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Best Practices To Help English Language Learners Succeed In Community College

Santina Caster
Hamline University

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BEST PRACTICES TO HELP ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS
SUCCEED IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

Santina Caster

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English as a Second Language

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Capstone Project Facilitators: Patty Born-Selly, Maggie Struck
Content Expert: Cynthia Anderson
Peer Reviewer: Kathleen Kessler

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction	5
Background.....	6
Benefits of Higher Education	9
Summary.....	10
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review	11
Reasons for Dropping Out.....	12
Preparation Before Community College	14
High school.....	14
Adult Basic Education (ABE)	15
Types of Support to Provide During Community College.....	16
Family	17
Peers.....	18
Faculty	19
Institutions	21
<i>Involvement of family members</i>	22
<i>Broad ELL courses</i>	22
<i>Credit vs. non-credit</i>	22
<i>Learning centers</i>	23
<i>Coordination between community colleges and employers</i>	24
<i>Bridge programs</i>	24
<i>Coordination between community colleges and four-year colleges</i>	25

Beyond Community College	26
Motivation for This Project	27
Research Gap.....	28
Summary.....	28
CHAPTER THREE: Project Description	30
Description of the Project Format	30
Section 1: Best Practices.....	30
Section 2: Getting Started.....	31
Section 3: Feedback.....	31
Audience and Setting.....	32
Choice of Format.....	33
Principles of Good Web Design and Consideration of Validity and Reliability...33	
Website Design and Relevance to Adult Learners	35
Contribution to Scholarship.....	36
Timeline.....	36
Assessment	37
Summary.....	37
CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion	38
Learnings	38
Literature Review Revisited	39
Implications of Project	40
Limitations of the Project	40
Recommendations for Further Research	41

Communication and Use of Results	42
Benefits to the Profession.....	42
Summary.....	43
References	44

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

According to a 2003 report from the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, approximately only 50% of students who attend community colleges and intend to continue to a four-year college actually do. This statistic, along with a program on Minnesota Public Radio (Miller, 2013) on first-generation college students and the challenges that they faced, piqued my interest in understanding the success rate of English Language Learner (ELL) college students. I was able to relate to the individuals who called into the program because I am a first-generation Italian-American and college graduate.

While colleges assist ELL students with separate courses to increase English language proficiency, language proficiency is not the only issue that ELL students face (Chavez, 2015; Ramirez, 2002; Uvin, Aguirre, & Lehrman, 2012). What I observed of other first-generation or ELL students that I knew personally, was the lack of support from peers or family members. These observations led me to my research question: *what are some best practices that can be implemented to help ELLs succeed in community college?* The aim of this project is to create a list of best practices that teachers and administrators in community colleges can implement to help students reach their goal of obtaining an associate degree. Additionally, ELL students may review this list of best practices and seek out these resources to assist them. Completing community college will provide students with more options, including the ability to transfer to a four-year college or university and earn a Bachelor's degree.

Background

I am career-switcher. I have worked in various positions in the Information Technology (IT) sector in Corporate America over the last 20 years and look forward to a rewarding career in teaching English as a second language (ESL). In my early years in IT, I was a Business Analyst at a helpdesk. In many of my interactions with users, I provided one-on-one training. Considering my audience, I avoided using technical jargon, explained how the software worked and then offered other possible solutions to meet their needs. As the corporation implemented new software in business units, I had the opportunity to teach classes. This was when I first discovered how much I enjoyed teaching. Over the years, I taught occasionally but had the desire to teach more frequently. I considered teaching ESL in my spare time but never made the extra time.

A few years later, after being laid off from my position in IT, I decided to switch careers and applied to the Master of Arts in ESL program at Hamline. I was immediately re-energized to learn something new and am enthusiastic at the prospect of teaching soon.

I am currently working at the State of Minnesota as a Business Analyst. I rarely teach formal classes but have organized some training sessions for co-workers on tools where I have gained expertise. The State of Minnesota has a diverse group of people, many who speak English as a second language very well and I hope to help my future students achieve proficiency in English so that they can also obtain professional positions.

As mentioned previously, one of the influences for this project was a report on first generation college students on a Minnesota Public Radio program (Miller, 2013).

Individuals called into the radio program and shared their experiences of being among

the first in their family to attend college. Many of them faced obstacles such as lack of knowledge in navigating the system of applying to colleges, lack of money and lack of moral support from family members. I could relate to all of these challenges because I experienced them too but the lack of support struck me the most. As I look back on this time, I can see that lack of support affected other first-generation Italian-Americans in my family as well. I had already decided that I wanted to teach ELL students at the college level, but listening to this radio program motivated me further.

A specific assignment in the MA ESL program allowed me to further investigate how I could help ELL college students. In the course “Course Design for Adult ESL Classes,” I designed a course on communication skills, based on the skills outlined in the Transitions Integration Framework (TIF), part of Minnesota’s Adult Basic Education standards. My goal was to create a course that would be taken in the first year of college in which students could improve communication skills, feel a sense of community, learn from each other’s experiences and possibly fuel their motivation to stay in college. Some questions that I had were:

- What are the standard topics that need to be covered in an ELL course at a Minnesota college?
- How can I bring about the students’ outside experiences into the classroom (i.e. make students feel comfortable enough to share these experiences in class)?

I considered ways that the ELL students could be more integrated into their content courses. For example, could simulating a group project in the ELL course help them in a content course? In another example, could having the ELL students create

study groups themselves, based on their major, also help them see the benefit of study groups and also encourage them to participate or even create study groups with non-ELL students? My hope was that making these connections outside the ELL group would help students to branch out and feel connected into the overall community, and thus encourage them to persevere in college.

While I had ideas on what to include in a curriculum, I had no concrete evidence that those ideas would work. I needed background information and research on what was actually causing students to drop out of college, which has led to the current project.

