FINDINGS IN ESL

A Quick Reference to Findings of CAAL Research on ESL Programs at Community Colleges

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CAAL

Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy

REPORT AVAILABILITY

This report, <u>Findings in ESL: A Quick Reference to Findings of CAAL Research on ESL Programs at Community Colleges</u>, is the final in a series on CAAL ESL research since 2004. The publication, by CAAL Vice President Forrest P. Chisman, is available in PDF format from the Publications page of the CAAL website (www.caalusa.org). It may be purchased as a bound document directly from CAAL ($10 prepaid plus postage, bheitner@caalusa.org for instructions). The four main research reports summarized in this Reference document are also available at the CAAL website, each for $20 prepaid plus postage.

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**A Quick Reference to Findings of CAAL Research
on ESL Programs at Community Colleges**

Between 2004 and 2008, the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL) published four lengthy research reports[1] on projects to examine the nature and effectiveness of Adult Education English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs at several community colleges. The research was conducted by field studies, interviews, and the review of a large amount of related data. The purpose of *Findings in ESL* is to make that ESL research more readily accessible to general audiences by summarizing the major findings in a concise, easy-to-read format. Strictly speaking, the findings are based primarily on data gathered from the colleges examined and apply only to college ESL programs. However, an examination of the literature on ESL as well the experience of the CAAL researchers with programs managed by local education authorities and other organizations leads us to believe that most of them are applicable to a wide range of ESL programs. For this reason, where appropriate, some findings in this document are stated as conclusions about the ESL field as a whole.

A. PROGRAM STRUCTURE

1. Noncredit ESL

Adult Education ESL is offered by many community colleges in geographical areas where there are large populations with limited English proficiency. At most colleges, this service is called "noncredit ESL." Like adult ESL programs offered by other institutions, noncredit ESL focuses on teaching adults with limited English four core skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening (comprehension of spoken language) in English. Also like other institutions, colleges divide their adult ESL programs into different levels of instruction—usually between six and ten levels. Each successive level represents a higher degree of English proficiency—ranging from the Literacy (for students who have very limited education in any language) and Beginning levels through Intermediate and Advanced levels. Most colleges offer separate courses to students at each of these levels, and each course is usually a semester in length. Most colleges have courses at all levels of proficiency, although some give courses at the higher levels.

Noncredit ESL is almost always provided at no charge, and it is supported by federal and state adult education funding. The primary focus of the curriculum is usually on "life skills" English—the application of core skills to situations students are likely to face at work or in everyday life. Many (perhaps most) colleges do not receive enough funding to serve all the students who wish to enroll in life skills ESL classes. Some colleges have waiting lists of students that are almost as large as the numbers they serve each semester, and other colleges do not keep very extensive waiting lists because they believe the chances that students on the lists will be able to enroll in the near term are fairly small.

2. Credit ESL

Most students who reach the higher levels of life skills ESL programs still do not have the English language skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education. This is because life skills classes usually do not teach the special vocabulary, grammar, listening, or other core skills required for college studies. Nor do they teach the application of these and other core skills to tasks students must perform in

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[1] Adult ESL and the Community College (2004, 59 pp.); Passing the Torch: Strategies for Innovation in Community College ESL (2007, 153 pp.); Torchlights in ESL: Five Community College Profiles (2007, 123 pp.); Pathways and Outcomes: Tracking ESL Student Performance (2008, 212 pp.) — all available from Publications at www.caalusa.org.

college—such as writing term papers, taking class notes, and fully understanding teachers speaking at normal English speed. To prepare students with limited English for postsecondary studies, many colleges offer "Credit ESL" programs that teach college-level English and related study skills.

Colleges almost always charge tuition for credit ESL courses, but they usually do not award academic credit for them (credit that counts toward the completion of degrees or certificates)— although in some cases the higher levels of credit ESL may count toward partial or full completion of freshman English requirements. Also, at many colleges, credit ESL students may co-enroll in at least some academic credit courses that do not require a high level of English proficiency (such as courses in mathematics or music). The academic courses in which they may enroll depend on the level of credit ESL they have attained. At City College of San Francisco and some other colleges, credit ESL students may enroll in any academic courses.

Many colleges offer both credit and noncredit ESL, but some offer only one of these programs. Where both programs are offered, some limited-English students who eventually enroll in academic studies begin by enrolling in credit ESL, whereas others begin in noncredit ESL and make the transition to the credit ESL program, or directly to academic programs. At most colleges, credit ESL is the pathway to academic studies for most limited English students.

B. STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN NONCREDIT ESL

The overwhelming majority of noncredit ESL students at community colleges are at the lowest levels of English language proficiency when they first enroll in programs. Regardless of the level at which they first enroll, only a small percentage of students persist in their studies for more than one or two years, and only a small percentage improve their English abilities by more than one or two levels of proficiency.

In addition, only about 8 percent of ESL students ever make the transition to postsecondary education of any kind—whether postsecondary studies take the form of credit ESL programs, academic studies, or customized vocational programs. Those who do make transitions are usually students who have attained the Intermediate level of ESL proficiency or above. The available evidence indicates that they are about as successful as native speaking students or students who begin in credit ESL or academic studies. This suggests that noncredit ESL students can obtain the substantial economic and social benefits of postsecondary education. But the limited persistence and learning gains of the vast majority of students who begin at very low levels means that very few of them reach the levels of proficiency from which they can make transitions or substantially improve their ability to use English in everyday life or on the job.

The available evidence indicates that there are various reasons for the limited achievements of most noncredit ESL students. It appears that a great many students have very modest goals. The initial goal of most students at the lowest levels appears to be learning enough English to meet the minimal challenges of living and working in a nation where English is the dominant language, rather than to improve their English as much as possible, let alone to enroll in college or vocational programs. Many appear to believe that even small increases in their English ability will improve their employment prospects. In addition, making large gains in English ability can often take several years of study. The requirements that work and family responsibilities place on adult students limit the amount of time they can devote to ESL or other types of adult education. Finally, programs rarely do all that they might to accelerate student progress, encourage students to expand their goals, or help students cope with the personal responsibilities that may create barriers to greater learning gains.

C. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE

Community colleges have developed a wide range of strategies to increase the learning gains, persistence, and transition to credit studies of noncredit ESL students. When examined closely, most of these

strategies appear to be effective—at least to some extent. Unfortunately, few if any colleges have implemented very many of these strategies, and few if any colleges apply the strategies to all or most of their noncredit students. In a sense, therefore, the challenge for colleges is to make more extensive use of proven strategies, as well as to develop new ones.

Among the strategies that appear to be most effective are the following:

1. <u>High-Intensity Instruction</u>

The available evidence indicates that one major factor affecting how much ESL students improve their English is the total number of instructional hours they take. Most noncredit ESL programs meet for 3 to 6 hours per week over the course of a semester. ESL professionals believe that it takes between 500 to 1000 hours for students beginning at the lowest levels of proficiency (the vast majority of ESL students) to attain the higher levels of noncredit ESL and/or to be prepared for transitions to credit studies. At the rate of 3 to 6 hours per week, it would take students many years to attain a high level of proficiency— especially considering that most colleges offer courses only during two 12 to 18 week semesters. This problem is compounded by the fact that most noncredit programs have "open entry/open exit" policies. Students can enroll in a class at any time during the semester and are not required to attend all the hours offered by that class after they have enrolled. As a result, many students do not attend all of the available hours of instruction even during the semesters in which they are enrolled, and it takes them more semesters to achieve significant learning gains than if they attended all of the available hours.

