including those from California, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, New Mexico, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin), personnel from community college and community-based AE ESL providers, and

researchers and policy analysts knowledgeable about AE ESL systems. Together, these sources offer a broad perspective on how federal policy shapes program delivery and how community colleges navigate their responsibilities as major AE ESL providers.

The report begins by describing MLs enrolled in community college AE ESL programs and how these programs function within the federal AE policy landscape, including how recent administration priorities may affect programming. Then, drawing on our interview data, the report discusses the strengths and limitations of community colleges as AE ESL providers and, in particular, how federal guidance and aims are taken up and interpreted by local AE ESL providers. Findings point to policy opportunities at the federal, state, and institutional level—and to the role that community colleges, in particular, can play—in improving AE ESL program access and outcomes.

Multilingual Learners and Community College AE ESL Programming

Adult MLs are highly diverse in terms of nation of birth, time in the U.S., socioeconomic status, educational background, and English proficiency. Those with the least English proficiency constitute a critical target group for adult education: Of the 20 million immigrant adults with limited English proficiency, nearly half (49%) report speaking English “less than well,” and over one-quarter (28%) report speaking English “not well” or “not at all” (Hofstetter & McHugh, 2023). In many states, immigrants comprise a disproportionately large share of adults without a high school diploma—28% of adult immigrants lack one (versus 9% of U.S.-born adults)—and immigrants account for 60% of adults with less than a ninth-grade education (Hofstetter & McHugh, 2023). Indeed, many MLs entering AE ESL programs face dual challenges: limited formal education and low English proficiency.

ESL courses comprise the largest component of federally funded adult education programming.² In 2023-24, 59% of all those enrolled in adult education, or 745,936 participants, were enrolled in AE ESL courses (National Reporting System for Adult Education [NRS], n.d.-b). Women accounted for 37% of AE ESL enrollees, and the racial and ethnic distribution of enrollees was predominantly Hispanic or Latino (59%), followed by Black or African American (17%), Asian (11%), and White (12%), with smaller shares identifying as Two or More Races, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (NRS, n.d.-b).

Community colleges are central to English language acquisition and other training for MLs. In many states, they serve as the key AE ESL providers, offering noncredit tuition-free or low-cost classes. What is more, some community colleges embed AE ESL courses, other noncredit ESL courses, or credit-bearing ESL courses into workforce and academic pathways, providing an important bridge into occupational training and higher education for MLs. At the same time, lengthy ESL course sequences, high-stakes testing for placement into ESL and college-level courses and for ESL course advancement, and limited supports for ESL students at community colleges create obstacles that can impede MLs from persisting long enough to reach credit-bearing coursework or to earn noncredit workforce credentials (Kenner et al., 2026).

MLs at community colleges have diverse linguistic backgrounds. They include recent high school graduates who were classified as English Learners (ELs) in the K-12 context with substantial proficiency needs, former ELs who were reclassified as conversationally fluent but

with remaining academic fluency needs, immigrants (often refugees) who did not attend U.S. schools, and international students from non-English-speaking countries (Kanno et al., 2024). MLs' goals also vary widely: While some seek English skills for more meaningful participation in daily life, many enroll in ESL courses to pursue citizenship, postsecondary education, employment, or professional advancement (Becker, 2011; Hsiao, 2016; Kamışlı, 2023; Shiffman, 2019). For example, internationally trained professionals (ITPs) often enter AE ESL to help re-establish their careers (Scherer & Stadd, 2023), while others with limited prior schooling may need extensive language and academic support before progressing to higher education or noncredit workforce programs.

The Federal Role in AE ESL Provision

Adult education in the United States has long been framed as a work-oriented antipoverty strategy designed to help adults gain the skills needed for employment and economic stability (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Rose, 1991). Today, adult education encompasses a wide range of services, including ESL courses, instruction in basic literacy and numeracy, and pre-GED and high school equivalency programming (Kim & Belzer, 2021).