The main entry point to higher education for ELL students is community college (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Preparing students for college during their high school years is the ideal solution but that support is not always provided (Callahan & Shifrer, 2012).

Even the community college entry point can present obstacles such as navigating the system of applying or obtaining financial aid. Although students may overcome initial obstacles, it is important to provide various types of support throughout college. That is, they are close to their goal of a two-year college degree but still need assistance in reaching that goal.

My ideas on this project have evolved through reading articles, books and theses. Rather than focusing on what I alone can implement in a community college ELL course, I decided to broaden my project to include support that may be provided by other strong influences: family, peers, faculty and institutions. Ideally, the support would be a combination from all of those sources to achieve a high retention rate at the community college level and possibly extend to a high transfer and retention rate to a four-year college or university.

Benefits of Higher Education

Helping ESL community college students stay in school provides benefits to society as a whole. First of all, the students benefit economically in the long-term. Without any postsecondary education, individuals are relegated to low-wage jobs with few opportunities to advance to higher positions. Nonetheless, questions have been raised within the last few years as to whether a college degree is necessary anymore. Quiggin (2011) makes the case that individuals who earn an associate degree tend to earn 20% more than individuals who only have a high school diploma. In addition, with so many technological advances in the last 20 years, the focus in the U.S. is on more advanced and technical positions. Jobs requiring lower-level skills will always be needed, but the demand has decreased significantly. Moreover, employers in Minnesota have expressed concern that there is a labor shortage for positions requiring technological skills, resulting in recruiting individuals from other countries (Depass, 2018). For the individuals who are already in the U.S. and seek higher education, why not raise their skill level by helping them succeed in college? That inquiry leads me back to my research question: *what are some best practices that can be implemented to help ELLs succeed in community college?*

Expected Outcome of Project

Community colleges have their own curricula and methods for addressing students' needs. Studies of successful methods are disparate and may take a significant amount of time for ESL professionals to gather, review and implement. For this project, I created a website that lists some best practices that may motivate ELL students to persist.

This website will serve as a central location for these practices and thus perhaps accelerate the implementation of improvements.

Summary

In Chapter One, I discussed the path that led to my decision to teach ELL students in a community college. I also introduced my project which aims at providing best practices that can be implemented to help ELL students to complete community college and these best practices serve as a possible resource list for students. The first chapter also described how the project will extend our knowledge and understanding of challenges faced by ELL college students.

Chapter Two consists of a review of the literature, indicating reasons that students dropout of college as well as strategies have been implemented and have been successful.

Chapter Three includes details on the recommended practices from current studies.

Finally, Chapter Four provides my reflections and conclusions on this project and how I can continue to further the conversation on helping ELL community college students succeed.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This project's goal is to provide a list of best practices that ESL professionals in community colleges can implement to help students obtain an associate degree instead of opting to quit. These best practices are also intended to serve as a possible resource list for students. The main focus of an ESL teacher is to improve language proficiency. However, to accomplish this, multiple facets of support are required. This project considers the various types of support as well as barriers that have prevented students from achieving their goal.

This project focuses on the success of ELL students in community colleges in an effort to increase retention rates. ELL students are defined as those who currently live in the U.S. and plan to remain in the U.S. International students also need to gain English proficiency but differ from ELL students in two major ways: 1) they plan to return to their country and 2) they tend to have fewer financial difficulties than ELL students (Janis, 2013). A majority of this literature review addresses challenges of the ELL student, rather than the international student.

This chapter mainly encompasses the journey of the ELL community college student. The chapter begins with the common reasons that students drop out and then continues to the preparation for postsecondary education in either high school or adult basic education. The next and main section of this literature review presents practices that have both helped and hindered ELL students in their aspirations to obtain an

associate degree. The last sections discuss the value of continuing to a four-year institution, my motivation for this project and the gap in current research.

Reasons for Dropping Out

Students who initially enroll in community college and later drop out cite several reasons for not pursuing their associate degree. According to Almon (2012), the following are among the reasons that students drop out: lack of funds, family responsibilities, full-time work responsibilities, and finally the lack of integration that may result from being labeled as an ELL student. Beal and Noel as well as Jalomo generalized that first-generation students were more likely to drop out of school (as cited in Ramirez, 2002). A few of the participants in Ramirez's (2002) study stated family responsibilities for leaving school, rather than lack of motivation or difficulty with classes.

Hodara contends that incorrect assessments of students' skills and placing them in a course that truly does not meet their needs, may contribute to the increase in the dropout rate (as cited in Scott-Clayton, 2012). Bunch and Endris (2012), in a study of California community colleges, provide more insight on placement tests and how the results of these tests may have a negative outcome. For example, students who were born in the U.S. but do not speak English at home tend to be directed to ELL courses. Some ELL courses are non-credit courses. If students are incorrectly placed into a non-credit ELL course, they are wasting money, which is likely a very limited resource to begin with. Moreover, students are commonly unaware as to whether they have an option to enroll in an ELL course or enroll directly into a college-level English course. In

interviews with instructors, Bunch and Endris (2012) noted that ELL students typically do not refute the course recommendations that are based on the placement exams.

Students are also often unaware that they are able to prepare for these placement exams. Community college websites may mention the placement exams but differ widely on how important these exams are. In most cases, the websites indicate that the placement exams are merely used to help students select the right courses in order to be successful (Bunch & Endris, 2012).

Students may take different routes in improving English language proficiency and pursuing higher education. For example, they may initially take only ELL classes and then add college-level content courses. Another option is that students may take an ELL course and college-level courses at the same time. Finally, some students only take the ELL courses and do not continue to other content courses. Razfar and Simon (2011) studied Latino ELL students at a large urban community college district in California and the routes they chose as well as their initial goals. In general, although students previously had intended to obtain an associate degree or had aspirations for a career, 36% enrolled in vocational courses. This pattern seems to indicate that students changed their long-term goal of an education to a short-term goal of learning skills for another job.

