

Feature Article

English Learners' College Persistence and Completion: Paths to Success

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Abstract

Research has largely been silent on English Learner (EL) persistence and completion in U.S. community colleges, yet studies conducted across higher education report that only one in eight ELs completes a bachelor's degree (Kanno & Cromley, 2013). Many interventions have been proposed to improve college student persistence and completion. This paper examines two such interventions at one Oregon community college: ESL Bridge to College (an academic contextualized model of developmental education) and PASS Lane (a career contextualized model). Using descriptive statistics, we tabulated EL participants' persistence and completion rates. Results show that average persistence and completion rates are higher for participants of these two programs compared to the general student population and to former ELs who were enrolled prior to the creation of the PASS Lane and Bridge programs. More research is needed that controls for participants' background characteristics like academic ability, motivation, socioeconomic status, prior education, and external commitments to determine whether the programs themselves caused this increase in EL persistence and completion.

Key Words: *English learner, persistence, completion, developmental education, remedial education, community college, academic contextualized model, career contextualized model, ESL student success*

Introduction

Data on English Learner (EL) success in U.S. community colleges is sparse (cf. Almon, 2012; Núñez et al., 2016), but the little information that does exist about ELs' persistence and completion in U.S. higher education does not paint a rosy picture. For example, Kanno & Cromley (2013) analyzed nationally representative data of students who began eighth grade in 1988 and found that only one in eight (12%) of ELs in the study completed a bachelor's degree by the time the study concluded in 2000. In comparison,

32% of monolingual English students in the study completed a bachelor's degree or higher. A more recent study of students at all California community colleges showed that 9% of former ESL students who started down the path of degree attainment graduated with a degree within 3 years of enrolling in the California community college system (19% within 6 years of enrollment), and 1% transferred to a 4-year university within 3 years (10% within 6 years) (Rodriguez et al., 2019).

Our study examines EL persistence and completion rates in two programs at one community college in Oregon: Lane Community College (LCC): ESL Bridge to College (an academic contextualized model of developmental education) and PASS Lane (a career contextualized model of developmental education). This paper is not designed as a causal analysis of the factors affecting success rates, but rather as a snapshot of two LCC programs that focus on helping ELs persist and complete their education. Both ESL Bridge to College and PASS Lane were created to help ELs transition into and succeed in credit courses at LCC. Prior to these programs' creation, only 22% of former ESL students successfully graduated with a certificate or degree or transferred within three years of starting in credit classes (LCC's office of Institutional Research; cohorts from Summer 2009 - Winter 2013). In comparison, 53% of the most recent cohort of former ESL students successfully completed (LCC's office of Institutional Research; Fall 2017 cohort).

In this paper, we first survey the literature on factors affecting EL persistence and completion before reviewing policy interventions, focusing on corequisite models of developmental education and comprehensive, wraparound support models. We then present data on EL persistence and success in two LCC programs: ESL Bridge to College and PASS Lane.

Literature Review

Factors Affecting EL Persistence and Completion

A number of factors contribute to English learners' low college persistence and completion rates. One reason for the high rate of attrition may be lower levels of prior educational attainment or academic preparation (Condelli & Wrigley, 2008). Lower levels of educational attainment may result from a lack of access to education in ELs' home countries or from their experience in the U.S. K-12 system. For example, English-only policies in K-12 schools can interrupt EL students' learning and cause them to be tracked into lower levels of coursework or barred from college preparatory coursework altogether (Flores & Drake, 2014; Ortiz & Hernandez, 2011). In cases like these, students

are often required to take a placement test to determine the level at which they must begin taking “remedial coursework” before being allowed to enroll in college-level coursework. Improper placement into such remedial coursework is another factor that affects ELs’ persistence (Hodara, 2015; Raufman et al., 2019). A single placement test is not an effective means of identifying how many extra terms of coursework students may need before enrolling in credit coursework, and many students arrive at community colleges unsure of whether they should take the ESL placement test or the general placement test (Raufman et al., 2019). Consequently, some may underperform on this exam causing them to start at lower levels than their actual proficiency and resulting in discouragement and lack of motivation. In fact, scholars have noted that students who are placed in the lowest levels of ESL coursework dropout at higher rates (Almon, 2012; Núñez et al., 2016; Park, 2019).

