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# The Community College: Bridge or Roadblock to Higher Education for US Adult Immigrant English Language Learners?

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The Community College: Bridge or Roadblock to Higher Education for US Adult Immigrant  
English Language Learners?

By  
Thomas N. Janis.

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## Abstract

While community colleges have been accessible for adult learners with an immigrant and an English Language Learning (ELL) background, there is a gap between preparation and academic success on the college level among these students. Within community colleges, older adult English as a Second Language (ESL) students have the lowest first semester GPAs, complete fewer semesters, and are four times less likely to graduate than their non-ESL counterparts. The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand the background, needs and goals of adult immigrant ELLs and how the community college institution mediates the needs of this diverse group within higher education. To achieve this six qualitative interviews were conducted with adult immigrants who are currently studying ESL for credit at a community college and three with faculty and administrators of the community college. The study examines these issues through the theoretical lens of Lamphere's (1992) mediating institutions and Bourdieu's (1990) cultural capital theory. These two theories are used in order to examine how the previous experiences of adult immigrant ELLs relate to the community college, and how the community college supports or inhibits these particular students in their life and academic goals. An examination of the cultural capital of the students provides insights on knowledge and social relations that immigrants possess, while the concept of mediating institutions examines how that knowledge relates to their student experience through their presence and social interactions on the community college. Family experiences as well the interactions with other students and teachers presented both mediating and non-mediating factors for students' adaptation to the community college.

*Keywords:* Community college, ESL, older adult immigrant, mediating institution

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Community colleges have long held the distinction of being considered “democracy’s colleges” (Boggs, 2010). They have this recognition because they have an open access policy for traditional students, but also make an effort to target non-traditional, marginalized students that may provide a “second chance” opportunity for those to pursue post secondary studies (Raby, 2001). Within this context, community colleges are places of learning that provide students with useful skills, academic knowledge and lifelong learning opportunities to transition to life and educational opportunities within a relatively short period of time. Examples of these transitions are high school graduates who complete an associate’s degree and transition to a 4-year university; in fact, nearly half of all freshman college students begin at a community college. There are high school drop outs that complete a General Education Diploma (GED) and pursue college studies both at a community college. There are recently laid-off working professionals who learn a new skill and transition to a new career. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, community colleges saw their enrollments rise on average from 6 to 10 percent (AACC, 2011, Moltz, 2010). Among these many community college transitional realities is the older adult immigrant student who is learning ESL. The way in which a community college supports so many particular student groups is critical to the success and reputation of the community college as an institution that an entire community can access and utilize as a bridge to the next phase of their life.

To understand how a community college serves a segment of its population, this research seeks to examine how older adult ESL immigrants from multiple cultural backgrounds adapt to the academic environment of the community college. More immigrants attend community colleges than any other post-secondary institution (Teranshi et al., 2011, p 154); in 2003-04, about one quarter of the 6.5 million community college degree seeking student body came from an immigrant background (Teranshi et al., 2011, p.155). Today, ESL instruction for adults is the fastest growing segment of America's adult education system as a whole, and is also the fastest growing among many community colleges. Among the students in these ESL programs, most can be characterized as older adult students (Chisman & Crandall, 2007; Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education, 2011).

However, in the context of all community college students, older immigrant ESL students have the lowest first semester GPAs, complete fewer semesters, and are four times less likely to graduate than their non-ESL counterparts (Almon, 2010, p. 79). While community colleges appear to be a gateway for adult learners with an immigrant and an ELL background, "the gap between academic preparation and college-level work, as well as other stressors, has resulted in high attrition rates and low transfer rates to four-year institutions" (Jehangir, 2010 p. 81).

