

PATHWAYS & OUTCOMES: TRACKING ESL STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Findings

Academic Achievement: Only about eight percent of the students who enrolled in CCSF's non-credit ESL program from 1998-2000 made the transition to academic (credit) studies in seven years. But here is what those "transition students" achieved:

- Seventy-five percent enrolled in credit ESL, and 85% enrolled in other academic courses, usually at the same time they were studying credit ESL.
- In terms of grade point averages, percentage of courses passed, and other measures of academic success, students who made transitions from non-credit ESL equaled or surpassed both other credit ESL students and other credit students at the College.
- Twenty-five percent of transition students obtained Associate Degrees or Certificates from the College.
- In short, students who began in non-credit ESL and made the transition to credit were among the College's best academic students.

Who made transitions?

- Most of the students who made transitions began at fairly low levels of non-credit ESL and "worked their way up" to gain the levels of English proficiency they needed to meet the College's standards for credit studies, and most began at fairly low levels in credit ESL after they had made transitions. They were students determined to achieve, and they did.
- Almost all transition students had attained the Intermediate level of non-credit English language proficiency or higher. About 30-40% of students who attained the High Intermediate Level and 20-25% who attained the Low Intermediate level made transitions to credit – compared to eight percent of all non-credit ESL students.
- One reason that so few non-credit students made the transition to academic studies was that only 19% of all non-credit students who began at low levels of proficiency attained the Intermediate level of or above.

Who advanced?

- Of all CCSF's non-credit ESL students, only 44% advanced even one level during the seven-year period.
- Not surprisingly, the students most likely to advance were those who enrolled for the most terms and attended the most hours of instruction. The correlation between persistence, hours attended, and level advancement is consistent and strong.

About the Study

This report presents the findings of a longitudinal study of English as a Second Language (ESL) students at the City College of San Francisco (CCSF) conducted during the summer of 2007 by Steven Spurling, Sharon Seymour, and Forrest P. Chisman. The study used College records to track all students who first enrolled in CCSF's credit and non-credit ESL programs in 1998, 1999, and 2000 for seven years each. In total, 38,095 non-credit and 6,666 credit ESL students comprised the "cohort" that was examined. The study's primary focus was on the persistence, learning gains, and transition to credit studies, and the success in credit courses of non-credit ESL students. It also examined various features of CCSF's ESL program that affected these variables. Although, strictly speaking, the findings of this study apply only to CCSF, the authors believe they have implications for the adult education ESL field as a whole – both because CCSF's ESL program has many features in common with a great many other programs and because the College's program is regarded by many ESL professionals as "exemplary" in the way it applies the principles of English language learning. In many respects, it is both a typical case and a best case of adult education ESL in the United States.

- On average, it took students who advanced a level about 100 hours to do so.
- Students who began at the lowest levels (the Literacy and Beginning levels) were more likely to advance levels and to advance more levels than students who began at higher levels, although it took them more terms and hours of attendance to do so.
- Of the College's two major ethnic groups, Asians were more likely to advance levels than Hispanics, although it took them more terms and hours to advance in the lower levels.
- Very young students (16-19) were more likely to advance levels than other students were, and they were more likely to make transitions to credit studies. Aside from this age group, age made no difference in level advancement.
- Thirty percent of non-credit students "stopped out" (stopped taking classes for a year or more and subsequently re-enrolled). These students (stop-outs) advanced at the same rate as other students who began at the same first level, although they attended slightly more terms than did comparable students, but they made the transition to credit at lower rates – at least during the time period during which they were studied. Because of their long absences from the program (often two years or longer), more stop-outs may make transitions at some point subsequent to the time period studied.

Who did not advance?

- Fifty-six percent of students who enrolled in CCSF's non-credit ESL program from 1998-2000 did not advance even one level (showed no learning gain, as measured by level advancement)

- Half of these students who did not advance attended 50 hours or less of instruction over the seven-year time period studied. An additional 30% attended less than 150 hours of instruction.
- Thirty-eight percent of non-credit ESL students enrolled for only one term, and hence did not advance levels. Sixty-eight percent enrolled for three or fewer terms.
- In short, more than half of CCSF's non-credit ESL students did not advance at all, and most of those who did so advanced only one or two of CCSF's 10 ESL levels.

