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Teachers College, Columbia University

The Importance of Integrated Campus Student Supports to Serve Adult Education ESL Students



City Colleges of Chicago students

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Image Source: <https://colleges.ccc.edu/2024/01/11/read-city-colleges-annual-update-forward-focused-community-centered-2023-in-review/>

In the chat

Please introduce yourself (name, role, and institution) so we know who is in the session!

Why focus on supports for AE ESL students in community college programs?

- Adult education (AE) ESL programs strive to offer students several supports to help them engage in complex language learning toward a wide range of goals
- Perennial challenge in higher ed/community colleges: *how to connect students with resources they need*
 - Even more challenging for students learning English and students enrolled in AE programs
 - AE students are underserved and AE programs have limited resources
 - Student persistence hinges on wraparound supports that fall outside what most federal AE funds cover
- In current context, many avenues of support for AE ESL students are at risk

This session will focus on

4 challenges

reflecting student access issues and institutional barriers to provide these supports to AE ESL students

3 promising approaches

that community colleges are using to better support AE ESL students

through concrete, actionable examples

Let's Discuss!

For folks who work at/with an AE ESL program based at a community college:



Are your AE ESL students permitted to access some college-wide student services? Which services can they access?

What are the biggest service gaps that your students experience?

Fast Facts about AE ESL Programs at City Colleges of Chicago (CCC)

18,923 adult education student headcount ([CCC](#), AY 2024)

- Most CCC AE ESL programs enroll predominantly AE ESL students and small numbers of High School Equivalency students.
- AE students are a large portion of enrollees at 3 CCC colleges (Truman, Daley, Wright)

CCC AE ESL classes

- Offered at 6 colleges and several satellite campuses and off-site locations
- Free; in-person, online, and hybrid modalities
- Students take placement test and then enroll in a course at NRS Levels 1-6 ([National Reporting System for Adult Education, 2025](#))

Research Activities

Data Collection (2023-2024)

Qualitative Fieldwork

- 75 CCC faculty, staff, and administrator interviews
- 55 CCC students in focus groups
- 14 CCC classroom observations
- Review of CCC institutional and program documents
- 28 federal and state officials, local providers, experts, and advocates in AE and ESL fields
- Literature review of AE ESL

Quantitative Analysis

- Systemwide CCC administrative data (500,626 unique CCC student records)
- Progression analysis (enrollment and test based)

Research Questions

- **RQ1:** What do college-wide student services department staff roles and AE ESL students identify as challenges for those departments' service to AE ESL students?
- **RQ2:** What are innovative approaches that college-wide student services departments are using in terms of programming, staffing, and other supports to serve AE ESL students better?



South Chicago Learning Center, Olive-Harvey College satellite campus offering AE ESL courses

Types of Services Provided to AE ESL students at City Colleges of Chicago (Fall 2023)

- Academic support (learning center, tutoring, conversation groups)
- Accessibility services
- Advising and support to transition into further education and career training
- Basic needs supports (childcare, emergency funds, food pantry, housing support, hygiene supplies, and referrals to other community-based resources)
- Bus passes
- Career services, including industry-specific employment guidance based on legal status
- Citizenship classes
- Counseling services, including affinity groups
- Evaluation of foreign credentials/licenses
- Laptops and other school supplies
- Library
- Specialized support for students with particular visa classifications and legal documents
- Supports for undocumented students, including student clubs at each campus

Survey Findings about AE ESL Students' Use of Supports

Table 1 Student Supports

Measure (% Strongly agree/Agree)	Noncredit ESL (%)
Please tell us about the resources you have used outside of your class at the college during this academic year *	
Tutoring center or online tutoring (e.g., Academic success center, student success center or learning resource center)	40.9
Writing lab or writing center	6.8
Math center or math emporium	3.1
Advising office	14.3
Career services	8.6
Technology support	30.6
Wellness center	6.2
Food assistance (e.g, The Healthy Market)	9.2
Total Responses	455
Survey Sample Size	455