There are few studies that focus on immigrants in the community college system, let alone ones that focus on older immigrants. Many studies conflate the experiences of international students with immigrant students. While both groups generally are foreign born, international students are non-immigrants on student visas, have a generally higher socio-economic status (SES), and most have the intention of returning to their home country. They also typically represent a younger group of students who possess the cultural capital understanding of an



academic institution as well as classroom interaction as they have recently come from an academic institution in the country of origin (Curry, 2001, p. 11). On the other hand, immigrant students are ones who have migrated to and intend to remain in the US (Teranishi et al, 2011, p. 155). Immigrants in community colleges may also have an illegal status or have migrated as refugees, which are experiences that are atypical of many international students. Older immigrants may also be many years removed from their last educational experience. There is a general sense among community college practitioners that all ESL students are alike in their English deficiency, which neglects the large range of experiences, backgrounds and needs that ELLs have in the community college (Blumenthall, 2002). In addition, studies on older adults in community colleges also conflate the experiences of native versus non-native English speakers. While older native English learners have some similar needs such as a need for technology expertise and some aspects of higher education, they generally possess a common secondary academic experience that acts as a point of reference for higher education (Chisman & Crandall, 2007). There is an increasing need to focus on the unique experiences of older adult immigrants in community colleges.

Becker's (2011) qualitative study of adult immigrants transitioning from vocational ESL to credit ESL relates well to this study. Becker found it was the awareness of the student's shift in self-identity and sense of marginality in a new culture that encouraged these students to seek the community college path as a means toward readjusting and trying to regain the centralized class and position they left behind. Consequently, one of the primary experiences students shared was their internal struggle to recalibrate and settle into life in the United States. (Becker, 2011). Yet the focus of that study was on non-credit ESL programs and their impact on students transitioning into credit ESL programs. This current study seeks to look at those older immigrant

students who have decided to take the credit ESL program to pursue an academic or vocational program.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand the background, needs and goals of adult immigrant ELLs and how the community college institution mediates this diverse group within higher education. To achieve this, six semi-structured qualitative interviews have been conducted with adult immigrants who are currently studying ESL for credit at a community college. Also, three informal interviews with staff, faculty and administrators were conducted to gain a sense of the support community colleges provide. The theoretical lens this analysis uses is mediating institutions (Lamphere, 1992) and cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1990). These two theories are used in order to examine how the previous experiences of an adult immigrant ELL relates to the community college, and how the community college supports or inhibits these particular students in their academic and life goals. The cultural capital of the students provided insights on knowledge and social relations that immigrants possess, while mediating institutions examined how students access new knowledge or cultural capital through their presence and social interactions on the community college.

### **Research Questions**

The main research question that this study sought to understand is how a community college supports or potentially inhibits an older immigrant ELL and their many identities in adjusting to a community college environment and transitioning to the next the phase of their life.

Specifically, this study addressed: (a) What are the current life identities and cultural capital (family, culture, class, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, career, education etc.) of these

students related to being an older adult immigrant English Language Learner and (b) what structures or experiences of the community college support or inhibit the goals of these non-traditional students?

Because an adult learner of any variety offers a wealth of understanding and knowledge, cultural capital theory was used to discuss the balance of identities (immigrant, parent, ELL, college student) and the implications of this demographic that pursue studies at a community college. Mediating institutions theory is also used to discuss the community college role in transitioning immigrant students to American academic studies and in situating their contextualized experience with one that relates to the community college and their life goals afterwards.

This study included adult immigrant students within a credit ESL program in the community college that prepares students to study English in a higher education setting. However, Adult ESL programs vary by program purpose and program focus. The typical programs range from life skills and survival ESL, citizenship ESL (EL/Civics), vocational ESL (VESL), GED ESL, family literacy, and academic ESL. Though these courses may be offered to a variety of proficiency levels, life skills/survival ESL and basic and family ESL literacy are most often offered to students of lower English levels who require a heavier focus on functional skills, while GED and academic ESL are typically offered to students who possess higher proficiencies of English (Crandall, 2004, p. 15). Studies have been heavily focused on the non-credit program exploring how to better serve these students, ones who require life skills and those who would like to prepare for academic studies.