This conclusion is similar to findings by Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco and Todorova (2008) who noted that work had two distinct impacts on students. Students who continued with school and continued working learned valuable skills such as responsibility and meeting deadlines, resulting in increased confidence. Students who did not succeed in school but did well in their jobs chose to leave school as their job gave them a sense of accomplishment.

So far, various reasons that ELL students give up on their initial goal of earning an associate degree have been discussed. The next section reviews the degree of preparation that ELL students receive before entering postsecondary education. The amount of preparation tends to have a large impact on an ELL student's college experience.

Preparation Before Community College

The focus of this project is on community colleges. In order to provide context around the experiences of ELL students at the community college level, it is important to review whether students are being prepared for postsecondary education. Younger students and older adults are dependent on high schools and Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs, respectively, for adequate preparation. By understanding current practices, perhaps the discussion for policy changes can begin.

High School. Although ELL students may require support to increase English language proficiency as they progress from elementary school to high school to postsecondary education, language is not the only barrier to their success. Adelman and Cabrera and La Nasa agree that there is a correlation between strong academic preparation in high school and the ability to attend a four-year college and subsequently obtain a bachelor's degree (as cited in Kanno & Harklau, 2012). Yet, because of low English proficiency, some ELL students are not allowed to enroll in advanced content courses. Callahan and Shifrer (2012) claim that high schools have low expectations of ELL students and thus, tend to keep them in lower-level content courses. These low expectations are corroborated by the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002. In this

longitudinal study, only 10% of ELL students in the tenth grade planned to attend college versus 34% of non-ELL students (Uvin, Aguirre, & Lehrman, 2016).

Callahan and Shifrer (2012) further contend that perhaps too much emphasis is placed on language proficiency for high school students. According to their study, students who spoke another language at home but attended mainstream classes were better prepared academically than ELL students. More specifically, because the students who attended ELL classes focused on language, they had less time and fewer opportunities to master content in other subjects.

An effective way to encourage ELL high school students to attend college is to actually go on a field trip to visit colleges. C. Anderson, a retired teacher who taught ELL high school students in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metro area, planned field trips for students to visit colleges and speak to guidance counselors. The visits helped the students visualize themselves in this setting and made their dream seem more attainable. The meetings with the guidance counselors allowed the students to ask questions and make a connection with the college (personal communication, September 23, 2018).

Adult Basic Education (ABE). To meet the demands of a more educated workforce, Minnesota has focused on preparing students in ABE programs to continue to postsecondary education (Johnson & Parrish, 2010). As many individuals in ABE programs are ELL students, educators need to take this into consideration in order for Minnesota's initiative to be successful. An alignment of values between ABE instructors and postsecondary institution instructors is important in students' successes. For example, college faculty place a high value on the following skills: critical thinking,

technology, note-taking and presentation; however, ABE instructors indicated that they teach these types of skills minimally, if at all (Johnson & Parrish, 2010).

Acquiring skills to be successful in college needs to start, at a minimum, in high school or ABE courses. Otherwise, ELL students are at a further disadvantage when attempting to adjust to the demands of college work. Preparation before community college also includes emotional support, which is discussed in the next section. One contributing factor that may even prevent students from considering higher education is low expectations from teachers in elementary or high school, resulting in low expectations of themselves (Chavez, 2015). Mentors outside of family, including the group Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, may provide this important emotional support, but new immigrants usually are not aware of these programs (C. Suarez-Orzco, M. Suarez-Orzco, & Todorova, 2008).

Types of Support to Provide During Community College

Types of support offered to ELL college students vary. More importantly, although certain types of support are available, students may not be aware of all of them and therefore may not take full advantage of these services. Direct support from family, peers and faculty provides a sense of community and is key to assisting students (Ramirez, 2002; Henderson, 2009; Chavez, 2015). On a broader level, institutions have the ability to provide indirect support by helping students in transitioning from high school or ABE programs to community college and subsequently, to four-year institutions. This requires coordination among the institutions (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). The following subsections include the different types of support. In most cases, ELL professionals are able to provide the required support for students' successes.

Family. Support from family members may be in the form of helping with homework or imparting knowledge of the college system and financial aid. Results of a study by Hurtado-Ortiz and Gauvin (2007) revealed that mothers tend to have more influence than fathers on their children's education. However, the study did not ascertain the reason for this correlation. The researchers recommended further studies on this finding. The other important finding from Hurtado-Ortiz and Gauvin's study was that older siblings had even more impact in providing support to younger children. The older children who attended college and learned to navigate the college system served as role models to the younger children. Again, the study did not explain the resources that helped the older siblings to achieve their goals and demonstrate that their younger siblings have the ability to succeed in higher education as well. It may be surmised that the older children had initiative or perhaps had mentors outside of their family which are also important resources as suggested by C. Suarez-Orzco, M. Suarez-Orzco and Todorova (2008).

Family members who have not attended post-secondary education and are therefore not able to assist with navigating the educational system are nevertheless able to provide support. These family members may motivate ELL college students simply with encouragement and acknowledgement that education will, in the long-term, create better job opportunities and improve the family's future (Ramirez, 2002). A participant in a Ramirez's (2002) study of Mexican-origin college students relayed the impact of encouragement. The participant stated:

I didn't have anyone that I could look up to...I knew that things had to be different, but I didn't know how. I had the encouragement of my family and

friends, but I didn't know anyone in a profession. So when I decided to attend college, my family would say 'andale mija tu si puedes' [go ahead daughter, you can do it], so I attended college. And now everyone I talk to, I encourage them to go to college. (p. 156)

While some students receive support in their decision to attend college, others, especially those who are first-generation students, may not receive such support.

Chavez's (2015) interviews with six Hispanic non-traditional students found that the women were still expected to fulfill their traditional household responsibilities in addition to working outside the home, making it difficult to find time to study (Chavez, 2015; Hanson, Maxwell, & Mulder, 2015). While ELL professionals may not be able to influence a student's family to provide support, an ELL instructor needs to be aware that this lack of support could affect a student's performance and persistence in college.

