

Ventura College Re-envisions ESL: A Community-Engagement Approach

Bellwether Finalist - Planning, Governance, & Finance
A focus on the planning and decision-making process



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Identifying The Critical Issue

In 2020 it became increasingly evident that Ventura College (VC) was not meeting the educational needs of English language learners (ELLs) in the community, despite updating English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum to better support transfer opportunities, modifying schedules on campus, and increasing marketing efforts for the program. College leadership was at a loss. The region was replete with adults who speak a language other than English at home, yet enrollments in ESL classes were declining. It was time to address the critical issue of the fate of ESL – would VC find a way to revive the program, or was it time to discontinue ESL and Ventura College?

The initial college response

Enrollments in ESL classes at VC had been down for a decade or more. In response, the college did what we usually do when enrollments drop. We asked existing faculty staff, and students what we could do to enroll more learners. We emailed current and recent students to encourage class registration in ESL. We aligned the courses with transfer pathways to support *perceived* bachelor's degree completion goals for ELLs. We offered more ESL sections at our East Campus, located in Santa Paula, which is a predominantly Hispanic community. And we marketed the program in local high schools, online, and via social media.



Still, over the past five years, VC served approximately 300 students annually and offered an average of 18 ESL sections a year, many of which had fill rates below 50%. Despite efforts to increase class sizes in our ESL courses, enrollments remained low and inconsistent, and classes frequently under-enrolled leading to regular cancellations. The college could not count on robust registrations, students could not count on the college running the classes they offered, and the vicious cycle reproduced the same poor results. Administratively, it became difficult to justify the costs, and smaller class sizes, for a program that appeared to be slowly dying.

A confluence of pressure: implementing legislation in a pandemic

In 2020, effects of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the ESL program's enrollment issues, forcing VC to cancel more sections and leading many students to withdraw from the few remaining online classes. At the same time, all colleges in the state of California were tasked with implementing new state legislation focused on English and math success, including improving ESL offerings and completion rates (Assembly Bill 705). VC's inability to successfully engage a more proportionate number of students in need of ESL over the past few years had college leaders considering sunsetting the VC ESL program altogether.

The alternative to program closure: Re-envision the Ventura College ESL program.

But how?

Why bother changing the ESL program?

We initially asked ourselves, "Are there enough English language learners in the area – interested in a college ESL experience – to benefit from a Ventura College ESL program? Essentially, we wanted to know, is there a real need for a Ventura College ESL program?" Despite our low enrollments, local demographics suggested that there was in fact a need.

Ventura County demographics

In Ventura County, according to 2019 CENSUS data:

- **31% of county citizens speak a language other than English at home.**
 - Approximately 132,000 adult *citizens* in Ventura County speak predominantly Spanish at home.
- This number is significantly higher when we also include undocumented residents.

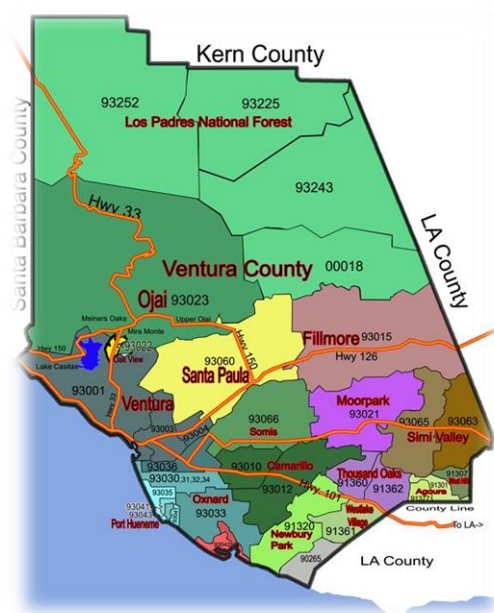
Limited English-speaking households

- **Nearly 102,000 households in Ventura County are limited English-speaking households.**
 - According to the US Census Bureau, a limited English-speaking household is one in which no member 14-years-old and over speaks only English or speaks English “very well.”
 - If there is an average of 3 family members in these limited English-households, **then more than 300,000 residents in Ventura County have at least some difficulties speaking English.**
 - If Ventura College was able to enroll only 1% of these potential language learners each year, the college would be serving **3,000+ ESL students** annually.