Non-academic factors, including age, sex, and financial aid, also play a role in EL persistence. Almon (2012) found that traditional-age ELs at a community college in the Northeast performed .43 GPA points better than non-traditional ELs. This could be because older students often have more responsibilities such as work and children which hinder them from spending as much time as traditional-age students on their school work (cf. Braxton et al., 2013; Janis, 2013). Female ELs also consistently outperform men (Almon, 2012; Flores & Drake, 2014); however, their higher grades do not always translate to higher persistence and graduation rates (Almon, 2012), perhaps due to cultural expectations that place more family commitments on women (cf. Braxton et al., 2013; Ortiz & Hernandez, 2011). While ELs who are able to enroll full-time perform better academically (Almon, 2012; Kanno & Cromley, 2013), ELs are overrepresented in the lowest income brackets making it difficult to enroll full-time due to work commitments (Kanno & Cromley, 2013; Kanno & Harklau, 2012; Núñez et al., 2016). However, those who receive financial aid such as Pell grants persist longer than those who receive no aid (Almon, 2012). Intensive, case-management advising is one method of helping students access financial aid, plan their coursework, and manage external commitments (Evans et al., 2020).

Students’ identities, sense of belonging, and support networks can impact their persistence as well (Kanno & Harklau, 2012; Núñez et al., 2016; Raufman et al., 2019). Those who see themselves as deficient or less capable than expert speakers or those who believe they cannot go to college because they are ELs may persist less readily than those with more agency and self-efficacy (cf. Kanno & Harklau, 2012). Students’ linguistic and academic identities as well as cultural and racial identities can affect their sense of belonging in the classroom (Núñez et al., 2016) as racism and stereotype threat are significant issues that ELs regularly face on campus (Ortiz & Hernandez, 2011; Steele,

2011). Nevertheless, ELs who have a strong network of supportive family members, friends, and on-campus advocates persist longer than those without these networks (Janis, 2013; Kanno & Harklau, 2012).

Policy Interventions

A number of policy interventions have been proposed to mitigate the factors that negatively influence students' college persistence and completion and support those that positively influence them. Most of these interventions have not been targeted specifically to English learners given that many colleges do not even collect data on which students are English learners (Bergey et al., 2018). In fact, Lane Community College (the school where this study was conducted) only began collecting data about students' language backgrounds in 2017, and Kanno and Harklau (2012) highlight that within the higher education sector, language proficiency has been almost an "invisible variable" affecting college student persistence. Thus, the following policy interventions have been proposed to increase college student persistence generally by providing targeted support for any students (not just ELs) who may be underprepared for college-level coursework. Following the literature and funding entities, we refer to classes that are offered to support underprepared college students in enrolling in credit-level courses as "remedial" or "developmental."¹

Corequisite models

Corequisite models of developmental education allow students to enroll directly in mainstream, for-credit coursework while simultaneously enrolling in a support course that helps them acquire the skills necessary for college success (Bailey et al., 2016; Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). Advising is also a strong component of some corequisite programs (Daugherty et al., 2018). Corequisite models alleviate the time that could be lost in long sequences of remedial coursework by enrolling students in credit-level coursework sooner. This structure is believed to increase student motivation by giving them a relevant context in which to apply the developmental skills they are learning and by reducing demands on their time and access to financial aid. We examine two corequisite models below in more detail: career contextualized models and academic contextualized models.

