September 2025

Communications and Student Services Support for ESL Programs

Insights from the Translating Opportunity Texas Initiative

Texas Success Center

Background and Context

Translating Opportunity Texas: A Strategy of Talent Strong Texas Pathways aims to support all community colleges in Texas in establishing effective English as a Second Language (ESL) pathways from adult education to credentials of value, including industry-based certifications, certificates, and degrees that lead to careers with living wages. In 2024, in partnership with WestEd, Student-Ready Strategies, and the Center for Community College Engagement, and with generous support from Ascendium Education Group, the Texas Success Center (TSC) initially engaged a cohort of four Texas community colleges in this effort: Amarillo College, Brazosport College, El Paso Community College, and Houston Community College. The products and learnings from this initiative will contribute to the scaling of best practices across the state, and ultimately, the nation.

Student-Ready Strategies (SRS) serves as the technical assistance provider for this project, working with participating colleges to refine processes and tools, redesigning and accelerating ESL pathways to students' completion and career success. Specifically, SRS is facilitating several activities with the first cohort of participating colleges from fall 2024 to fall 2025 that will explore each institution's ESL curricular pathways, student communications, student support services, and institutional policies. The findings and insights from these activities will provide a foundation for each college to develop and implement an action plan aimed at better serving students who are Multilingual Learners of English (MLEs).

In late fall 2024/early spring 2025, SRS supported the first cohort in developing curricular maps for their ESL programs. A summary report from that process can be found here.

SRS then engaged in a review of student-facing communications and student support services related to each college's ESL programs. The purpose of this exercise was to explore how participating institutions communicate with and support students who are MLEs, identify what is working well, and highlight opportunities for enhancing communication and support. This report summarizes the findings from this engagement and offers recommendations that are applicable to any institution seeking to strengthen these areas for MLE students.

Review Process

Student-Facing Communications

Due to accessibility and privacy issues related to other types of communications, the student-facing communications review focused on the ESL content on each college's public website. Three members of the SRS team reviewed these websites in February 2025, while completing a questionnaire that assessed the following:

- Content and language
  - Use of asset-based language that is free of jargon
  - Availability of information in other languages
- Ease of finding information about ESL/MLE programs, including:
  - Placement testing
  - Program coursework
  - Costs
  - Pathways to college credit programs
  - Student services

Student Support Services

SRS scheduled a one-hour Zoom meeting with each of the cohort colleges in March 2025 to explore the supports that are available to students who are MLEs at their institution. Participants included faculty, staff, and administrators from various roles and functional areas, including:

- ESL and ESOL programs
- Adult Education and Literacy (AEL)
- Academic support/tutoring centers
- College readiness
- Student resources and support centers (e.g., student wellness and basic needs, counseling, student advocacy)
- Career services
- Admissions
- Registrar's office
- Operations
- Institutional research

The conversations focused on the following topics: general support available for students, new student orientation, campus community building, institutional response to struggling students, mental health support, academic support, communication of institutional norms, and career services support.

Review Findings

The four cohort institutions' student-facing communications and student support services demonstrate thoughtful design and intention to serve ESL students. By offering an impressive variety of webpages and support services both across and within institutions, the cohort's ESL initiatives indicate a collective commitment to meeting the diverse personal and professional needs of MLE students.

Key findings and takeaways from SRS's review of the cohort's student-facing communications and student support services are summarized in this section. These findings highlight the importance of intentionally focusing on how institutions communicate with and support ESL students.

Student-Facing Communications

Content and Language
Overall, the cohort institutions' websites were largely free of deficit words and phrases, and the language used was culturally responsive. Across the college websites, the tone of the content was generally positive and encouraging for students seeking to enhance their English skills for a variety of personal, professional, and academic reasons. However, some higher education jargon appeared on the websites that prospective students, including MLE students, may not be familiar with or might find confusing. For example, the review team found multiple acronyms on the websites that were not spelled out and might not be immediately meaningful to students (e.g., ESL, ESOL, AEL, CE, etc.).

When colleges offer information in different languages, students are better able to comprehend and use website content. However, the availability of information in languages other than English varied across colleges. The review team found several examples of best practices to highlight, including the use of multimodal tools, like posting pre-enrollment and orientation videos in multiple languages, providing digital and print copies of forms in multiple languages, and incorporating the Google Translate widget on the institution's ESL website. Despite these best practices, none of the institution's websites had a mechanism to fully translate the content across all its webpages into another language, and the institution's websites primarily presented information in English only.

Website Language
Important Definitions

Deficit language: Words and phrases that convey needs, are externally- and problem-focused, and communicate what a student is missing.