Many ESL professionals believe that students become discouraged by the slow rate of progress that results from attending only a few hours of instruction per week and that they set their goals at levels they can attain in a year or two. A substantial number of students drop out and subsequently re-enroll in noncredit ESL classes. CAAL research conducted at the City College of San Francisco indicates that these "stop out" students attend class for about the same number of hours and achieve the same learning gains as students who are continuously enrolled.

To increase learning gains, a number of colleges have introduced "high-intensity" classes—classes that meet between 12 and 20 hours per week or more. Most high-intensity classes also have "managed enrollment" policies. This means that students can usually only enroll at the beginning of the semester and they are dropped from the class if they have a very large number of absences. Research on high-intensity, managed enrollment classes indicates that most students improve their English far more in a shorter period than do students in other ESL classes. Moreover, they are more likely to advance through more levels of English proficiency during the time in which they are enrolled in noncredit ESL, and they are also more likely to make transitions to credit studies.

Although students in high-intensity programs learn English at a faster rate, they will not progress through levels of ESL more quickly if classes teach only one level per semester. As a result, many high-intensity courses teach two or more levels each semester, and some promote students to higher-level classes at mid-semester. At least one well-regarded program (at Mira Costa Community College near San Diego) is structured around single-level high-intensity classes that are half a semester in length.

Colleges assume that high-intensity courses require a larger commitment of time each week than many adult students are willing to make. As a result, most colleges offer only a few courses of this kind— usually to students at the higher levels of ESL. However, at a few colleges, high-intensity instruction is offered to students at all levels, and, in some cases, a large percentage of students select this option. Moreover, some colleges that have offered a limited number of high-intensity courses are expanding their offerings in response to student demand. It appears that far more ESL students than would be expected are willing to attend for large numbers of hours per week if they can improve their English more quickly. The full potential of high-intensity, managed enrollment courses has yet to be determined. But from the

evidence available, it appears that high intensity tracks can make an important contribution to increasing learning gains and transitions in most ESL programs.

2. <u>Learning Outside the Classroom</u>

Many ESL professionals believe that at least some of the benefits of increased hours of classroom instruction can be obtained by incorporating various forms of learning outside the classroom into noncredit programs. This approach to increasing learning gains and retention takes two forms: *practicing English in authentic situations* and *using instructional technology*.

<u>Authentic projects and experiences.</u> Teachers report that many students at the lower levels of proficiency are embarrassed to try out their language skills through extensive communication in English with native speakers, and many live and work in linguistically isolated communities where this is neither necessary nor possible. As a result, many students forgo one of their most important learning opportunities: the fact that they live in a nation where English is the dominant language, and where opportunities to learn by observing and practicing are abundant.

Most "life skills" ESL programs are built around applying the elements of language learning (such as vocabulary and grammar) to simulations of reading, writing, speaking, and listening situations students will face in their everyday lives. But there are limits to how many situations can be incorporated into even the most intensive programs. Practice in authentic situations expands the range of opportunities students have to apply their English skills and leads to gains in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, comprehension, and other skills beyond the planned activities of formal instruction. In addition, testing and refining second language skills in real life situations outside the classroom adds "practice" hours to the learning process. Equally important, practice in authentic situations encourages students to become "active learners"—to take responsibility for learning how to learn English, which they will need after they leave programs—rather than to rely solely on classroom lesson plans. Many teachers believe that these benefits of practice in authentic situations help students to see the relevance of classroom instruction and lead them to persist for longer periods.

Programs use a variety of means to facilitate practice outside the classroom. Many of these take the form of class research projects on topics of interest to students (such as access to healthcare or other services in their communities). In other cases, teams of students are assigned to try out everyday activities such as shopping or ordering meals in English. At one college, students are assigned to learn about campus facilities, courses of study, and admissions processes. Several colleges report that ESL students organize sales booths at college events. In most cases, these student activities are, effectively, homework assignments, and students present oral and written reports on their experiences. Teachers believe that assigning the activities to teams of students not only builds their confidence but also helps them to learn from their peers.

It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of particular activities of this sort, because programs that incorporate them often have other special instructional features. But it appears that these programs have higher retention and learning gains than programs that do not incorporate authentic learning components, and both teachers and students believe that authentic learning is an important reason for their success.

<u>Technology.</u> An alternative way to expand instruction beyond the classroom is through the use of instructional technology. During the last decade, an enormous number of ESL computer learning systems have been produced by commercial vendors and nonprofit language learning centers (such as universities). Most of these provide interactive, self-paced instruction in the "receptive" core skills (reading and listening), although a few also use advanced technology to teach the "productive" skills (writing and speaking). Some systems are keyed to established levels of English proficiency or lesson plans in particular textbooks, whereas others use "computer adaptive" software that allows students to

determine their level of skills. The available systems are based on somewhat different approaches to language learning, and they use a wide array of learning sequences, graphic presentations, and devices for student interaction (such as keyboards, touch screens, and writing pads). Although the instructional content of most systems is based on life skills applications of English, some take a more academic approach to teaching skills such as grammar.

Instructional technology of these kinds has the obvious advantage that they help to overcome the time constraints of classroom instruction. Students can improve their English skills at times that are convenient to them and they can work on particular programs for as long as they wish, rather than only during class hours. If they wish, students can spend far more hours learning by instructional technology that they do in the classroom. Moreover, as noted below, students learn particular skills at different rates and they have different learning styles. Self-paced instructional technology can help students move ahead at the rate most suited to each of them, and the variety of systems accommodates at least some differences in learning styles. In addition, an increasing number of programs teach keyboarding and other elementary computer functions, both to facilitate the use of instructional technology and as a valuable skill in its own right. And some programs require students to use college intranet systems to submit homework or learn about class assignments. Many teachers believe that learning how to use computers can motivate students to enroll and persist in ESL classes.

For all of these reasons, most college ESL programs have invested in instructional technology of some kind. Usually, instructional systems are housed in learning laboratories to which students have access for a large number of hours per day. There appears to be limited experience with making most computer learning systems available online. Because of the diversity of instructional systems, programs and teachers appear to have difficulty in determining which to purchase and the best use of different systems. As a result, programs differ greatly in the systems they make available, although most programs appear to have identified a few systems to which they most commonly refer students.

Most programs view instructional technology as a supplement to classroom instruction, rather than a substitute for it. Teachers report that some students make extensive use of learning laboratories, but most rarely use them unless required. As a result, some programs incorporate the use of instructional technology into their curricula—either by assigning homework that requires the use of computer systems or by scheduling class sessions that meet in learning laboratories. Most teachers appear to believe that the distinctive features of instructional technology (such as self-paced instruction and the lack of time constraints) help to accelerate learning. However, there has been remarkably little independent research to show the extent or conditions under which this occurs.

Some programs also use information technology for program management. Program websites include information such as class schedules, curricula, program policies, and other resources. For example, teachers may report attendance and student assessments online, or ask for advice from program managers or their peers. In addition, some websites provide access to teacher training resources. Compared to paper-based systems, these managerial uses of technology increase efficiency, but they require maintenance, and some teachers make more extensive use of them than others do.

3. Dealing with Diversity

Students placed at the same levels in ESL classes often learn different core skills at different rates. For example, some students may learn speaking or listening skills more quickly than reading or writing skills. Also students often "plateau" in the rate at which they learn and subsequently sprint ahead. ESL professionals believe that these and other differences in learning patterns are due to a variety of individual differences—such as the skills students bring to the program, their learning styles, their home and work environment, their personal goals, and their level of prior education. This last factor is particularly important. Most ESL professionals believe that students with higher levels of education (high school

or college graduates) in their native languages learn English faster and are more likely to persist and make transitions to postsecondary education than are students who have limited educational backgrounds (those with only a few years of formal schooling).

