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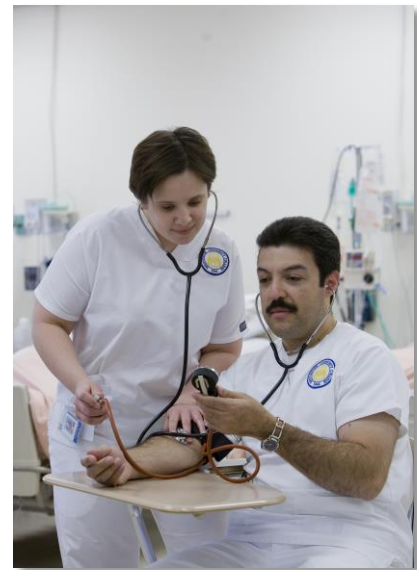
## ACCELERATING THE SUCCESS OF LOW-LITERACY ADULT ESL LEARNERS

*By Eloise Teisberg*

### MEETING THE CHALLENGE HEAD ON

Leading community colleges around the country are creating high-quality, integrated ESL career pathway programs to help immigrant students simultaneously improve their English skills and obtain living-wage careers in growth industries, such as healthcare and technology. However, many of these programs require intermediate-to-advanced English language skills and higher levels of academic achievement, thus making them inaccessible to many lower-skilled, low-literacy adult ESL learners who don't meet these entry-level requirements.

Today, almost 25 percent of community college students come from an immigrant background, fueling a corresponding need for accelerated, career-related, ESL instruction at the community college level. By 2030, nearly one in five members of the workforce will be an immigrant. This population is increasingly critical to maintaining a strong competitive workforce in the U.S. Yet, the number of Limited English Proficient adults in the U.S. has increased dramatically in recent decades, from 6.5 million in 1980 to 18.7 million in 2012. In 2012, nearly 31% of the 35.1 million immigrants ages 25 and older lacked a high school diploma, compared to 10% of native-born adults, according to the Migration Policy Institute.



Adult ESL learners, usually older than traditional college students fresh out of high school, are often balancing the competing needs of work, family, and education, as well as dealing with language and cultural barriers. In addition to lacking the prerequisite English language and basic education skills needed to succeed at the post-secondary level, many have been out of school for years and face difficulties navigating the community college system.

In response, a growing number of community colleges—often in partnership with community-based organizations, adult education providers, and regional employers—have developed on-ramps or bridges to their career pathway programs that are significantly increasing educational and workforce opportunities for lower-skilled adult ESL learners. The exemplary initiatives from Washington State’s Community and Technical Colleges and South Texas College are described below. These initiatives share a common goal: Accelerate success of low-literacy, lower-skilled adult learners lacking English language skills and a high school diploma. Rather than waiting until they attain higher English language skill levels, which might take months or years, students now have immediate access to an educational path that will lead to the ultimate goal of being employed in a living-wage career.

## Washington State’s On-Ramps to I-BEST: Project I-DEA and High School 21+

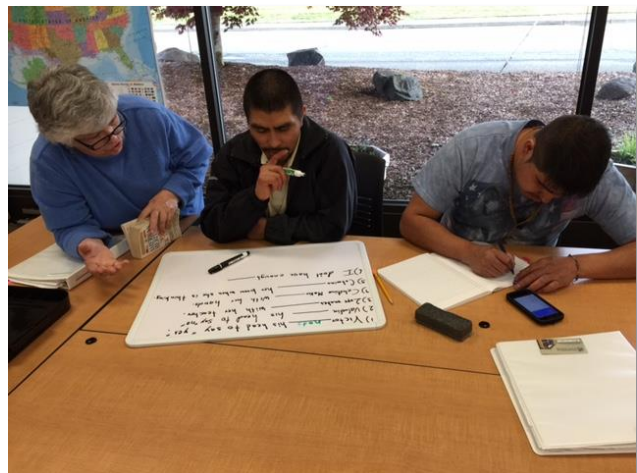


Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) is a nationally known accelerated instruction program, which started in the Washington state system and is now being replicated at community colleges across the country. Team teaching is at the heart of the I-BEST approach: a career or technical instructor and an ESL or ABE instructor work in the same classroom to plan, teach, and assess students’ learning and skill development. This allows students to earn college and workforce credentials while also mastering critical basic skills identified by employers. All I-BEST programs partner with service organizations to provide access to wraparound services, such as navigational support, academic advising, financial aid, childcare, housing, transportation, and emergency funds which significantly increase student success.

