

The Opportunities and Challenges of Community Colleges as Providers of Adult Education ESL

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About CCRC

CCRC studies community colleges because they provide critical access to postsecondary education and are uniquely positioned to promote equity and social mobility in the United States. Our mission is to conduct research that helps these institutions strengthen opportunities and improve outcomes for their students, particularly those from underserved populations.



MPI's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy

NCIIP's Primary Areas of Work:

- Education and Training for Immigrants and their Children
 - Early Childhood Education and Care
 - K-12 Education
 - Adult Education and Workforce Development
- Language Access in Federal, State, and Local Settings
- The Governance of Immigrant Integration Policy

See more of our research at:

www.migrationpolicy.org/integration



What You'll Learn Today

- Understand the **federal and state Adult Education (AE) English as a Second Language (ESL) policy landscape** and its impact on community colleges providing AE ESL.
- Understand how federal and state AE ESL policies impact **multilingual learners (MLs) in AE ESL courses** at community colleges.
- Explore **the challenges and opportunities** in community college-based services for AE ESL students.
- Discuss **promising practices and policy recommendations** to that support MLs' academic and career success within policy constraints.

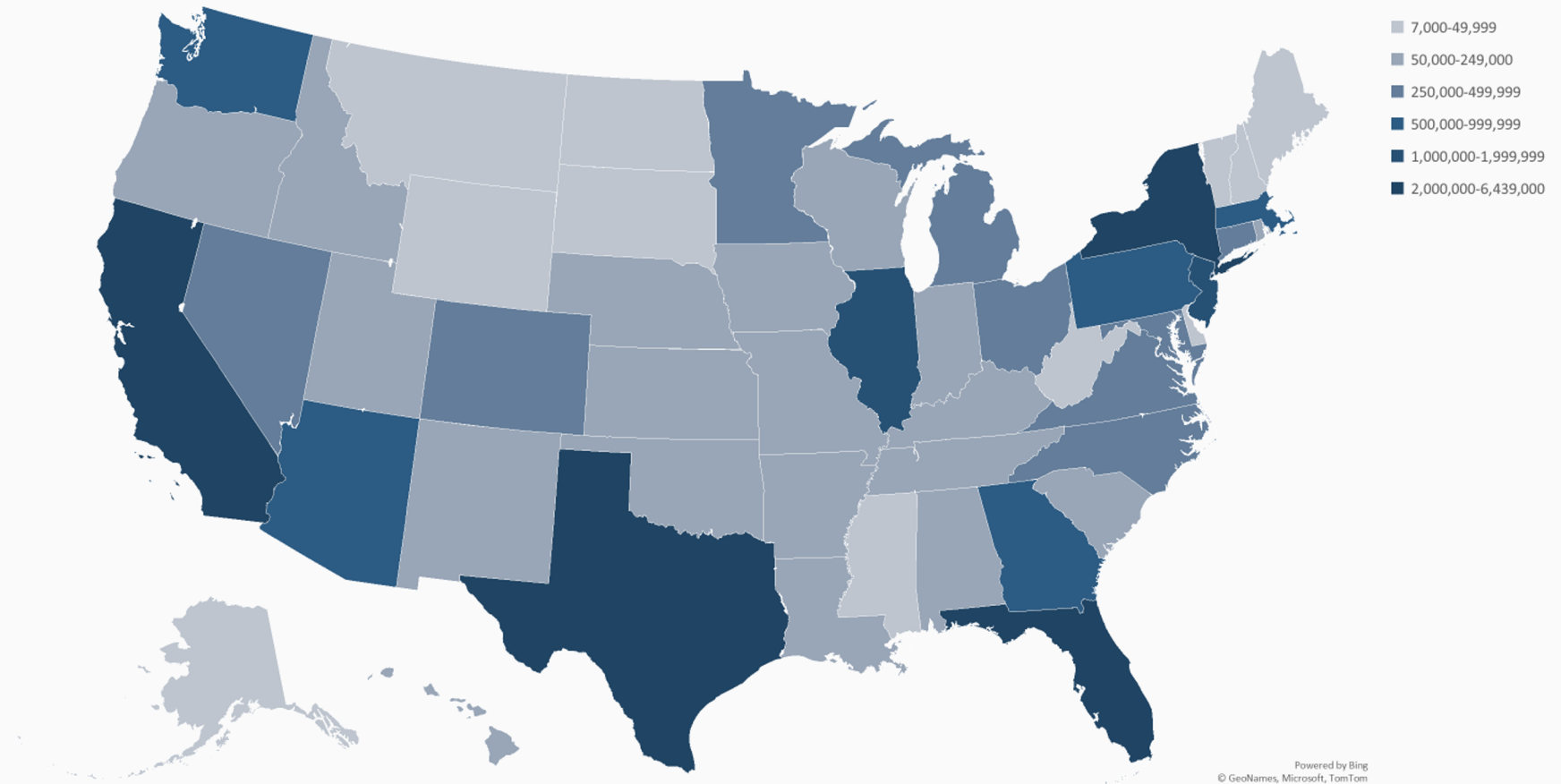
Looking at the Data: Adult ELs in the U.S.