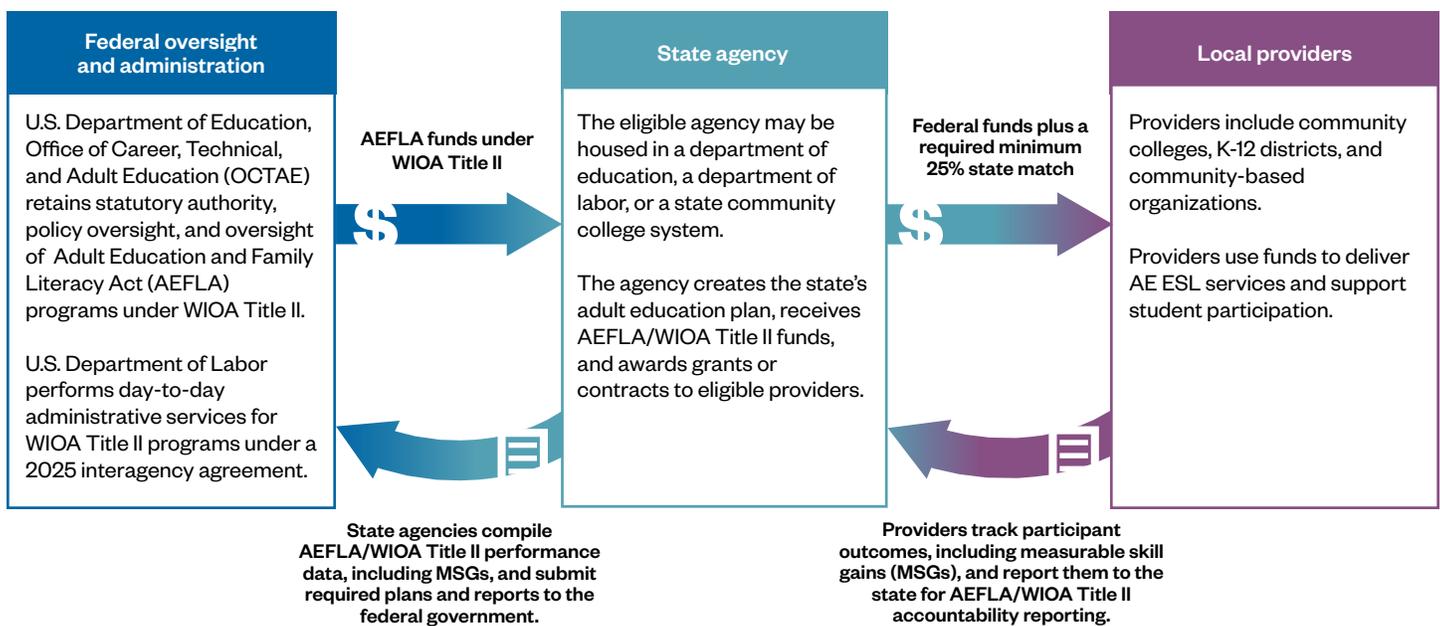
At the federal level, adult education, including AE ESL, is authorized under Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)—known as the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA). Through this law, Congress provides funding that flows to state agencies (commonly housed in departments of education or labor). In 2024, \$715 million were appropriated through the AEFLA for adult-education state-administered federal grants, which are deployed in four program areas: basic skills instruction below the high school level, high-school-level instruction, integrated English literacy and civics education (IELCE), and English language acquisition instruction (Newson, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2024). State agencies then distribute these funds—supplemented by a required minimum of 25% in state matching funds—competitively to local providers such as community colleges, K-12 systems, community-based organizations, and libraries. Nationwide, about 1.26 million adults participated in AEFLA-funded programs in program year 2023-24, 745,936 of whom participated in AE ESL courses (NRS, n.d.-b). On average, federal funds account for about 39% of adult education program budgets, with much of the remaining support provided by states. The proportion varies widely depending on state investments (Cronen et al., 2023), and adult education services may also be supplemented by other funding.

Nationally, community colleges make up a large share (about 29%) of AE ESL providers (Cronen et al., 2023). Their role is particularly significant because, as noted earlier, community colleges serve as key entry points to free or low-cost English instruction and as hubs for transition into academic and workforce pathways. In multiple states, including Georgia, Illinois, North Carolina, and Washington, adult education, including AE ESL, is administered through community or technical college systems, and 16 states now house adult education within community and technical college governance structures (Larson, 2023; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Community colleges in these states play an outsized role in shaping access and delivery of AE ESL. Services vary across states, partly because some states invest more than the required 25% match, creating differences in capacity, program design, and learner supports (Cherewka & Prins, 2022).

