



Vignette

Promising Progress

Empowering Adult Learners with Lumina Foundation's Prioritizing Adult Community College Enrollment Initiative (PACCE)

March 2024

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MEASURE

FINDING
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CHANGE

COLORADO MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

ESL Learners at Colorado Mountain College: Understanding, Respect, and Support

In partnership with [Lumina Foundation](#) and Achieving the Dream (ATD), Equal Measure is the learning and evaluation partner for the Prioritizing Adult Community College Enrollment (PACCE) Initiative. Twenty colleges were awarded grants and technical assistance for the initiative from October 2021 through May 2023. The [PACCE](#) initiative was designed to identify and scale promising strategies for increasing the enrollment and reenrollment of adult learners in high-quality credit and non-credit programs. **This vignette delves into Colorado Mountain College's (CMC) strategies for adult English as a Second Language (ESL) learners.**

"As educators, we assume we have it all right. Even myself, I grew up in these communities. My parents were also English language learners. My parents also didn't have education beyond high school. But my experience may be very different from the experience that people are experiencing right now, even when we have similar backgrounds. I've learned a lot through this process." CMC Staff

CMC Adult Learner Context and Strategies

In 2023, Equal Measure visited **Colorado Mountain College (CMC)** to learn about their context, approach and early implementation of promising adult learner strategies. Some of the actionable insights we learned include:

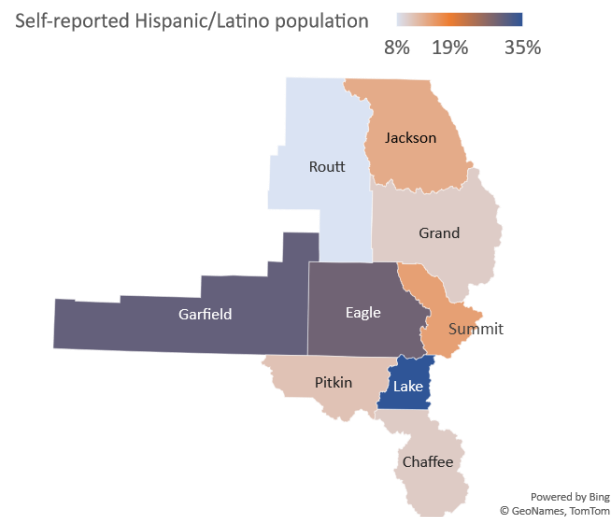
- **ESL Learners at Colorado Mountain.** CMC knows and is continuously learning more about the community it serves. They gather data to implement strategies and make decisions aligned with adult learners' wants and needs.
- **Career Exploration ESL Course.** Armed with data, CMC designed its Career Exploration course to create a bridge for adult ESL learners, helping them transition from non-credit to for-credit pathways.

- **Shared Language and Experience.** Adult ESL learners benefit from CMC faculty and staff who share similar backgrounds, Spanish and dual language speaking and comprehension skills and immigrant and Latino identities.
- **Mindset, Culture and Practice Change.** CMC ESL staff utilize an asset-based ESL adult learner lens that rejects conflating English language skills with intelligence and intentionally positions bilingual staff to support ESL learners.

Snapshot: Colorado Mountain College

Established in 1965, CMC is a dual-mission college offering a variety of certificates as well as associate and bachelor's degrees. It is the only higher education institution and primary provider of non-credit educational opportunities to nine Colorado counties across a vast 12,000 square mile region. With eleven campuses, many of the rural communities CMC serves are beautiful but geographically isolated. Additionally, the cost of living in this region is high, characterized by affluent and transient homeowners and year-round residents working in the service and tourism sectors.

In 2021, after an intentional, multi-year effort to grow the college's Hispanic/Latino learner enrollment, CMC earned the designation of a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), signifying a Latino learner population of 25% or higher. This milestone marked the achievement of the colleges' long-term goal of enrolling learner populations that reflected the diversity of their communities and made CMC eligible for additional grant funding opportunities.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 5-year estimates, 2021-22.

ESL Learners at Colorado Mountain College

CMC's ESL learners are a diverse group, reflecting a range of backgrounds and educational experiences. Some are recent immigrants with limited formal education, while others hold undergraduate and professional degrees from their country of origin. Undocumented ESL learners face unique enrollment barriers related to residency, affordability and financial aid eligibility.