There were over **24.9 million adults** with limited proficiency in English in 2023 (self-reported American Community Survey data).

Includes millions of LEP adults who also have **less than a high school diploma or equivalent**.

- 23 percent of all immigrant adults based on previous MPI data analysis (Tabulation of 2015-2019 ACS data).
- Notable shares of immigrant adults, particularly Latino immigrants and low-income Asian and Pacific Islander, also had less than 9th or 5th grade level of formal education.

LEP Population by State (over age 5), 2022



Source: MPI Tabulation of 2022 ACS data

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Adult English Learners and Adult Education System(s)



Adult education programs are the primary source of English language acquisition services for adult English learners.



Participants in English acquisition-focused programs (ELA and IELCE) **comprised over half (56 percent) of all those served by WIOA Title II in PY 2022**(*National Reporting System*).



Yet the system meets less than 5 percent of the need for English instruction ([MPI, 2023](#)).

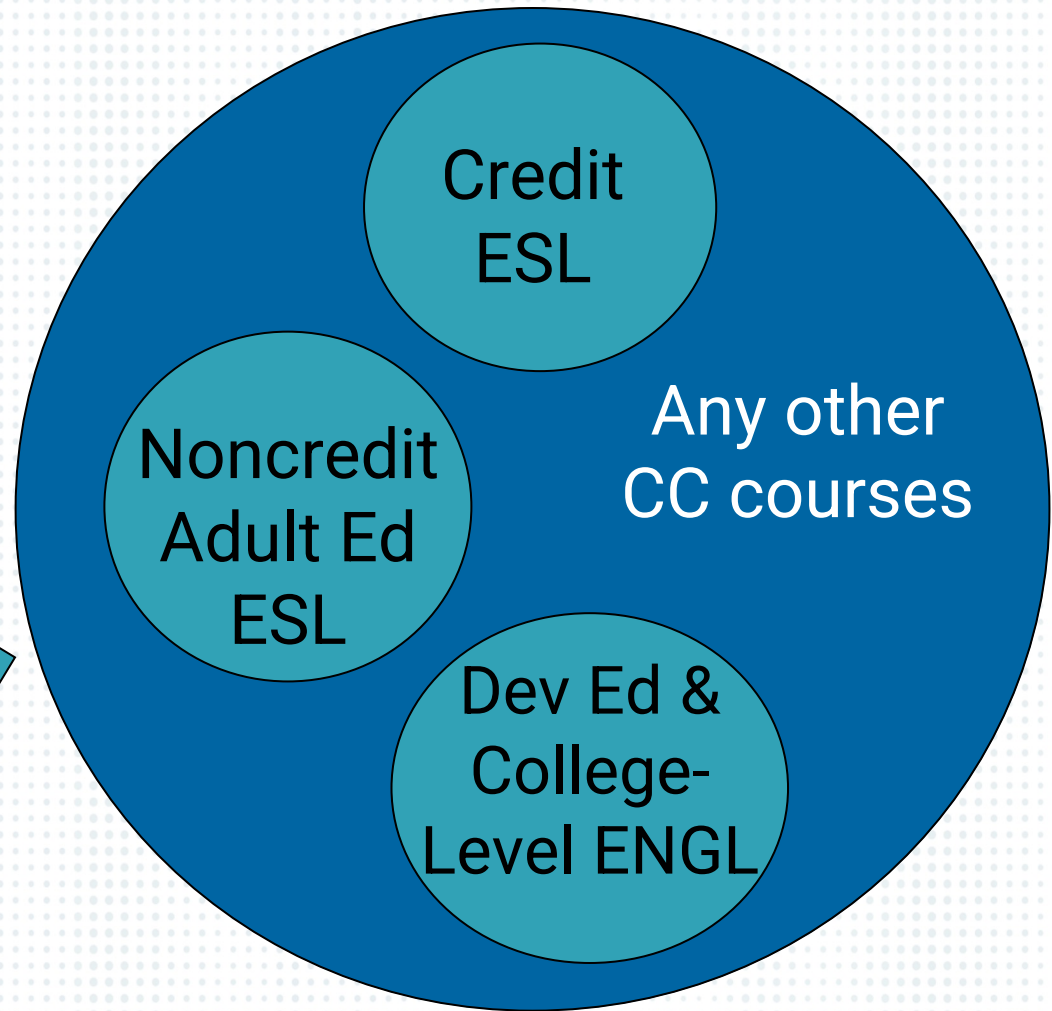
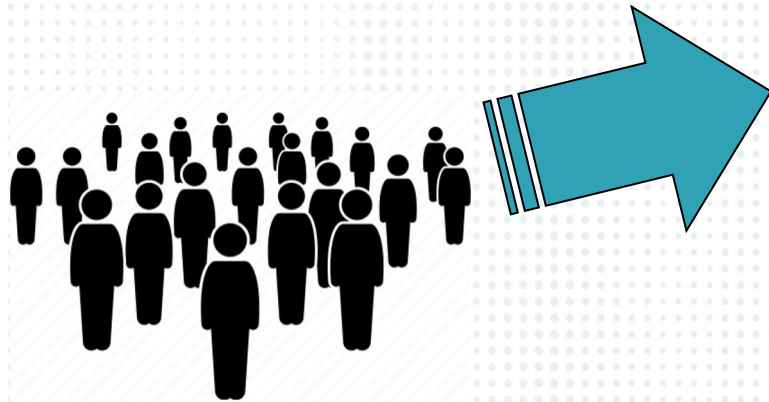
WIOA Title II and Adult English Learners