Career contextualized models. Career contextualized models of developmental education give students the opportunity to enroll in college-level courses focused on their

¹ The terms "remedial" and "developmental" are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

career or technical interests while also receiving extra developmental-level support through additional instructors or corequisite courses (Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). Washington’s Professional/Technical Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (Professional/Technical I-BEST) program is a canonical example of this model (Bailey et al., 2016; Rutschow & Schneider, 2011). The I-BEST model was created with a two-part theory of change: 1) *integration* between developmental-level and college-level coursework is achieved through a team teaching model and 2) *contextualization* of developmental skills within a transfer-level course is achieved through the corequisite structure (Emory et al., 2016). Jenkins, Zeidenberg, and Kienz (2009) report that students who enrolled in the I-BEST program earned more credits, persisted for more terms, and completed more awards than their similarly situated students who did not enroll in the I-BEST program. LCC’s PASS Lane program is an example of a career contextualized model of developmental education (see program description in Methodology).

Academic contextualized models. Based on the success of the career contextualized model, academic contextualized models of remedial education were created to allow students to enroll in transfer-level coursework focused on their *academic* interests while simultaneously receiving developmental-level support through additional instructors and/or a corequisite course (Emory et al., 2016). Washington state’s Academic I-BEST program is an example of this model (Emory et al., 2016). Preliminary results from the Academic I-BEST program suggest that those enrolled in the program had higher average GPAs in Interpersonal Communication (CMST 210), Introduction to Writing (ENGL 99), and College Writing (ENGL 101) compared to those not in the program and spent roughly two fewer terms in developmental sequences of education (Emory et al., 2016, pp. 47–48). Because this model is newer than its counterpart, the effects of the model on students’ persistence and completion rates have not been as rigorously examined. LCC’s ESL Bridge to College program can be classified as an academic contextualized model of developmental education (see program description in Methodology).

Comprehensive, long-term wraparound supports

The City University of New York’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs’ (CUNY ASAP) approach to supporting underprepared, low-income college students integrates and incentivizes many other support structures (e.g. advising, tutoring, developmental education courses, student success courses) via funding (which covers tuition, books, and metro cards) throughout students’ college experience (Bailey et al., 2016; Schak et al., 2017; Scrivener & Weiss, 2013). This integrated approach to providing wraparound support for students has been the most successful persistence and completion policy intervention to date. “[T]he program increased the proportion of students who graduated

within two years by almost 6 percentage points — a 66 percent increase over the control group’s graduation rate” (Scrivener & Weiss, 2013, p. 9). The fact that this approach addresses many of the factors that affect student persistence (e.g. background levels of education, financial aid, advising, and other support networks) in one integrated model may explain its higher levels of success. All community colleges in Oregon, including LCC, have a SNAP Training and Employment Partnership (STEP) program that shares some similarities with CUNY ASAP. The STEP program at LCC is too new for us to examine in depth in this paper, but it holds promise, and we include it briefly in the Discussion.

Research Questions

Based on the reported success of the above interventions, we sought to examine the influence of career and academic contextualized models of developmental education at LCC. To do this, we formulated the following research questions.

1. Career Contextualized Model (PASS Lane at LCC):

2.

- a. To what extent do ELs enrolled in a career contextualized model of developmental education (PASS Lane at LCC) *persist* to a second term of credit classes?
- b. To what extent do ELs enrolled in a career contextualized model of developmental education (PASS Lane at LCC) *graduate*² from LCC with a certificate or degree within 3 years of starting credit classes?

3. Academic Contextualized Model (ESL Bridge to College at LCC):

- a. To what extent do ELs enrolled in an academic contextualized model of developmental education (ESL Bridge to College at LCC) *persist* to a second term of credit classes?
- b. To what extent do ELs enrolled in an academic contextualized model of developmental education (ESL Bridge to College at LCC) *graduate* from

² Research Question #2 asks whether Bridge students *graduated* or *transferred*, but we were unable to obtain transfer data for PASS Lane students due to a lack of resources in LCC’s office of Institutional Research, so we use only graduation rates for PASS Lane (Research Question #1). Given that the goal of PASS Lane is to help students finish Career Pathway Certificates, which only exist at LCC, it would be surprising if any PASS Lane students transferred to other institutions.

LCC with a certificate or degree or *transfer* to another college within 3 years of starting credit classes?