Asset language: Words and phrases that convey strengths, are internal- and opportunity-focused, and communicate what a student has that can be built upon.

Culturally responsive language: Words and phrases that acknowledge students' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

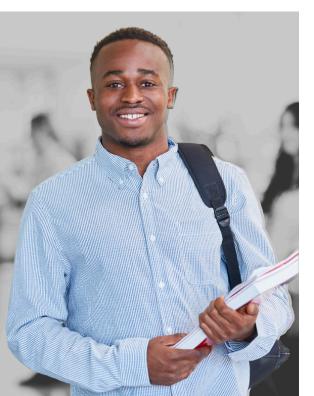*(Keadle, 2020; Ledwell, 2024; University of Memphis, n.d.)*

Ease of Finding Information
Website Search Function. The cohort colleges' website search functions were easy to use and generally effective in finding ESL program information. But it is important to note that the search functions were sometimes less accurate when the desired information did not match an exact webpage title. For example, a search for "ESL cost" may direct a student to the institution's general tuition and fees page, when ESL program costs often differ from the standard tuition rate. In many cases, this cost information is only available on the specific ESL program page. This could lead to frustration or confusion for ESL students.

Direct Navigation. In general, directly navigating to ESL program information from the colleges' homepages required more detailed knowledge of each college's organizational structures than a prospective student is likely to have. For example, prospective students may not be aware that ESL courses are housed in the Continuing Education department, which is the case at many institutions. Without having some preliminary knowledge about the types of ESL courses that may be available and in which department(s) they are housed, a student may miss important information or the ESL program information entirely.

Placement Requirements. Information about placement procedures and requirements varied across college websites. Most mention general testing requirements on the ESL program page and either direct students to the testing center or the program office for more information. Notably, none of the cohort institutions' ESL websites listed the specific placement criteria to enroll in ESL courses (e.g., placement test cut scores or other specific requirements).

Costs. Website information about costs also varied across cohort colleges. Some ESL program pages clearly listed course/program costs (including noting those that are offered free of charge). In other instances, the ease of finding that information varied by program. For example, cost details are listed in a Frequently Asked Questions tab of the ESL webpage at one institution. In instances like this, students need to continue searching across the program page to find the relevant cost information or contact the program directly.

Program Courses and Pathways. In general, information about ESL courses (e.g. course descriptions, schedules, etc.) was available online across the cohort, but the level of detail provided and the location of the information on the website varied by institution, and sometimes by program within the same institution. In some instances, course information was provided on the ESL program pages. In others, a student would have to search for the college catalog and understand how to use it to look for their desired program.

While individual ESL course information was generally accessible on the website, course pathway and sequencing information was more difficult to locate. Additionally, the pathway from ESL coursework to college credit classes was not always clear. This makes it challenging for students to understand the entire ESL program pathway, and how that pathway can feed into other programs at the college.

Student Services. All cohort colleges' websites provide comprehensive information about student services. Both the search functions and the homepages helped find general student support services. However, ESL webpages did not always include this information, and the student services pages often did not mention programs or services specifically for ESL students. This highlights an opportunity for cross-departmental collaboration in making those connections for students.

Student Support Services

During the information-gathering meeting with the institutional teams, participants shared a wealth of information about the various supports available to students who are enrolled in each college's ESL programs. The culture of care for students who are MLEs at these institutions was pervasive throughout the conversations, and it was clear that this population of students is a priority for each institution. The holistic approaches to student support shared by meeting participants demonstrate an intentional focus on fostering educational environments where students who are MLEs feel supported and can succeed.

Student Intake and Orientation

Each institution reported a different approach to onboarding new MLE students, but all have mechanisms in place to smooth the process for students. Some offer ESL-specific orientation sessions, online modules, and/or materials. Others have designated staff who provide additional support to ESL students that complements the college-wide new student intake and orientation procedures. Cohort colleges also reported offering specialized intake and orientation support for international students, as well as ongoing information sessions for adult education students focused on topics like career exploration and employment resources.

Early Alerts and Proactive Interventions

Most cohort colleges have a formal early alert system in place to identify students who may be struggling and intervene to provide support. This is supported by software platforms that enable staff and faculty to log concerns, which then trigger intentional outreach to the student. However, the extent to which students enrolled in ESL courses benefit from these systems varies. This is particularly true for ESL programs offered through adult education or continuing education, which may not be included in the institution's early alert system.