- Previous MPI findings on the impacts of WIOA:
 - Performance measures create incentives to serve those who can meet them;
 - Discourages serving those facing greater barriers;
 - Creates a gap between system and those most in need of its services (who are disproportionately immigrants);
 - Undermines efforts to promote integration (e.g., civics).
- Ongoing underfunding of adult English acquisition programs.

Multilingual Learners in Community Colleges

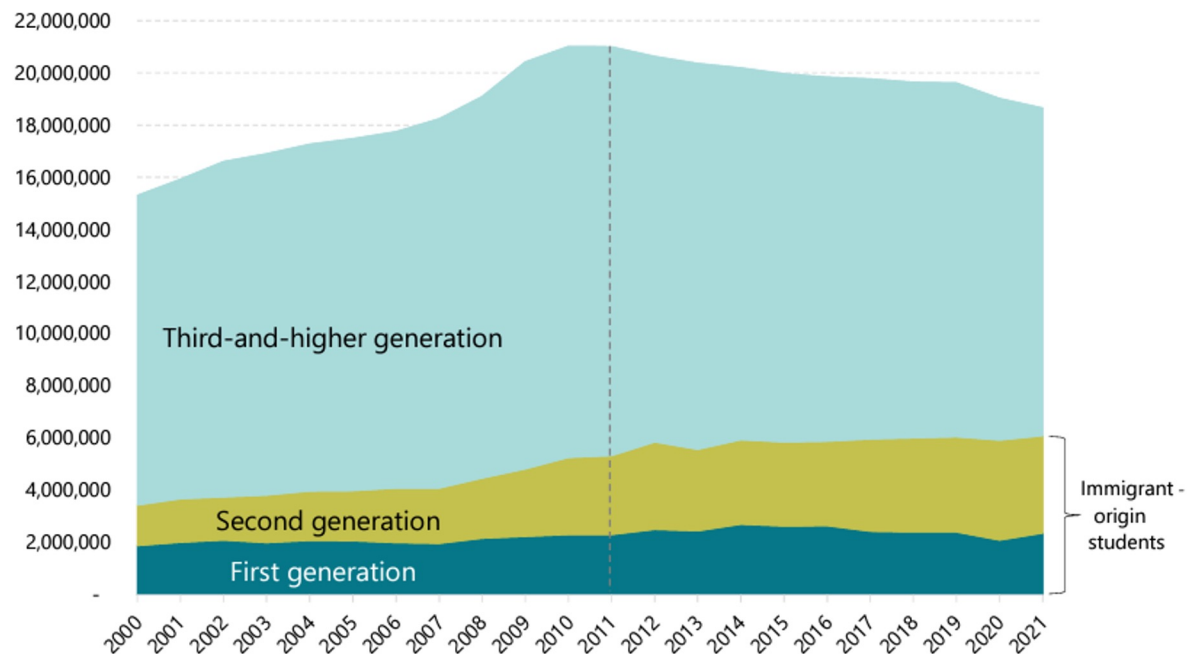
Multilingual learners in community colleges



Immigrant-origin students have bolstered enrollment in two- and four-year institutions.

