

ELLs in Chittenden County: College Preparation, Access, and Adjustment

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Research Summary Report (draft)

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to study English Language Learners (ELLs)¹ from high schools in Chittenden County, who are attending or planning to attend college. The aim is to understand what skills and resources are most helpful to students in preparing for, entering, and adjusting to college, as well as what challenges and barriers prevent these students from achieving their postsecondary goals. The ultimate goal of this project is to increase collective understanding of the educational trajectory for ELLs from Chittenden County, and to identify areas of success, as well as potential for improved collaboration among institutions and individuals with a stake in college attainment for this student population.²

Three questions are at the center of this analysis:

1. What are the greatest academic challenges for ELLs in middle and high school?
2. What factors increase the likelihood that ELLs will pursue postsecondary education?
3. What do college-bound ELLs wish they had done or learned in high school, to be better prepared for college?

Overview of Data and Methods

The first phase of this project involved individual interviews with students who are planning to attend or are currently attending college. Interview participants were contacted via partner institutions that work closely with ELLs in the college transition and adjustment process (Johnson State College, Champlain College, Vermont Adult Learning, and King Street Center etc.). Interviews were semi-structured, lasting approximately one hour, and most were audio-recorded, with written consent of the participant. A total of 15 students from Burlington, Winooski, and Williston school districts have been interviewed—11 males and 4 females.³ I have completed detailed outlines of the interviews, looking for key topics and themes, and have transcribed the most relevant sections.

This analysis is also informed by informal meetings I have had with teachers, administrators, community service providers, and parents, as well as my participation in several committees and programs devoted to education in Chittenden County. I have also looked closely at other publically available data, including newspaper reports, district documents, and CCTV recordings. Using these additional data points helps to “triangulate” (provide greater validity for) my analysis of interview data.

¹ English Language Learners (ELLs) are students for whom English is not a first or primary language. Other terms often used to refer to this population include: refugees/immigrants, New Americans, and ESL students.

² Approval for this study was obtained from my institution (Middlebury College), and all interview participants were required to give written consent.

³ I would like to recruit more female participants for the next phase of this study.

This draft report is intended for a general audience, and provides an overview of the initial trends that have emerged from the interview data, and that are supported by other data (meetings, documents, etc., as described above).

*Key Findings*⁴

Question 1: What are the greatest academic challenges for ELLs in high school?

1. Most students say they struggle more with either math/science (N= 8) OR reading/writing (N= 6). This is closely related to the schooling experiences they had prior to coming to the U.S.
 - a. Learning specialized vocabulary is often a major challenge in science courses.
 - i. Biology was mentioned by several students as a particularly challenging course.
 - b. Reading textbooks is a challenge for many students, especially for areas such as social studies and science.
 - i. Some students admitted to doing very little reading overall in high school.
 - c. Receiving individualized feedback on writing (and having the opportunity to revise) is one of the ways students feel they grow most in their English language proficiency.
2. Many students have low self-confidence about their language proficiency and/or academic skills. (N=8). Even if they are achieving high grades, they may not feel they are making the sort of progress needed to be prepared for college or career goals.
3. Some students express a preference for being in mainstream classes (with extra support), rather than being in sheltered ESOL classes. Others say they like the supportive environment of sheltered classes, and may choose to stay in them even after testing out.
4. Academic motivation is sometimes compromised by peer pressure (not being “cool” to focus on academics) and social isolation (as “ELL” and/or as a student of color) (N=8)
 - a. Some students described pretending not to care about academics, because they were concerned that they would be socially stigmatized by their peers
 - b. Students often pointed out that there is a great deal of racial segregation at their high schools, particularly in the cafeteria and in certain after school programs.
5. Many students struggle to balance school, extra-curricular activities, jobs, and family responsibilities—not just during high school, but in college
6. Testing (NECAP, WIDA, TOEFL/SAT/ACCUPLACER) is a cause of both confusion and frustration for students (e.g., comments made during protest in April 2012, as well as in a some of the interviews)

⁴ N values are out of 15 student interview participants.

- a. Many students feel that there is too much weight given to NECAP and WIDA test scores, and that decisions about course placement are sometimes made without looking at the whole student and what he/she is able to do with support.

Question 2: What factors increase the likelihood that ELLs will pursue postsecondary education?

1. Encouragement from a mentor (teacher, community service provider, family friend) (N=13)
 - a. Many students struggle with low confidence about their academic and linguistic preparation (N=8). They need to hear *explicitly* that they are “college material.”
2. Early and sustained guidance (starting 9th grade or sooner) (N= 10)
 - a. High school course selection, college entrance exams, admissions processes, etc.
 - b. Extra-curricular activities, summer opportunities, and other ways to “boost” their college profile
 - c. Learning more about possible career paths, and which colleges are best for different paths.
3. Financial aid advising and resources (N=13)
 - a. Most students said MONEY is their biggest barrier to completing a college degree
4. Academic challenge or “push” to accelerate progress (N=9)
 - a. Some students feel that they are being “tracked” into less rigorous classes that will not prepare them for college (N=5 said this directly, but others implied it)
5. Sense of institutional belonging at high school
 - a. A mix of “international” and “American” friends (N=12)
 - b. Opportunities for leadership and/or service to the school or community (N=10)
 - c. A culturally-relevant, globally-oriented curriculum, especially in history/social studies (N=4 mentioned this directly, but others implied it)
6. A chosen career path for the future (N=8)
 - a. Many students wish to pursue “helping” professions, such as medicine, psychology, and education.
 - b. Students often have a sense of what they want to do (e.g. be a physician), but little knowledge about what it takes to get there.
7. Family support (N=8)
 - a. Parents willing to negotiate family responsibilities, work hours, etc. to make time for academics and extra-curricular activities

Question 3: What do college-bound ELLs wish they had done or learned in high school?

1. “Push” themselves more (see Question 2, point 4, above)
 - a. Taking more challenging classes
 - b. Putting more time and energy into school work, especially in 9th and 10th grade
 - c. Taking advantage of college-preparation programs (e.g., Upward Bound, Intro to College Studies)
 - d. Becoming involved in more extra-curricular activities (besides sports), particularly school leadership

2. Begin thinking about college early (before junior year)
 - a. Planning ahead both academically and financially
 - b. Learning about tests such as the Accuplacer, which determine whether students are able to enroll in credit-bearing classes at CCV.
 - c. Connecting more with community members in career fields they might pursue.
 - d. Talking more with students who are currently in college, to learn from them.