Outside of formal early alerts, the college teams highlighted the engaged and proactive culture among ESL program faculty and staff. Across cohort colleges, ESL instructors are very dedicated to their students. They regularly reach out to students to check on them and offer support, particularly if a student is showing signs of struggling. Strong campus connections and relationships across departments also facilitate a holistic approach to proactively supporting ESL students.

Academic and Career Supports
All of the participating institutions offer multiple academic supports for ESL students. These include a specialized ESL lab, bilingual tutoring, technology support, writing and math centers, and bilingual instructional aides. One college, in particular, created a bridge program specifically for students who do not meet the placement testing requirements to enroll in a credit-bearing ESL course.

Institutions also reported providing numerous employment and career support services for ESL students that augment the English language instruction they are receiving in the classroom. For example, some cohort colleges indicated that they partner with local non-profit organizations and companies to assist ESL students with career skills and workforce placement. Many of these supports are integrated into ESL programs and courses, making them accessible and convenient for students.

Basic Needs Support
All of the participating colleges prioritize basic needs support for ESL students. There are many resources available to support students' needs across the cohort, including food pantries, financial assistance, and wellness services (including fitness and recreation). One college, in particular, operates a market where students can shop every other week for groceries and other necessities. Mental health support is also available at all institutions, but only some have multilingual counselors on staff.

A unique area of support that one cohort college offers is citizenship classes. These classes are designed to help prepare students for the citizenship test and interview that are components of the US citizenship process. ESL professors volunteer their time to conduct these classes, emphasizing the culture of care and community within the ESL program at the college.

Key Insights and Recommendations

To streamline and strengthen student-facing communications and student support services for ESL students at cohort institutions, SRS, with input from WestEd, offered considerations and recommendations to the cohort colleges, like those shown below. These recommendations were tailored to each college's programs, but those outlined below are more general and can be applied to any institution. For more information about the research base behind these recommendations, see the Translating Opportunity: Improving Postsecondary Pathways for Multilingual Learners of English report.

Student-Facing Communications

- **Add subtitled videos to the college website to increase engagement and information comprehension.** Create videos that convey important information to students and include subtitles in languages most commonly spoken by ESL students at the institution. This will make the content more dynamic and engaging, while also making it accessible to students who speak different languages.

- **Make it easy for students to access website content in different languages.** Ensure all important forms and documents are available in multiple languages online. Consider embedding a translating tool or widget on the college website that allows prospective ESL students to select their preferred language.

- **Add links to the ESL program page(s) across the college's website.** Focus on webpages that prospective students tend to search for first when considering applying to an institution (e.g., admissions, financial aid, programs of study, etc.). If the college offers more than one ESL program, include comparative overviews of the programs with links. Additionally, consider embedding links to the different ESL programs on each ESL program page.

- **Ensure all key information is included on the ESL program webpage(s).** Add details about course pathways, placement testing, cost information, and student support services as needed. Include a visual of ESL course progression and transitions to other programs and opportunities, highlighting career pathways.

- **Clearly delineate document translation responsibilities at the institution.** Identify who maintains responsibility for translating important college forms and documents into different languages. Consider partnering with an external translation service to decrease the burden on multilingual staff.

Student Support Services

- **Ensure multilingual tutors, advisors, and mental health counselors are available and visible on campus.** Evaluate the languages spoken by current staff and fill gaps where needed for the languages most commonly spoken by ESL students at the institution.

- **Continuously evaluate onboarding and orientation processes and procedures for new ESL students.** Ensure ESL students are receiving the information they need in a format that is accessible to students with varying levels of English proficiency. Help ESL students integrate into the larger campus culture while also ensuring they make important connections within the ESL program.

- **Expand support services for external barriers.** Seek community and organizational partnerships to increase the institution's capacity to provide support to ESL students who are experiencing educational barriers due to life events (e.g., job loss, food insecurity, childcare needs, etc.).

- **Advocate for the inclusion of non-credit-seeking ESL students in campus initiatives.** Identify which campus initiatives, activities, events, etc., are limited to credit-seeking students and request that non-credit ESL students be granted access.

- **Create a comprehensive list of certified interpreters employed by the institution.** Publish the list on the college's website and link to it on the ESL program webpage(s). Inform college faculty and staff where the list is posted so interpreters can be located promptly when needed, including during emergency situations.

Next Steps

The communications and student support services review serves as the second of several technical assistance activities that SRS is facilitating with the first Translating Opportunity Texas cohort. Next, SRS will review institutional policies across the cohort, considering how these policies support or hinder MLE student success. Each college will then receive a memo with specialized findings and recommendations. SRS will also publish a cohort-level summary report for this activity. Ultimately, SRS will develop an implementation guide to support institutions across Texas and the nation in this work.

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