This study examines immigrant students who are enrolled in credit academic level ESL to see how their community college experience relates to their academic goals and aspirations. Because students are enrolled in the credit program, they are investing a commitment of money as the credit courses they pursue are usually the same cost as all credit courses at the college. They also are investing their time. Learning English at a later age is not a simple endeavor, and it takes a lot of time and effort. With the many life identities of older immigrant ESL students, the transition to a student role may be conflicting with other aspects of older immigrants' lives. With many hoping to complete a program that will benefit them with useful marketable skills, learning English for their academic studies is a key hurdle. Looking at how students transition their academic ESL skills into their life goals is a key part of this study.

Older adult immigrant students who enroll in academic ESL programs can transition from lower level functional ESL programs, a transition that can be problematic for many, especially those who have little or no experience in a post-secondary academic setting (Becker, 2011). While data is not universally kept among community colleges, transitions from non-credit to credit programs is only made by 10-12 percent of non-credit students, even though 50 percent of students are non-credit students (Chisman & Crandall, 2007) What can be shocking is the adjustment to an institution and an environment that is entirely new for these students. The redefinition of one's life in this institution and language drives the theoretical component of this study: cultural capital and mediating institution.

### **Theory and Literature Review**

In exploring adult immigrant ELLs in community colleges, cultural capital and mediating institutions theories are used as guides. Cultural capital is conceptualized as the access to the

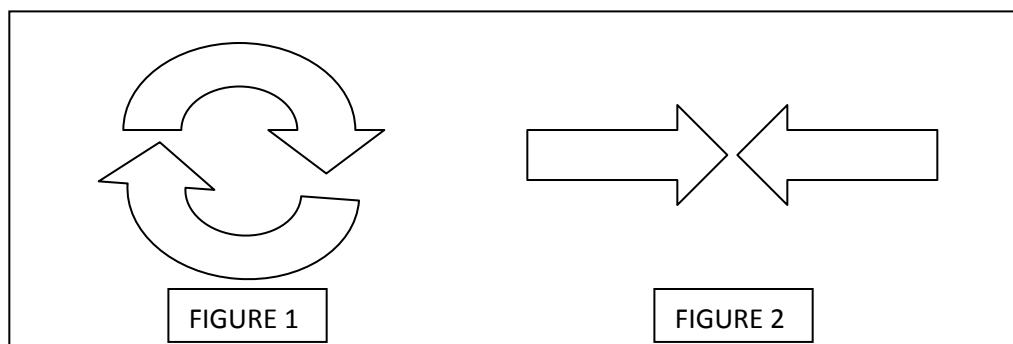
knowledge of English, academic culture and social relations that contribute to a ‘student’ identity in addition to the other identities held by adult immigrant students (Becker, 2011). Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, the conscious and unconscious actions and perceptions of learners that impact academic and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1990) is useful in understanding this construction:

The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which when deposited in each organism in the form of schemes or perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the “correctness” of practices and their constancy over time, more reliable than all formal rules and explicit norms (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 54-55)

This *habitus* is formed through the socialization that one experiences through their position in society (Valadez, 1999, p. 85). Students who can connect their previous cultural capital to the experience of studying at the community college can transition into their new identity as a college student more easily (Becker, 2011). Studies have found that minority community college students have lacked confidence to build meaningful relationships with professors and fellow students (Estrada, Dupoux & Wolman, 2005). If the community college experience contrasts with the previous cultural capital of immigrant students, then there may be a dissonance. The community college transition may for some be threatening. An experience of this nature may create disequilibrium (Jehangir, 2010, p. 141), or the grappling of new ideas, in a new, academic context. The way cultural capital is drawn upon in the community college is essential, and mediating institutions theory helps conceptualize this method in the context of a community college.

The way that an institution can manifest the past experiences of a student is important. Students have other lives and responsibilities, yet the role a community college plays in the student experience of older immigrant students is critical. In essence, the community college can help integrate the older ELL immigrant student within the culture of the community college. Conversely, this experience may inhibit the student from this integration and create a conflict of identities or the institution itself may be structuring the older immigrant ELL to fail. Mediating institutions is useful in analyzing the achievement or non-achievement of older immigrant ELLs at the community college level.