Most ESL classes include students who progress at different rates due to these and other individual differences. It is a major challenge for teachers to respond to learning differences. More importantly, students will not advance as rapidly as they might unless those differences are addressed. Some colleges have adopted program designs that help to alleviate at least some of these problems.

Some high-intensity programs take advantage of the additional classroom hours they provide by offering separate courses in the different core ESL skills. Students who advance more rapidly in one skill are placed in a more advanced class for that skill, and less advanced classes for other skills. As a variant on this model, City College of San Francisco offers supplemental classes in each core skill. For example, students who are having difficulty with reading can enroll in a supplemental reading class at the same time they are enrolled in classes that teach all four skills. (More than 30 percent of students take advantage of this option). Finally, many colleges offer supplemental tutoring to students who are lagging behind in particular skills or assign homework in the learning laboratory or elsewhere to strengthen that skill. All of these approaches appear to increase learning gains, persistence, and transitions significantly.

The primary means by which programs address differences in educational levels is to place students with very low levels of prior education in special Literacy-level courses that focus primarily on improving basic reading and writing skills. Although a significant percentage of Literacy-level students complete these courses, it is not clear how well they compensate for limited prior education. The effectiveness of Literacy-level courses is hard to determine, in part because they often also contain students with very limited prior English ability (regardless of their education levels), and students whose native language poses special problems to learning English (for example, those who learned to read and write in languages that do not use the English alphabet). However, longitudinal research at City College of San Francisco indicates that students initially enrolled at the Literacy level progress through more levels, on average, than those beginning at any other level. This suggests that Literacy-level classes are at least partially successful in overcoming differences in prior education.

In communities where the native language of many ESL students is Spanish, a growing number of programs have introduced Spanish language literacy classes and preparation for the Spanish GED examination (which is a literal translation of the English GED examination). The purpose of these courses is to help Spanish speakers with limited prior education improve their basic skills before they begin to study English. This approach is based on the belief that these students will be more successful in ESL classes if they improve their literacy levels in their native language, rather than by improving them through enrollment in Literacy-level classes taught in English. In addition, program administrators and faculty believe that the Spanish GED is a valuable credential in its own right. Advocates of Spanish literacy and GED believe that students can substantially increase their basic skills in a fairly short period, and that this is an efficient way to overcome the barriers to success in ESL created by limited prior education. It appears that most colleges offer only a small number of Spanish literacy or GED classes, although one college (El Paso Community College in Texas) reports that this is the dominant form of noncredit instruction for students with limited English. Unfortunately, there has been very little systematic research on the effectiveness of this approach to overcoming the problems posed by limited prior education in ESL programs.

4. Increasing Transitions

The available evidence indicates that any of the strategies to increase learning gains mentioned above also increase transition rates. The more likely students are to reach the Intermediate or Advanced levels of

ESL, and to do so quickly, the more likely they are to make transitions to credit ESL, academic programs, or both. In addition, some colleges have introduced special program components that increase transitions.

Bridge courses. A growing number of programs have developed courses that help students bridge the gap between the life skills ESL usually taught at the noncredit level and the requirements for college-level English. These are usually fairly intensive programs that teach many credit ESL skills at the noncredit level and also provide students with various forms of precollegiate services—such as help in developing study skills; understanding the scheduling, attendance, and grading systems of credit courses; and planning academic programs. In some cases, these courses also include extensive guidance, counseling, and coaching to help students overcome personal barriers to success in college. Although the specific design of these bridge courses differs greatly among colleges, most report very high transition rates. These positive outcomes may be influenced to some extent by the fact that bridge courses are usually offered only to students with high levels of life skills English proficiency—students who would be likely to make transitions whether or not they received special assistance. The available evidence indicates, however, that students enrolled in bridge courses are significantly more likely to make transitions than are other students with the same level of proficiency. Unfortunately, colleges usually offer only a limited number of bridge courses, in part because their cost per student is much greater than the cost of most other noncredit ESL courses.

Vocational ESL programs. Most students do not persist in noncredit ESL programs long enough to reach the levels of proficiency required for transitions to academic studies. Although many students enroll in ESL programs because they hope to improve their economic prospects, it appears that they are often unable or unwilling to devote years of study to preparing for and completing academic programs that would greatly increase their earnings. To serve these students, a large number of colleges have developed an alternative form of further education that can have substantial economic benefits: Vocational ESL (VESL) programs. These programs integrate English language learning with training for a particular occupation. Probably the most common occupations for which VESL programs prepare students are entry-level positions in the healthcare field—particularly jobs as certified nursing assistants. But colleges also offer VESL programs in various areas of the construction, maintenance, customer service, and other fields.

The defining characteristic of VESL courses is that students study English and other basic skills (such as math) at the same time they receive vocational instruction. In addition, the language components of VESL programs are customized to focus primarily on the specific English language skills needed to succeed in the occupation for which they are studying. Students learn the vocabulary, grammar, and other English language skills they will need on the job and practice by reading job-related materials (such as instructions or manuals), and writing in job-related formats (such as filling out specialized forms). And they improve their speaking and listening by practicing the types of dialogues they are likely to encounter at work.

VESL programs are usually a partnership between ESL teachers and vocational instructors, and they alternate between instruction in English skills and the application of those skills in different ways. For example, students may be introduced to the vocabulary they need for a particular task by an ESL teacher, practice by performing the task in a vocational class, and then review any problems they encounter with either the ESL or vocational teacher.

Students can enter and succeed in VESL classes at a lower level of life skills English proficiency than is required for entry into credit ESL or academic programs. Their English skills improve substantially, although the major focus of VESL programs is on skills and their applications specific to a particular vocation. As a result, programs report that VESL graduates sometimes subsequently enroll in life skills or credit ESL courses to expand their proficiency in other applications of English.

Most VESL programs do not enroll a very large number of students—in part because they are fairly expensive to operate. They are almost always fairly intensive noncredit programs, and most are a year or less in length. Some charge tuition or fees to partly offset their cost. By most measures, well-designed VESL programs are highly successful. They usually have high rates of student retention and completion, and in fields were public or industrial certifications are required, they result in high rates of students meeting certification criteria. Because VESL programs usually prepare students for entry-level positions, however, they may not result immediately in very great income gains. Students often use VESL programs as the first step to new careers, and some colleges are adopting "career ladder" programs that help students who take that first step to receive further VESL for higher-level jobs.

D. UNMET NEEDS

Although colleges and other ESL providers have devised a wide range of strategies that improve the performance of noncredit students, there are a number of issues affecting student performance that they rarely address in an adequate way. Four of these appear to be especially significant.

1. Student Services

Most ESL professionals believe a major barrier to progress in noncredit ESL is the fact that the students are adults and have the responsibilities of adult life—including families and jobs. In addition, most are low-income adults, which means that they often face difficulties with such problems as lack of transportation, poor housing, unemployment, and lack of access to public services. ESL professionals believe that these responsibilities and difficulties are a major reason why many students do not attend ESL classes on a regular basis or persist in programs for very long.

Few programs have the resources to help students overcome such barriers to success. Some colleges have on-site daycare programs, and some teachers and counselors help students solve personal problems—often by referring them to community agencies that can provide assistance. But few, if any, colleges provide extensive or systematic programs that address these barriers. Strictly speaking, the personal problems adult students face are not educational problems, but rather barriers to educational access. As a result, they may seem to fall outside the mission of colleges. Moreover, college funding systems rarely provide financial support for overcoming these barriers. But unless colleges or some other agencies find more effective means of assisting adult students with personal barriers, the persistence and progress of many students in both ESL and other forms of adult education will be severely limited.