Peers. Interviews with the Hispanic non-traditional students also revealed that, while going back to school was difficult, building relationships with other students who shared the same background helped them to become acclimated to college life (Chavez, 2015). Another study of Hispanic non-traditional students at Treasure Valley Community College in Oregon reiterated the claim that friendships motivated students to persist in school, especially when family support was lacking (Ramirez, 2016).

Peers who have already begun or completed college may also serve as mentors to younger students. De La Cruz's (2008) study found that older peers' advice included reminding students of their goals during especially difficult periods experienced by ELL students. This advice redirected the younger peers energies into focusing on their long-term goals, rather than the short-term obstacle.

Learning centers, by way of offering a physical space to gather, also encourage peer support. For example, students who used the various services at the learning center at Portland State University not only benefited from the staff's expertise but also studied together and supported one another (Hanson et al., 2015).

Faculty. Faculty support may also have a very positive impact on a student (Henderson, 2009; Chavez, 2015). For example, a qualitative study of eleven Hispanic women, who were also first generation college students, indicated that encouragement from faculty was key to their success (Chavez, 2015). On the other hand, some faculty members are reluctant to provide additional support because they expect all of their students to have a certain skill level, for example, in academic writing (Browning, 1996; Hanson et al., 2015).

The effectiveness of ELL community college courses may be measured on students' perception and their level of achievement. One creative addition to an ELL curriculum includes service learning. In service learning, students participate in a community project that is related to a classroom lesson(s). Douglas (2017) surveyed community college ELL students who participated in a service-learning community project. Almost all of the students who responded to the survey felt that they improved their English skills. Other benefits from this type of format allows students to work in teams, build relationships and become more integrated into the community. The study did not correlate the participation in service-learning community programs to completing community college; however, the various benefits may result in increased support among peers, which has shown to be important in student retention.

Elwell and Bean (2001) also incorporated a service-learning project into an ELL reading class and noted many benefits. The most important benefit was student engagement. Students read John Steinbeck's classic novel *Of Mice and Men* and subsequently participated in a collection drive for farmers who had recently lost most of their citrus crops during an unexpected freeze in California. The connection of the collection drive to the plight of the characters in the novel engaged the students. The instructors also noticed that the students' previous reluctance to work on the group research project was replaced by interest and enthusiasm. More importantly, the students felt a sense of accomplishment in contributing their service. Again, although this study on the benefit of service-learning projects to ELL students did not specifically intend to increase the retention rate of ELL community college students, the increased engagement could certainly contribute to higher retention rates.

Lastly, while faculty can provide direct support to ELL students, faculty can also promote the use of college services that may be available, such as writing centers and tutoring services (Hanson et al., 2015). Initial use of these services by students may convince students of the value of the services and encourage continued use, setting up a cycle of continuous achievement.

Henderson (2009), among others, purports that ELL students require continuous support. According to Henderson, this continuous support may be in the form of an English as a Second Language Across the Curriculum (ESLAC). The aim of the ESLAC is for instructors of developmental courses and instructors of content courses to communicate and collaborate. As a result of this partnership, the instructors of the

content courses revise their lessons so that ELL students actually learn in the content courses.

One of the concerns mentioned by some faculty teaching at community colleges was that students did not always communicate when they needed assistance or clarification. Henderson (2009) reports this finding in her study of ESLAC. It was suggested that instruction delivery could be tweaked to address the needs of ELL students. Some of the recommended changes to the delivery of instruction included speaking more slowly, avoiding use of idioms and using shorter sentences. Another important change was to provide time to ask questions either after class or during a break as some students hesitated to speak in front of the entire class. Surprisingly, the instructors noticed that the changes had a positive impact on native speakers as well as the ELL students (Henderson, 2009).

Institutions. A major barrier to attending college is finances and the government is able to assist by providing bilingual education grants. It is worth noting that all of the eight Hispanic participants in a study indicated that the grants allowed them to achieve their dream of attending college (Ramirez, 2002). In addition to issuing grants when feasible, there are a number of other ways that institutions can support students. These include engaging family members to provide emotional support, ensuring that ELL courses are broad and do not just focus on academic writing, giving credit for ELL courses, supporting service-learning projects, providing learning centers, coordinating with employers, supporting bridge programs and coordinating with four-year colleges. These ideas are explored further in what follows.

Involvement of family members. As stated previously, family members may offer emotional support to ELL college students in the form of encouragement. An outcome of Ramirez's (2002) qualitative study was the suggestion that colleges plan events to involve and engage family members. These events would allow the colleges to communicate the importance of education to family members and, in turn, these family members would likely be more supportive of the students' educational goals.

Broad ELL courses. The common ELL support provided by institutions is in the form of ELL classes. These classes address students' issues with their English language proficiency so that they can succeed in the content courses. At universities, these classes typically focus on improving academic writing. One study at a southeastern university sought to determine whether international students perceived the ELL class as beneficial. In this study, the ELL class did not focus solely on writing skills; it also concentrated on speaking, listening and reading skills. The general results were that the ELL class was helpful. From this study, the researchers recommend that ELL classes include instruction of both academic skills and general communication skills. The emphasis on the general communication skills is to help students actively participate in discussions with peers, faculty and the community members. The researchers also suggested that universities tailor their curricula based on specific needs of the students (Pathirage, Morrow, Walpitage, & Skolits, 2014).

Credit vs. non-credit ELL courses. Ignash (1995) studied the policies of six community colleges in the U.S. and suggests that policies affect ELL student retention. For example, each community college determines whether an ELL class is credit or non-credit. In addition, community colleges may choose separate locations for the credit and

non-credit ELL classes, creating physical distance between the two categories of students. The study revealed that the community colleges that had both credit and non-credit classes on the same campus tended to have a higher retention rate. To eliminate this segregation, Ignash (1995) recommended moving some courses from other departments and allowing the ELL courses to be on the main campus.

