

Translating Opportunity Texas

Multilingual Learners of English
Focus Group Findings

Cohort One Colleges





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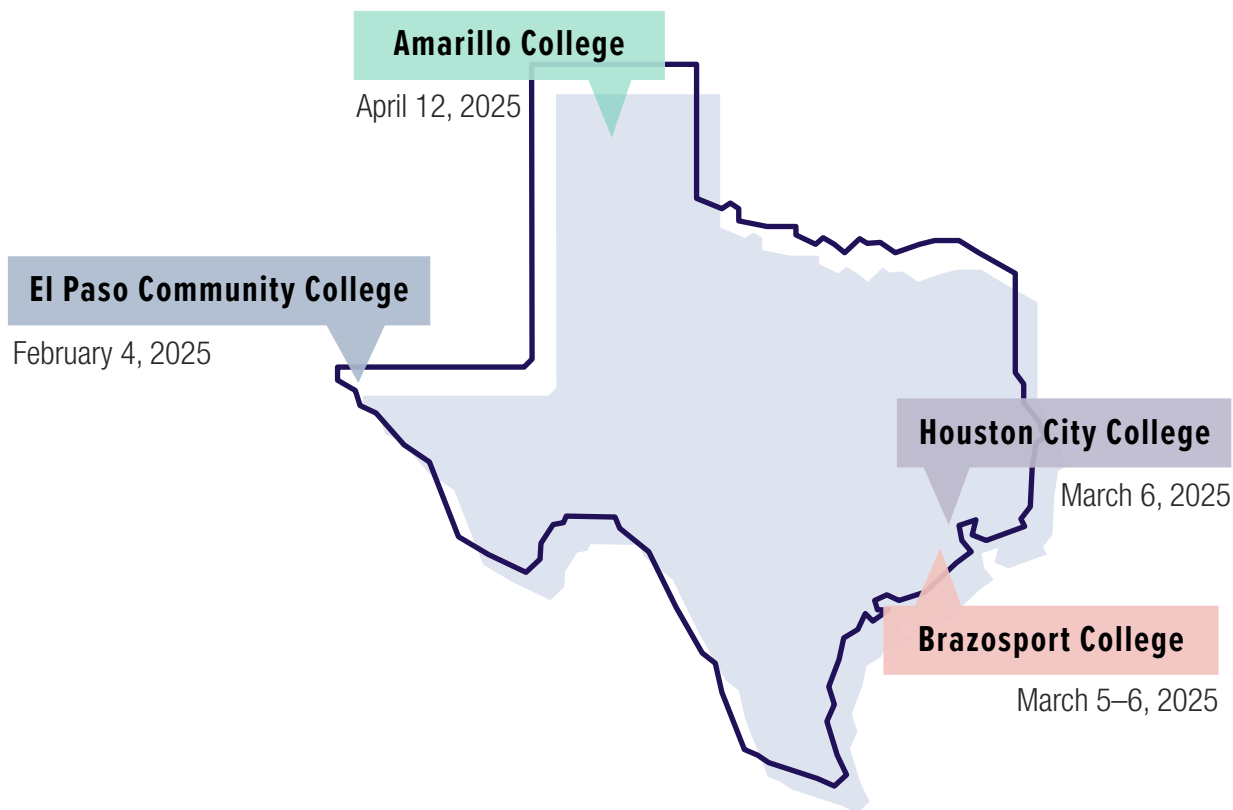
Acknowledgments

Translating Opportunity Texas is a collaborative initiative between the Texas Success Center, Student Ready Strategies, WestEd, and the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE). CCCSE gratefully acknowledges the Texas Success Center as well as Ascendium Education Philanthropy, a division of Ascendium Education Group.

We would also like to thank the four Texas community colleges that allowed us to conduct multiple focus groups with their Multilingual Learners of English (MLE) in February, March, and April 2025. Without these voices, we would not be able to demonstrate how MLE community college students in Texas are experiencing their English as a Second Language (ESL) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and transitioning to credit courses. Finally, we thank the students who shared their stories of purpose and perseverance with us. This report is dedicated to them.

CCCSE is a service and research initiative in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin. By delivering “aha” moments about the student experience based on insights that matter, CCCSE assists institutions and policymakers in using information to promote improvements in student learning, persistence, and attainment.

The findings and conclusions contained within are those of CCCSE and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of Translating Opportunity Texas: A Strategy of Talent Strong Texas Pathways and its partnering organizations (Texas Success Center, WestEd, and Student-Ready Strategies) or Ascendium Education Group.