A related problem is that colleges rarely have the resources to guide students through adult ESL programs once they are enrolled. Because virtually all noncredit ESL students are immigrants and many have low levels of prior education and/or have been out of school for some time, they often need help in understanding the routines and expectations of the American educational system. They also often need help in understanding the sequence of instruction in ESL programs and the options available to them. Equally important, many noncredit students are uncertain about their goals in ESL. Because of the personal barriers they face, many set their goals very low. For example, most immigrants come from countries where postsecondary education or specialized vocational training is only available to the privileged few. Often, they consider using ESL as a pathway to further education to be an unrealistic goal.

ESL programs rarely provide extensive guidance, counseling, and coaching services that can help students navigate the instructional process, encourage them to establish more ambitious goals, and show them how those goals can realistically be achieved if they persist in their studies. CAAL's research indicates that even minimal guidance and counseling services of these kinds can increase persistence, retention, and transitions. More extensive efforts would probably have even greater effects. But most college guidance and counseling offices are understaffed, and many lack staff members with special expertise in the problems that face ESL students.

2. Faculty

A large part of the responsibility for the success of ESL students falls upon individual faculty members. Although many programs have established syllabi and model lesson plans for various types of instruction, it is up to the teacher to translate these guidelines into effective instruction. To provide even standard life skills ESL instruction, teachers must be highly skilled in the principles of language learning. The requirements of strategies to improve student performance—high intensity programs, authentic instruction, dealing with diversity, and special transition programs—require an even higher level of skill.

The ESL field has the advantage of decades of research on the principles and methods of language learning. Based on this research and practical experience, leaders of the field are fairly confident about the knowledge and skills effective ESL teachers should have. They are also confident that developing the necessary professional background requires extensive specialized education. A master's degree in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), Applied Linguistics, or some related field and specialized certificates in TESOL along with practical experience are usually regarded as the "gold standards" for teacher qualifications. In addition, leaders of the field believe that even the most highly skilled teachers need extensive continuing professional development to keep up with the state of the art and become fully proficient in new approaches—such as the applications of instructional technology.

Unfortunately, very few ESL teachers have the specialized professional background and experience required to perform their essential functions at the highest levels of proficiency. And very few programs offer professional development opportunities that are very extensive. At most, programs usually offer a few days or weeks of preservice training for new teachers, and even less in-service training per year. For the most part, therefore, individual teachers must develop their professional skills on their own time and with their own resources. Regrettably, there is little incentive for them to do so. In most states, there are few if any requirements for the professional training that adult ESL teachers must have. In most cases, a K-12 teaching certificate and possibly some short-term training in ESL are all that is required.

In addition, the vast majority of ESL teachers are part-time adjunct faculty members. Invariably, they are paid far less than full-time faculty members, and they rarely receive benefits or have employment security. Most ESL teachers are highly dedicated people and would very much like to obtain higher levels of specialized training that would help them do their jobs better, But many are reluctant to make the large personal investments required to do so when almost the only opportunities available to them are low-paying positions.

As a result, taken as a whole, much of the ESL teaching force lacks the professional preparation that leaders of the field and many individual teachers believe is required to provide the highest quality instruction. In contrast, most colleges establish very high professional standards for full-time ESL instructors and provide them with salaries, benefits, and professional development opportunities on a par with other college faculty.

The heavy reliance of ESL programs on part-time instructors also creates other problems. Usually, adjunct faculty are paid on the basis of classroom instructional hours. As a result, they often are not available after class to help students with special learning problems. Often, they are also unable to meet student needs for individualized advice and counseling on how to navigate the ESL program and deal with personal issues. In addition, they seldom participate in curriculum development, program planning, and other functions essential for the management of any instructional program. In most programs, these and other responsibilities fall primarily on a small number of full-time faculty members, who themselves often carry heavy teaching loads.

Some programs have adopted strategies to improve faculty qualifications. For example, at City College of San Francisco half the ESL faculty have full-time appointments. City College has also implemented a

"reflective teaching" program in which teachers help each other solve instructional problems. The College of Lake County in Illinois now requires that new adjunct faculty must have special certifications in TESOL or must be working toward them. It has established a TESOL certification program, and it offers tuition reimbursement as well as reduced teaching loads to adjunct faculty members who participate in this or other approved professional training programs. Kapi'olani Community College in Hawaii has developed a certification program to support its offerings in credit ESL. Yakima Valley Community College in Washington state has established a program of peer mentoring in which full-time faculty supervise and help improve the skills of adjuncts. But substantial initiatives of these or other kinds to systematically upgrade teacher quality appear to be fairly rare. Unless more colleges find a way to address this problem, instructional quality will not be as high as leaders of the ESL field believe it should be.

3. Strategic Planning

Although many ESL programs have adopted strategies to improve student performance, change in most programs often comes about too slowly and incrementally. Program directors and faculty usually devise or learn of new approaches and try them out one at a time. Few programs engage in comprehensive strategic planning to determine their effectiveness in terms of learning gains, persistence, transitions, or other metrics of performance and to make adjustments in individual components or overall program design. This is one reason why many programs have adopted only *some* program improvement strategies, though most have not adopted very many.

The lack of strategic planning in most ESL programs appears to be largely due to the fact that they ordinarily have very small managerial staffs and budgets. Usually no one has the full-time responsibility of serving as program manager—most program managers also teach, and their noninstructional time is consumed with routine administrative tasks. Also the authority as well as budgets available to program managers—or to the deans or department chairmen to whom they report—is not sufficient to carry out comprehensive strategic planning, even with the help of faculty committees.

Although most programs receive federal and state funds for "program improvement," these resources are largely consumed by the cost of routine reporting requirements, teacher training, and other standard administrative responsibilities. In short, extensive strategic planning is not mandated, expected, or supported in most ESL programs.

To compound this problem, most programs do not have access to the data required to adequately assess their strengths and weaknesses, or even their strategies for improvement. Most data on student performance is reported on an annual basis, because both financial support and educational institutions operate on annual cycles. As a result, programs have a limited understanding of their effectiveness. For example, they may know how many students advance a level, drop out, or make transitions in a given year. But because it often takes students many years to make significant learning gains, and many who drop out subsequently return, annual data gives an inadequate picture of any program's impact. Moreover, student performance data of any kind is most useful if analyzed in terms of student characteristics—such as level of first enrollment, attendance records, prior education, age, ethnicity, and employment status. Knowing more about these factors makes it possible to determine which students are most successful, and which students would be best served by different strategies than those in use.

The data required for strategic planning and thorough program evaluation can only be generated by longitudinal analysis of student performance and by student record systems that gather as much information as possible about student characteristics that can affect performance. But few ESL programs conduct longitudinal research or archive data on individual students that sheds light on all the major characteristics that might affect performance.

Many programs and the colleges or other institutions that administer them seem to believe that longitudinal research would be prohibitively difficult or expensive to conduct. But CAAL's experience with a number of colleges indicate that these concerns are unfounded. At most colleges, longitudinal research that generates significant findings for program evaluation and planning can be conducted using existing student records, and even more revealing research can be conducted if students simply ask students for more information when they first enroll.

The key to success is forging a partnership between the ESL program and the college's institutional research office to define what longitudinal data will be useful and how it can best be presented. After these parameters have been established, the cost of longitudinal research is fairly modest. Apparently, the primary reason that so little research of this type is conducted is that it is neither requested by ESL programs nor required by college management. Because of the importance of longitudinal research for program evaluation and planning, it should be a routine function at any institution that manages ESL programs.

