



# The College Website as a Tool to Improve Communications to Adult Multilingual Learners Of English

## PURPOSE

A college website can serve as a primary recruitment tool for prospective students. Through its website, a college can promote itself as a place where learners will feel comfortable and supported in exploring and pursuing their education and career goals. They can learn about training, academic opportunities, and how those opportunities translate into pathways to employment and further education. A website should provide clear easy-to-understand information about programs, entry and application processes, student supports, and explicit pathways (e.g., areas of study, next steps and outcomes, such as certifications and employment) targeted to specific populations of students. This information will peak interest and help prospective students feel as though they can navigate and persist in exploring college as the right choice for them. A first step of recruiting students is to make the prospective students see the college as a place where they can belong and be successful. Furthermore, an easy-to-navigate and welcoming website can help students explore and find answers to questions and resources throughout their academic journey.

This brief provides insights and guidance for improving college websites to recruit, enroll, and support MLE students based on research and student reviews. WestEd researchers reviewed eight community college websites, four located in Texas, to explore how effectively they support multilingual learners of English (MLE) in accessing information about English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, career

<b>Table of Contents</b>	
<b>PURPOSE</b> .....	1
<b>SUGGESTIONS FOR USE</b> .....	2
<b>CONSIDERATIONS FOR WEBSITE IMPROVEMENT</b>	
● Overall Presentation .....	2
● Site Navigation.....	3
● Program Information.....	4
● Application, Enrollment & Next Steps....	5
● Student Supports .....	5
● Other Audiences.....	6
<b>RESOURCES</b>	
● Fireside Chat: Student Video.....	6
● Think -Aloud Protocol.....	7
● Website Mockup.....	7
● Example Websites.....	7
● Tips for Website Content.....	8
● Research & Guides.....	9

pathway programming, the enrollment process, and student supports. The criteria for the review were based on literature and recommendations for effective practices. In addition, three Translating Opportunity Texas Student Advisory Board members—all students enrolled in a Texas community college ESL programs—provided feedback on the websites from four large community colleges via a ‘think-aloud’ protocol.

See the RESOURCES section for additional information such as examples of websites that model some of the suggested changes and the ‘think-aloud’ protocol we used so you can gather feedback from students on your campus.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THIS BRIEF

- **Use the brief as a starting point for discussions** about messaging and communications on your website and in other platforms and venues. Think broadly about what stakeholders could be engaged in this process, including students and people who work with potential MLE students, such as Adult Education partners, community-based organizations, etc.
- **Validate the findings with your own students.** Support a group of students to review this memo, look at the relevant elements on your college website and give their own feedback. Meet with the students at the beginning of the process to explain the charge and offer support in understanding the memo. Another approach is to ask students to look for certain information on the website, observe their process, and gather feedback on their experience.
- **Create an action plan for improving messaging and communications.** Prioritize things that can be changed quickly and items that you think have the greatest impact on students. Use the examples and resources provided at the end of the brief to guide your work.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR WEBSITE IMPROVEMENT

### Overall Presentation

**Importance:** The website is one of the first introductions to your college. Prospective students access the website to find information on academic and career educational opportunities. Accessible and easy-to-understand content signals to students that the college is the right fit for pursuing their educational and career goals. The website should present the college as an engaging environment with supportive staff and activities that will enhance their experience. Providing photographs, images, and videos that support comprehension, translation tools, and leveled text can help MLE students see your college as a place that will understand and support their needs as a college student. It is important to think about the variety of characteristics of the MLE population in terms of age, educational background, language, and culture.

## Suggestions

- Ensure the home page has a welcoming feel with a strong student focus, including visual representations of and quotes by students, including MLE students, who attend the college. Add text, icon, or language on the homepage that identifies and links to ESL programs. Since ESL programs are often housed within different departments, prospective MLE students—who may be unfamiliar with the U.S. educational system—can have difficulty locating them. Clearly identifying ESL as a distinct educational offering can help students easily find ESL programs. Avoid the use of jargon and acronyms and provide definitions when such terms are necessary. Students may not be familiar with terms and acronyms such as Adult Education, developmental education, ESL, ESOL, etc. Identify and feature key topics that prospective MLE students will recognize, such as navigators or counselors, high need supports (e.g., transportation, childcare), campus locations, MLE student success stories, certificate programs, and opportunities that lead to high priority occupations.
- Build in a translation feature that offers the possibility of exploring the website in a language other than English. Adding a translation feature can advance multiple goals—making students feel welcome while supporting comprehension and easier website navigation.
- Review language for readability and identify ways to reduce or simplify complex information by using bullets, shorter sentences, and graphics.
- Ensure compatibility with mobile devices. Students may not have regular computer/internet access.