Methodology

Site

Lane Community College (LCC) is a public institution with multiple campuses in Lane County, Oregon. LCC uses the quarter system, and students can start taking classes in any term. Enrollments vary from term to term; a snapshot from Fall 2017 shows that there were 13,500 students enrolled in a wide range of programs, including classes designed to transfer to 4-year colleges (e.g., Biology), career/technical programs (e.g., Welding), professional development classes (e.g., Massage Therapy), personal enrichment classes (e.g., Personal Finance), early college (students concurrently enrolled in high school & college), and skills development classes (ESL & Adult Basic and Secondary Education) (data from LCC's office of Institutional Research).

Target Population: English Learners in PASS Lane and ESL Bridge to College

PASS Lane and ESL Bridge to College are two LCC-specific programs created to help students in non-credit ESL classes transition into and succeed in credit classes. This paper focuses on the persistence and completion rates of ELs in these two programs.

PASS Lane

PASS (Pathways, Academic Skills, and Services) Lane is a career-contextualized model of developmental education that started in Spring 2013 after an internal review of ESL student success found that very few ESL students transitioned to credit, and of those who transitioned, very few transferred or graduated with any certificates or degrees (Rosa Lopez, personal communication, March 2, 2021). Specifically addressing graduation and transfer rates: in the 5-year period of time before PASS Lane started (Summer 2009 - Winter 2013), 350 ESL students transitioned into credit, and only 22% (78 former ESL students) graduated or transferred within 3 years of starting their first credit class, compared to 31% of non-former-ESL students in the same time period (LCC Office of Institutional Research).

Students in PASS Lane take free, non-credit basic skills classes that are contextualized in specific career-technical education (CTE) programs that have Career Pathway Certificates. Career Pathway Certificates are short-term (less than one year) certificates that are embedded into larger CTE certificates or degrees at LCC. They are designed to

help students quickly gain skills to enter the workforce. The specific Career Pathway Certificates supported by PASS Lane have changed slightly over time, but fields have included Early Childhood Education, Health Professions, Culinary, Industrial Trades, and Business. Some PASS Lane programs start with a free, non-credit class designed to help students explore careers in the field and prepare for rigorous credit-level classes the following term, and some PASS Lane programs have co-requisite classes in which students take a gateway credit class required for a Career Pathway Certificate while also taking a free, non-credit PASS Lane class. Most PASS Lane classes focus on reading, writing, and study skills and are taught by ESL instructors; one series of PASS Lane classes focuses on culinary math and is taught by a math instructor.

PASS Lane is open to students of all language backgrounds (including speakers of English as a first language) who are in developmental levels of education. In this paper, we only focus on the persistence and completion rates of the 127 ELs in PASS³ Lane. 66% of the ELs (84 students) took ESL classes at LCC prior to starting in PASS Lane and 34% of the ELs (43 students) never took ESL classes at LCC but were identified as ELs by the PASS Lane advisor. One EL was an international student (a student studying at LCC with an international student visa), and the remaining 126 ELs were resident students (those living in Oregon without an international student visa).

ESL Bridge to College

ESL Bridge to College (shortened to “Bridge”) is an academic contextualized model of developmental education that started in Fall 2017 to help ESL students “jumpstart their college credit work while continuing to receive ESL support” (*ESL to Credit Bridge Program*, n.d.). LCC’s intensive ESL program has six levels, and students at the top two levels can choose between the regular ESL classes and Bridge classes. Students in Bridge take a package of two ESL classes (Reading & Writing and Oral Skills) and specific co-requisite credit-level classes that are required for many Associate’s Degrees and that are transferable to 4-year schools. The co-requisite for the second-highest ESL level is Intercultural Communication. The co-requisite for the highest ESL level started as Historical Racial & Ethnic issues for Fall 2017 before changing to Writing 121 (Academic Composition) for subsequent terms. 140 students participated in Bridge from Fall 2017 - Spring 2020 (Bridge has been on hiatus since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic); 14% (19 out of 140) were resident students and 86% (121 out of 140) were international students. It is important to note that LCC’s International Programs office

³ 156 total students (127 ELs and 29 English L1 speakers) participated in PASS Lane from Spring 2013 - Fall 2020.

uses the Bridge program as a recruiting tool, and it is presumable that many international students came to LCC specifically to attend Bridge; therefore, selection bias must be kept in mind while reviewing Bridge student success results.