While AE ESL programs focus primarily on English instruction, a growing number incorporate civics education and workforce training, particularly through integrated education and training (IET) programs. These programs, often funded under IELCE, combine English learning with workforce skills preparation (in soft skills related to workplace conduct, communication, and punctuality) and specific job-related skills development (in areas such as healthcare, manufacturing, or hospitality) through contextualized ESL courses.

Figure 1 below outlines how AE ESL programs are funded and monitored. WIOA Title II establishes federal–state–local coordination requirements. States must set priorities, develop plans, and oversee program delivery within federal guidelines. Importantly, WIOA requires adult education to prioritize service to individuals with barriers to employment, such as low-income adults, English language learners, those with low literacy, and individuals facing cultural barriers (Eyster & Nightingale, 2017). As Belzer and Kim (2018) note, federal funding decisions significantly influence what counts as effective practice at the local level and shape which populations programs are best equipped to serve.

Figure 1. AE ESL Programs: Funding and Reporting



Recent Developments in Federal Policy

Recent federal policy changes since January 2025 carry direct implications for MLs at community colleges and elsewhere. New immigration-status guidance now limits federally funded adult education programs to qualified aliens and restricts workforce program access to those with employment authorization. These shifts affect MLs' access to vital English-language and workforce courses; they may also reduce MLs' use of community colleges as trusted institutions that serve as a primary entry point to higher education and workforce advancement. The federal measures also place new administrative burdens on resource-constrained programs tasked with verifying student eligibility.

Immigration-Status Restrictions and Access

In July 2025, the Departments of Education and Labor released guidance that includes new restrictions on immigrants' access to federally funded programs. The guidance requires adult education programs, including ESL programs, to limit participation to qualified aliens as defined by federal law³ and restricts all WIOA Title I workforce programs to individuals with employment authorization, a requirement that has long existed for workforce services but is now being more strictly enforced (Bearden, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2025a). Analysis from the Migration Policy Institute indicates that this policy marks a significant departure from longstanding federal practice, under which adult education programs have generally been open to all adults regardless of immigration status (Hofstetter & McHugh, 2026). Policy analysts note that adult education—including English-language instruction—has historically been viewed as a foundational integration service, and restricting access may reduce opportunities for immigrants to acquire language skills needed for employment, civic participation, and educational advancement. The changes also create administrative challenges for resource-constrained providers, who must establish systems to determine, verify, and report each student's immigration status. Advocates and providers have warned that these rules could exclude large numbers of learners (Fensterwald et al., 2025; McHugh et al., 2025).

Administrative Shift to the Department of Labor

In May 2025, the Department of Education transferred operational responsibility for adult education under WIOA Title II and career and technical education (Perkins V) to the Department of Labor. While the Department of Education retains overall policy oversight, the Department of Labor now manages grants and program administration. This change signals a repositioning of adult education squarely within a workforce development framework, one that may privilege short-term employment outcomes over longer-term educational goals. The shift has raised concerns about continuity, accountability, and the sidelining of educational priorities (Dembicki, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2025b).

Funding Volatility and Local Impacts

Federal adult education funding has also become highly unstable. In July 2025, the Office of Management and Budget froze nearly \$6.8 billion in education funding, including \$715 million for adult education. The freeze forced providers to plan for cuts before partial funds were released following lawsuits and bipartisan pressure. Local impacts were immediate and highly visible: The Wallingford Adult Education Center in Connecticut, for instance, faced program reductions before being able to restore (and even expand) offerings once funding was released (Metzger, 2025). At the same time, the administration's FY 2026 budget proposes to reduce adult education funding to zero, a move that, if authorized by Congress, would particularly threaten programs like IELCE, which provides critical workforce-focused services to immigrant communities (McHugh et al., 2025).

