

# TRANSLATING OPPORTUNITY INTO CAREERS

## How Brazosport College is Connecting ESL to High-Demand Jobs

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Like developmental education before it, postsecondary institutions commonly treat English language instruction [e.g., English as a Second Language (ESL) courses] as a prerequisite to students entering academic and workforce pathways, rather than a core component of those pathways. Historically, this has resulted in multilingual learners of English (MLE) being enrolled in long sequences of ESL courses that often have no clear connection to their ultimate career goals. When access to goal-aligned coursework and training is delayed, students who are MLEs may be less likely to persist through the full ESL course sequence. This challenge can be compounded by the pressing life demands many MLE students face, including employment pressures, financial strain, and caregiving responsibilities (Núñez, 2016).

However, evidence suggests that programs that integrate English language instruction with career training can provide MLE students with effective and high-impact pathways to simultaneously enhance their English proficiency while obtaining industry skills and credentials (Machkouri, 2025). **By aligning ESL programs with career training from the start, institutions can design ESL programs to be a launchpad to credentials of value and living-wage careers, rather than a precursor to entry into career-aligned coursework and training.**

The team at Brazosport College (BC) in Lake Jackson, TX, has put this concept into practice. As part of the institution's participation in the [Translating Opportunity Texas](#) initiative, BC set out to align ESL courses to occupations and establish pathways that connect Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) programs to other college credentials and degree programs.

In this piece, I am joined in authorship by Dr. Anne Bartlett, Vice President of Industry and Community Resources at BC, to highlight BC's programs and explore what makes them successful. Dr. Bartlett and her team also offer advice for institutions seeking to integrate English language instruction and support with career training.

### Institutional Spotlight: Brazosport College's Approach

Brazosport College participated in Translating Opportunity Texas (TOT) Cohort 1 to expand opportunity for multilingual learners and adult students. On the Texas Gulf Coast, we recognized a disconnect between adults building English language skills and local careers that offer economic mobility. TOT provided a framework to better connect language learning, workforce preparation, and college attainment.

Our strategic priorities were to establish pathways connecting Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) programs to college credentials and degrees while aligning ESL instruction to occupations with strong local demand. We also focused on programs aligned with Texas' HB8 emphasis on Credentials of Value—credentials tied to strong completion outcomes and labor market value.

That meant prioritizing pathways connected to High-Skill, High-Growth careers where completers could secure family-sustaining wages. We also identified enrollment opportunities, including diversifying the pipeline into Electrical Technician pathways and expanding access to Health Services Management for new student populations. We then mapped the many routes students could take through the college “Spaghetti Bowl” of entry points, services, funding streams, and academic options. Through this process, we identified the Adult Education and Literacy Integrated Education and Training (IET) model—where technical instruction is paired with contextualized academic support—as the best fit for our students and institution.

That work led to two bilingual Tejanos Avanzando pathways funded through separate grants but built on the same design. The first, supported through a Carl D. Perkins Excellence in Access and Opportunity Program grant, created an Electrical Technician pathway in which students complete three credit courses culminating in an Occupational Skills Award that stacks into additional certificates and degrees. Coursework mirrors English-language classes and is rooted in the National Center for Construction Education and Research curriculum, allowing successful students to earn Core and Level 1 credentials.

The second pathway, launched through a Perkins State Leadership grant and Pre-Healthcare Pathways work with Achieving the Dream, created a bilingual, non-credit Medical Billing and Coding IET for ESL students. Twenty-five students are currently enrolled in the inaugural cohort. Upon completion, students may sit for a national certification exam, continue into credit coursework, apply their credential for credit through Prior Learning Assessment, and earn an Occupational Skills Award on the way to a certificate or degree in Health Services Management.

Brazosport College also partnered with a local nonprofit to translate and deliver a career readiness workshop, helping students build confidence in workplace expectations, communication, and employability skills.

These programs succeed because of braided funding, cross-functional collaboration, employer-informed design, community partnerships, and student-centered supports such as advising, flexible scheduling, and career navigation. Most importantly, students can see momentum through clear milestones that build confidence and create opportunity.



## Advice for the Field

For institutions looking to integrate language instruction and support with career training, **start with the end in mind.** Before selecting curriculum or designing courses, define what students should earn through the experience. Is the goal an industry-recognized credential, college credit, job readiness, employment, or a stackable pathway leading to a degree? Clear outcomes shape program design and help students see the value of participation from day one.

Second, **let labor market information guide pathway selection.** Choose occupations that are in demand, offer advancement opportunities, and lead to family-sustaining wages. Strong pathways should create a return on investment not only for students, but also for the college and community. When programs align with employer demand and regional workforce needs, institutions are better positioned to sustain enrollment, build partnerships, and demonstrate impact.

Third, **collaborate early and often across departments.** Efforts like these naturally involve adult education, workforce training, academic affairs, student services, advising, financial aid, grants, and employer engagement. That can feel complex, but it is also one of the greatest benefits of this work. Integrated pathway projects can become powerful silo busters that unite departments around a shared student-centered goal. Clear ownership, regular communication, and a willingness to solve problems together are essential.

Another lesson from Brazosport College is that **success requires more than language and skill acquisition alone.** The strongest programs meet students where they are, operate in cohorts, and recognize the realities adult learners often face. Wrap students in supports such as onboarding assistance, flexible scheduling, technology access, transportation solutions, nonprofit referrals, career readiness, and proactive advising. These services are often the difference between enrollment and completion.



Institutions should also be prepared to **braid funding streams.** Rarely does one source cover everything needed for a high-quality model. Combining resources from adult education, workforce grants, Perkins, philanthropy, and institutional funds can make implementation more feasible and sustainable.

Finally, **start small and improve as you go.** A focused pilot with strong outcomes can build internal confidence, attract partners, and create momentum for future expansion. The goal is not perfection on day one—it is building a pathway students can successfully navigate and trust.

## Final Thoughts

Brazosport College's programs serve as a compelling example of applying a student-ready mindset to ESL program design. Their success demonstrates what can happen when institutions center MLE students' goals, leverage cross-functional collaboration to integrate English language instruction with workforce training, and build programs informed by labor market demand. In doing so, ESL programs become vehicles for economic mobility by creating onramps to immediate career opportunities as well as pathways to further education and training.

This work is pivotal because it has the potential to transform not only the lives of individual students but also the long-term prosperity of entire communities.



### **About Translating Opportunity Texas**

*Translating Opportunity Texas: A Strategy of Talent Strong Texas Pathways (TOT) 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 leading to careers with living wages.*

*Participating colleges serve as co-development partners with the Texas Success Center, in collaboration with WestEd, Student-Ready Strategies (SRS), and the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), and with generous support from Ascendium Education Group. Ultimately, this project will contribute to the scaling of best practices across the state. To learn more about the project and access a wealth of tools, learning opportunities, and evidence-based insights, visit the [Translating Opportunity Texas Resource Hub](#).*



## References

Machkouri, C. M. (2025). Adult education is career pathways in action: Best practices in integrated education and training for healthcare careers. *COABE Journal: The Resource for Adult Education*, 14(1), 69.

Núñez, A. M., Rios-Aguilar, C., Kanno, Y., & Flores, S. M. (2016). English Learners and their transition to postsecondary education. In Paulsen, M. (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 41–90). Springer.