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Leveraging Institutional Policy to Promote ESL Student Success

Insights from the Translating
Opportunity Texas Initiative



Texas Success Center

Prepared by Student-Ready Strategies
as part of the Translating Opportunity
Texas initiative

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. In 2025, a second cohort of institutions joined the initiative: Austin Community College, Grayson College, San Jacinto College, and South Texas 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 to support redesigning and accelerating ESL pathways to students' completion and career success. Specifically, SRS facilitated several activities with the first cohort of participating colleges from fall 2024 to fall 2025 that explored each institution's ESL curricular pathways, student communications, student support services, and institutional policies. The findings and insights from these activities provided a foundation for each college to develop and implement an action plan aimed at better serving students who are Multilingual Learners of English (MLEs).

This report focuses specifically on the institutional policy component of this project and summarizes the findings from SRS' review of the policies submitted by cohort one institutions. The report also offers recommendations for institutional policy reform that are applicable to any institution engaged in similar policy work.

Importance of Institutional Policy Review

Institutional policy is critical to student success, from the requirements it sets forth to the rights and protections it guarantees. However, institutions do not always have an infrastructure for reviewing and updating their policies to ensure they are aligned with student needs, up-to-date research, and institutional goals. As a result, institutional policies often “sit on the books” for extended periods of time without being reviewed, evaluated, and/or updated.

The institutional policy review for this project provided an opportunity for cohort one institutions to reflect on their policies and receive concrete, actionable feedback from SRS policy experts with a focus on:

- Evidence-based improvements to the policy content and direction, particularly for supporting MLE student success
- Opportunities to streamline and reorganize policy language to be more easily understood by students and campus professionals

Policy Review Methodology

SRS policy experts used the organization’s Institutional Policy Framework to review a total of 14 policies submitted across cohort one institutions, assessing the extent to which each policy met the following criteria:

- Centered on Students
- Streamlined in Structure
- Explicit in Language
- Validated by Data

Two separate SRS professionals reviewed each policy independently and then compiled feedback and recommendations. Each institution received a memo summarizing high-level findings and takeaways across the policies reviewed, as well as a red-lined version of each policy they submitted with discreet recommendations and edits.

Overview of Policy Findings

High-Level Takeaways and General Policy Recommendations

SRS identified several themes across the cohort’s institutional policies, and the high-level takeaways related to those themes are summarized here. This section also includes general policy guidance and recommendations related to each theme.

Purpose Statements

Some institutional policies reviewed as part of this initiative included clear purpose statements, while others did not. Purpose statements are important because they explain why a policy exists and what it aims to achieve. They provide clarity, direction, and focus toward a shared vision and common goals. Additionally, purpose statements serve as a road map for meaningful change and impactful outcomes. **Each institutional policy should include a purpose statement to assist readers' understanding, now and in the future.**

Policy versus Procedure

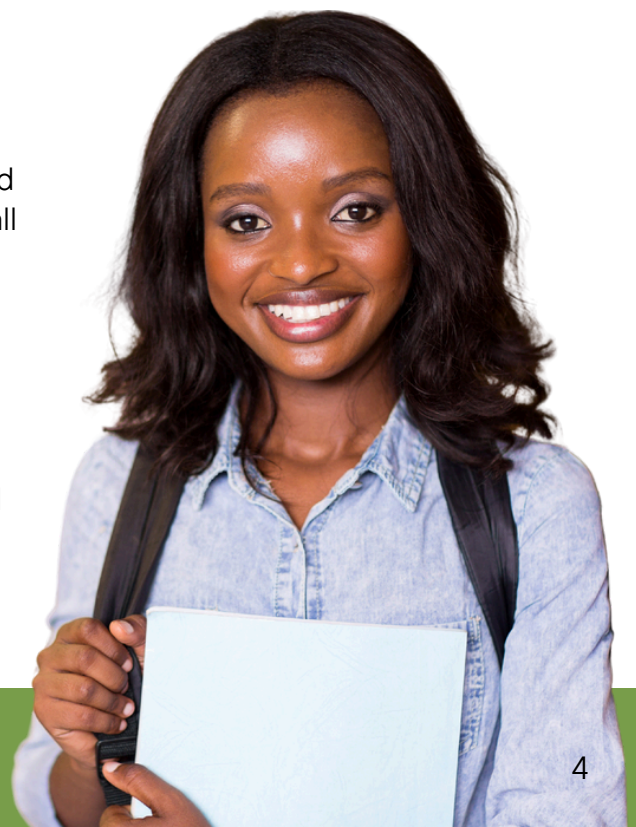
Procedural language often appears in institutional policies, and a number of the cohort one institutional policies reflected this. Because institutional policy can be difficult and time-intensive to change, including too many procedural details in policy can stifle continuous improvement.