The Focus Groups

For over 20 years, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) has delivered “aha” moments about the student experience and assisted institutions and policymakers in using information to promote improvements in student learning, persistence, and attainment. One of the ways CCCSE shares these aha moments is through the student voice as captured during focus group interviews.

As an enhancement to Translating Opportunity Texas (funded by Ascendium Education Group), the Texas Success Center invited CCCSE to conduct focus groups with MLE students in spring 2025 at four Texas community colleges to explore the MLE student experience—in particular their pathway from ESL students to credit-earning students. Each of the four participating colleges received a report based upon the themes that emerged from the focus group conversations and a set of focus group video clips.

Through the four focus group visits, CCCSE spoke with 37 MLE students. At times, the terms ESL and ESOL are used interchangeably with MLE to describe students. To feature the voices of the focus group participants and to showcase the breadth of the discussions, select quotes have been included in this report. Text in italics represents these quotes. Some of the quotes were edited for clarity and conciseness or to remove extraneous information that did not contribute to the meaning of what was said.

MLE EXPERIENCE THEMES

There are many factors that contribute to the experience of MLE students. Starting on this page and through page 11 are some of the themes or topics that the focus group participants discussed about their past and current experiences at their institutions.

TOPIC #1:

Catalysts for Learning English at College

Students talked about why they decided to study English at the local two-year college. Some students discussed how they didn't need to speak English to communicate within their communities—they were able to effectively interact in their native language with others to meet their daily needs. However, some students shared that they wanted to learn English to better communicate with their children. Some discussed the importance of learning English to communicate with doctors. Others indicated that learning English would further help them achieve their desire to embrace American culture. Most of the students shared that they wanted to learn English to enhance their career opportunities.

I decide to begin studying English because when I go to, for example, in a mall, I don't know how to say to another people, and I don't know nobody, so [laughs] I decide to begin here and ask for English classes to be more comfortable with talk to another people.

My daughter wants me to speak English to learn more, and that way, I feel like we can connect more with her.

Now, when I go to the doctor or the school, I must to ask for help from my sister or my brother. I want to do it myself, so I must to learn English.

I am studying here in the college because I want to learn English. I speak a little bit, but I think I can do it better. I am glad to be here. I appreciated this college for the opportunity because it's a great help for me because I am new in this country. I think that learning English is very important for live here—for work, for study, for a lot of stuff.

I'm studying at this college because I have a goal. I wanted to be a nurse.

I definitely want a better job, and I want a better future for me and for my children, and I think that is going to happen—just being at school and getting at least a certificate or a degree.

I'm here because I want to have a degree and be successful.

Students found out about ESL classes at the local college mostly through friends and family.

The friend told me, "You need to go to this college because it's ... good for teaching about English." Right now, I'm here learning. My friends come here to learn English.

I asked my friends. Then they told me to come to this college. That's how I ended up coming here.

Oh, my brother, my mother, come here and study English. They told me, "Come here. Study English, too."

Students shared how much ESL courses better prepared them for their credit-bearing courses.

I'm taking the credit [speech] course, and it's a little hard to me because in that course, the instructor only speak English, and all my classmates only speak English, so we definitely need the ESOL.

ESOL classes makes you have confidence, and practice, and knowing about the system, because it's not the same—the college in the United States and that in Mexico, for example—so we have to learn about the educational system. The ESOL program helps you with that, and I think that that's the difference between taking or not taking the ESOL program.

After three weeks, I feel more confident. I know my deficits because I understand and I learn how to detect what I need to improve my skills in English, thanks to the ESL program. It also is very relaxing having the support of my professors. Also, I can come back to my ESL professors and ask them for help, and they are always open to help me. That helped me to feel more confident right now.

I don't want to imagine what will happen if I didn't do the ESL classes or the Bridge classes because right now, the [credit] courses are very intense.

TOPIC #2:

Enrollment Decisions

GETTING STARTED

Students shared repeatedly how easy the process was for getting started on their English-learning journey at the college.

I was surprised because I was thinking that it will be like difficult. ... It was easy and faster.

It's easy because the staff of the college—they're helpful.

I come here to the college and filling a form online ... then I have an exam; and the next week, maybe, I'll start English classes. Yes, it was a really easy process.

SELECTING A MAJOR

For those students who were getting close to transitioning into college-level courses, they met with a counselor or advisor who helped them identify the best career path.