- Spring 2021 student survey distributed to 5,441 students and 952 responded (18% response rate); targeted multilingual students
- Asked about students' academic experiences in college and academic/personal background (including life circumstances, linguistic histories, academic/professional goals)
- Among respondents, **455 were enrolled in AE ESL**, 121 in credit ESL, and 386 in non-ESL credit courses
- Survey findings discussed in this report: <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/supporting-multilingual-learners-lessons-ccc.pdf>

Focus Group Findings about AE ESL Students' Use of Supports

- AE ESL students' first resource for support was often to ask their instructors, followed by the
 - tutoring center
 - food pantry
 - wellness center

Students also talked about ways that they support each other.

“We have a support group in the back. I noticed that we have a classmate who struggles or feels shame when she speaks, so I say ‘speak louder.’ We all speak Spanish. If there’s a word we don’t understand, one of us will say the meaning (for example, table / mesa). I think it’s helpful that almost all of us speak the same language.”

- AE ESL student

A blue-tinted photograph of four students walking away from the camera on a paved path. The student on the far left is wearing a dark jacket and a large black backpack. The student next to them is wearing a plaid shirt and a brown backpack. The student in the center is wearing a denim jacket and carrying a white bag. The student on the far right is wearing a dark jacket and light-colored pants. In the background, there is a modern building with a grid of windows and a staircase on the left side.

4 Challenges

reflecting student access issues and institutional barriers to provide these supports to AE ESL students

Challenge 1

Limited collaboration between AE and college-wide student services depts

- Varied levels of collaboration across campuses, with several not working directly with AE
- AE and other depts not well informed of each other's offerings and AE ESL students
- AE instructors limited in knowledge of college offerings, but critical sources of information for AE ESL students

Challenge 2

Staff language and time capacity constraints

- Staff turnover and some depts with 1-2 total staff
- Typical delivery hours 9am-5pm
- Limited bilingual/multilingual college dept staff (and challenges to recruit/hire more)
- Statewide “undocumented student liaisons” have limited capacity to reach out to AE ESL students

Challenge 3

AE ESL students not eligible for some services and/or those services are designed for U.S.-born credit students

- Must transition to credit for certain grants/federal funding, including scholarships for undocumented students
- Limited transportation support or accessibility accommodations (eligibility/documentation requirements)
- Career services staff may not have skillset to serve undocumented student needs
- Eligibility challenges exacerbated in current political context

Challenge 4

Limited tracking of AE students' use of college services

- Colleges have limited ability to track whether and how AE ESL students use services
- Most systems don't distinguish between AE and credit students
 - While some workarounds exist (manually flagging AE students), those approaches are inconsistently used/time-intensive
- AE data collection is uneven more broadly (info on enrollments, persistence, progress difficult to obtain and measure)

Let's Discuss!



- Which of these challenges resonate for you and your students?
- What challenges are we missing that come up in your community college AE ESL context?



3 Approaches

that community colleges are using to better support AE ESL students

Approach 1

Increase AE instructors' knowledge of college-wide and community-based services

- AE ESL instructors were most commonly mentioned by students as the people who helped to connect them to various college services.
- Some student services depts offer PD for AE instructors
 - E.g., Undocumented Student Services training, plans for Disability Access Center staff training on disability laws and regulations
- AE instructors need to know about campus resources, be encouraged to share about them during class, and bring the services into or closer to the classroom setting (e.g., embedded tutors)



The second day, I attended classroom with my teacher []. She made a tour of the whole college. She explain everything that the college has.”

- AE ESL student



But I talk with my teacher because she knows my case, she knows what [AE ESL] level I am. [] And she even told us about the tutoring. But she always stay there saying, 'Oh, no, please relax and calm down. Don't make this quick. Stay here. You don't have to be expert right now. But you're gonna get it. Then take your time. Don't get frustrated. And we can continue.' That's why we're still here [in AE ESL].”