Implications of the Study

Because most of CCSF's non-credit ESL students (and most adult education ESL students nationwide) begin at quite low levels of English proficiency, they must be "willing and able" to devote a substantial amount of time (terms of enrollment and hours in class) to improve their English very much and/or to advance to success in postsecondary education. That is, they must have the personal motivation and goals to climb the ladder of ESL and they must be able to work around the responsibilities of adult life to do so. This study showed that some of CCSF's ESL students are willing and able in this sense, but most do not advance very far (or at all) in non-credit ESL. CCSF has adopted some measures to help students expand their goals and accelerate their progress, and these measures should be reinforced by the College and also examined by other programs. Although the study was an exercise in observational research, it provides the basis for informed speculation about what other measures might be adopted.

Calibrate instructional units. Many ESL programs offer only 3-6 hours of instruction per week and do not operate during the summer. At that rate, it would take even students with good attendance records several years to advance very far, and many may not be prepared to make this commitment. CCSF offers 175 hours of instruction per term, usually promotes students only at the end of each term, and does not promote them on the basis of studies during its short summer term. Thus, at most, students can advance two levels per year. Many students can probably advance more quickly, and may become discouraged. Programs should consider offering 4-5 terms of ESL per year, each providing about 100 hours of instruction and promoting students as soon as they have mastered the skills of each level in which they are enrolled. This would make it possible for students to advance from quite low to quite high levels in a year or slightly more.

Managed enrollment. Like most ESL programs, CCSF has an "open-entry/open-exit" policy. Students can enroll in programs and drop out at any time. More ESL programs should consider a "managed enrollment" policy in which students can enter only at the beginning of each instructional unit and can be dropped for non-attendance. Programs that have adopted managed enrollment for all or some of their students believe that it encourages learners to make a stronger commitment to persistence and attendance. It also accelerates the instructional process, because teachers do not have to repeat instruction for students who enter classes at mid-term, and those students do not have to struggle to catch up with the rest of the class.

Fast-track programs. The success of CCSF's curricular enhancements suggests that many students are prepared to devote extra time to ESL if they believe it can lead to the achievement of some near-term goal, beyond simply learning more English. As a result, programs should consider implementing high intensity "fast track" programs to help students achieve goals such as transition to postsecondary education and enrollment in vocational programs. For example, programs should consider a "pathways to college" track that would combine short-term multi-level courses meeting for a large number of hours per week with pre-collegiate orientation, and incorporate college-level English into the non-credit curriculum. "Fast tracks" of this sort could challenge and motivate students to move on to academic or vocational studies in a year or less.

Enhanced student services. The low retention rate of students who first enroll in CCSF's non-credit program – and especially of those who enroll at very low levels – cries out for solutions that extend beyond changes in the instructional program. It calls for something this study could not accomplish – an in-depth examination of why a majority of students take the trouble to enroll in ESL, but quickly drop out. The effectiveness of CCSF's fairly modest matriculation services underlines the importance of enhanced guidance, counseling, and supportive services to help students understand the nature of ESL classes and the responsibilities they must assume. Above all, enhanced student services should help students understand that they can succeed in ESL and that there are benefits to success, encourage them to establish ambitious personal goals, trouble-shoot their academic difficulties, and help them overcome barriers to attendance that are created by personal problems such as work schedules and child care responsibilities.

Target success. The findings of this study indicates that CCSF and other ESL programs can identify at least some categories of students who are most likely to succeed in noncredit courses. Among these are the

youngest students (those in the 16-19 age group), those who express interest in using ESL to obtain further education (such as academic studies or vocational training), stop-outs, and those who have advanced to the threshold of the Intermediate levels. Programs may wish to consider recruiting more younger and intermediate-level students as well as targeting curricular and student enhancements on students most likely to take advantage of them.

A culture of success. These and other measures are premised on the belief that many ESL students can achieve much more than they do now, and that it is a primary goal of ESL programs to help each student advance as far as possible up the ladder of English language learning. The authors believe that too often programs are so overwhelmed with the enormous demands of program maintenance that they find it hard to focus on how well they are achieving these larger goals and what they can do to achieve them better. Unless program managers, teachers, and students are joined in an enterprise that expects a high level of achievement, and unless they reinforce each other in the belief that this is both possible and necessary, the prospects of improvement are diminished. ESL programs, like any other enterprise, are most successful if they make the time and devote the energy to creating and reinforcing high expectations for everyone involved.

Full Report:

Spurling, Steven, Seymour, Sharon and Chisman, Forrest. PATHWAYS & OUTCOMES: TRACKING ESL STUDENT PERFORMANCE. The Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy. January 7, 2008. <http://www.caalusa.org/pathways-outcomes/pathways-outcomesfull.pdf>