### A Leaky Educational Pipeline for Adult ESL Learners

Prior to I-BEST in Washington’s community colleges, the system was simply not working for many adult ESL learners and those with only a high school diploma or less: “We found that up and down the educational pipeline, the two-year system was hemorrhaging working age adults with high school education or less and ESL students at an alarming rate,” notes Jon Kerr, Director of Adult Basic Education at the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC).

About one-third of every new class entering the Washington state community and technical



college system was made up of prime working age students who were non-native English speakers or who had high school diplomas or less. Yet the overwhelming majority, eight out of ten ABE/ESL students, made only modest skills gains—at best earning a GED but going no further.

In Washington state, two programs are broadening access to learners who need it most: Project I-DEA and High School 21+. These “on-ramps” allow students to qualify for I-BEST courses quickly, usually within one to three quarters.

### Project I-DEA (Integrated Digital English Acceleration)

**Project I-DEA**, initially piloted in 2014-2015 at nine colleges partnering with community-based organizations, now operates at 19 Washington state community colleges. The goal is for all 34 colleges to offer I-DEA by the end of the 2015-2016 school year. In collaboration with the Gates Foundation, the program helps English language learners who have the biggest language gaps learn English quickly and in practical ways. Students simultaneously learn both English language skills and job and life skills in short, contextualized units.

Groups of 25 adult students learn and study together at local community “hubs,” organized and operated through partnerships between the community colleges and CBOs. Students participate in 31 week-long courses that blend English language instruction with practical life and work readiness skills, such as time management, health and wellness, budgeting and consumer economics, professional and interpersonal communication, and job search and interviewing skills.

The I-DEA classes are “flipped,” meaning students are expected to learn basic concepts and vocabulary online through independent study before class. Each student is provided with a laptop computer and 24/7 Internet access, which allows for self-directed learning. The online portion is organized into 31 free, open-resource modules of instruction. Students are able to study at any time, choosing topics that are meaningful to them. In-class time is used to practice, strengthen, and apply that knowledge with the support of instructors and other learners. The classes are team taught by an ESL instructor and a technology coach.

WASHINGTON'S COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGES

## INTEGRATED DIGITAL ENGLISH ACCELERATION (I-DEA)

*"Immigrants (are) insistent that learning English is critical for their success. Focus group discussions made it clear that this conviction is driven by pragmatism and the desire to be understood. Fully 85 percent say it is hard to get a good job or do well in this country without learning English; only 12 percent say it is easy. Some immigrants also see learning English as an ethical obligation." Migration Policy Institute article citing a research study by Public Agenda, May 2003*

**A better idea for Adult English Language learners**

**How it works**  
Funded with a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, I-DEA features:

- **Community-based hubs:** Groups of 25 adults learn at local "hubs," partnerships between community and technical colleges and community-based organizations. Students participate in 31-week-long instructional modules that blend English language instruction with college and career skills. Topics range from navigating your community and information literacy, to professional communication, job exploration and interview skills.
- **Integrated learning:** Unlike traditional approaches—in which learners are expected to learn English before pursuing job-training—I-DEA teaches English in tandem with college and career skills. Students quickly learn skills relevant to their lives and careers.
- **"Flipped" classes:** Students complete online modules to learn, practice and develop knowledge of concepts before coming to class. They then use classroom time to apply and practice what they've learned, in-class instructors and peer support guide and enhance skill acquisition.
- **Computer access:** Students receive computers and 24/7 Internet access to complete coursework that prepares them for college and family-wage jobs.