- AE ESL student

Case Example from a Level 1 AE ESL instructor



Introduced vocabulary
related to neighborhoods
and transportation



Discussed practical resources to
help students access housing and
explained process for
undocumented immigrants and
non-citizens to obtain an IL
driver's license

Approach 2

Increase hiring of staff and instructors who share language backgrounds represented in college's AE ESL program

- Helps increase students' understanding of available programs and resources and
- Helps foster relationships across the college

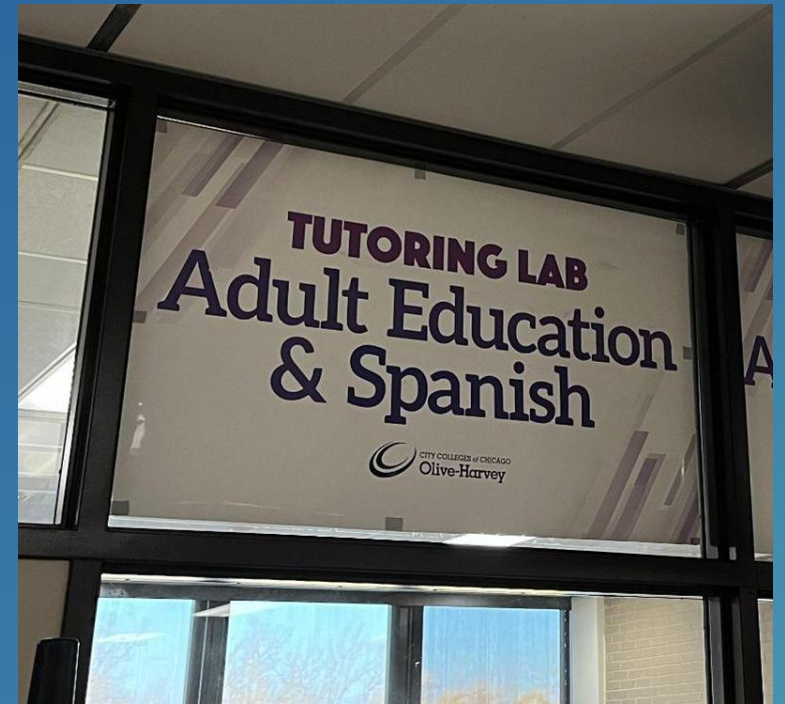
Key Backgrounds / Skills

- Multilingual
- Prior experience as an (AE) ESL student
- Experience working with ESL students (TESOL, linguistics training)

Innovative practice at Olive-Harvey College

Challenge: absence of interpretation services for Haitian-American students

Approach: tutoring center staff submitted request for higher-placed AE ESL student who speaks Haitian Creole to be hired as embedded tutor in lower-level classes



Tutoring Lab for Adult Education & Spanish
at Olive-Harvey College

Innovative practice at Truman College

Challenge: highly diverse student population and need for staff who speak particular languages

Approach: career services staff referred AE ESL students in higher-level courses for full-time jobs on campus

“They were looking for students to work as translators in this department. ...I would just like to see more diverse students working here that are coming through adult ed. ... And maybe this isn't exactly where they want to wind up. But it's certainly a very good place for them to start.” - career services staff

Innovative practice at Daley College

Challenge: need for English language supports for new immigrants before they begin formal AE ESL coursework with the college

Approach: instructor set up opportunity for Spanish-speaking AE ESL student to help in introductory English classes as a teacher assistant



Richard J. Daley College

“As a student, that helped us to practice. And my teacher today mentioned that we want to visit some classes this semester to help another teacher, then that's going to build us up, right? I like that.” - Spanish-speaking AE ESL student

Approach 3

Develop intentional partnerships with community-based orgs that address knowledge or capacity gaps at each community college

District-wide strategy: hold regular gatherings that bring together

AE program staff and
AE instructors from all
CCC campuses



Leaders of several
community-based orgs
across Chicago

- Purpose: foster relationships, market CCC AE and other programs to community, identify community-based services that would benefit AE students

During our fieldwork, we attended the CCC Adult Education Citywide Community Leaders Breakfast, hosted at Kennedy-King College.