### **Student quotes in response to translation features on websites.**


*That is so cool! Makes me feel included and like this school cares about students like me.*

*That is very good. Four years ago [when I started in ESL] I could not understand in English.*

## Site Navigation

**Importance:** The first step for prospective students is finding information about programming, timing, requirements, costs, supports, enrollment and application, and contact information. Providing easily accessible information that helps prospective students understand options, make decisions, and plan effectively, can reduce frustration, build confidence, and increase the likelihood of success.

## Suggestions

- Identify or add something on the home page that immediately highlights ESL programs. ESL pages should be findable in three minutes or less and three clicks or less. After three minutes and three clicks, students may disengage, either because they are frustrated, or because they assume your school does not serve students like them.
- Add navigation icons (e.g., a home icon ) to support quick navigation. Icons can help prospective MLE students to easily identify and navigate the website.
- Create navigation that standardly brings MLE students to a comparison chart of all ESL programs so that they can clearly compare and choose the program or course that best fits their needs. Building a 'one-stop-shop' helps simplify information gathering and decision making.
- Review and add prominent links on home and ESL program pages to information that MLE students might find important (e.g., student supports, contact forms, application or enrollment information).

### **Student quotes after clicking multiple links without finding information on ESL courses.**

*I hate [this website]. I give up! I wonder if the school even offers ESL courses?*

*This website is bad. I can't find anything... I am frustrated. Makes me think this school is not good, [it] would not be the place for me.*

## Program Information

**Importance:** Prospective students may want to explore and compare programs, or they may have identified a program of interest. Providing key information such as length of study, courses needed, entrance requirements, costs, and outcomes (e.g., employment opportunities, academic and employer recognized certificates) helps them make more informed decisions and possibly save time. Enrolled students also need information that will help them keep on track to meet their goals.

## Suggestions

- Provide key program information that students need including, costs, duration of classes, locations, schedules, registration processes, entrance requirements, and eligibility.
- Use visuals to show program or certificate pathways, including course sequencing and transitions to other programming or employment. These visuals should clarify program structure, duration, transition points, and outcomes. Such visuals can support understanding of how programs function, program duration, transition points, and expected outcomes.
- Include clear and diverse methods for students to access additional information (e.g., email, contact form, telephone, address).

- Include videos featuring MLE students sharing their experiences, for example, the enrollment process, why they chose the program, and the benefits of being in the program. Be sure to provide English subtitles and a transcript for accessibility and translation purposes.
- Use a standardized format to provide information about programs to support comprehension, ease of use, and comfort.

## Application, Enrollment, and Next Steps

**Importance:** Many prospective adult learners may be unfamiliar with the enrollment process. Providing clear instructions with timelines, supports for planning and preparation, and tips for navigating the system can help students understand the college system or prepare for next steps.

### Suggestions

- Include a fillable contact or interest form on ESL program pages.
- Provide an application and enrollment checklist.
- Include a link to information about enrollment steps or to the application, as appropriate, on ESL program pages.
- Add demonstration, explanatory, or how-to videos (e.g., how to fill out an enrollment or contact form, what to expect in class, how to find the program office). When creating these videos, focus on showing a clear step-by-step process. Include subtitles and transcripts that can be used to supplement comprehension. Consider offering multiple videos with speakers of the most common languages in your programs. These videos are an effective tool for engaging and supporting MLE students' comprehension by providing information through multiple modalities e.g., auditory, visual.

#### Suggestions from student reviewers.

Build in a big button that says "APPLY HERE."

Terms like "Call to register" or "Request more information" might be unclear or confusing.

When possible, videos should be 5 mins or less.

## Student Supports

**Importance:** Most colleges offer a wide variety of crucial services to support students to enroll, persist, and succeed in achieving their educational and training goals. MLE students, like other learners, need information to help them take advantage of these services.