Because I have a technical diploma as an Administrative Assistant in Mexico, I was following the same role to continue that preparation here on campus. From now, it's ESOL. The counselors just let me know what are the subjects that I have to take later on when I get registered for the major.

The advisor ... showed me a lot of different areas in college and which one is more reliable, which one has more work. ... It is something with health. ... He showed me the path through it.

REGISTRATION

MLE students shared how advisors helped them to register for classes.

It's very easy.

We need to go see an advisor first because it's part of the preparation for the English [course]—to see them, and they can see your grades or how it went [that] semester. Then they advise us of what is the next steps or what are the classes that we can take. Those give us a list of the classes that we can take. We go to any computer lab and then start picking the schedules and the time that work for us.

They help us. They get a computer. At the beginning, I had been here three times doing that. The first time, they help me total. The last one, they gave me computer, and I fill out the computer. If I had a doubt, I can ask them, and they helped me. The way they do that is very, very well. They are very kindful.

I like to meet with the same person because I think that she already knows a little about me and my history—and what I want to do. That's why always I look for her.

ESL students shared how having an academic plan helps them in planning their academic journey:

The plans are already laid out. I just have to follow it. . . . What I did—I tried to do the hard ones first to get it away with before I started doing the easy ones.

It is helpful. It's written. When you go to meet an advisor, they will give you whole year—how you're supposed to study to enroll yourself every year. It's easy.

Actually, my advisor set a plan for me. It's in a computer. I have to go there for each semester that I want enrolled there. I can pick out from there, and, yeah, it's easier to enroll and easier to know what's the plan is in the future.

FINANCIAL AID

For those ESL students who qualified for financial aid, they shared how seamless the process was for them.

My counselor told me about the financial opportunities that I have, and I just go to the financial aid area, and they help me with all.

It was very quickly also because I only filled my form online. Then they answer me one month later and told me, "Everything is paid." It was very quickly.

Our teachers in the Bridge program teaches how to find information. At the end of the course, we can have a meeting with our advisor, and they can provide us more information about what expected career we can choose. That was the last week of the course; we started learning how to enroll in the classes in the college. We have meetings with the advisors and start looking for professionals in the financial aid office. They connect us with those offices.

TOPIC #3:

Classroom Experiences

ENGAGING ACTIVITIES

It cannot be stressed enough that students shared repeatedly that they want classes in which they speak English frequently and with intentionality. For some students, the only place where they practice English is in their MLE classes. For other students, they may speak English in other settings (e.g., at home with their children), but they became more comfortable learning English when the class expectations included a lot of opportunities for conversing in English (presentations/speeches, partner activities, interactions with instructors, etc.).

I like face-to-face classes because the activities are really dynamic because to speak with another student, to speaking front of the class—sometimes, it's a little bit nervous. I think you can develop your skills.

I have to speak, and that's what I really need. I need to practice because I don't speak English at my house, so this is the only time that I speak English. I like it because nobody will laugh at you if you have a bad pronunciation, and that's why I like it.

I love it. I love it to death. Especially with my partner—all the time we are practicing together.

Well, in the beginning I thought it's not really convenient for me if my teacher speak only English because I thought maybe my English is not enough to communicate with her. During classes, I changed my mind because it's better for me because now I have to force myself to speak only English. . . . Now I feel like I can go anywhere, answer calls and make calls, because my teacher speak English, so that made me speak more English.

ESL students also shared how they liked games (like Bingo) or dictation exercises (where they identify what is incorrect within a sentence) for learning English.

I like the teacher. She is very—she explain a lot. It's clear and speak slow. It's good. Sometimes she have games for active. I like her.

It was Bingo, and we had a very beautiful time together.

[The teacher] wrote a sentence on the board. She wanted us to translate in our different language. That was very good. I put it in my language. That made me know someone else's language. I mean, what I'm getting at is, she's trying to make it very broad for everybody to understand it. I think I like that. If other professors can do that, it brings student like us together and makes me know your point of view. You know my own point of view and where I'm having challenges. We can come together and resolve it, if you get what I mean?

ONLINE FORMAT

The majority of ESL students prefer a face-to-face learning environment, but some liked the flexibility that online classes provided.

I prefer more face-to-face classes. It is because I'm a person that I like to meet people, other students.