FIGURE 1

Number of Adults (ages 18–54) Enrolled in U.S. Colleges, by Immigrant Generation, 2000–21

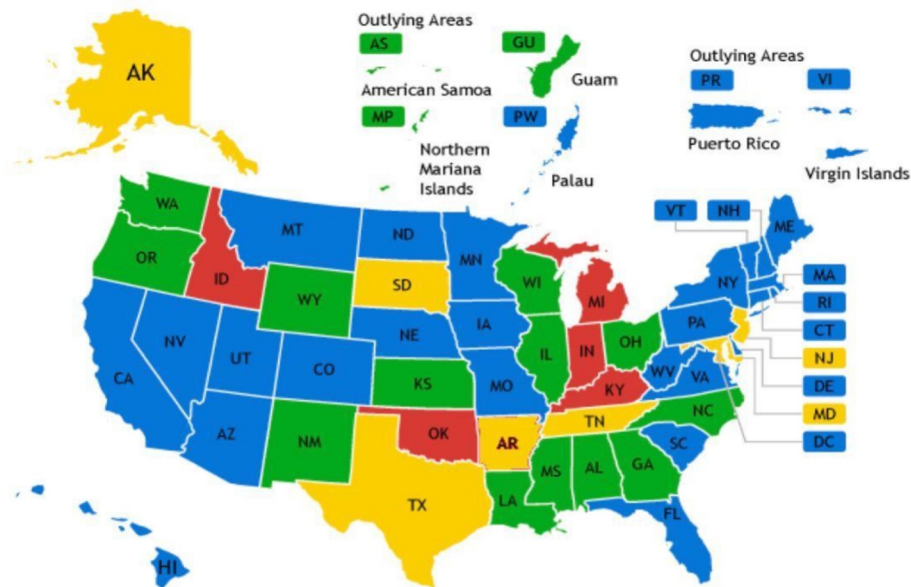


Population change over time

Total students	+ 37% (2000–11)	– 11% (2011–21)
Immigrant-origin students	+ 55% (2000–11)	+ 14% (2011–21)

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) October School Enrollment Supplement 2000–21.