Legislative Proposals and Budget Implications

Amid these restrictions and threats of defunding, Congress has moved in the opposite direction. The bipartisan Adult Education WORKS Act was introduced in April 2025 to amend WIOA and strengthen AEFLA (H. R. 2789, 2025). The bill would nearly double authorized funding by 2030, elevate digital and information literacy, and encourage

innovation. Yet these proposals are at odds with the administration's FY 2026 budget request, which calls for eliminating all AEFLA state grants and national leadership activities, effectively dismantling federal support for adult education (Office of Senator Jack Reed, 2025). As these competing proposals advance, the future of federal support for adult education will depend on negotiations that are difficult to anticipate.

Pursuing Federal Policy Aims in Local AE ESL Settings

Building on the policy context we have outlined above, the findings that follow illustrate how federal aims are taken up in local settings. They describe, first, how community colleges expand access to AE ESL; second, how accountability systems shape student persistence and progression; and third, how policy expectations around workforce and postsecondary transitions compare with on-the-ground implementation.

Despite challenges, community colleges provide a valuable pathway to a range of free or low-cost AE ESL courses along with essential support services.

Community Colleges as Central AE ESL Providers

Interviewees we spoke with emphasized that community colleges are strategically positioned to deliver AE ESL effectively. They noted community colleges' extensive reach across regions, consistency in high-quality programming, and ability to integrate technical training with language instruction, making them central to meeting state postsecondary transition goals. They also noted that community colleges help to provide an affordable, accessible pathway to postsecondary education and training, especially for immigrant-origin students (those born abroad and those born to an immigrant parent), who make up nearly one third of community college enrollments and who have been among the fastest-growing populations within higher education (Upwardly Global, 2023).

Indeed, MLs may be drawn to community colleges due to their accessibility and affordability (Nuñez et al. 2016), as they offer a range of free or low-cost noncredit courses, such as AE ESL, to help students develop language proficiency and other skills needed to transition into postsecondary education and employment. Many community colleges also offer credit-bearing, tuition-based ESL options within academic departments (e.g., developmental education, English, or foreign language departments), along with bridge programming to support students' transitions from adult education to academic programs or occupational training. In some states, adults working to complete their secondary credential can access federal student aid through the Ability to Benefit (ATB) provision, which allows individuals without a high school diploma to receive aid if they are enrolled in approved career pathway programs that integrate adult education with postsecondary coursework (Career Ladders Project, 2023; Raufman et al., 2019).

Challenges in Serving Students

Despite their central role, community colleges face persistent challenges in supporting AE ESL students, in part because of the lengthy course sequences often found in AE ESL and hurdles stemming from the associated federal accountability system, which we discuss later in this report. AE ESL programs often have high attrition rates (Greenberg et al. 2013; Schalge & Soga, 2008), and interviewees frequently pointed to the burden of lengthy ESL sequences on students. A state administrator noted that most students enter at the lowest ESL levels, making

it difficult for them to persist through long course sequences and transition onward. A federal administrator similarly observed that lengthy ESL sequences often conflict with WIOA's emphasis on rapid employment outcomes, since many learners exit before advancing to higher-level coursework. Research has shown that adult students may disengage if classes do not meet their expectations (Greenberg et al., 2013), and external factors, such as anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, may also affect MLs' program participation by potentially making them fearful of attending class (Carter, 2016; Hofstetter & McHugh, 2026).

Reported AE ESL student outcomes remain a challenge across community colleges and other providers, in part because the federal accountability system defines progress narrowly: In 2022-23, only 42% of participants in federally funded AE ESL programs were recorded as making a measurable skill gain (discussed below) under NRS criteria (NRS, n.d.-a). Housing AE ESL within community colleges, however, affords particular advantages: Colleges can draw on their instructional and support infrastructure to help MLs persist through long ESL course sequences; they can also leverage additional funding sources (e.g., Perkins and Strong Workforce) to deliver career-focused ESL programming (such as IET programs).

A policy analyst we interviewed said that while AE ESL programs at community colleges are well positioned to connect students with credit coursework and workforce training, sustaining these bridges is resource-intensive and typically requires additional funding and employer partnerships. This challenge is compounded by the fact that, in many programs, only a very small portion of federal adult education funds is allocated to wraparound support services, making them difficult to finance (Cherewka & Prins, 2022; Collins, 2014). Providers we spoke with emphasized that student persistence in AE ESL depends on far more than classroom instruction, noting that challenges such as childcare and transportation needs and difficulty in navigating financial aid often affect enrollment. This perspective aligns with research showing that comprehensive supports—including assistance with food, housing, childcare, and transportation—are critical for postsecondary student success (Dawson et al., 2020).