I don't like classes online, but this class was great, absolutely. I think the teacher was great. I really like the class. Right now, I take it online also because it's more comfortable for me, for my kid, for my husband. I think it's really good to take classes online. In the past, I really don't like it, but right now I think it's a good choice.

ESL INSTRUCTORS

The students shared how their ESL instructors—some of the students' first teachers in their community college journey—provided a culture of caring.

Here, everyone help you a lot. Sometimes, they tell you, "If you don't know what is the building or your classroom, I going to take you." It's like [they treat you like] a little kid. They take you and go to the building or the room. Here in the school, everybody help a lot.

At first, I feel very nervous because it's college, and I feel a little old, but that teacher here are very good with me. That class was good, and I'm here, and I'm happy.

Yeah. It feels good because there's someone else who cares about you. This community shows empathy for when we are not [native] English speakers.

TOPIC #4: Challenges and Improvements

FLUENCY

MLE students were asked about some of the challenges they face when learning English. Students spoke about the differences between their native language and English and the process of becoming more fluent in English.

There are many differences between when you are writing in Spanish and when you are writing in English, and I think that the Bridge program and also the ESL classes helped me to understand that.

I think the most hard for me for learn is when maybe somebody talk you in English too fast. I am like, "Hey, take it easy. Wait." Because a lot of people here, they talk you fast.

For me, it's the accents. Everybody speak different.

I think when we are in a classroom, people say things. You can get lost very quickly, so I think it's communication. My big challenge is how to communicate, how to say that. I am thinking in [my native language], but I cannot say in English.

The most challenging part of learning English is to stop translating in my mind. That's the main problem that I'm actually doing right now. I understand—now, I understand it is part of the process and how to avoid it. I think that's the major problem.

MANAGING MULTIPLE PRIORITIES

Some students discussed that their work-life balance is challenging.

Well, for now, I work in a warehouse in Amazon. I work 40 hours per week. It's kind of hard to come to school and go to work and get my family, but I think it's something that I need to do for get better. Yeah, it's kind of hard.

For me right now, it's a little difficult. I have four kids, so it's a little difficult because we're running three schools, working for myself. We try to do a lot in my house, my kids. I try to make [learning English] these two days priority—make the time. I try to say to my job, "Not this time. Only these two days try to come." We feel exhaust because I'm running 5:00 in the morning through 10:00, 11:00 on the night.

It's not easy to balance it with school—full-time school, full-time work.

STOPPING OUT

Some students discussed why they have considered taking breaks from school.

Sometime, it's a lot. I might say, "I feel like I'm going to give up a little bit," and say, "Why?" Then I remember my goals.

It's not because of the school; it's because the school was so far than where I live. I feel like I am so tired. I take 1 hour and 30 minute by bus to come to school, so make me feel very tired. I have to do assignment. That's point I feel like ... I will stop. I know I am not the only one. I know people that feel the same.

Maybe that happened to me in my last semester because I was with younger people. Sometimes that make you feel like I don't belong here, you know?

CONFIDENCE TO SUCCEED

When students were asked why they felt confident that they were going to complete their academic goals, many attributed this feeling to the ESL/ESOL faculty.

This college, to help me to get that confidence that I need to speak—they teach you that you are not the only one to try to learn English or learn another language. They tell you that you can do it, and with a little bit effort—that you are awesome because you are trying to learn another language. Yeah, this is a good experience.

When my teachers came and told me be confident—because sometimes I doubt myself. They came in and told me, "Don't be shy, keep going," and they push me to go on. I think that that's one of the greatest parts of being here.

I feel so confident about finishing the ESOL classes and start the career classes.

If you want to live here, you must join in the class because it's very necessary. When I come here, I feel worry when I go anywhere. After join this class, I feel more confident.

I'm really confident that when I finish the English class, I'll go to college.

I'm confident that going like this—putting my eyes on the prize—I think I will get to my goal.

I know how to do my assignments, how to enroll my classes. I know where I can find help. I have information, so that's make me confident that I can go forward.

Students shared that not only do they feel like their English skills are improving, but others have noticed their improvement as well.

My husband told me that I speak better English than when I come here.

Some of my family members—when we went to a restaurant, maybe I did the order. They hear me and say, “Hey, your English is getting better.” They ask me, “Where are you learning that English?” “Oh, I go to the college. I learn new words.” They say, “Oh. That’s good.”