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I-DEA was designed as an on-ramp to connect basic skills ESL learners to I-BEST course offerings as quickly as possible. The results of the first quarter of the pilot project were significant. In Phase I,

57% of I-DEA students made significant gains which was an increase of 11% when compared to ESL students in traditional programming and 50% made federal-level gains, an increase of 9% over students in traditional classes.

In the second year (Phase II), preliminary data continues to show increased progression. As of mid-spring 2015 over half the students (57%) made a state-level significant gain, and almost half (46%) made a federal-level gain. Statewide for the same time period, 46% of all ESL students made a significant gain and 37% made a federal-level gain.

### High School 21+: A New Way to Get a Second Chance

**High School 21+**, is a competency-based diploma program that recognizes adult learners' life and work experiences as well as course credits and classroom time allowing ESL students an opportunity to receive a high school diploma as a result of their basic education experience. High School 21+ infuses ABE/ESL skills classes with more rigorous, high-school level education and training so students can upgrade their skills while working toward a high school credential. As the name implies, students must be 21 or older to participate. When they start the program, learners meet one-on-one with an advisor to develop a customized plan. The advisor evaluates any transcripts as well as life and work experience and administers assessments to find any educational, language, or work-readiness gaps. The student and advisor then work together to make a plan to meet any remaining requirements to earn a diploma.

One of the key differences that sets High School 21+ apart from other non-traditional diplomas or equivalencies is that it recognizes life experience. Competency can be shown in multiple ways in addition to what is reflected in a transcript. Learners can create prior learning portfolios that demonstrate applicable experience in the work, life, and military arenas. This program meets students where they are and takes advantage of all applicable life skills and experience.



*Adelina Machuca-Santiago, a native from Mexico, entered the HS21+ program at Lower Columbia College in fall 2014 to pursue her dream of graduating with an American high school diploma and entering college. She spent two quarters taking ESL and ABE classes, logged in 444 hours, earned 7 achievement points, and completed 9.1 high school credits. HS21+ allowed Adelina to receive some high school credits from life experiences, work experiences, face-to-face classes and online classes at LCC. Through hard work, dedication, persistence, and friendships, she accomplished the first of her educational goals and walked in graduation June 2014. To continue her dream, Adelina is now enrolled in the medical assisting program at LCC and credits her success to the HS21+ program, her instructors, and the love and support of her family. Adelina often tells her husband Robert and their two boys, "Education is the investment in our future."*



To receive a diploma, students must demonstrate competency in English, reading, writing, and math in the context of science, history, government, occupational studies, fine arts and digital literacy, fulfilling the Washington state high school graduation requirements. SBCTC has created an **evaluation tool** that includes guidelines and examples of prior learning that would meet all or part of various subject area requirements and the types of activities that would provide evidence of competency.

In 2014-2015, 91 students were enrolled in HS 21+ programming across the system. Nearly one-third of those enrolled received their Washington State High School Diploma; over half made a federal-level gain, and over three-quarter made a significant gain on the CASAS test. Students move quickly through the program as outcomes are met and, upon completion, they are better prepared to enter college-level programs and earn certificates, and they are eligible to receive federal financial aid, notes Kerr.

### Career Pathways at South Texas College



At South Texas College (STC), 40 percent of continuing education students are immigrants, and 11 percent are enrolled in the ESL program. STC's Career Pathways program offers 16 integrated, sector-based career pathways in such fields as Emergency Medical Technology, Medical Assistant Technology, Electronic Health Records, Pharmacy Technology, Nursing, Welding, Accounting, and Computer Technology. The career pathways include contextualized ESL and basic skills support leading to clearly defined stackable credentials, employment, and advanced learning opportunities for the region's lower-skilled, low-literacy adults lacking English language skills and a high school diploma or GED. Students are in separate classes for ABE/ESL skills and job skills, and their instructors meet weekly to coordinate. Two tracks at the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade levels allow students to enroll in credit-bearing post-secondary Career and Technology Education programs through the noncredit Continuing Education division while also acquiring basic literacy and ESL skills. The STC program helps students transition from heavily contextualized ESL, coupled with math and technical terminology in Spanish, to noncredit occupational skills training and from there to credit bearing classes. Students gain a contextualized GED in English along the way. The credit