Learning centers. An alternative way to assist ELL students outside of formal classes is to provide learning centers. A study at Portland State University sought to understand how the students used these learning centers. Although this model is at a university, it is well worth considering for implementation in community colleges as well. Establishment of a learning center aiming at specific needs of ELL students has also been supported by researchers Hanson, Maxwell and Mulder (2015) who conducted a study on how students use learning centers (LCs) to obtain support. Based on student responses to this qualitative study, the motivation for using the LC included:

- The varied resources provided, such as tutoring and computer labs
- Location of the LC, which was centrally located on campus
- Physical space, which was comfortable, and because it was smaller, students were able to find English books more easily.
- Personal connections made with staff as well as other students

Most important, the researchers observed that the students felt a sense of community at this LC. This sense of community encouraged the use of the LC, making it easier for students to integrate into the college life and also build their English language proficiency skills and succeed in their content courses. K. Kessler (personal communication, October 7, 2018) recommended organizing events at learning centers to attract students. This

strategy is an important way to reach out to students who may not be aware of the learning center's services. Lastly, continuous promotion of these services such via email, social media, flyers and direct conversation is also important (Hanson et al., 2015).

Coordination between community colleges and employers. Another way that institutions can provide support is through coordination between community colleges and employers. In Minnesota, manufacturers' profits have increased; however, some manufacturers need to plan for the long-term to ensure that they have an educated workforce to continue their success. To that end, Traci Tapani, co-owner of the Wyoming Machine metal precision shop in Minnesota, suggests that manufacturers partner with community colleges to prepare students with skills to work in factories which require more technological knowledge than before (as cited in Depass, 2018). What was not mentioned in that suggestion was that the resource pool of workers may include ELL employees; therefore, community colleges may have to consider investing in ELL employees as well.

Bridge programs. Institutions may also provide support to ELL students via college bridge programs. One example of a college bridge program is Northern Virginia Community College's (NOVA) Pathway to the Baccalaureate College Success Consortium. The Consortium coordinates with local high schools and assists each student individually in entering NOVA and subsequently transferring to a four-year university. This program offers grants and scholarships as well (Uvin, Aguirre, & Lehrman, 2016).

An additional support mechanism is the Educational Opportunity Program at the University of California and California State University, whose goal is to encourage

underprivileged students to enroll and complete their studies (Uvin, Aguirre, & Lehrman, 2016). However, Kanno and Varghese (2010) claim that these educational opportunity programs could assist ELL students, but the programs do not make an overt effort to engage them.

Coordination between community colleges and four-year colleges. In an article on ELL students' challenges in transferring to a four-year college, researchers Kanno and Varghese (2010) recommend that community colleges forge a stronger partnership with four-year colleges/universities. Advancing to postsecondary education at a community college seems favorable to ELL students because tuition at community colleges is typically less than at universities, and community colleges offer more direct support in the form of developmental courses and individualized attention from counselors and instructors. However, support is necessary to make the transition from a community college to the four-year college/university that has higher demands and less personalized attention. When community colleges and four-year colleges/universities collaborate, they create a smoother path for students who wish to continue their studies (Kanno & Varghese, 2010).

While the premise of strong collaboration between the two types of institutions makes sense, increased retention results may not be as favorable as expected. Ironfield (1992) described a program called "Bridges to Business" in which Holyoke Community College in Massachusetts and the School of Management at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst partnered to encourage ELL students to obtain a bachelor's degree. The two schools worked together to recruit students, establish criteria for guaranteed admittance to the university, provide advisors from each school and offer

scholarships. By exposing students to the university while still in community college, the aim was to motivate students with an easier path to the university.

Although the schools addressed many of the obstacles in transferring to a university, they realized that other factors should also have been addressed. One of the most notable of these issues was that students had low expectations of themselves and lacked self-confidence. As a result, students were reluctant to commit to the “Business to Bridges” program. That is, students had committed to obtaining an associate degree but perhaps not stretching beyond that goal to a bachelor’s degree. Another notable issue was low-level math skills which required students to take developmental courses. These extra courses increased both the length of time and amount of funds to receive an associate degree. Finally, an important lesson learned in establishing this partnership is to agree on the goal of the two institutions. The goal of Holyoke Community College was to increase the retention rate of their ELL students; in contrast, the aim of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst was solely to recruit students (Ironfield, 1992).

Beyond Community College

Carnevale and Rose offer two important statistics on the value of continuing to a four-year college (as cited in Kanno & Harklau, 2012). First, they indicated that full-time employees with a Bachelor’s degree earned 74% more than students who only completed high school. The second statistic looks beyond the impact of earnings. College graduates tended to have significantly more opportunities to receive additional formal education than their high school graduation counterparts.

Bilingual education grants afforded several Hispanic students to attend Treasure Valley Community College. However, one participant stated that other students could

have continued onto Eastern Oregon University, but because of family responsibilities, chose not to do so. This participant felt that someone should have intervened and convinced them to continue to the four-year college (Ramirez, 2002).

Motivation for This Project

In reading the literature on ELL students' positive and negative college experiences, I reflect on what I have observed and how I, as an ELL educator, can contribute in providing more positive college experiences. The lack of family support may prevent a student from even entering college. However, a student may still succeed despite lack of emotional and financial support. A former coworker of mine, who came to the U.S. from Thailand at the age of three, recounted that her culture believes that women should not pursue higher education, but instead should marry and have children. This co-worker did well in grade school and high school and wished to continue to college. Because she did not receive any financial support from her parents, she worked full-time to finance her education and took the normal load of college courses. She was proficient in English since all of her schooling had been in the U.S., and she eventually earned a bachelor's degree. This example shows how one's culture from his/her first language can present a barrier to higher education. Some students may persist, as this co-worker did. However, others may not be able to overcome such obstacles.