4. Assessment

A related barrier to adopting strategies for program improvement is the lack of adequate cost-effective standardized tests for assessing student learning gains. Commercial firms and nonprofit organizations have developed at least half a dozen testing systems to measure English language proficiency, and military language-learning schools have developed methods of their own. But, with one exception, none of these systems measure all four of the core skills taught by ESL programs (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Most measure the receptive skills (reading and listening), but not the productive skills (writing and speaking). The exception is the combination of the BEST and BEST Plus assessments developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics. Many programs report, however, that these and other tests of productive skills require too much staff time to be cost-effective because they require scoring of each student's responses by trained evaluators.

The federal government's National Reporting System for Adult Education requires all programs that receive federal adult education funding to report student learning gains (in terms of how many levels students advance) on an annual basis using the available standardized tests. As a result, most programs administer these tests to their students. But a great many programs believe that the tests do not provide an accurate measure of student learning, in part because they do not measure all of the skills taught. They also believe that the standardized tests fail to take account of curricular differences among programs— such as the sequence in which skills are taught or the differing contexts of instruction (such as the different emphases programs place on use of authentic materials or preparation for academic studies).

ESL program providers believe that assessing student progress is essential to place students in appropriate levels of instruction, guide teachers, and determine when students should be advanced to higher levels. To work around what they consider to be the shortcomings of standardized tests, many have developed their own assessment systems to perform these essential functions. In many cases, these systems are adapted from state or national model standards for the skills ESL students should have at different levels. Programs also rely heavily on teacher evaluations to determine student learning gains and needs.

There is no way to know if the assessment systems developed by ESL programs are adequate, precisely because there is no adequate standardized assessment system to which they can be compared. Likewise, there is no satisfactory way for programs to benchmark their overall performance against that of other programs. That is, they have no good way to know if their approach to instruction has better results than that of comparable programs. Hence, they have no good way to spot difficulties or opportunities to learn from their peers. The lack of adequate standardized assessment systems balkanizes ESL programs in a great many ways and reduces meaningful accountability.

In short, a great many ESL program providers do not believe that the available standardized tests, which serve as measures of accountability to the federal and state governments from which they receive funds, accurately measure what they teach or what their students learn. Moreover, all instructional systems require certain "tools of the trade" to function at their best. One important tool the ESL field needs is a more comprehensive and cost-effective standardized assessment system that accommodates programmatic differences.

E. BARRIERS AND IMPERATIVES

If there are viable strategies for improving the performance of ESL programs, why do so few programs adopt them on a large scale? And if there are unmet needs in this field, why have they not been addressed? There are many obstacles to progress on both of these fronts, and each of them carries an imperative for government, ESL providers, or both. Those imperatives will have to be met to create an ESL system that serves both students and the nation in the best way possible. Three of the major barriers that emerged from CAAL's research — the need for additional funding, clarification of program goals, and a system of peer learning among programs are discussed below. (A fourth barrier, the need for additional research, is discussed in Section F on p. 16.)

1. <u>Funding</u>

Undoubtedly, the greatest barrier to progress in ESL service is a shortage of funding. It is not possible to determine exactly how much ESL programs spend on a per-student basis each year—in part because programs have different levels of funding, and in part because some students remain in programs (and hence consume program resources) for longer periods than others. Most estimates place the average per student expenditure in free noncredit ESL classes at about $700 to $800 per year. Whatever the exact figure, it is clear that ESL programs are not wasteful. They stretch the funding available to them as far as they can. That is why they rely so heavily on inadequately paid adjunct faculty and their administrative structures are so lean. And it is why many ESL programs have long waiting lists. The available funds are simply not enough to meet the demand for the types of services they presently provide.

Equally important, the funds available to ESL programs are not adequate to enable them to adopt strategies for improving student performance or to overcome barriers to progress on a large scale. Virtually every strategy for program improvement substantially increases the cost per student. High-intensity instruction and authentic learning strategies require more instructional time, and hence greater instructional cost. Integrating technology into the curriculum may reduce costs to some extent, but it requires a substantial up-front investment, and, to date, programs primarily use technology as an instructional supplement. As a result, instructional technology as used probably adds to the net cost of ESL programs. Dealing with diversity by offering separate courses or tracks not only requires a greater investment in curriculum development and student placement, but if the separate courses and tracks supplement mainstream instruction (as they often do), this strategy increases hours of instruction and, thus, instructional costs.

Bridge courses to increase transitions and VESL programs add entirely new layers to traditional programs that entail additional costs. High-quality VESL programs are especially expensive because they usually require at least two teachers rather than one and because they are usually of high intensity. Some cost several thousand dollars per student. Likewise, enhancing student services and creating the capacity for strategic planning would require new staff members, and bringing adjunct faculty salaries to parity with those of full-time teachers could double total instructional costs. Developing improved standardized assessment systems is beyond the capacity of any one program, but would certainly cost millions of dollars.

In short, the primary reason that so few ESL programs make large enough investments in program improvement, and that student outcomes in ESL are often disappointing, is that programs simply cannot afford to make these investments. The choice this presents to the providers is stark. Either they can stretch their resources as far as possible to serve more of the students on waiting lists, or they can reduce the numbers served and invest more of their limited funds in strategies to improve learning gains, retention, transitions, and other student outcomes. Most programs are caught on the horns of this dilemma and try to do a little bit of both.

Public and private sector funding must be greatly increased, both in total and on a per-student basis. That is the imperative that flows from these financial realities. It is estimated that funding for noncredit programs from public sources now totals about $800 million, serving about 1.1 million ESL students nationwide.[2] It will require a doubling or tripling of present expenditures to eliminate waiting lists and provide services that incorporate strategies to increase student performance and overcome barriers to progress. Unless and until government at all levels and the private sector provide this additional funding, the nation's need for ESL service will remain underserved.

Charging fees might be an option. Absent increased public funding, colleges may wish to consider charging fees for noncredit ESL classes. Bunker Hill Community College in Massachusetts has a fee-based program that charges half the rate of credit tuition. It also has a free noncredit ESL program. Enrollment in the fee-based program is far larger than in the free program, although the free program has a long waiting list. At least some ESL professionals believe that charging at least nominal fees might increase persistence in noncredit classes, because students would feel that they have a financial interest in attending the classes for which they have paid.

2. Goals

Even with greater funding, ESL programs will have a hard time charting a course toward increasing student performance unless and until they more clearly define what they believe the goals of noncredit ESL should be. Because the primary purpose of ESL programs is to increase English language proficiency, there is a sense in which ESL as presently offered is an open-ended enterprise. Many immigrants could spend a lifetime studying English and never achieve the fluency of native speakers. In short there is no obvious answer to the question, "How much improvement in English is enough?"

There is ambiguity about the answer to this question, both within most programs and within the ESL field as a whole. On the one hand, many community college programs provide a sequence of instruction that ranges from Literacy classes to credit ESL classes that prepare students for academic studies. It might be expected that the goal of programs would be for as many students to progress as far along this sequence as possible. In practice, this is not always the case. Because noncredit ESL primarily teaches life skills one level at a time, many ESL teachers and administrators are inclined to believe that any learning gains that improve the ability of students to function on the job and in other aspects of their lives are successful outcomes. This is often seen as a customer-driven approach to establishing program goals: the purpose of ESL instruction is to help individual students advance as far as they want to advance in English proficiency—or at least as far as their personal circumstances allow them to advance.