Ventura College service area demographics

Ventura College serves a large area of the county including, but not limited to, the city of Ventura and the Santa Clara River Valley region; the SCRv is predominantly rural, but also includes the small cities of Santa Paula, Fillmore, and Piru. According to the World Population Review:

- two thirds of the working-age adults in Santa Paula speak a language other than English; 97% of these residents speak Spanish at home.
- 55% of the adults in Fillmore speak a language other than English, 98% of these speak Spanish.
- 64% of the adults in Piru speak a language other than English, 100% of these speak Spanish.
- In the City of Ventura, approximately one in four of the 106,000 residents speak a language other than English, and 83% - or over 87,000 - residents speak predominantly Spanish.



Language skills, poverty, and joblessness

English language skills impact the ability of adults to make a living and provide for their families since English is the language spoken in most workplaces. In fact, in 2019, in Ventura County:

- **Over 21,000 of all adults living below the poverty line** spoke a language other than English at home; 89% of these adults speak Spanish.
- **Approximately 88,000 adult residents over the age of 25 who speak a language other than English at home are unemployed.**

Addressing The Critical Issue

Leaning into our mission: A responsibility to our community

Community colleges aim to serve adults in need of critical workforce skills. Part of the VC mission states: “**Placing students at the center of their learning experience**, we serve a highly diverse student body by providing innovative instruction and student support, focusing on associate degree and certificate completion, transfer, **workforce preparation**, and **basic skills**.” The data clearly shows that thousands of potential English language learners reside in Ventura County. Therefore, to serve them effectively, the college had to turn the problem-solving focus *internally*, rather than focusing on trying to understand why the community was not taking advantage of our ESL courses. While VC was serving 300 students a year, we could have been serving 3,000 students or more if we were able to address the real needs of the local community. College leaders, faculty, and staff realized we need to not only re-envision our ESL program, but we also needed to change HOW we make decisions and HOW we process meeting community needs, and we needed to do so immediately for the ELLs who were already in our own backyard.

Changing Ventura College’s decision-making lens

In 2020, VC decided to endeavor to re-envision the college’s ESL program. To do so successfully, we needed to change the lens from which we plan for, and make decisions about, serving students. We engaged the Institutional Effectiveness and Partnership Initiative (IEPI), which works to help California’s community colleges improve their operational effectiveness. The IEPI deployed a Partnership Resource Team (PRT), providing Ventura College the opportunity to learn from peer-consultants who had experiences relevant to our goals for our ESL program. Recommendations and funds received through the IEPI process allowed Ventura College to re-envision the ESL program *and* reconsider our internal decision-making processes to *center on* community engagement.

Taking steps toward doing ESL education differently

Through the IEPI consultative process, the Partnership Resources Team (PRT) recommended that VC engage an outside firm to investigate how the college could most effectively serve the community through ESL education, and how we could most effectively market and promote what will be a new and improved ESL program. Exploring existing perceptions about the college as well as learning from community members how we could relevantly offer ESL - including exploring the features we should include to best serve the community – was to be a primary goal of the research. Additionally, it was recommended that we learn through the work of the third-party firm, how and where we should market and do outreach in the community. If VC was to do ESL differently, it was imperative that we investigate these changes with a team that could view the issue with a fresh lens.

Based on the PRT recommendations, in February 2021, VC’s Vice President of Academic Affairs connected with Hanover to discuss the scope of the project. Dr. Goetz stressed the need to engage in qualitative research within the community, meeting potential ELLs where they are at – even in COVID, and she stressed that any research done with future ESL students must be done in Spanish ... by *native* Spanish speakers. Much to the delight of VC, Hanover accepted the challenge and VC and Hanover set out to begin the process of doing ESL differently.

Defining the research agenda

When Hanover engages with a new prospective partner, the first step is to understand the overarching objectives for a market research partnership. Hanover identified four main objectives related to ESL programming – building a safe, effective, and accessible ESL program, enhancing support services for Hispanic community members, expanding Ventura College’s presence in the Santa Clara River Valley, and using the East Campus to expand educational opportunities to Hispanic students.



Once those overarching objectives are identified, the next step is to come up with key research questions to help define the research agenda. These are a few examples of those larger research questions that were identified for Ventura.

- How can we more effectively communicate with the Santa Clara River Valley Community?
- How should we adjust for curriculum to attract and retain English Learners?
- How can we build an ESL program that will match our community’s needs?
- What are best practices for creating a safe space for English learners?

The research process

Hanover provides market research support using a mixed methodological approach combining primary and secondary research. However, in this case, it was clear early on that a primary approach was going to provide the richest and most relevant data related to the ESL program. Hanover proposed beginning the relationship with three qualitative research projects – First, in-depth interviews with internal stakeholders including current and previous students as well as faculty members. Next, in-depth interviews with external stakeholders including members of the community as well as representatives from other education institutions. And finally, focus groups with community members conducted in Spanish at locations convenient and comfortable for the participants.