Practices to Support Student Persistence

Institutional practices can help improve persistence. For example, cohort-based ESL models have been found to reduce stopping out by creating a "community of connection" (Drago-Severson, 2004). By creating stable peer networks and consistent instructional environments, these models can help students build meaningful peer relationships and a sense of belonging, which may, in turn, promote self-confidence. Outside of the classroom, academic and support services play an important role in sustaining persistence by helping adult MLs navigate college systems, address basic needs, and remain engaged in their educational pathways (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010).

While AE ESL students typically have access to college services, such as academic tutoring, career services, and basic needs supports, MLs may experience challenges in using these resources, including a lack of information about them, language barriers, or scheduling difficulties (Ivey & Getz, 2024; Janis, 2013; Suh & Hodges, 2020). Moreover, existing supports often overlook the specific needs of MLs, particularly those seeking to reenter professional careers after immigrating. A national survey of community college practitioners found that only 10% of colleges had sufficient programs or services to help students with recredentialing and career reentry (Upwardly Global 2023). Some community college-based providers, like City Colleges of Chicago, have made efforts to implement tailored supports to MLs, such as having a transition specialist provide coaching and career navigation to AE ESL students who want to enter workforce or academic programs. Outreach activities include classroom orientations to reach lower-level AE ESL students (Kenner et al., 2026).

Broadly, career navigators and advisors at colleges serve as a similar source of support for AE ESL students who may want to enter career-oriented pathways (Scherer & Stadd, 2023). Like transition specialists, navigators may help with recruitment, enrollment, advising, and other transition-related support.

Cross-Sector Partnerships to Expand Access and Support

Community colleges increasingly rely on partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs), workforce agencies, and Offices for New Americans (ONAs) to expand access to AE ESL and reach learners with emergent English proficiency (i.e., learners who are just starting to build foundational English skills). Interviews with state administrators suggest that, in some states, community colleges have developed partnerships with other AE ESL providers to better reach those with emergent English proficiency and fill service gaps. For example, in Wisconsin, where adult education is administered through the technical college system, one interviewee shared that CBOs tend to serve lower-level MLs, who then transition into higher levels at the community college. Similarly, a state administrator from Illinois described how community colleges in their state collaborate with CBOs that serve learners with emergent proficiency, creating a pipeline into higher-level ESL courses at the college. Another administrator pointed to a partnership with an immigrant welcome center that developed literacy-focused ESL classes designed to transition students into community college programs once students had acquired basic English skills.

Interviewees frequently highlighted immigrants with prior higher education or professional experience in their home countries as a group with distinct needs. Across sample states, adult education administrators spoke about the growth of ITPs, individuals with degrees from their home countries, the need to better understand this subgroup's goals, and the need to reduce barriers to participation in the U.S. job market (e.g., through re-credentialing, career coaching, and resource navigation).

CBOs themselves play a critical role in connecting learners to AE ESL programs and supports. For instance, ScaleLit, a Chicago-based CBO operating as a one-stop within the American Job Center (AJC) system, pioneered a career pathways navigator model. The navigators provide “warm handoffs” of clients to adult education programs and other education service providers. In some cases, navigators are embedded directly at AJCs located on community college campuses and coordinate with agencies such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families to build pipelines between federal programs and adult education programs. This integrated model demonstrates how partnerships can expand access and support.

Existing instructional infrastructure (e.g., classrooms and trained ESL instructors and curriculum developers) and built-in career pathways (in both noncredit and credit programs) make community colleges well positioned to deliver a range of affordable, accessible AE ESL courses and services. Partnerships with CBOs and other entities help enhance the provision of supports. Community colleges also benefit from centralization when it comes to coordinated data collection and federal reporting, whereas smaller AE providers may struggle to overcome the high administrative burdens associated with federal accountability requirements.