Yes, I speak a little bit more, and writing and reading. It’s good for me because when take my mom to the doctor’s appointment, I can speak with the doctor. Yes, she understand me because sometimes she call a translator. But most of the time, I don’t need the translator because I tell her, “I understand you, and I want to speak English to practice because it’s good for me.” Yes, this class has helped me.

Well, my daughters tell me all the time, “Mom, I’m very proud of you. Because your age, you were struggling to learn.” I feel very proud, too, because my English is getting better.

TOPIC #5:

Advice

ADVICE TO NEW MLE STUDENTS

The advice of focus group participants to new students who are interested in studying ESL at the local community college can be summed up with the Nike® slogan, “Just Do It!” Most also commented on others’ willingness and eagerness to help.

For new students, my advice is that don’t be afraid. You need to keep trying.

I definitely recommend, to all my friends that don’t speak English, enroll here at the college because it’s a great program. I will advise that they don’t have to have fear; and no matter what age you have, this is a great opportunity to learn academic English.

Especially here, I noticed that everybody wants to help you. Just ask help. Ask your advisor. Ask your instructor. Ask other student. They will help you to achieve your goal.

I think one helpful advice that I will tell to a new student is, “Do it. Do it. Do it right now. Do it no matter your age—no matter the level of English that you have.”

Several students recommended that new English-learning students dedicate time to practicing English outside of their classes.

For me, I had been learning a lot in internet because most of the people think you come to college, and you go to learn. No, you no practice at home; you no learn nothing because you can listen and listen. You go home and never practice and never practice, you not going to learn.

Well, before I told you I was nervous and embarrassed to speak English. . . . In my house we have a rule now that 80% of our conversations—they have to be in English. That help me to practice because my daughter—of course, she went to school, and she speak English and Spanish. She’s 100% bilingual, and my husband, too. I have to learn, and I have to practice. Now that rule help a lot. Of course, our teachers tell us all the time, “Try to speak English not only here in the class. Try outside in the stores, in your house.”

ADVICE TO COLLEGE

Students found it difficult to identify areas of improvement at their community colleges. Many students commented on the helpfulness of their ESL/ESOL instructors and staff. The most consistent area of improvement was for faculty to provide more opportunities for students to speak English.

Just last thing that I think that during the ESL classes—I think that we need more opportunities to talk. I understand that teachers have to view a schedule. They have tasks to their students. There's just a little moments that you can participate, and it doesn't give us the time to experience this process, because I think that this is one of the most things that I struggle: talking. I think that it could be advice for the ESL teachers and also advice for students. Participate in class and give us more opportunities to talk. Or include another class where we can do it in something like a speech. It will help us. Because in college classes, we have to ask quickly, and sometimes I am translating a lot and in slow mode, so it take me a lot of time, and I lost opportunities answering a question or suggesting something in the class. I think that it will be helpful if they implement another class.

More English. More class [sessions] on English because I working. I need English for working.

My advice to English teachers is to speak English, only English. That way, we can learn more from them.

Based on participant feedback, Texas community colleges could benefit from more intentional ESL/ESOL program mapping. Several students recommended that courses should focus on a specific level (e.g., beginning, intermediate, and advanced) instead of mixing students of varying proficiencies in the same class. It was also suggested that colleges ensure vertical alignment, in which faculty of different English levels build upon the learning of earlier ESL/ESOL classes.

Sometimes the information is the same. Sometimes, for me, it's boring because I had all my papers, and I not want to do it again the same. I would like the change, the different information, different things to teach.

My time is a lot of important because I have the autistic boy, and I need to do a lot of things at home. I come here in order to learn new things. For me, it's difficult. I would like another room with different things. Understand the problem no is the teacher. The problem probably is I need more rooms.

Some students no want to come here because they told me, "It's the same. It's the same." They don't want to go. I no want to go there. The people that are learning for first time—it's good because their learning is there. The learning, they never had listen this learning. For me, listen three times, four times, or five times the same things; it's boring—no like it.

This is my first time, so we don't know too much. The little things what I heard, and the little things what I see, I think the college has to have a program, like books. This is for first level, second level, third level, or more. Because if the teachers—they're doing amazing, but they are try to maybe figure out the class for herself. They don't know what's the other teacher doing.

Our class—it's amazing. . . . What I see, it's more about speak, speak, speak—like your normal day speaking good. Vocabulary is the most important for the teacher, and it's good. It's good. It's not means it's advanced because probably the intermediate is more advanced. It's not the teacher fault. They . . . do it the best. If the college had a programs full of books, it's help a lot because this book can focus on this and here improve.