In another example, I observed an individual whose family immigrated to the U.S. before she started school. She completed community college and continued to a four-year college. This student dropped out as she felt overwhelmed with classes. Reaching out for assistance such as tutoring services, sharing her experience with peers or seeking

assistance from faculty may have encourage her to persevere. In other words, more integration and a sense of community may have resulted in a more positive experience.

The above two personal observations, along with the literature review for this paper have fueled my motivation to teach ELL students at the community college level.

Research Gap

Many of the studies reviewed for this chapter focused on single challenges that ELL students face. While the emphasis on particular issues is important, it is also valuable to take a holistic approach in helping ELL students obtain an associate degree.

That is, this approach would consolidate the research on the significance of: support from family, peers and faculty, promoting available resources and disseminating information on financial assistance. Also, in reviewing the literature, it was noted that no specific graduation rates were found for ELL students. The closest statistic found was found in the Department of Education's website. The statistics provided associate degrees earned by race/ethnic group. The lack of tracking ELL students' graduation rate also seems to be a gap, which brings to mind the saying, "What gets measured gets done." That is, less attention is paid to ELL community college students and more emphasis is placed on ELL students in grades K-12. While this emphasis in earlier grades is certainly valuable, the ELL community college students today need support and assistance to succeed in postsecondary education.

Summary

This literature review has helped to provide a backdrop to answer my research question: *what are some best practices that can be implemented to help ELLs succeed in community college?* Various sources summarized above have indicated that ELL

students require more support than just academic support in order to achieve their goal of completing community college. Preparation before starting college can pave a smoother path for a student. Although students may have received guidance before entering college, they still require support to keep them in school. Academic support is in the form of ELL classes but also requires ELL teachers and faculty from other content courses to collaborate. Academic support can also be in the form of a service-learning program or learning center. In addition, emotional support is also key in student retention and this may come from family, peers or faculty. Lastly, institutional support, by way of grants and scholarships, also plays an important role in student retention.

In Chapter Three, I will describe how the effective practices outlined in this literature review can be combined onto a website. Listing practices to mitigate barriers to completing community college will provide a central source for ELL professionals to review, and hopefully, consider implementation to increase retention rates and help ELL students achieve their goal of earning an associate degree.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

This project's goal is to answer the following research question: *what are some best practices that can be implemented to help ELLs succeed in community college?* In this chapter, I provide details of my project, including a description of the project format—which is a website—along with target audience and setting. These details are followed by reasons for choosing a website format, principles of good web design, how the website will be designed to meet the target audience's needs and how this project contributes to scholarship. The final sections of this chapter provide the timeline for developing the website and the methods to be used for assessing the website.

Description of the Project Format

The website that was created as part of this project will be published and available at <https://sccook01.wixsite.com/ellcommcollege>. The website's home page contains the title “Best Practices to Help English Language Learners Succeed in Community College.” The three major components of this website are: Section 1: Best Practices; Section 2: Getting Started; 3: Feedback. Each of these sections is detailed in what follows.

Section 1: Best Practices. As described in the literature review in Chapter Two, qualitative studies at community colleges have been conducted to determine whether ELL students complete their degrees. However, a review of the current literature suggests that data is in disparate places and may be hard to glean. Since a large number of incoming students are ELL, it is important to develop and track measurements of the

students' successes or failures so as to correct course and make improvements to increase student retention.

The home page of the website shows an image of college graduates, which is supported by the four categories documented in the Chapter Two. Each of the four resources: family, peers, faculty and institutions is represented by an image. After clicking on each image, the list of best practices obtained from the literature review appears.

Section 2: Getting Started. On the home page, a tab titled "Getting Started" is displayed. The text behind this tab includes questions to prompt action. For example, a first step would be to assess the current situation and find out if there are any statistics available on ELL students. A subsequent step is to discuss possible practices to implement and gain a consensus so that all stakeholders agree on the same goals and develop a plan and timeline. Finally, it is suggested that, after implementing one of the best practices, that the ELL professionals meet regularly to discuss outcomes of the changes made and determine if any adjustments are necessary.

Section 3: Feedback. The research documented in Chapter Two provided a good foundation of knowledge to address my research question. However, I am hoping to create a community of ELL students and professionals in community colleges across the U.S. with this website. To that end, I added a tab in the home page titled "Feedback." Clicking on the tab displays a Google Form asking visitors whether the website was helpful and inviting the visitors to share the most effective method of support as well as their experiences. My aim is to add the responses to one of the four categories on the website, creating a website that is constantly evolving.

The tabs mentioned above are key to the website but other tabs have been added as well. For example, the tab “Purpose” explains why I have created this website and contains information that I have documented in Chapter One. An additional tab includes a reference list for the studies mentioned in the best practices as well as credits for the images and two quotes on the home page.

Audience and Setting

The target audience for the website is for both ELL professionals and ELL students. A review of the literature revealed that there is a myriad of ways to support ELL community college students. For instance, family, peers and faculty have direct contact with the students and therefore may be able to influence these students more easily. On the other hand, institutions do not necessarily have daily, direct contact with students, but they have the ability to effect change that may positively impact ELL students in general. The intent of the website is for ELL instructors and administrators to consider what changes can be easily made to gain momentum and then continue to implement additional practices. ELL students may also benefit from reviewing the types of support that may be available to them.

To encourage the use of the website among my target audience of ELL teachers and administrators, I will explore having a link to it on professional associations’ websites-- such as MinneTESOL, the Minnesota chapter of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Having ELL instructors at the community college level review the website will hopefully spur further debate and discussion, and lead to implementation of the suggestions provided in the third component of the website.

Making students aware of the website may be done via several communication methods. C. Anderson, a retired ELL high school teacher (personal communication, September 23, 2018) recommended adding the website link to application or registration forms. Another communication method would be to inform guidance counselors at various local community colleges of the website so that they relay the information to ELL students.