bearing courses are held “in escrow” until the GED is attained and then recognized on the credit side. The STC Career Pathways programs are funded by leveraging mostly state grants but also federal, private and institutional funding resources, as well as students’ contributions.

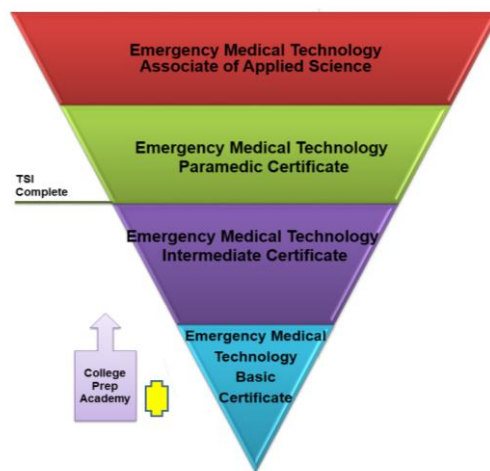
A strong case management system is a major component of the Career Pathways program. The case manager is in close contact with students, helping to keep them on track and coordinating access to any wraparound services they might need. Juan Carlos Aguirre, Associate Dean of Continuing, Professional, and Workforce Education, maintains that this one-on-one support of learners is a key factor in the success of their Career Pathway programs. STC’s Continuing Education Department uses federal Perkins funding to provide case management services.

### A Redesigned Emergency Medical Care Pathway

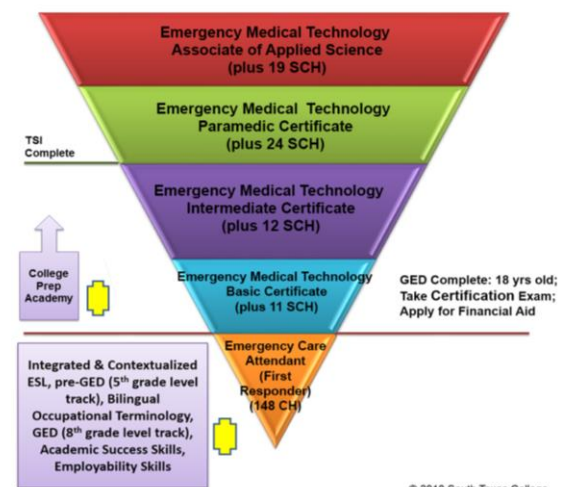
One extremely successful strand is STC’s redesigned Emergency Medical Care pathway. There’s high demand in the field, and it offers excellent potential for career advancement and a living wage. STC revamped its existing program to allow multiple exit and entry points to accommodate the real life events and changing needs of students. One such change was to create a new entry-level course: Emergency Care Attendant. This course allows lower-level students to start targeted technical skills training in a credit-bearing class. The course includes academic, as well as career success skills instruction, including the “soft skills” that can make the difference between keeping and losing a job once it’s obtained. Among others, these employability skills include resume writing, interviewing skills, customer service, phone etiquette, work ethics and responsibilities, and critical thinking. This course leads directly to employment in a high-demand occupation, feeds into the next level credit-bearing certificate, is recognized by employers as a marketable skill credential, and can be converted to semester credit hours.

At the next level in the track, Emergency Medical Technology Basic Certificate, a College Prep Academy component is added, preparing students for academic success at the college level. At this

South Texas College Career Pathway: Basic Certificate to Emergency Medical Technology AAS



South Texas College Career Pathway: Emergency Care Attendant to Emergency Medical Technology AAS



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point, students can take a certification exam and apply for financial aid, while continuing in stackable certificates to the ultimate goal of Emergency Medical Technology Associate of Applied Science.