An alternative version of this view is that learning English is an act of personal empowerment for students. Consequently, they should play a large role in determining not only how much English is

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[2] See Passing the Torch: Strategies for Innovation in Community College ESL, JoAnn Crandall and Forrest P. Chisman, February 2007, available at www.caalusa.org. For comparable figures, also see Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce, National Commission on Adult Literacy, Appendices 6 and 7, June 2008, available from www.nationalcommissiononadultliteracy.org, or www.caalusa.org.

"enough" but also what the focus of ESL programs should be—whether that focus should be on personal enrichment, economic and job benefits, or social change.

All versions of the view that the goal of ESL programs should be keyed to student goals have consequences for program design. Because most students begin at very low levels of English proficiency and limited personal goals, it will, in the best of circumstances, take them years before they can advance very far in the ESL sequence, and even longer before they can make transitions to credit studies.

Programs that accept student goals as program goals, therefore, often do not *expect* very many students to advance very far or to make transitions. This is one of the reasons why they do not place more emphasis on strategies to accelerate learning gains or increase transitions.

At least some ESL professionals and programs take a different view of what their goals should be. Looking outside the world of language learning, they point out that most jobs that pay a family-supporting wage in the United States require a fairly high level of English language proficiency as well as some postsecondary education and/or specialized vocational training. They also point out that at least some ESL students can and do advance far enough in the noncredit sequence to make transitions to credit ESL and academic studies. In fact, CAAL research on the City College of San Francisco's ESL program indicates that students who begin at the lowest levels of proficiency are more likely to make transitions than are those who begin at higher levels. If some students can accomplish this, others should be able to do so as well.

Some ESL professionals who focus on the economic effects of their programs believe they would be doing both ESL students and the national economy (which needs more highly educated workers) a disservice if they adopted the fairly modest goals many students bring to their programs. They believe increasingly that a major goal of noncredit ESL should be to help as many students as possible attain high levels of English proficiency and make transitions to postsecondary education.

Like the student-centered view of program goals, this more economically driven view has implications for program design. It appears students can usually make successful transitions to VESL programs and to credit ESL after they have attained the Low Intermediate or High Intermediate level of life skills ESL. And the limited longitudinal research available indicates that a substantial percentage of students who attain these levels do, in fact make transitions. As a result, the economically driven view suggests that programs should adopt whatever strategies are necessary to help as many students as possible achieve these threshold levels of proficiency and make transitions to academic or vocational studies. For some ESL professionals this may imply that, if there is a shortage of resources, priority should be given to providing fewer students with a higher level of service.

Importantly, this view of ESL goals suggests that programs should make much greater efforts to help students expand their personal goals and to removing the individual barriers that may stand in their way. For example, they should continually reinforce the message that postsecondary education and its benefits are within the reach of most ESL students, if they are willing and able to persist long enough to attain it. And they should build on the observations of many teachers that the more ESL students achieve, the more ambitious their goals become. Overall, programs should nurture a culture of success that expects faculty and students to strive for the largest possible learning gains, even though all will not achieve this goal.

These differing views of the goals of ESL programs lead to clear imperatives. Too many programs have not confronted or resolved the issue of what their goals should be in these terms. They must do so if they are to improve the service they provide because differing goals imply differing priorities for program improvement. Equally important, if individual funders or the ESL field as a whole are to make a convincing case to federal and state governments that they should receive more funding, they will have to specify what that additional funding will buy. Ultimately, this requires clarifying their goals and

specifying the outcomes related to those goals to which they believe they should be held accountable. Regardless of their goals, all ESL programs require additional funding. But the amount of funding required and the purposes to which it should be put will differ depending on the nature of their goals.

Finally, it is imperative that federal and state funders should decide how to respond to differences in program goals. A case can be made that there is a national interest in establishing the highest possible level of achievement for ESL students as the goal programs should adopt if they are to receive public funding. The national interest resides in the needs for a more highly trained workforce and for greater social cohesion. Because immigrants with limited English ability comprise a large and growing portion of our workforce and population, neither need can be satisfied without more substantial student outcomes in ESL programs. Likewise a case can be made that reasonable people can differ about the goals of ESL, and that funding should be calibrated to the particular financial needs of local programs. To make responsible new investments in ESL, it is imperative for federal and state governments to determine how they should resolve this issue.

3. **Peer Learning**

To a remarkable extent, ESL programs are intellectually isolated from each other. Although ESL professionals share common understandings of language learning theory and pedagogy, most have very little understanding of the program structures or strategies for improvement adopted by other programs, even in their own vicinity—let alone nationwide. Teachers and program managers attend national and state conferences or workshops and they read occasional reports (such as those produced by CAAL) to pick up "tips" on approaches their peers have adopted that might be useful to them. But there are severe limits to how many approaches they can be exposed to and how well they can come to understand them by these means. A few consultants specialize in ESL program improvement, but most programs lack the resources and/or staff time to make use of their services. Several organizations—such as the Center for Applied Linguistics and the National College Transition Network—provide technical assistance on particular types of program improvement, but no organization provides a comprehensive menu of improvement strategies.

In short, there is no very effective method for peer learning about program improvement in the ESL field. This seemingly simple problem is in fact a serious barrier to progress. Like most teachers, ESL professionals learn best by seeing concrete examples of how new approaches are implemented in programs such as theirs and through dialogues with their peers who have implemented them. If they do not do this, they will be less likely to discover or adopt them.

The lack of a very robust peer learning system is a particularly great problem because the ESL field is a hive of innovation. Working largely in isolation, a great many programs have adopted distinctive approaches to improving student performance that others might find beneficial. In some cases, they have adopted variants of the same approach (such as high-intensity instruction) and could find ideas about possible ways to refine their work. In other cases, truly unique approaches that seem to have promising outcomes remain largely unknown. There are elements of both "reinventing the wheel" and missed opportunities for progress in the existing peer learning system. The net result is that progress in program improvement is much slower than it needs to be.

It is imperative for the ESL field to develop a more effective peer learning system. This need not be a vastly expensive undertaking. It could take the form of a clearinghouse of strategies for program improvement and the research that indicates their effectiveness, combined with support for teachers and administrators with allied interests to meet and demonstrate their ideas. Participating programs should probably be required to make a commitment to grant their staff members released time to engage in peer learning activities. A peer learning program of this kind could be housed in an existing center of expertise on ESL—such as a professional organization, research center, or university. Funding could come from

either public or private sources. However it is structured, an improved peer learning system is an imperative for building the intellectual capital of ESL professionals. It is a small key that would open many doors.

F. RESEARCH PRIORITIES

Significant progress in the ESL field would undoubtedly come from disseminating the lessons programs have learned about how to improve the performance of ESL programs and providing more adequate funding to apply those lessons. But a large number of important issues related to improving student performance are not understood very well by anyone in the field and they can only be resolved by systematic formal research. Regrettably, there are few sources of funding for research in this field, and the total amount they make available each year is small. It is imperative for both public and private sources to increase the level of research funding and to target it on issues that are central to improving the quality of ESL service. Some of those issues are discussed below.

1. <u>Measuring the Need for Service</u>

Surprisingly, it is not known exactly how many adults in the United States have limited proficiency in English, what their level of proficiency is, and how many would benefit from ESL programs. Virtually the only nationwide data comes from a question in the decennial U.S. Census that asks people living in households where a language other than English is spoken to indicate whether they speak English "not at all, not very well, well, or very well." Obviously, these self-reports are imprecise, and the question asks only about speaking English (thereby neglecting reading, writing, and listening skills). Moreover, there appears to be little or no research on how the self-response categories used by the Census correlate with the levels of English proficiency that ESL programs are designed to teach. The ESL field as a whole requires better information about the need and possible demand for service if it is to design a national system large enough to serve the population of adults with limited English proficiency, targeted on a realistic assessment of the service they require. Without this information, it is hard to make the case for how much additional ESL funding is required or how it should be used. Local ESL programs also need better information on need and demand for service in their communities.