- ✓ Perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of Ventura’s current ESL program
- ✓ Factors that impact student enrollment in Ventura’s ESL programs
- ✓ Challenges associated with transfer from non-credit to credit-earning
- ✓ Strategies for engaging local community members
- ✓ Priorities and unmet needs that exist among community members
- ✓ Ways to improve the relationship between the community and Ventura College

Translating Research Findings to Action Items

From the findings of the initial studies, Hanover made several actionable recommendations to Ventura for steps forward. Some of these recommendations can be summarized into four categories: Personnel, Engagement, Onboarding, and Achievement.

Personnel: Recommendations

- Consider hiring a dedicated program leader
- Employ bilingual, culturally competent individuals to connect with potential students

Personnel: Actions

In 2018, the Ventura College Executive Team re-envisioned the personnel needs of the East Campus in Santa Paula. They wanted to have a dedicated team with the necessary skills that would reconnect the campus with the community. Since then, they have assembled a team that is bilingual, culturally competent, and that has re-established trust with the community. As the research component was taking place with our partners, the last hire of the team was added. The Student Services Assistant was the person that our community was asking for in their focus groups. Cynthia is the point person for our ESL students and the community. She is responsible for conducting the newly created ESL Open Houses, application workshops, and more importantly, in person support. She is building a rapport with students that allows them a space to ask questions in their native language and build community with the college campus.

Engagement: Recommendations

- Increase involvement in the community and create strategic partnerships with local community organizations
- Promote Ventura's offerings among community members

Engagement: Actions

As we learned about our lack of visibility in the community, particularly among English Language Learners who we have been especially hoping to reach, we committed to increase our engagement in the community and improve Ventura College's image. Our first engagement priority was to build strategic partnerships with community organizations. Our eyes were open to the possibilities when in a moment of synchronicity, Ken Wiseman, from the Piru Neighborhood Council (PNC), reached out to us about offering ESL classes at their community center. We jumped at the opportunity. This collaboration between PNC and Ventura College is now entering its second semester and has laid the foundation on how to replicate this effort in our other local communities. In the past month, conversations have begun with Poder Popular in Santa Paula to offer ESL classes at their location for Fall 22. Since the findings, Ventura College has increased its visibility in the communities it serves. Strategic Spanish marketing campaigns promoting ESL classes began in the local newspapers (Thanksgiving-End of Year), social media campaigns, collaboration with school districts to promote the opportunities with their Spanish speaking families, and posting of flyers in bakeries, neighborhood shops, and laundromats.

Onboarding: Recommendations

- Reduce online registration barriers for both current and potential ESL students
- Reduce non-credit student barriers to enrolling in credit courses

Onboarding: Actions

The onboarding process for our ESL students has been completely overhauled. The East Campus team redesigned the process by introducing new components and removing many of the barriers we had created for our students. The team decided to develop community events to help with the promotion of the ESL Program. The ESL Open House allows the team to introduce potential students to the program, instructional faculty, counseling faculty, and their team on the ground as well as introduce them to the East Campus. For the courses in our community, our team goes out to their location to conduct the events. For those students that are not able to attend, Cynthia is available to them in person on a walk-in basis, by appointment, over the phone, and through Zoom.

The major barrier that we removed and has proven to be a success is the online application. When Ventura College moved to the online application process, we required all students to complete it not realizing that we had created barriers for our ESL students that are not familiar with the language or may have a tough time with computers. The decision was made to transition from a multi-step application and a multi-day process to a one-page paper application. The new registration process takes about 30 minutes from start to finish with the students leaving the Open House with ESL information and registered for their class.

Achievement: Recommendations

- Reassure potential students of the value of ESL classes and how they can succeed in them
- Expand course offerings to include higher demand subjects with real-life application