In general, policy language should focus on rules or guidelines that are expected to be sustained long-term. Policy language should also rely on a thorough review and approval process to be amended. **Procedure, on the other hand, is more fluid and should focus on the “how” of the policy.** Procedure should include things that need to be easily updated, like office numbers, email addresses, and schedules.

Policy Language

Commendably, the policies reviewed from cohort one institutions were generally free of deficit language. However, many of the policies included terms, phrases, and acronyms that would likely be unfamiliar to students, and all of the policies were only available in English.

Institutions serve a variety of students, including Multilingual Learners of English. Policies are often full of jargon, written in legalese, and are otherwise confusing, even when written in a student’s native language. **All institutional policies should include student-centered terminology and be readily available in the languages spoken by MLE students.**



Definitions and References

The extent to which cohort one institutional policies defined terms and phrases varied significantly across the policies. Some policies included a designated definitions section, while others embedded definitions throughout the policy (or sometimes across related policies).

To provide clarity and ensure understanding, policies rely on a thorough definitions section. Institutional constituents, including students, parents, and other campus community members, may read the policies. Without prior in-depth knowledge of higher education, a lot of the policy language can be challenging to understand. **Including a well-written definitions section supports a deep understanding of institutional policy.**

Policy Evaluation

SRS reviewers also observed variation in evaluation components across the cohort's policies, and specifically how the effects of the policy would be measured or monitored. In some cases, the policies explicitly defined the evaluation mechanisms, but in other instances, evaluation was either implied or not referenced at all.

Each policy should be continuously evaluated to ensure that the policy is achieving its intended outcomes (which should be explicitly outlined in the policy's purpose statement). Evaluation requirements should be included in the policy language, and the results should inform continuous improvement activities, including future policy revisions.

Recommended Action Steps

SRS recommends institutions seeking to leverage institutional policy to promote student success, including MLE students, should prioritize the following action steps related to institutional policy:

- If the institution does not already have one, create a **policy on policies** that outlines how policies are created, revised, and evaluated. Include an outline for each policy that includes a purpose statement, definitions, and policy “shall’s and may’s.”
- Establish a cadence for the **routine review of all student-facing policies** (e.g., every three years). In addition to reviewing policy content for substantive revisions, check for other technical items like broken hyperlinks.
- Ensure **consistency across institutional policies** and eliminate any conflicting information.
- Intentionally **include MLE/ESL students in institutional policies**. When student groups are specifically mentioned, Multilingual Learners of English should be incorporated.

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- Link **referenced procedures and documents** in policies. This allows students to easily access all documents and understand the procedures that inform policy implementation.
 - **Define terms and phrases** used within all policies. SRS recommends including a definitions section as the preamble to policy language, creating a streamlined place to define key terms and avoid competing, conflicting, or missing definitions within the policies themselves.
 - If not already included, add **student membership** to campus committees responsible for policy review/revision.

Next Steps

The institutional policy review served as the third of several technical assistance activities that SRS facilitated with the first Translating Opportunity Texas cohort, and SRS will repeat this exercise with cohort 2 institutions. Ultimately, SRS will develop an implementation guide informed by these activities to support institutions across Texas and the nation in this work.