"90% of the students say, I'm actually in ESL to move into credit-bearing because I want to improve my career pathway because I am interested in a further educational pathway."
CMC Staff

Despite offering ESL courses for 25 years, when assessing learner outcomes in 2021, CMC discovered that

less than 3% of ESL learners had attained a credential since the program's inception. This realization prompted CMC to reevaluate its approach to better understand the goals and needs of ESL learners.

With the PACCE grant and other funding, CMC explored a series of questions about their ESL offerings and their English-language learners: Were learners enrolling only in non-credit courses for English language acquisition? Would they be interested in credit-bearing courses and credential pathways? They conducted surveys and gleaned more insight from the adult ESL learner perspective. With that data, leadership and staff at CMC were ready to experiment with strategies to better serve the population.

The Career Exploration ESL Course

CMC's Career Exploration ESL course is the cornerstone of their adult learner strategies. The course functions as a bridge for ESL learners, helping them transition from non-credit to for-credit pathways while addressing barriers to student success. CMC's approach prioritizes clear communication and support to

ensure ESL learners succeed in academia and the workforce without compromising academic rigor.

"We're not dumbing down the curriculum. We're not making it easy. We're literally honoring people where they start."
CMC Staff

The Career Exploration course provides valuable resources for adult learners. It helps guide them through the college enrollment process, offers support for financial aid and teaches essential workforce skills such as resume building

and interview preparation. The course intentionally avoids using academic jargon and is tailored *"to be a holistic view of our target audience and understanding what their lens is, not ours."*

Applying an Adult Learner Lens to ESL

CMC's PACCE leads and their collaborators share a mission-driven disposition when it comes to developing a nuanced understanding of the college's adult ESL Latino learners. Many faculty and administrators at CMC have much in common with their ESL learners, like their Spanish and dual language speaking and comprehension skills and immigrant and Latino identities. The college has also intentionally hired more staff with diverse skill sets and lived experience. Some ESL administrators and faculty we met were once ESL learners themselves.

"The way we were doing it in the past, it was like, 'well, learn English,' then assess whether [ESL learners] are college ready. We were unintentionally correlating college readiness with English acquisition." CMC Staff

CMC has prioritized positioning bilingual enrollment and other support service staff to meet adult ESL learners where they are. The college also plans to implement professional development for faculty to help increase their awareness of and compassion for multilingual learners.

Mindset, Culture and Practice Culture Change

The college has fostered a mindset that shared experiences and kinship with ESL learners contribute to learners' success and sense of belonging. In addition to collaborators whose experiences resemble those of

"Imagine that you don't speak the primary language. What are your barriers? What is going to scare you?"

CMC Staff

current ESL learners, CMC PACCE leads also stressed the importance of helping all faculty and administrators embody and sharpen their adult learner lenses. Adopting an adult ESL learner lens at CMC means understanding that language does not equal intelligence or cognition. It requires CMC PACCE collaborators to recognize the diversity of adult ESL learners' needs, circumstances and goals. It also requires appreciating the implications of

gender, parenting, home care and work responsibilities for learners and celebrating and leveraging their assets and transferable skills. Staff, faculty and administrators are asked to consider what it is like to start college as an ESL learner.

Advice to Peer Community Colleges

CMC's experience offers valuable lessons for other community colleges aiming to support ESL learners effectively. When developing new pathways and support, recognize that mindset shifts in faculty and staff may be needed and that individual ESL adult learner journeys will differ. Embracing a holistic approach, being data-driven and genuinely centering students in decision-making are critical.

"My advice to other colleges is to really get to learn your data, learn the opportunities and really see this from a holistic systemic solution base. The solutions for things like this often don't rest in one department, or in one location, or in one position. The solution needs to be with students in mind, but often, that gets tossed around institutions a lot, 'we're very student-centered.' Are you? Where is that student voice articulated? And I think that has been very important for us to say." CMC Staff

About Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Our goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy.

About Equal Measure

At Equal Measure, we hold that building sustainable equity strategies in a postsecondary context requires that colleges assess (1) their institutional history and readiness to implement equity strategies, (2) the history and context (like economics and demographics) of the communities they are intended to serve, (3) and what learner populations in their community have and continue to experience postsecondary inequities. This foundational knowledge can help colleges develop and implement equity strategies for learners who've been historically underserved.

LUMINA PACCE TEAM

Equal Measure's Lumina PACCE team includes Alice Soo-a Choe, Victoria Worthen Lang, Katie Mosher, Steph Skinner, and Kelly Sloane.