The new structure has had an enormous success rate: Over the past three years, of the 166 students enrolled: 99% of students completed the program, 74% attained a GED, 76% earned post-secondary certificates, 66% earned national or state certificates, 67% earned college credit hours, and 75% enrolled in college and/or are employed. STC has developed a **10-step procedure** for developing career pathways for lower-skilled, low-literacy English language learners that can be customized to fit specific college and community environments. The Career Pathways Program could be expanded significantly if more Continuing Education students had access to federal aid through Pell grants. Currently, only students entering on the credit side are eligible for Pell grants, though recent legislation introduced, the **JOBS Act**, would **expand Pell grant eligibility** for students in non-credit, short-term training programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials (see *Making Pell Work: How America's \$30 Billion Investment in Need-based College Aid Can Be More Job-driven*, National Skills Coalition). STC is also researching ways to award the Pell grants to Continuing Education students pursuing certificates that lead to jobs in high-demand occupation. In addition, starting this fall the college expects to attract more Continuing Education students into its programs under the recently amended **Partial Restoration of Ability to Benefit** provisions that allow students without a high school diploma or GED to access Pell grants if they are enrolled into **eligible career pathway programs**.

## COMMON SUCCESS FACTORS

The ESL college bridge initiatives from Washington state colleges and South Texas College share many similar components:

- Areas of study meet academic and life needs and lead to living wage jobs.
- Programs are built in collaboration with CBOs and business community.
- One-on-one case management/career counseling support starts at pre-college level.
- On-going discussions with partner organizations provide continuous improvement.

## CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most striking similarity between the cutting-edge initiatives from Washington state community colleges and South Texas College is that both communities build in a one-on-one connection between their students and a case manager or career counselor. These navigators help the learners access the myriad support services available: financial aid, childcare, transportation, assistance navigating bureaucracy, transitioning to college and work, troubleshooting, etc. This direct connection with one point person at the community college allows these programs to meet the learners where they are, and adapt to their unique needs, strengths, and experiences. A large percentage of immigrant students need more training before they can enter existing programs designed to help learners obtain living-wage jobs. These models are smart, creative, flexible solutions to that problem, and can serve as springboards to help other community colleges create their own on-ramp programs to better serve ESL students.

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**To access resources cited in this publication follow the links below:**

Project I-DEA	<a href="http://bit.ly/1Mu4FCM">http://bit.ly/1Mu4FCM</a>
High School 21+ evaluation tool	<a href="http://bit.ly/1Nog9IT">http://bit.ly/1Nog9IT</a>
10-step procedure	<a href="http://bit.ly/1jTn69Q">http://bit.ly/1jTn69Q</a>
JOBS Act	<a href="http://1.usa.gov/1KBVKA6">http://1.usa.gov/1KBVKA6</a>
Expand Pell grant eligibility	<a href="http://bit.ly/1jKi8fu">http://bit.ly/1jKi8fu</a>
Partial Restoration of Ability to Benefit	<a href="http://bit.ly/1j2Xqrk">http://bit.ly/1j2Xqrk</a>
Eligible career pathway programs	<a href="http://bit.ly/1jTndIT">http://bit.ly/1jTndIT</a>

**Eloise Teisberg** is a consultant for CCCIE and a Career Pathways and ELL instructor at the Hubbs Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, which offers a variety of classes to prepare adults for post-secondary programs or employment while they improve basic skills. She is currently part of a project team creating an accelerated Medical Administrative Technician program in collaboration with St. Catherine University, the Minnesota Literacy Council, and the Project for Pride in Living.

*The Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education, hosted and led by Westchester Community College in Valhalla, N.Y., is a national network of community colleges and other professional and research organizations that have joined forces to increase educational and workforce opportunities for immigrant students.*