State-Administered AE Program Agencies

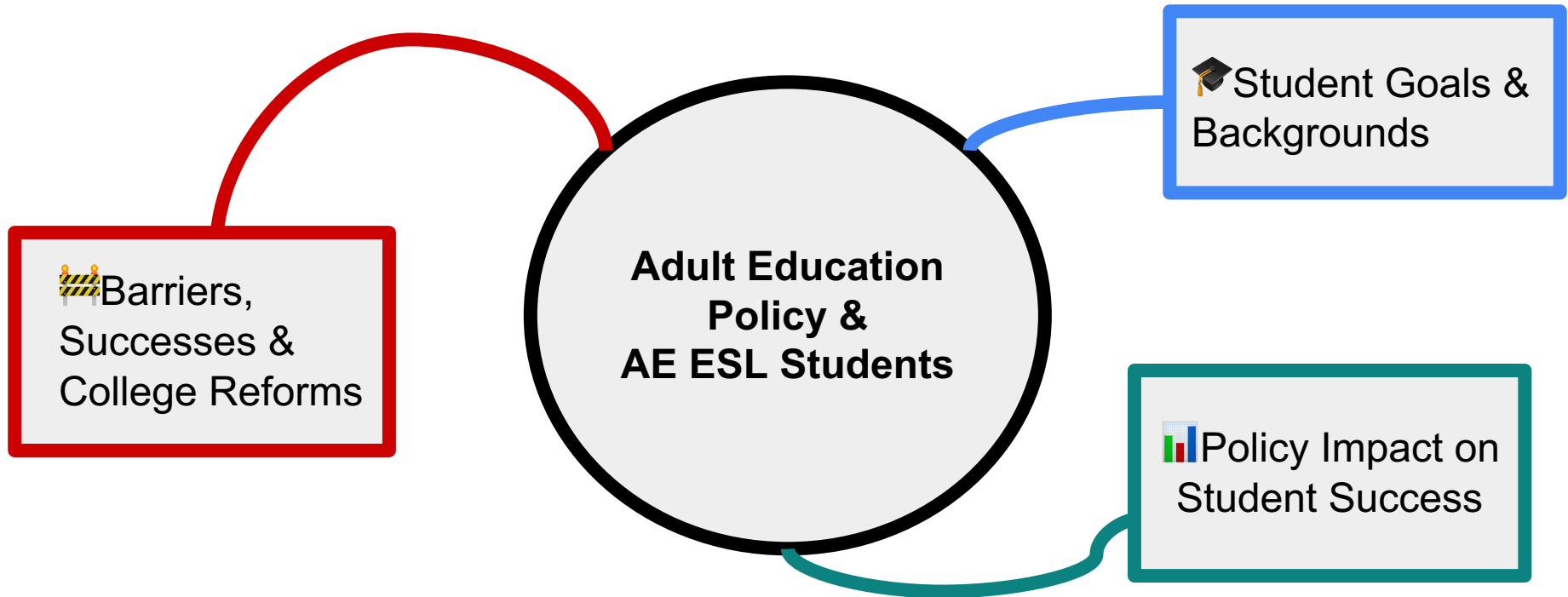


State Agency Types

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

CCRC's research on AE ESL in City Colleges of Chicago

Research Questions – Understanding AE ESL Students and Policy Impact



Research Activities

Data Collection between 2023-2024

Qualitative Fieldwork

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

- Literature review of AE ESL

Quantitative Analysis

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

Research Takeaways from Federal and State Adult Education Policy Analysis

Community colleges provide free or low-cost AE ESL courses and support services for MLs to access.

- Instructional and support infrastructure to help MLs persist.
- Additional funding sources (e.g., Perkins, Strong Workforce) for IETs/career-focused programs.
- Tailored supports coaching and career navigation.
- CC partnerships with other AE ESL providers to fill service gaps.

Community colleges can struggle to support MLs, who have varied goals, through the highly regulated AE system.

- Students in AE ESL have varied goals.
- Persistence through the lengthy ESL course sequence is a challenge to progression into an occupational training or academic pathway.
- High-stakes assessments serve a gatekeeping function; and determine if a student can move on to the next level in the ESL class sequence.

Link between AE ESL and postsecondary education/workforc e pathways remains weak despite policy incentives and institutional efforts.

- CCs have developed different pathway models to expand access:
 - Bridge courses (e.g., City Colleges of Chicago)
 - Concurrent enrollment in ESL & Technical classes (IET model)
 - I-BEST Model (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training)
- Rigid divisions (credit vs. noncredit) make integration difficult.
- Reforms like Bridge, IET, I-BEST show promise—but aren't widely adopted.

Key Considerations

Key Takeaways & Recommendations

- ✓ Expand funding and support services for AE ESL in CCs.
- ✓ Strengthen CBO & workforce partnerships for student success.
- ✓ Implement flexible pathway models (IET, I-BEST, Bridge Programs).
- ✓ Address barriers in placement & long course sequences.

Key Considerations from MPI Research

Adult ELs face shared but also unique barriers compared to U.S.-born participants ([MPI, 2023](#)).



Accepted approaches like Integrated Education and Training may require different considerations for adult ELs ([MPI, 2022](#)).



Opportunities for states, localities, and even individual providers to develop their own approaches separate from WIOA (MPI, 2018).



Recognizing the reality of a changing context for serving adult ELs (federal policy shifts and new uncertainty).

Discussion Questions

- How can state-level coordination support better integration between AE ESL and workforce training?
- How can CCs enhance AE ESL programs to better support MLs?
- What are the biggest challenges your institution faces in supporting AE ESL students?
- How can community colleges improve AE ESL to credit transitions?
- What local policy changes could make a difference?
- What policy changes could improve student persistence & transitions?

Thank you—let's stay in touch!

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Find data, reports and other analysis by state and for the nation at:
www.migrationpolicy.org

Key NCIP reports WIOA, adult education, and immigrant integration:

- [*Leveraging Data to Ensure Equitable and Effective Adult Skills Programming for Immigrants*](#) (2023)
- [*The IELCE Program: Understanding Its Design and Challenges in Meeting Immigrant Learners' Needs*](#) (2022)
- [*English Plus Integration*](#) (2018)



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Thanks!

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