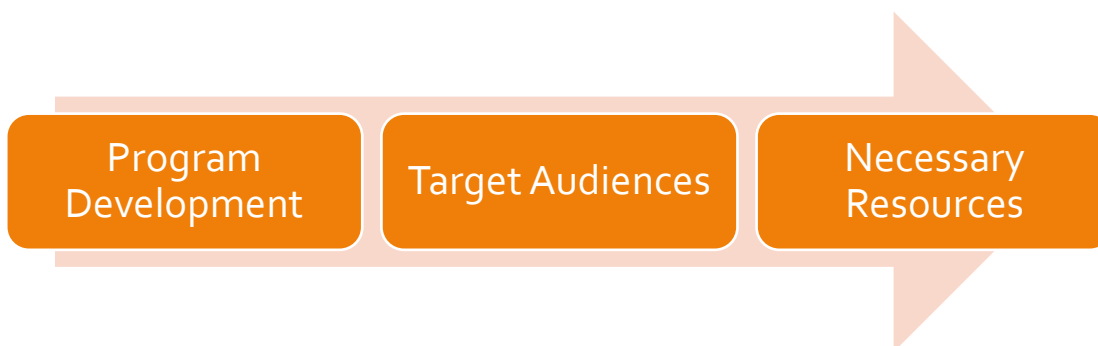
Achievement: Actions

In Fall 2021, VC offered and successfully delivered an ESL course that was linked with a course for Agriculture Field Supervisors. This helped students gain skills in English that they could immediately use in their profession, and it provided a topic (agriculture) for the ESL class. VC is gearing up for similar pairings, most notably ESL paired with Bookkeeping.

Additionally, everyone at Ventura College loves to celebrate our students' successes and heard loud and clear that we empower students if we acknowledge students' milestones. Faculty in noncredit classes converted their last class meeting to a celebration that honored students having completed their class. Looking ahead, VC hopes to have graduation ceremonies for students and their families for formal achievements that will be noted on their transcripts. These include Certificates of Competency for Beginning, and for Intermediate ESL.

Creating a Plan of Action

Once the initial primary research studies were complete, Ventura College created a plan of action. This plan of action has taken place and will continue to take place over a timeline of immediate, short-term (1-2 semesters), and long-term (beyond 2 semesters) actions.



Immediate implementation

As soon as the first round of Hanover Research results was delivered to the College, the ESL department with support from the English Math Success Team (EMAST) identified action steps that could be completed quickly:

- Offer a multi-level, community-based ESL class at the Piru Community Center with the support of the local neighborhood council,
- Link an ESL course with a course for Agriculture Field Supervisors as a part of a Career Education certificate,
- Develop two new Certificates of Competency for Beginning and Intermediate ESL,
- Clarify the sequence of ESL classes by organizing them into clear levels, eliminating confusion about course numbering systems,
- Begin developing an online guided self-placement tool for ESL students.



Short-term implementation

The college community mobilized to take further action on the results of the research with participation from East Campus leadership and staff as well ESL, EMAST and division faculty and dean:

- Hire a culturally competent and bilingual student support person at East Campus to be the go-to person for all ESL students,
- Launch local marketing campaign in newspapers and with flyers in bakeries, Mom-and-Pop shops, local libraries, and laundromats.
- Offer monthly open houses and regular registration workshops for ESL students,
- Create paper application form in multiple languages to allow students to apply and register for classes without using the sometimes confusing online application process,
- Offer all credit ESL classes with mirrored noncredit courses to provide free options for students,
- Recommend as a high priority to hire a new full-time ESL faculty member to have at least one discipline expert to lead ongoing curricular and programmatic revisions and to spearhead faculty outreach efforts.

Long-term implementation

Based on the research findings and our momentum, we anticipate the following areas to focus on:

- Revise and develop our curriculum to include ESL classes for life as well as transfer and degree completion. Revise course numbering to make progression through the program more intuitive.
- Pair beginning ESL classes with more career-focused courses such as Business and computer skills taught in Spanish.
- Develop more sites to offer beginning ESL classes where students feel at home in partnerships with local community organizations.
- Expand our offerings to serve 3,000 students,
- Hire additional faculty and student support professionals,
- Provide ongoing support to faculty in and beyond the classroom to engage more deeply with the local community.



Lessons learned and opportunities for replication

When we look within, *from* within, it can be difficult – possibly impossible – to accurately diagnose a problem. When we aim to meet the needs of students that seem to be impossible to meet, the “fix” must happen at the institution; expecting students to conform to our expectations is ineffective and arguably irresponsible. When we work in service to a community, we must engage relevantly and effectively those who we seek to serve in the solution and the decision-making process.

Adopting a fresh lens: Ask a third party for help

For decades, Ventura College was attempting to support residents who predominantly speak languages other than English in securing living-wage jobs, advancing their education, and improving their quality of life through our ESL program. Low enrollments in ESL clearly demonstrated that we were not meeting the needs of this community we sought to serve. The college did what we usually do when enrollments drop, to no avail. To address the puzzle of why there were many potential English language learners in the region, yet enrollments in VC’s ESL classes were dwindling, we engaged consultants to help us take a fresh look at the problem. Through the recommendations of our PRT, we employed Hanover - a third-party research and marketing firm to help us see what was before our very eyes and yet still eluding our vision.