Conclusion

The students shared many favorable sentiments about attending ESL courses at their local college and the impact that the community college is having on their English language learning and their lives. CCCSE data have shown that when students make at least one connection at the college, they are more likely to be engaged. The following are some of the participants' comments about how attending their community college has made them feel.

I really love to be in this college. They opened my eyes about my opportunities. . . . This is my de-stress. I don't know if I say it right in English. It's my way to not have any stress. I'm enjoying to learn new things. I'm enjoying to learn a new language. It's hard. It's hard for me, for my age, and because I have children, and I don't have enough time to study, but this is my happy place for me.

I think she's helped me because she's teaching us how to speak or write or reading in English, and in that group, we feel safe.

I feel like this college, the priority is the students. They try help us a lot. If they can't, they find a way to help us. Of course, if I want to get another degree or certification or something, I want to take it here.

Everybody's positive. Everybody wants to help me. I'm talking about my instructors. They want to help me. They want to do more for me to reach my goal. My instructors—they are the best.

I've not gone to college before, so it's my first time. I always want to listen and do what they say because I think they have my best interests at heart. They want me to succeed.

I feel that I belong in this college because my teachers support me—the staff members and also advisors—and they embrace me as part of this community.

CCCSE RESOURCES

GUIDED PATHWAYS



One resource for enhancing the student experience around advising is the publication [Show Me the Way: The Power of Advising in Community Colleges](#). CCCSE more recently published a national report focused on guided pathways, [Building Momentum: Using Guided Pathways to Redesign the Student Experience](#), which may be helpful to review when creating pathways for MLE students.

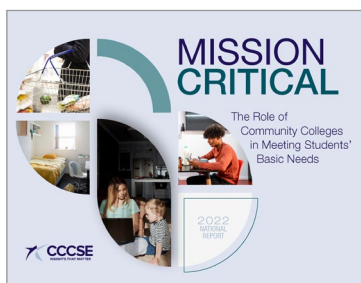
CULTURE OF CARING



In fall 2025, CCCSE published [*Essential Conditions for Community College Student Success: Maximizing Student Engagement by Fostering a Culture of Caring*](#). This report underscores how systemic, intentional support fosters belonging, self-efficacy, and engagement. For MLE students, who may face language barriers, cultural adjustment, and stigma in seeking help, building a culture of caring is vital to ensuring they feel supported and able to succeed.



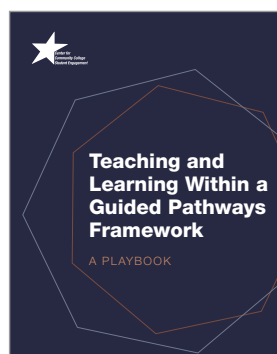
In fall 2024, CCCSE published [*Supporting Minds, Supporting Learners: Addressing Student Mental Health to Advance Academic Success*](#). The report illustrates that many community college students experience anxiety, depression, or emotional difficulties that affect academic performance. For MLE students, these challenges may be compounded by language barriers and isolation, making accessible support in the areas of mental health and well-being for this population essential.



In fall 2022, CCCSE published [*Mission Critical: The Role of Community Colleges in Meeting Students' Basic Needs*](#). The report highlights how unmet basic needs—like food and housing insecurity—adversely impact students' ability to persist and learn. For MLE students, who may be facing additional challenges, understanding and addressing these barriers is important for supporting their success.

CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT

In the MLE focus groups, when providing advice to instructors about how to improve their courses, students repeatedly mentioned more opportunities to speak English in the form of activities. Students provided examples of the interactive exercises they found most engaging, which primarily involved partner work, class games, practical assignments, and so on.



A review of the components of “Ensure Students are Learning” (also known as Pillar 4 of the [*Guided Pathways Framework*](#)) can support this conversation. More details can be found in [*Teaching and Learning Within a Guided Pathways Framework: A Playbook*](#). Examples of innovative teaching practices for these components can be found in CCCSE’s [searchable database](#), as part of its [*Ensure Students Are Learning Toolkit*](#).

The toolkit also features [professional development tools for faculty](#)—a two-hour professional development activity and a multi-step activity designed to take place over three weeks.

CCCSE SURVEYS

It is recommended that colleges participate in [CCCSE surveys](#) at least once every three years to monitor their progress so that they can implement interventions and continue to make strides in improving their students' experiences. If your college wants to know how students are experiencing college, it's best to ask students.