Federal and institutional structures contribute to lengthy pathways and limited transitions for MLs in AE ESL.

Accountability Systems and the Measuring of Student Progress

Community colleges, like other adult education providers, face considerable challenges in supporting MLs through lengthy ESL course sequences and high-stakes testing systems that affect students' progress. Under federal adult education policy, state and local providers are required to document measurable skill gains (MSGs) of students through the NRS, a performance accountability framework that has significant implications for program structure and student experience. The skill-gains requirements, combined with long course sequences, can unintentionally extend the time students spend in noncredit courses and make persistence difficult for those with the greatest language development needs. Accountability requirements under WIOA Title II shape how students move through AE ESL programs. States are required to report to the U.S. Department of Education performance outcomes, including MSGs, which are typically demonstrated through standardized pre- and post-tests showing advancement across Educational Functioning Levels (EFLs). Although federal funding is allocated to states by formula rather than directly by individual student gains, MSG rates serve as the primary performance indicator used in state oversight and local grant competitions. As a result, programs face pressure to demonstrate test-based gains within a single program year, which can create incentives to prioritize learners who are more likely to advance levels quickly.

States report MSGs for all AE ESL participants either by showing gains in a student's educational functioning level (EFL)⁴ or noting a student's receipt of a secondary credential. Students who enroll in AE ESL initially take a designated pre-test (e.g., the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems [CASAS] or BEST [Basic English Skills Test] Plus) to place into one of six NRS levels of ESL.⁵ Many students test into the lowest levels.⁶ Interviewees reported that getting students to persist through all six levels—which can take multiple years—is one of the biggest challenges to their progression into an occupational training or academic pathway, as only students in the highest levels can access these pathways.⁷ As a result, access is often largely restricted to those with higher starting levels of English proficiency. A federal administrator acknowledged that reliance on MSGs can create unintended incentives for programs to focus on learners who can show gains quickly, potentially discouraging investment in MLs who are placed into lower-level courses.

Narrow Measures of Learning

Performance accountability requirements in the form of pre- and post-tests, which are the customary practice to measure MSGs, can have substantial implications for student outcomes (Scott-Clayton et al., 2014). While providers in workplace literacy and IET programs may use alternative MSGs, these are uncommon and largely unavailable to traditional ESL programs. Standalone placement tests typically used to measure MSGs assess a limited set of skills, often emphasizing discrete reading, listening, or vocabulary items, while overlooking productive and interactional abilities central to speaking, writing, and real-world communication tasks.⁸ Because these assessments do not capture the full range of language skills or language growth, they can create barriers to success for historically marginalized students whose strengths may lie in competencies the tests do not measure (Gonzalves, 2017; Soares, 2013; Suárez-Álvarez et al., 2024). For students in AE ESL, high-stakes assessments serve a gatekeeping function in

that post-tests typically determine whether a student can advance to the next level in the ESL course sequence. Indeed, the assessment system helps drive the amount of instructional time required to demonstrate progress.

By privileging short-term, narrow, test-based indicators, the federal accountability system may inadvertently disadvantage MLs in community college AE ESL programs, limiting the definition of success and constraining pathways to longer-term educational and occupational advancement.

Efforts to connect AE ESL instruction with workforce training and postsecondary education are often weak and sometimes privilege MLs with fewer language development needs.

Access to Workforce Bridge Programs

As mentioned earlier, WIOA Title II frames adult education, including AE ESL, primarily as a workforce strategy. Aligned with the policy aim of boosting the economic mobility of participants, many community colleges have launched bridge programs, such as IET and IELCE programs, to connect language instruction with technical training through contextualized learning. However, interviewees emphasized that these efforts are resource-intensive and fragile—these programs tend to have high costs in an already underfunded environment and sometimes require coordination with workforce system partners (Hofstetter & Cherewka, 2022).