Future efforts to re-envision Ventura College programs and services will continue to employ the assistance of third-party consultants and research firms. VC is preparing to engage the IEPI-PRT consultant process again in 2022 to assist us in developing an honors program, market an online PACE program, and to assist the college in building the Ventura College East Campus into an official Center. As well, VC has renewed their contract with Hanover so we may benefit from an outsider’s in-depth analysis of the problems we are sure to face as we continue to work our way through teaching and learning in and beyond the many phases of a lingering pandemic.

We speak of the “new normal” that colleges will open to post-pandemic. As we speak, that new normal is being formed around us. Assessing what this new reality looks like for our students, colleges, and communities, so we can respond relevantly and effectively, will require colleges to analyze the problems before us differently. As we aim to evolve and adapt to our emerging realities as educators, it will be essential to engage third parties to help us see our realities and solve our issues with fresh lenses by considering and developing new frameworks from which we do education.



Becoming student-ready: Ask students what they want and need

When we approach an enrollment issue or student success and retention problem by asking ourselves if students are college-ready, we have already lost the battle. To effectively serve students, assist them in achieving success, and help them persist in college, we need to become student-ready. Student-ready institutions perceive student success as the responsibility and obligation of the college. Student-ready programs embrace the belief that all learners can achieve course outcomes and their personal goals. Student-ready colleges adjust their structures to place student needs and interests at the center of their decision-making processes. Ventura College is working to be a student-ready institution.

Ventura College is applying the lessons we have learned through our re-envisioning ESL project to tackle other student-centered problems. On a smaller scale, we are re-envisioning our Dean's List celebration event to reflect what students and their families most desire and appreciate. The college is also engaging in a student driven "hackathon" to inspire interest in Computer Science professions and fields of study. Before we re-build the CS program, we will not only use industry expert feedback, we will also learn from the students who are inspired by the hackathon to relevantly create a program that meets their needs and interests. At the institutional level, VC is planning to engage students in helping us expand and develop our satellite site – Ventura College East Campus - into an officially recognized Center. To succeed in this endeavor, we will ask students, community members, and family members of students what our VCEC should provide – be it childcare support, unique classroom designs, transportation to and from school, free legal services for undocumented students, more STEM and workforce education opportunities, etc. – to make it a preferred college destination in our state. Ventura College is beginning to shift the focus from telling the community what we have to offer, to asking the community and our students what they need and investing in these identified needs whenever possible.

Doing Education Differently

Ventura College has learned to approach educational problems in a way this differs from traditional educational approaches to problem solving. By taking a community-engagement approach to re-envisioning the ESL program and beginning to change our decision-making processes to model what we have learned, VC is beginning to do education differently. Over the coming years, the college will be working to solve major issues that pre-date the pandemic and that emerge post-pandemic. Applying the framework we engaged through the ESL program redesign project, we intend to evolve our institutional processes and practices for decision-making to place the student voice at the center. We invite other colleges to join us in this effort to become student-ready as we serve our greater communities together by doing education differently.

#DoingEducationDifferently

Appendix

Links to additional resources

- [Ventura College](#)
- [Ventura College – East Campus](#)
- [Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative](#)
- [Hanover Research](#)
- [Piru Neighborhood Council](#)
- [One Step A La Vez](#)

Hanover Research proposal

- [Ventura College Proposal – January 2021](#)

Hanover Research reports

- [ESL Program Demand - Community Focus Group Analysis](#)
- [ESL Program Demand - External Stakeholder Consultation In-Depth Interview Analysis](#)
- [ESL Program Demand - Internal Stakeholder Consultation In-Depth Interview Analysis](#)

Select research participant quotes

*"They need to find **one person that is really passionate about the program**, that really cares for the people that are going to be in the program. Speak with people that were **part of the program [from the beginning]**. Maybe they can have better ideas on how the program worked."*

*"If they could get a faculty **here at Poder Popular**, it's a good place and it's close to everyone."*

*"What we used to do, **we had paper and pencil applications and we would help the students complete it**...I would just very naturally ask them 'You want to come?' And it's like, 'Yes. Okay. Let's do this. Let's start.'"*

*"I have seen that in churches on Sundays after mass there are organizations promoting different things. So, maybe, **it might be a good idea for Ventura College to look at different options on how to give out this information.**"*

*"**We lose a lot of students along the [online registration process]**. I'll get emails that are like, 'Oh, I'm really interested in taking classes'... but then they **can't figure out how to enroll online because it's such a complicated process.**"*

*"**Something that's kind of for everyday life**, for what you need in your day-to-day, to buy food at the store, to go to parent-faculty conferences at your kid's school, to go to the store to buy them something, or even to make whatever phone call you need to in English, too. Even some documents that arrive in English, to learn how to read those. **I think that would be the most important part for me.**"*