The Community College Research Center's "[Scale of Adoption Self-Assessment](#)," a tool that is designed to help a college assess how far along it is toward adopting essential guided pathways practices at scale, includes this:

- » *The college assesses effectiveness of educational practice (e.g. using CCSSE or SENSE, etc.) and uses the results to create targeted professional development.*

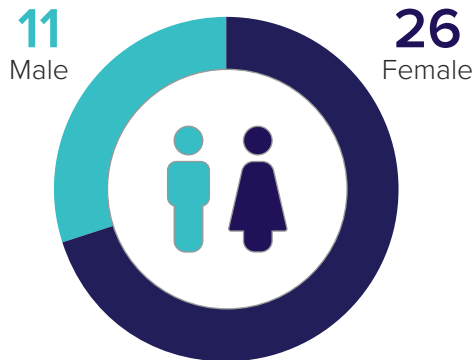
If your college is interested in learning more about administering CCCSE surveys or utilizing the resulting data, please contact us.



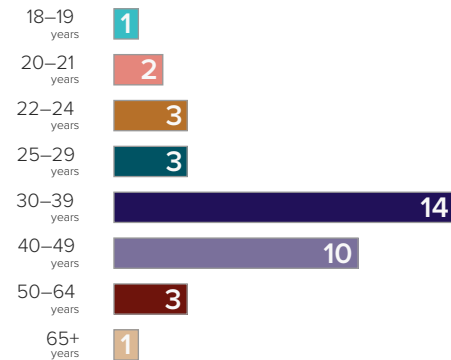
APPENDIX

Student Demographics

GENDER



AGE



ENROLLMENT INFORMATION



10 participants had gone to college immediately after high school.

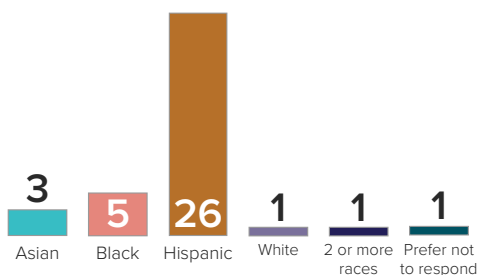


25 participants said that the specific cohort college was the first college they attended.

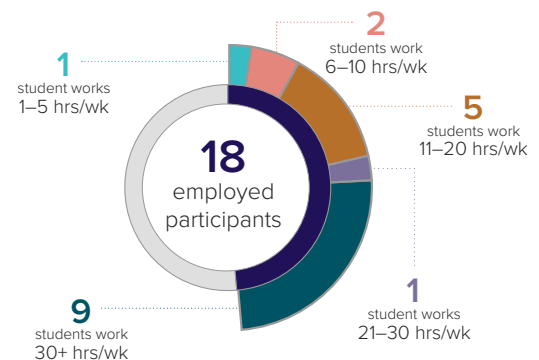


15 students were in their first semester at the college.

RACE



EMPLOYMENT



NATIVE LANGUAGE

26 students indicated that **Spanish** was their native language.



Other languages spoken were Creole-French (1), Farsi (1), Italian (1), Kinyarwanda (1), Kpelle (1), Portuguese (1), Thai (1), Vietnamese (3), Yoruba (1).

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY



2 students indicated an **Advanced** proficiency.

15 students indicated a **High-Intermediate** proficiency.

18 students indicated a **Low-Intermediate** proficiency.

2 students indicated a **Beginner** proficiency.

CHILDREN & CHILDCARE



23 students had children or other dependents living at home with them.



14 students had children who did not require childcare.



4 students had childcare outside of the college.



Of the **3** students who didn't have childcare, **2** needed it.



2 students did not respond.

MARITAL STATUS



21 participants were married.

FIRST-GENERATION



11 students were first-generation college students.

Special Thanks

CCCSE would like to express gratitude to the following individuals for their support in planning and conducting the focus groups.



- » Tiffany Kimmell, *ESL and PD Coordinator*
- » Anna Rodriguez, *ESL Coordinator, AEL*



- » Dr. Anne Bartlett, *Vice President for Industry and Community Resources*
- » Dr. Gracie Pequeño, *Director, Adult Education & Literacy*



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Please cite this report as follows: CCCSE. (2025). *Translating opportunity Texas: Multilingual learners of English Texas focus group findings – Cohort one colleges*. <https://www.cccse.org/TX-MLE-focus-groups>



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