State context also shapes the implementation of such programs. In Texas, for example, the 2013 transfer of adult education oversight to the state’s workforce commission and subsequent investments in Accelerate Texas—an initiative focused on the integration of basic skills training with workforce development—have elevated IET as a policy priority (Green, 2020). The state’s tiered funding model distinguishes ESL (tier 1) from “workplace literacy” (tier 2) and IET services (tier 3), providing higher reimbursement rates for the latter two categories. While this structure was designed to incentivize alignment with workforce goals, it can inadvertently stratify access: Providers may prioritize higher-level learners who can complete tier 2 or tier 3 programs more quickly. Tier 2 and tier 3 programs tend to attract learners with higher levels of English proficiency, leaving lower-level MLs with fewer options. A state administrator noted that the policy incentives may unintentionally discourage services for learners with greater language development needs.

Importantly, tier 2 includes services for ITPs—a growing population within the state who bring substantial professional experience but face difficulties in having their educational credentials recognized in the U.S. (Hofstetter & McHugh, 2023). These learners, who often find that their skills are underutilized, benefit from targeted advising, credential evaluation, and career navigation supports that go beyond standard ESL instruction.

Transitioning to Academic Programs

While WIOA Title II frames adult education primarily around employment, community colleges also serve as a useful yet underutilized gateway for MLs seeking to continue into academic higher education pathways. AE ESL programs in community colleges often operate in separate divisions—administratively and financially—from academic departments, creating structural barriers to this transition.

Some colleges have piloted bridge courses, transition specialists, and co-enrollment models to help MLs move more seamlessly into academic programs, but these efforts are typically grant-funded and limited in duration (Kenner et al., 2026). Similar to the challenges of IET programs, the sustainability of academic transition supports depends on cross-departmental collaboration, funding, and institutional priorities. Research findings suggest that students who begin in AE ESL do not often transition into credit-bearing English courses, let alone degree programs, without substantial supports (Raufman et al., forthcoming; Suh et al., 2022). The separation between divisions is considerable. The records of ESL students may reside in a different student information system, and ESL students may be disconnected from advising services aimed primarily at students in credit programs. Indeed, AE ESL students may complete a sequence of noncredit courses only to discover that they must retest, reapply, or repeat coursework to enter credit programs. While community colleges hold substantial potential to link AE ESL with both workforce and academic pathways, current policy and accountability structures often reinforce fragmented systems that privilege more advanced learners who can navigate college options and opportunities more independently.

Conclusion

This report describes how community colleges play a central yet often constrained role in delivering AE ESL programming that may be especially useful in connecting learners to further workforce training and academic pathways. Given their regional reach and multiple missions; their convenient locations and established student support infrastructure; and their partnerships with CBOs, workforce agencies, and immigrant-serving organizations, community colleges play an important role in providing access to English language instruction and other services that are responsive to the needs of MLs.

Findings also illustrate how federal and institutional structures help to shape the ways in which community colleges fulfill this role. Lengthy ESL sequences, rigid accountability practices, and narrow definitions of language-skills growth and success tend to thwart student persistence and hamper institutional flexibility. Meanwhile, federal policy that aims to improve workforce outcomes, while laudable, may privilege more advanced students and may discourage MLs who enroll in AE ESL for other reasons.

Conversations we had with interviewees from federal and state agencies, community colleges, and local organizations underscore how policy dynamics are often experienced on the ground. State administrators and AE ESL providers described having to make difficult “business decisions” with respect to funding and accountability measures that result in fewer supports and services for learners with the greatest language development needs. Adult education providers, in particular, emphasized a fundamental mismatch between federal performance metrics and the realities of language learning, noting that skill acquisition is gradual and multidimensional. They also emphasized that student persistence hinges on wraparound supports—academic advising, childcare, transportation, and financial aid navigation—that fall outside what most federal adult education funds cover. Federal administrators similarly acknowledged a gap between policy aims and institutional realities concerning student needs—a gap that has widened as 2025 immigration-related eligibility restrictions and proposed funding reductions create new administrative burdens for colleges and heightened uncertainty for learners.

The findings in this report point to several considerations for federal and state policymakers, as well as for community colleges and their partners, for improving AE ESL programming:

Broaden the definition of success. Accountability systems should move beyond narrow skill gain measures; they should consider including others that reflect the complexity and multiple skills inherent in language learning. Examples of potential alternative indicators include successful transition from noncredit AE ESL to a credit or noncredit workforce training program; completion of an IET or bridge program; demonstrated progress in workplace or community communication; consistent course attendance; and an increase in learner confidence, agency, and clarity of goals.