### Suggestions

- Spotlight a wide variety of student supports (e.g., health, daycare, mental health). This offers a whole-student perspective and communicates that student success may depend on more than academic outcomes and support.
- Identify and create a link to student supports on the ESL program pages.
- Include welcoming language to ensure students in ESL programs know they are eligible for support services and normalize help-seeking with statements that communicate that successful students ask for assistance. Quotes, videos, and testimonials from other students can help encourage students to use services.
- Highlight the availability of navigators, coaches, or relevant advisors on program pages.

**Suggestions from student reviewers.**

Listing contact information for multiple staff members along with the languages that they speak can help MLE students feel seen/welcome and make them more likely to reach out and take advantage of resources.

**Audiences Other Than Students**

The college website is also an important resource for faculty, staff, and other student support professionals (e.g., community English tutor, library staff, social service providers) who advise students formally and informally. MLE students report that they rely heavily on information from faculty and staff to navigate their postsecondary journey. For this reason, it is essential that those who support MLE students have access to information that is up-to-date, easy to find, and user-friendly. When the website is more accessible to students, it enables faculty, staff, and other professionals supporting MLE students to provide accurate and consistent information to the students they serve.

**RESOURCES**

[Translating Opportunity Texas Campfire Chat Series - Students Perspectives: Designing High-Quality ESL Websites \(webinar\)](#)

*Description:* In this Campfire Chat, the facilitator leads a conversation with three MLE students who share their insights from a website review think-aloud activity. Together, they examined four college websites for ease of use and accessibility for multilingual learners, highlighting key takeaways and offering recommendations for improving usability, designing for inclusion, and providing essential content. The session also features an independent, research-based external review of the same websites, adding further guidance and best practices for designing college websites that truly support MLE student success.

## [Translating Opportunity Texas Student Feedback ‘Think-Aloud’ Protocol](#)

*Description:* A think-aloud is a User Centered Design thinking tool that can provide insight into users’ thought processes, motivations, and frustrations in real time. During each 45-minute think-aloud, students were asked to visit four websites and complete a series of simple tasks on each that one should reasonably be able to accomplish in 5-10 minutes on an inclusive, well-designed website. As students completed tasks, they were asked to narrate their thoughts. Colleges are invited to use this protocol with their students to collect deeper feedback on their websites, or to get inspired for other low-lift ways that they can engage with MLE students as co-designers and thought partners.

## [Translating Opportunity Texas: A Sample Mockup Website](#)

*Description:* Staff from [Student-Ready Strategies](#), the partner organization that is leading technical assistance for the Translating Opportunity Texas project, have developed a sample mockup of a high-quality ESL website. To create the mockup, they looked at best practices in inclusive website design, findings from this memo, and findings from the individual feedback memos that Student-Ready Strategies is providing to each school that is participating in the project.

## Example Websites

### [City College of San Francisco](#)

#### Website strengths:

- [Home](#) page
  - Has a “Learn English” click option so that MLE students can easily identify and explore these opportunities
  - Includes student pictures that help prospective students to see themselves at the college
  - Includes a “Select Language” drop down option
- Well laid out [English as a Second Language](#) page
  - Lays out tiles for all programs so that MLE students can see the full menu of ESL classes
  - Includes tiles for other resources and information
  - Includes student story videos that describe their experiences and the benefits of their educational experience at the college
  - Provides an “Enroll” tile that leads to an easy-to-follow enrollment page, “[Join our Noncredit ESL Classes.](#)” This page offers step by step instructions that are opened up by clicking on each step. This serves to both lay out the clear process and limits the text on the page. Steps include videos that explain each section of the process.

## Chicago City Colleges

### Website strengths:

- ESL identified as an option on home page
- [Student Stories](#) are easily located and represent diversity of the student body, to which an MLE might be able to relate to.
- [Programs and Transfer Pathways](#) page (accessed via the College & Career button on home page) lists all options and does not filter by academic or career technical studies, provides an excellent menu of options for students to explore.
- Programs of study/career pathways are identified allowing students to easily understand the pathway and explore next steps (see [Medical Coding Advanced Certificate](#) as an example).
- [Adult Education \(ESL, GED/HiSET\)](#) page (accessed via the GED/ESL button on the home page) is less engaging and informative; however, if one clicks on bridge programs (accessed via clicking the [Career Bridge Program](#) button on the left hand side menu) you get full information about different programming available to the learner.
- [Kennedy King College](#), a Chicago City College, offers an example about how to center students and their experiences through the banner, pictures, student success stories, pathways, etc. It provides information or links to topics and information students will want to know or explore in making a decision about the college.