Choice of Format

I selected the website as the format for this project based on my research for the literature review. To be clear, no articles specifically recommended providing a website for listing methods that may help to increase retention of community college students.

My aim is to provide these practices to spur discussion and debate and subsequently action. I considered creating a curricular unit or a professional development course for ELL teachers. However, in taking a holistic view of the support needs of the ELL community college student, I concluded that a culmination of some best practices in a website was the logical choice to share this information with other ELL professionals.

To ensure that the ELL professionals become engaged in the website, I must adhere to principles of good web design, which are presented in the next section.

Principles of Good Web Design and Consideration of Validity and Reliability

I am a novice in Web design and my initial concern was that the technological aspect of creating the website might detract from my focus on the content. In addition, time was limited as this project had to be completed in the Fall of 2018 during the Capstone Project course. I plan to seek guidance from individuals who have expertise. I will also consult the recommended source titled *Research-based web design & usability*,

created by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2006). In an review of this guide, I noted the following recommendations with high ratings on relative importance.

- **Provide material that is practical and helpful.** Some studies have shown that good, relevant content is valued more than other features of the website such as ease of navigation and usability.
- **Ensure that users can easily find the website.** When users perform a search, they have a tendency to ignore any sites that are listed beyond the first 30 sites. One way to increase the odds that a website will be found more easily is to add keywords. The following keywords were added to Wix so that various search engines will find this website:
 - ESL college student
 - ELL college student
 - community college
 - two-year college
 - English as a Second Language
 - English Language Learner
 - Limited English Proficiency
 - associate degree
 - associate's degree
 - graduation
 - retention
- **Ensure that the website is credible.** Examples to achieve this goal include offering articles with citations and references, maintaining the website with up-to-date information, and organizing the website so that it is logical.

Another source that I referenced was “6 Criteria for Websites” from the Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. These criteria focus on the content of websites. Some of the

criteria align with the principles stated in the above bullet points from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services guide. There is an additional criterion suggested by Dalhousie University, which is objectivity--providing information with little or no bias. The bias that may likely come across in my website is that the practices listed are indeed useful and effective. This positive bias is based on information from my literature review, provided with citations, and it should serve to convince users to implement the practices. At a minimum, I hope that an ELL teacher would view the website as part of their ongoing action research and tailor one of the best practices to fit his/her students' needs.

It should also be noted that the information included in the website came from more than one type of data source. This triangulation helps increase validity (Creswell, J. & Creswell, D. 2018). In the literature review presented in Chapter Two both qualitative and quantitative research results were examined, along with information on what some institutions did to help with retention of ELL students in community colleges.

Website Design and Relevance to Adult Learners

The website's title of "Best Practices to Help English Language Learners Succeed in Community College" may pique interest of ELL professionals. However, to keep their attention and encourage participation, further consideration of adult learning principles is required. According to Knowles (1992), adult learners prefer to actively participate in learning and that their learning should be relevant to issues that they face. One way that the website will promote active participation is a feedback form. The form includes a question as to whether the website was helpful. The form also invites participants to indicate the method of support that has been the most effective and to share their

experiences. In addition, details from the literature review were added to the recommended practices. This gathered information of practices and corresponding examples allow ELL professionals to compare their own experiences with those described in the studies. Also, given that time is a limited resource, providing the studies from the literature review as support for the suggested practices gives ELL professionals a start on action research, if they choose to pursue action research.

Contribution to Scholarship

This project contributes to public scholarship by drawing more attention to helping ELL community college students succeed. Much of the focus of ELL students is on K-12 for good reason—providing ELL students early on is important so that they build on their language skills. However, ELL college students require support as well. Users of the website may not agree with all of the listed best practices, but they may be inclined to try one of the suggestions. If one practice proves to be successful, another suggestion may be undertaken, further contributing to the goal of helping ELL students complete community college.

Timeline

This project was completed over two semesters. In the summer of 2018, the first three chapters were drafted and revised with feedback from the instructor. During the fall semester, the drafted chapters were reviewed by the instructors for the final course, an outside content reviewer and a peer. The development of the website involved several iterations of updates. In the latter part of the project, I reflected on and documented my experiences in Chapter Four. The website will be published after all feedback has been incorporated.

Assessment

The website will be assessed using two methods. As a broad measurement, the website will track the number of visitors. For a more specific assessment, an online form requests feedback from visitors as to whether the website was helpful. In addition, the online feedback form also asks visitors to share their experiences on support methods that have been most effective. My goal is to share those stories and add them to the website as further encouragement for other ELL professionals to implement practices to help students succeed in community college.

Summary

This chapter provided a plan to create a website to address my research question: *what are some best practices that can be implemented to help ELL students succeed in community college?* I indicated the need for more attention to this population of ELL students. Researchers recognize the lack of rigor on gathering data to track the journey of these students. Without measurements to serve as concrete evidence on how many ELL community college students drop out, there is less likelihood that new practices are employed to increase the retention rate and reduce the dropout rate. The website is intended to encourage debate and discussion among my project audience of faculty members and administrators. The main goal is for these stakeholders to implement one or more of the best practices outlined in the website.

In Chapter Four, I reflected on my learnings from the entire process of completing this Capstone Project. Additionally, I set goals on how to ensure that the website is maintained so that other ELL professionals and I continue to learn and collaborate across the U.S.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

The first chapter of this paper provided my background as a first generation Italian-American and one of the first individuals in my family to attend college. My personal experience and my desire to help other immigrants persist in higher education motivated me to perform research to answer the question *what are some best practices that can be implemented to help ELLs succeed in community college?* The literature review in Chapter Two presented various sources and methods of support to assist ELL community college students and Chapter Three outlined the format and tool to share that information with the community of ELL students and professionals. In this final chapter, I reflect on my learnings from this capstone project and how I will create a cycle of continuous research for helping ELL community college students achieve their goal of obtaining an associate degree and subsequently, better job opportunities.