Stabilize and expand funding. Given ongoing threats to adult education appropriations and the transfer of adult education operational responsibility to the Department of Labor, maintaining consistent funding is critical. Stable investment should support not only instruction but also wraparound services and advising essential to persistence and the transition to other programs.

Ensure access for all learners. Recently introduced immigration-status-based restrictions risk excluding those most in need of AE ESL. Upholding English instruction as a cornerstone of civic integration and economic opportunity requires access for all adult learners.

Support program redesign and integration. Policymakers should invest in redesigning AE ESL pathways to shorten course sequences, reduce attrition, and promote seamless transitions into workforce and academic programs. Integrated models such as bridge and IET programs should be scaled with dedicated resources for faculty collaboration, contextualized instruction, and career navigation and advising.

Strengthen cross-sector partnerships. Community colleges should continue to collaborate with CBOs, workforce agencies, and immigrant-serving organizations to expand outreach to learners with emerging English proficiency, support ITPs, and co-design education-to-employment pipelines that reflect regional labor market and community needs.

This report shows that community colleges occupy a pivotal position within the federal AE ESL ecosystem. They translate broad federal policy aims into locally meaningful practice to meet community and regional goals. With stable investment, inclusive access policies, and broader conceptions of language-acquisition success, AE ESL programs in community colleges can better support MLs' educational and economic advancement.

Endnotes

1. About one out of ten adults who speak English less than “very well” are native born (Hofstetter & McHugh, 2023) and are presumably the children of immigrants.
2. Other large components of adult education include adult basic education (instruction in foundational reading, writing, and math), preparation for GED or a similar credential, and training in occupational skills.
3. Under federal law (8 U.S.C. § 1641), “qualified aliens” include lawful permanent residents (green-card holders); refugees; asylees; individuals granted withholding of removal; certain parolees admitted for at least one year; Cuban/Haitian entrants; and other designated humanitarian categories.
4. Moving from one NRS level (e.g., from Low Beginning ESL to High Beginning ESL) counts as an MSG, which states report to the federal government under WIOA for performance accountability and funding allocation.
5. The six levels are Beginning ESL Literacy, Low Beginning ESL, High Beginning ESL, Low Intermediate ESL, High Intermediate ESL, and Advanced ESL.

6. Young (2007) found that among 6,500 students from two states, the largest number of students pre-tested into the lowest level, NRS Beginning ESL Literacy (49%). Another 45% pre-tested into the next four levels (Low Beginning ESL through High Intermediate ESL). The fewest placed into the NRS Advanced ESL level (7%).
7. This finding is consistent with prior research showing that long remedial and ESL sequences in community colleges are associated with lower rates of progression into credit-bearing English, particularly among students balancing work, family, and other responsibilities (Bailey et al., 2010; Bunch et al., 2011; Kanno & Cromley, 2015). This has led some states, such as California, to shorten or accelerate remedial and ESL pathways.
8. Research literature points to a number of issues associated with the measures that are approved to show educational gains in AE ESL (through assessments such as CASAS, TABE CLAS-E, and BEST) (Eyring, 2014). For example, two decades ago Crandall and Sheppard (2004) pointed out that such tests, which may be less costly or less time-consuming, may not be the most effective way to estimate language gains or program effectiveness because programs may use these assessments to measure only one set of language skills, either receptive (listening, reading) skills or productive skills (speaking, writing). More recently, scholarship has critiqued the continued reliance on narrow, test-based MSG indicators as misaligned with adult learners' broader language growth and program goals—highlighting concerns that high-stakes testing can narrow instruction and disadvantage some learners, and calling for more inclusive approaches such as portfolios, performance-based assessments, and other culturally and work-relevant measures (Chyl et al., 2024; Pickard, 2021; Suárez-Álvarez et al., 2024). Gonzalves (2017) notes that “while the progressive gains [of low-level ESL students may be] monumental in their own eyes and the eyes of their instructors, it can take quite some time before their gains are financially awarded [through funding allocations] by the state” (p. 166). As a result, some providers have developed supplemental, informal assessments to place students; however, these do not affect funding and may raise concerns about validity and reliability.

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