Baseline data on limited English proficiency in the United States could be met if the Census would test a sample of respondents in households where a language other than English is spoken with the Best and Best Plus examinations or some other comprehensive standardized assessment of all English language skills.

2. <u>Differences in Prior Education</u>

There is evidence that students with limited prior education in their native countries (five to six years of formal schooling or less) persist for longer in ESL classes than students who completed high school or some postsecondary education, but it appears that students with limited education do not advance as far or as fast in learning English as do more highly educated adults. The evidence on both of these points is fragmentary, however, and more systematic longitudinal research is required to determine the nature and extent of this problem.

More importantly, there is a great need for research and development programs to determine the effectiveness of existing methods of serving students with limited prior education and how they might be improved. These students do double the work of more highly educated ESL students, because they must learn basic literacy and English language skills at the same time. We know far too little about which of the various teaching strategies used in Literacy level classes best meet their needs and what improvements should be made to improve their performance. We also know far too little about the effectiveness of literacy classes in their native language (such as Spanish literacy programs), either by themselves or in

combination with ESL classes. This area of research should have high priority because immigration researchers indicate that an increasing percentage of new immigrants have very limited prior education.

3. Learning and Earning Beyond ESL

Although there is useful research on how much students improve their English proficiency while they are enrolled in ESL classes, there is little or none on how much they improve their proficiency after they are no longer enrolled. This is an important topic, because the learning gains of most ESL students are fairly modest. It is possible, however, that attending ESL classes provides them with a foundation for improving their English through interactions at work and in their communities that they might not otherwise have. If so, this may have implications for ESL program designs. Programs should possibly focus more on helping students understand how they can improve their English by means other than formal classes—to become "independent learners."

Professor Stephen Reder of Portland State University has just completed an excellent longitudinal study of the post-program learning of native English speakers enrolled in Adult Basic Education and GED courses. The study shows that many of these students continue to improve their literacy skills in an interesting variety of ways, and that some return to adult education classes after very long absences.[3] Similar research on the post-program learning of ESL students should be a priority.

A related area of post-program research should focus on the economic benefits of ESL instruction. According to teachers, many students enroll in ESL programs because they believe that improving their English will help them to gain and retain higher-paying jobs and open up opportunities for advancement in either their existing field of work or new careers. Likewise, a common justification for public investments in ESL is that it will help to build a higher-skilled and higher-wage workforce. But there has been remarkably little research on the economic benefits of ESL instruction, either in the short term or the long term.

Do students who advance in ESL classes earn more than comparable immigrants? Are they more likely, for example, to advance from frontline positions to supervisory positions, and from there to positions in management? Do VESL students move up career ladders? Importantly, if there are economic benefits, what are the threshold levels of learning gains or attainment of English proficiency levels that allow students to realize them, and how does this differ among students with various personal characteristics (such as different levels of prior education)? Some teachers believe that one reason students do not persist in programs for longer periods is that they believe they have learned enough by advancing one or two levels of ESL to get better jobs. Is this the case?

Research on the economic benefits of ESL is essential to help programs calibrate their goals. If at least some students can obtain significant benefits from fairly modest learning gains, programs may wish to focus their efforts on helping students achieve threshold levels of English proficiency. If students are wrong that they can improve their earnings very much, or on a lasting basis, without large increases in English proficiency, programs should have this evidence to help convince them to persist longer in ESL classes. Labor market researchers know how to calculate the benefits of various forms of education using unemployment insurance earnings files and other data. Their expertise should be put to work in the ESL field.

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[3] Reder, Stephen, "The Development of Literacy in Adult Life," in S. Reder and J. Bynner (eds.), *Tracking Adult Literacy and Numeracy: Findings from Longitudinal Research*, pp. 59-84, New York and London: Routledge, (2008, in press).

4. <u>Technology</u>

Although most ESL programs make some use of instructional technology, the large number of systems available to teachers and programs is bewildering. Too often programs select the systems they use primarily on the basis of information provided by commercial vendors. There is a great need for impartial research and dissemination of information about the relative strengths and weaknesses of different systems, and how each can best be used. Equally important, there a great need for foundation research on how the use of instructional technology can be more effective. As noted above, most teachers see technology as a supplement to classroom instruction. But there is too little research on how much student performance improves if technology is used in various supplemental ways.

Most importantly, research and demonstration programs are needed to determine whether and how instructional technology can substitute for classroom time. Can students learn better and faster, and are they more likely to persist in ESL programs, if they spend more time in self-paced learning labs that are open most hours of the day and less time in classes that meet at times inconvenient for their schedules? Because more than three-quarters of American household have access to the Internet, an increasing number of ESL professionals and experts are interested in the use of technology for instruction, and in whether or how online ESL instruction can supplement or substitute for all or some classroom time. The ESL field has limited experience with substituting technology for classroom instruction in any way, and most of that experience has not been carefully evaluated. Because increased use of technology could possibly both improve student performance and dramatically reduce the cost per student of ESL programs, there is an urgent need for programs of research, development, and evaluation in technology applications of this kind.

5. <u>The Role of Community-Based Organizations</u>

Most ESL professionals believe that community-based organizations (CBOs) perform an important role in providing and supporting ESL service. But there appears to be a shortage of systematic research on the full dimensions of what that role is or might be, and in particular how it is or might be articulated with the roles of other providers. In most communities with substantial immigrant populations, immigrants receive a wide range of services from comprehensive social service agencies (such as YMCAs), faith-based organizations (such as Catholic Social Services), local affinity groups, libraries, and other CBOs, both large and small. Some of these organizations provide ESL instruction, but it the nature of this instruction appears to differ greatly. For example, some CBOs appear to specialize in serving low-level learners or preparing immigrants for citizenship tests, while others offer comprehensive instruction and job training. In some areas, it appears that there is an implicit division of labor and a relationship of mutual support between CBOs and colleges or other providers, while in other areas there is very little articulation.

Importantly, CBOs that serve immigrants provide or can provide a wide range of supportive services to ESL students, whether or not they offer ESL instruction. The lack of these support services—such as child care, income assistance, transportation, information about educational opportunities, mentoring, and various forms of comprehensive "case management"—is generally considered a major barrier to participation and success in ESL programs. Colleges and other ESL providers rarely offer such support services, and it appears that they seldom form partnerships with CBOs that can offer them. Too little is known about the actual or potential articulation of CBOs with other providers. But it appears that there is at least the potential for CBOs to perform essential functions in ESL service that other providers cannot perform as efficiently or at all.

To improve the nation's ESL system, there is a great need for a baseline study to determine in a systematic way what types of instructional and supportive services CBOs do or can provide to ESL students, the quality of that service, how it is articulated with service by other providers, and how instructional and supportive service provision, quality, and articulation might be improved.

6. **Improved Assessment Instruments**

As noted above, most ESL professionals believe that the existing standardized tests of English language proficiency do not adequately measure the learning needs or learning gains of their students. There are a number of organizations in the United States (such as the Educational Testing Service and ACT[4]) that can produce high-quality assessment systems for almost any purpose. A public or private contract of several million dollars with one or these organizations to develop an improved system could help overcome a major barrier to progress in ESL. But there is an initial issue that must be overcome.