## Wisconsin Technical Colleges

### Website strengths:

- Easy-to-navigate home page.
- The [Programs](#) dropdown identifies ESL programming under the “Other Educational Options” topic. However, it is not included on the actual page. If exploring a career pathway (e.g., [Transportation, Distribution, & Logistics](#)) it does not mention ESL in the information about other options; it does, however, include GED.
- Clearly identifiable translation feature at the top of each webpage.

### Tips for Website Content Inclusion

- Advance Media New York (2025, April). Top 5 Ways Prospective Adult Learners are Finding Your Programs. <https://www.advancemediany.com/top-5-ways-prospective-adult-learners-are-finding-your-programs/>
  - *Description:* Brief article that identifies key content to include in a college or program website that will support adult learner interest and engagement.

- Chapman, T. (2024, May 9). *Streamline adult learner enrollment: Best practices guide*. Collegis Education.  
<https://collegiseducation.com/insights/streamline-adult-learner-enrollment-best-practices-guide/>
  - *Description:* Brief article that identifies learner enrollment strategies that can inform content to be included on a website that can appeal to and support adult learners in decision making.
  
- Instituto del Progreso Latino: Carreras en Salud/Healthcare Career Pathway.  
[https://www.institutochicago.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC\\_ID=372463&type=d&pREC\\_ID=2154213](https://www.institutochicago.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=372463&type=d&pREC_ID=2154213)
  - *Description:* Exemplar of a healthcare program progression visual that demonstrates time commitment, expectations, and sequence of program courses and transitions.
  
- Kalfsbeek-Goetz, J. (2015, February 9). *Attracting and retaining adults: Top 10 features of programs designed for busy adult students*. The EvoLLLution.  
[https://evollution.com/programming/program\\_planning/attracting-retaining-adults-top-10-features-programs-designed-busy-adult-students](https://evollution.com/programming/program_planning/attracting-retaining-adults-top-10-features-programs-designed-busy-adult-students)
  - *Description:* Brief article that identifies key content to include in a college or program website that will support adult learner interest and engagement. Includes link to supporting research and additional information.
  
- Ondrish, M. (2024, July 23). *3 best practices for your college website: Turn your website into an enrollment engine*. EAB.  
<https://eab.com/resources/blog/adult-education-blog/3-best-practices-for-your-college-website/>
  - *Description:* Brief article that identifies key ideas to address on a college or program website that will support adult learner interest and engagement. Note, this is a vendor website.

## Research & Guides (includes strategies and suggestions)

- [Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research](https://belk-center.ced.ncsu.edu/adult-learner-guidebook/). (n.d.). *Adult learner guidebook: A guide to recruit and retain adult learners at North Carolina community colleges*. NC State, College of Education. <https://belk-center.ced.ncsu.edu/adult-learner-guidebook/>
  - *Description:* Guidebook developed based on learnings of a pilot recruitment project for adult learners in North Carolina Community College. Includes recruitment and engagement strategies based on learner feedback.
  
- Geary, C. (2023, April 26). *Bringing adults back to community college playbook: Strategies and recommendations to increase adult enrollment*. New America Center on Education & Labor, Education Policy.

<https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/bringing-adults-back-a-playbook-for-community-colleges/>

- o *Description:* Brief report that overviews learnings from six community colleges that partnered on a national effort to re-enroll adult learners. While all findings are relevant, Theme 1 focuses on findings and strategies for engaging learners through communications and websites.
  
- VanZoest, E.R., Harry, D.T., Lewis-Sessoms, M. *et al.* The Five Ps of the Adult Learner Journey through the Community College: A Conceptual Framework. *Innov High Educ* **50**, 85–105 (2025).  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-024-09716-6>
  - o *Description:* This academic article presents the findings of a qualitative study that resulted in the “Five P Framework” for engaging and supporting adult learner success. Of particular interest to website enhancement is the section discussing the Public Messaging component of the framework.