Data Collection & Analysis

Descriptive statistics about persistence and completion were collected and tabulated from student transcripts, from the office of International Programs at LCC and from LCC's office of Institutional Research. Because of variations among records from each program office and between research questions, data collection for each research question differed slightly.

Research Question #1: Career Contextualized Model (PASS Lane at LCC). We used students' transcripts to show if the student *persisted*⁴ to a second term of credit classes and *graduated* with a certificate or degree within three years *after* their first term of credit classes *that was either concurrent to or after their first term in PASS Lane*. In other words, some students took credit-level classes *prior* to enrolling in PASS Lane, but we chose to ignore any credit classes that students may have taken prior to PASS Lane when looking at data for the program. Data for this program are from students who began credit classes between Spring 2013 (PASS Lane's first term) and Fall 2020.

Research Question #2: Academic Contextualized Model (ESL Bridge to College at LCC). We used students' transcripts to show if the student *persisted* to a second term of credit classes and/or *graduated* with a certificate or degree within three years *after* their first term of Bridge classes. Data for this program are from Fall 2017 (Bridge's first term) to Spring 2020. LCC's International Programs provided transfer data for the 121 international students enrolled in Bridge, and Institutional Research provided transfer data for the 19 resident Bridge students Course.

Results

Persistence and completion rates for both programs are shown below. Data for students in PASS Lane are presented in Table 1, and data for students in ESL Bridge to College are presented in Table 2. In each table, the Mean is the proportion of the population that persisted/graduated/transferred. 88% of PASS Lane students persisted, 55% of PASS

⁴ 156 total students (127 ELs and 29 English L1 speakers) participated in PASS Lane from Spring 2013 - Fall 2020.

Lane students graduated, 91% of Bridge students persisted, and 72% of Bridge students graduated and/or transferred.

Table 1

Persistence and Completion Rates for PASS Lane Students

PASS Lane Students			
Characteristic	Mean	SD	Total Number
Persistence to 2nd Term in Credit (1st term in credit Spring 2013 - Fall 2020)	.881	.323	118
Graduation within 3 Years of 1st Credit Class (1st term in credit Spring 2013 - Winter 2018)	.552	.497	58

127 ELs took PASS Lane classes from Spring 2013 - Fall 2020. Nine of those students took only a non-credit PASS Lane class and have so far not continued to credit; they are not included in our results.

Of the 118 students who continued to credit, 104 students (88%) persisted to a second term of credit classes after their first term of credit classes that was either concurrent with or after their first term in PASS Lane.

Of the 58 students who started in PASS Lane in Winter 2018 or earlier⁵, 32 students (55%) graduated within three years of their first term of credit classes that was either concurrent with or after their first term in PASS Lane.

Table 2

Persistence and Completion Rates for ESL Bridge to College Students

ESL Bridge to College Students			
Characteristic	Mean	SD	Total Number

⁵ Our data collection & analysis were performed in Spring 2021, so 3-year completion data could only be used for students who started in Winter 2018 or earlier.

Persistence to 2nd term in credit (1st term in credit Fall 2017 - Spring 2020):	.914	.280	140
Graduation within 3 Years of 1st Credit Class (1st term in credit Fall 2017 - Winter 2018):	.721	.449	43

140 ELs took ESL Bridge to College classes from Fall 2017 - Spring 2020. 128 of 140 students (91%) persisted to a second term after their first term of Bridge classes. 31 of the 43 students (72%) who started Bridge in Winter 2018 or earlier graduated or transferred within three years of their first term of Bridge classes.