Learnings

One of the main learnings from this project is that, while it is important to maintain focus, it is also equally important to remain amenable to broadening scope as more research is gathered. Because I plan to teach English as a Second Language in post secondary education, my original plan for this project was to create a curriculum that would help me to be better prepared for my future position. However, I am also interested in how to keep all ELL students motivated to persist in community college. Improving students' English language skills is essential and I could impact students in my class. However, as I performed research on assisting ELL students, I found other resources that could contribute to motivating students and have a broader impact. As a

result, the target audience was extended to include institutions, which have the ability to affect an even larger group of students. Finally, at the suggestion of my content reviewer, my target audience was widened to include ELL students so that they can actively seek out this assistance.

Another key takeaway from this project is that feedback from both peers and faculty are essential. With their assistance and encouragement, I believe I have a better product than if I had continued on my own. For example, developing the website was at first daunting. However, a former co-worker who is an Instructional Designer and who is also especially interested in the user experience, recommended the tool called Wix. An additional concern I had was that I might become consumed by the mechanics of building the website and lose focus on the content. I made a conscious decision to value both the format and content of the website in order to attract users and receive feedback from them. As I developed the website, I sought feedback on the site, implemented suggested improvements and moved on to refine the website with more complicated features.

Literature Review Revisited

After completing the literature review, I was not entirely surprised to discover that many of the opportunities to provide support are at the institutional level. On a positive note, institutions have the ability to make bigger impacts as they can affect a larger audience. On the other hand, that finding also raised a concern because change at institutions I prioritized by need and funding. Therefore, I believe the best approach is to effect change one step at a time. Suggesting that ELL professionals evaluate their current state and make simple changes will perhaps spur momentum to continue with additional changes. This idea is similar to the concept of helping students gain confidence in their

abilities in order to take on more challenges and generate a cycle of continuous improvement. I liken this approach in my current work in Information Technology. I hesitate to use new software until I am convinced that it is relevant to my day-to-day work and will eventually reap benefits such as increased efficiency.

The methods of support listed on my website will help ELL professionals review what their colleges have or have not implemented and subsequently choose to pursue one method of support that may be easy to implement. This first step will involve gaining consensus on which method could provide the most benefit and , depending on the current statistics of ELL community college students.

Implications of Project

This project acknowledges that courses to help ELL students improve their language skills are essential. However, equally important is to provide support in various forms that will keep ELL students motivated to stay in college. Taking this holistic approach in viewing the issues faced by ELL students, implies that retention and graduation rates will increase and that students will be able to obtain better job opportunities. The implementation alone of the best practices listed in the website is not enough to increase the retention and graduation rates. The implementations must include action to reach out to students to ensure they are aware of the additional resources. By the same token, students must seek out and take advantage of the resources in order to gain benefits from them.

Limitations of the Project

This project presented four sources of support for helping ELL community college students succeed. Support from family and peers do not have a financial cost but

may involve significant time cost. Most of the best practices are listed in the categories of faculty and institutions. This project did not delve into the amount of time or funds that may be required to implement the listed practices. The website is intended as a starting point for ELL professionals to engage and commit to make improvements and for ELL students to know of possible resources and to seek them out. My hope is that the ELL community will share their past experiences and learnings from newly implemented practices by responding to the feedback form on the website.

Recommendations for Further Research

To add to the scholarship of increasing ELL student retention rates, research is needed on practices to help student community college graduates to advance a four-year college or university, if they choose to do so. This research may take the approach of determining whether some students may be overwhelmed at the prospect of advancing to a four-year college or university or whether some students may be more motivated. In any case, the option of continuing post-secondary studies should be discussed.

Further research may also be done to determine whether colleges provide a structure to connect older students to younger students in a mentor/mentee relationship. While this relationship may occur naturally, a community college might consider formalizing this structure for all students who could benefit from a peer mentor. As with most mentor/mentees, both sides benefit—the older peer gains leadership skills and the younger peer learns from the older peer's experiences.

Additional research may involve circling back to the support through ELL classes. At the 2018 Minnesota English Learner Education conference, I learned that one of the universities did not offer ELL classes. Instead, the university referred students to another

organization that provided the courses. Further recommended research would be to discover if any other community colleges take this same approach and whether this practice affects the retention rate.

Communication and Use of Results

As a simplistic tool to measure the website's utility, a counter has been added to record how many individuals find the website. While this counter will not indicate whether an individual has actually gained any benefit from reviewing the website, this measurement will give an indication on whether individuals are, at the very least, finding the site. If the count of visitors to the site continues to be low over a period of time, I may need to revise the key search words that I created for the site and also consider other ways to advertise the site.

The tab titled "Feedback" will be a significantly better measurement tool on the website's utility. Because the aim of the site is to build community around sharing ways to support ELL community college students, the "Feedback" tab invites visitors to respond with the most effective method of support and to share their experiences. Based on these responses, I may add new methods of support to one of the four categories (i.e. family, peers, faculty and institutions) or add examples to one of the existing methods of support. I deliberately used a Google Form to collect visitors' responses so that I would be able to compile the results more easily and create visual representations of the information (e.g. pie charts) and display those results into a new tab on the website.

Benefits to the Profession

The main benefit of this project to the ELL profession is that it brings attention to ELL community college students. Offering ELL classes is essential for students to

succeed in community college. This website compiles a list of support mechanisms that can supplement the ELL classes and thereby improve retention rates. As I will be a new teacher, researching and learning about these best practices has made me feel better prepared to begin my new position.

Summary

This project involved performing research to answer the question: *what are some best practices that can be implemented to help ELLs succeed in community college?* and promoting those best practices in a website. The intent of the project was to encourage conversation on this topic, spur individuals to take action to implement some best practices and finally, have individuals share experiences. In essence, the goal was to create a community and foster collaboration to help ELLs succeed in community college.

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