Image Source: <https://colleges.ccc.edu/2023/11/17/city-colleges-october-november-2023-newsletter/>

Examples of Key Career Readiness Partnerships

- Upwardly Global, a national nonprofit that provides immigrant and refugee professionals with job coaching and career-training resources
- American Job Center outreach to AE ESL students
- scaleLIT, Chicago-based non-profit that helps AE organizations secure resources and training and helps immigrant and refugee professionals with job coaching and career-training resources

Innovative practices at satellite campuses and off-site locations

Challenge: AE ESL students at satellite campuses and off-site locations have less access to college-wide student services

Approach: Off-site location Onward Neighborhood House hosts AE ESL courses and provides in-house social services including

- Citizenship classes
- Community health services for people who do not hold insurance
- Computer literacy classes (+ free access to computers on site)
- Early childhood programs
- Food pantry
- Home-based programs for expectant mothers and parents of young children
- Immigrant/refugee welcome center
- Supports for small business owners



Emerging Areas to Provide Support

In addition to these three approaches, it's also key to:

- Facilitate intentional collaboration between AE and college-wide student services departments, though we only had one example of an AE associate dean holding a meeting that involved college student services staff, AE staff, and AE instructors to discuss student needs and supports.
- Continue to work to identify current AE ESL students' needs and develop dedicated supports
- Develop services for AE ESL students that help them visualize their goals and see their progress, including through support for education, career, and financial planning
- Draw upon AE ESL students' knowledge, assets, and relationships to further tailor and build capacity for existing services and help more AE ESL students learn about and access services.
- Increase the visibility of support services and bring them into or closer to the AE ESL instructional setting, for example, through dedicated tutoring for AE students and ESL cafes for informal language practice
- Ensure that communication about basic needs services is provided in students' predominant native languages as well as English

From Learning → Taking Steps to Improve Support

I shared 3 approaches and several emerging areas of support:

- Approach 1: Increase instructors' knowledge of college-wide and community-based services
- Approach 2: Increase hiring of staff and instructors who share language backgrounds represented in college's AE ESL program
- Approach 3: Develop intentional partnerships with community-based orgs that address knowledge or capacity gaps at each community college
- Emerging Areas: Facilitate intention AE/college-wide dept collaboration, identify AE ESL students' needs, help them visualize their goals and see their progress, draw upon students' knowledge and assets to tailor and promote services, increase service visibility and bring closer to classroom, multilingual communication about basic needs services

**Which of these approaches would you prioritize?
What would you do first?**

Questions and Comments

Relevant Publications from the Project

James et al. (2026). Adult Education ESL in the United States: A Systematic Literature Review

CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER
Teachers College, Columbia University

**Adult Education ESL in the United States:
A Systematic Literature Review**

Benjamin M. James
University of Delaware

Kylie A. Kenner
University of California, Santa Cruz, and Cabrillo College

George C. Bunch
University of California, Santa Cruz

Julia Raufman
Community College Research Center

Xittlali Trejo
University of California, Santa Cruz

January 2026

Working Paper No. 139



Kenner et al. (2026). Supporting Multilingual Learners in Community Colleges: Lessons from City Colleges of Chicago

REPORT | FEBRUARY 2026

**Supporting Multilingual Learners
in Community Colleges:
Lessons From City Colleges of Chicago**

Kylie A. Kenner | Julia Raufman | Benjamin M. James | Jorge Mahecha-Rodriguez | George C. Bunch



Raufman & Deutsch (2026). Community Colleges as Providers of Adult Education ESL: The Role of Federal Policy

RESEARCH REPORT | MARCH 2026

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

By Julia Raufman and Ariel Deutsch

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 immigrants—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 (federal funds) and are the primary providers of AE ESL. Community colleges provide both academic and workforce training, and as a result, community colleges can connect English language learners and employment pathways, positioning them as a critical pathway for multilingual learners (MLs)—students who use more than one language at home and are not fully proficient in English—many of whom enroll in AE ESL.



Thanks!

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