Discussion

The results of our study revealed that roughly 90% of students in both the PASS Lane and Bridge programs persisted to their second term of credit classes. In addition, Bridge students graduated or transferred within three years of their first credit class at 72% and PASS Lane students graduated within three years at 55%. As a point of comparison, prior to the creation of the PASS Lane and Bridge programs, approximately 74% of former ESL students who were enrolled in credit classes persisted to the second term, and only 22% of these students graduated or transferred within three years (Summer 2009 - Winter 2013, office of Institutional Research at LCC). Thus, students in both the PASS Lane and Bridge programs are persisting and graduating or transferring at higher rates than former ESL students who were enrolled at LCC prior to the creation of PASS Lane and Bridge programs.

However, it is important to note here that these improved persistence and graduation/transfer rates included in this descriptive study cannot be attributed solely to the PASS Lane or Bridge programs. Further research focusing on other variables that could influence EL outcomes is needed. It is also important to point out that completion rates for all students have been increasing across the college over the last eight years. From Summer 2009 - Winter 2013, the three-year graduation or transfer rate for non-former ESL students was 31%, but from Spring 2013 - Summer 2017 this rate increased to 37%, and the Fall 2017 non-former ESL cohort had a graduation/transfer rate of 40%.

We cannot conclude based on this study that the PASS Lane or Bridge programs are increasing students' persistence and completion rates. The primary reason that we cannot draw these conclusions is the problem of selection bias. Because students are not randomly selected into either the PASS Lane or the Bridge program, they may differ from those who did not opt in to these programs in important background characteristics like academic ability, motivation, socioeconomic status, prior education, and external

commitments. If we compared the results of PASS Lane and Bridge students to the results of cohorts before the programs existed or to the results of cohorts who chose not to participate, it is likely that these unobserved background characteristics would act as confounding variables skewing the results. Unfortunately, however, LCC has not yet collected data on these characteristics. Without being able to control for these variables, it is not possible to determine whether these factors have influenced the higher persistence and completion rates among these cohorts or whether it was the programs themselves. We expect that the programs themselves are contributing to these outcomes at least in part based on the literature (Emory et al., 2016; Jenkins et al., 2009), but identifying the influence of the programs themselves must await further research.

We would also like to emphasize that these persistence and completion data should *not* be used to compare the Bridge & PASS Lane programs with each other. Bridge and PASS Lane generally serve mutually exclusive populations of students (although one student took one non-credit PASS Lane class before switching to Bridge) that self-select into each program based on their needs and goals. Anecdotal evidence from PASS Lane & Bridge advisors and teachers suggests that the students enrolled in each program differ significantly in background characteristics such as socioeconomic status, prior education, and external commitments.

By collecting EL persistence and completion data disaggregated by students' background characteristics, more rigorous studies could be conducted to determine the extent to which programs like PASS Lane and Bridge have influenced student outcomes. Additionally, similar data should be collected for students in STEP at LCC. As we described in our Literature Review, STEP provides comprehensive, long-term wraparound support for students but is too new to be examined in this paper. Given the high levels of success of the CUNY ASAP model, we believe investigating the influence of STEP on student persistence and completion should be a high priority.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the persistence and completion rates of ELs enrolled in two different programs at Lane Community College (LCC): PASS Lane and ESL Bridge to College. Using data gathered from student transcripts, from the office of International Programs at LCC, and from LCC's office of Institutional Research, we presented descriptive statistics about PASS Lane and Bridge ELs' persistence and completion. Our study found that roughly 90% of students from both programs persisted to the second term of credit classes, 72% of Bridge students graduated or transferred within three years, and 55% of PASS Lane students graduated within three years. These persistence and completion rates are higher than overall average persistence and completion rates at LCC

and higher than the average persistence and completion of former ELs who were enrolled at LCC prior to the creation of the PASS Lane and Bridge programs. While these increased persistence and completion rates are not sufficient evidence to conclude that the programs themselves caused these results, we do believe the PASS Lane and ESL Bridge to College programs as well as STEP hold promise and warrant further research that controls for participants' background characteristics like academic ability, motivation, socioeconomic status, prior education, and external commitments.

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