Although ESL professionals are dissatisfied with existing standardized tests, they are dissatisfied for different reasons, and the locally developed tests they use for placing and advancing students differ greatly. As a result, there is a need for extensive formative research to determine what the specifications for an improved standardized assessment system should be. Among the questions to be addressed before significant advancement can be made in improving ESL assessments are the following:

- What skills should it measure and by what standards, to what uses should it be put, how should it map onto existing measures of English learning gains, in what form can findings about student proficiency most usefully be presented?

- How should any new system take account of individual differences in learning styles, prior education, or other variables?

- Will a single assessment system meet all the needs of the ESL field, or should a group of different systems be developed for different purposes?

- If several systems are required, how can they be designed so that their findings can be related to each other in ways that are most useful for instruction, transitions, accountability, job placement, and the many other purposes for which ESL assessments are used?

The need for better systems has been apparent for many years. This formative research should be carried out as soon as possible.

7. **Translating Teacher Qualifications into Practice**

Although leaders of the ESL field believe they understand the knowledge and skills ESL teachers should have to provide high quality instruction, translating this understanding into measures that will help improve the qualifications of ESL faculty is a formidable task. Many people in the ESL field believe that states should have much stronger certification requirements for ESL teachers. But exactly what form should these requirements take? For example, should they require that all teachers have the highest level of professional skills, at least a minimal level of skills, or some level in between? Should there be a single certification standard or series of certificates indicating different skill levels, and if there should be a series, should this affect the duties to which teachers with different skill levels can be assigned?

Whatever the design of the certification system, how can the level of teacher skills be determined? What should be the relative weight of formal education in TESOL or some other field compared to teacher experience? What types of pre-service or in-service training would be required to bring teachers up to various levels of certification, and how should the necessary training systems be structured and supported financially? Finally, although ESL leaders believe they understand the knowledge and skills teachers should have, there appears to have been very little research on which aspects of teacher qualifications

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[4] Formerly American College Testing

have the greatest effect on student outcomes and in what ways. Any effort to create a teacher certification system should be informed by a solid research base on this issue.

In short, a concerted research and development effort that includes ESL professionals, provider institutions, federal and state funding sources, and researchers is required to answer these and other questions about improving teacher qualifications and to put them into practice.

8. The Student Perspective

There is a paucity of research on the student perspective toward ESL instruction. For example, little is known about how students themselves define their learning goals, why they drop out or persist in programs, what benefits they think they receive, what they like or dislike about various aspects of programs, or what they think about various forms of program improvements, such as the use of technology. Many programs circulate student satisfaction surveys or ask students to write essays about their experiences, but the results of this type of informal research are seldom very informative because ESL students are usually reluctant to be critical of programs and teachers. A better understanding of the student perspective through ethnographic, interdisciplinary research would help program designers, evaluators, and faculty do a better job.

G. CONCLUSION

Taken as a whole, Adult Education ESL can be seen as a glass half empty or a glass half full.

On the one hand, only a small percentage of students who enroll in ESL programs persist for very long, increase their English proficiency by very much, or make transitions to further education. These outcomes are particularly troubling because most Adult Education ESL students have very low levels of English language ability and prior education in any language. As a result, they face major economic and social challenges in a nation where English is the dominant language and where most jobs that pay a family-supporting wage require fairly high levels of educational attainment—often at least some postsecondary education or specialized technical training.

On the other hand, significant numbers of Adult ESL students persist for fairly long periods, advance to the higher levels of English proficiency, and succeed in further education. The ESL system works for these students, and their success suggests that it is not fundamentally flawed. The challenge adult educators face is to find ways to make the system work better for more students.

Strategies to improve outcomes. Fortunately, ESL professionals have developed a wide range of strategies that improve student outcomes. These include:

- high-intensity instruction

- curricula that emphasize practicing English in authentic situations

- the extensive use of instructional technology

- dividing programs into classes that accommodate different student learning rates and prior education

- instruction in native-language literacy

- various forms of bridge courses to increase the rate of transitions

- vocational ESL (VESL) programs that help students improve their English at the same time they are obtaining technical certifications

There is no shortage of means to improve student outcomes in the ESL field, and many programs employ one or more of these strategies to serve at least some of their students. But few programs apply all of the strategies that have been shown to be effective to a large portion of the students who might benefit from them. To meet the challenges they face, programs must greatly expand their use of these and other approaches to improve student outcomes.

Services to reduce barriers. At the same time, there are a number of unmet needs in the Adult ESL system that few programs address adequately, and that they must find new or better ways to meet. Most ESL professionals recognize that many of their students fail to advance because they face personal barriers (such as inadequate transportation or childcare) that make it difficult for them to attend or persist in classes, and many others become discouraged because they do not fully understand how to navigate the U.S. educational system. Very few programs provide systematic help in obtaining support services or offer more than nominal guidance and counseling.

Professionalizing the teaching force. Likewise, most ESL professionals believe that effective instruction in this field requires teachers with highly specialized skills that can only be acquired from extensive pre-service and in-service education. But very few ESL teachers have the opportunity to acquire a professional background that allows them to function at the highest levels of proficiency, and few programs provide them with the opportunities or incentives to do so.

Strategic planning and longitudinal data. Few programs engage in comprehensive strategic planning to systematically evaluate and improve their performance, and many do not generate the data—especially longitudinal data on student outcomes—needed to do so. And they are handicapped in this regard by the lack of comprehensive and cost-effective standardized assessment instruments that can be used to measure how well students learn the skills they teach in the *way* they teach those skills.

Unless and until programs do a far better job of addressing the unmet needs for support services, guidance and counseling, professional development of teachers, strategic planning, and assessment, it will be difficult for them to devise or implement strategies to improve student performance.

Need for increased funding. Undoubtedly, a lack of adequate funding is the major barrier programs face in addressing these unmet needs and adopting improved instructional strategies. In recent years, Adult Education ESL programs have enrolled about 1.1 million students per year and received only about $800 million from all sources of public funding. This level of funding is barely adequate to provide minimal ESL instruction, let alone to make the program improvements required. Adult educators know how to make ESL programs far more effective than they are today, but they cannot do so unless public and private funding for their efforts is greatly increased—both in total and on a per student basis.

Defining goals. Even with greater funding, ESL programs will have a hard time increasing student performance unless they more clearly define what their goals should be. Traditionally, the primary goal of Adult Education ESL programs has been to teach the use of English for a wide range of life skills. Increasingly, at least some ESL professionals, employers, and labor market experts have advocated a greater emphasis on the goal of workforce preparation in ESL programs. Because this has not been a major goal of ESL programs in the past, actively pursuing it will require changes in the expectations, program structures, curricula, and staffing of most programs. In making the case for additional funding and allocating whatever resources they have, programs must carefully consider what their money should buy.

Building intellectual capital. In addition, the need for greater funding in Adult Education ESL is not limited to investment in program services. There is a great need to enhance the intellectual infrastructure of this field. This includes the creation of stronger peer learning networks through which ESL practitioners can share information about program improvement strategies. It also includes an investment

in a wide range of basic and applied research topics, such as a more precise mapping of the need and demand for ESL service, the effects of different levels of prior education on learning English, how classroom instruction can better stimulate independent learning, the economic benefits of different forms of ESL instruction, better applications of technology to learning English, and the best ways of providing support services.

Adult Education ESL should probably be considered a glass half full, rather than a glass half empty. Although the agenda that must be pursued to substantially improve program outcomes is long, that agenda is at least fairly clear. There are many excellent people in the ESL field working on parts of the agenda, and there would undoubtedly be many more if resources allowed. The challenge for ESL programs is to make a commitment to adopting that agenda in full. The challenge to the nation is to provide them the resources to do so.