The cultural capital that encases the background and experiences of immigrant students is important to maintain in a higher education experience. Students who are older bring with them a wealth of cultural capital from a variety of experiences. From these experiences, one who has ‘self-authorship’ has the ability to construct an internal identity that is distinct from external influences. This also provides one with the ability to interact with others without sacrificing that internal identity (Jehangir, 2010, p. 141). However, the mediating institution of the community college culture might create external forces that overpower the cultural capital of the adult immigrant students and marginalization. Three areas this study focuses on are social adjustment, community college structures, and English Language Learning. From the diagram below, if the cultural capital of the student is validated within the community college experience, the experiences support each other (figure 1). However, if the experiences of the student and the community college are conflicting in some way (figure 2) students may experience a dissonance.



Mediating institutions, as discussed by Lamphere (1992), is conceptualized in two ways. One way is to conceptualize the channeling of larger macro-level forces of institutions upon individuals, such as new immigrants, in relation to established residents. The second way to think about this term is the mediating factors between the interactions among newcomers and established residents. These relationships can take the form as management-worker, owner-tenant, teacher-student. Social mobility is a central piece of the mediating institution analysis. The kinds of questions used to describe the experience in mediating institutions relate to if immigrants are able to find access to higher paying jobs, if they live in neighborhoods alongside residents or live in areas marked by exclusion, if schools foster interaction among immigrant children and children of other backgrounds, if they learn the skills to improve their economic and political position (Lamphere, 1992). This study looks at the older immigrant experience from the social environment, the community college institution, and English language learning perspective.

### **Social Environment**

Immigrants who form social relations with others on campus are important to the embedment of student life in the community college and life outside. Those that do not “fit” in with the academic and social environment of the community college are less likely to complete their studies (Estrada et al., 2005, p 558-559). The current study seeks to examine how the older immigrant student experience aligns with the community college experience. Previous research found that ELLs in community college were reluctant to engage in classroom interactions and interpersonal situations (Kelly, 1991). Some more recent literature focuses on the experience of the ESL student pertaining to “personal-emotional adjustment” to community college and found

that forming meaningful relationships, balancing life demands helped students adjust to their new environment (Estrada, et al., 2005). Estrada et al.'s study focuses on the transition of high school ELLs to community college, yet concluded that social adjustment is keen for a healthy integration into community college. However, a limitation of Estrada et al.'s study was its use of a psychological questionnaire instrument and the researchers themselves suggest that a qualitative design is needed to provide in-depth social experiences that this study hopes to achieve with interviews.

In Lamphere's mediating institutions theory, an emphasis is placed on whether or not the mere presence of the increase of immigrants is changing the structure of the institutions that mediate the interactions among established residents and immigrants. In relation to social environments, a 2007 study on community colleges has shown that a 'critical mass' of Latino teachers and students on campus produces a safe and conducive learning environment among Latino students which may help contribute to academic success at the community college (Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda, & McLain, 2007). While this study is aimed at Latino students, its implications are still relevant for the roughly 40% of ELL students in this study that have a Latin American background. It also indicates that because the experiences or cultural capital of the students are supported by the representation at the community college, this helps ELLs take on the role as a student more fluidly. In addition, this mediation may also occur among students of varying backgrounds as the social representation of ELLs from varying backgrounds support the common experience of attending community college to learn academic English. In this way, the community college ESL classroom and social setting can help spur interaction among students with similar cultural capital and similar life situations and provide peer support to build



confidence in students (Brickman & Nuzzo, 1999; Gray et al., 1996). The current study hopes to see if older immigrant ELLs are supported in a similar way.

From a pilot study conducted in the Fall of 2011 that consisted of five interview with a mix of ESL students in the community college, I found that the multicultural environment for students was a major theme and factor for integration into academic life. The multicultural environment, obtained solely through the students' own presence, was useful in creating a safe place for students to converse and speak in class. Even though students realized everyone had a different background, they shared the same experience of learning English and felt comfortable to participate. While I completed this study with three older immigrant ELLs and two international student ELLs, this was a common theme among all students.

This pilot study also revealed that cultural representations on campus helped some students feel welcome in their academic environment. Some saw their flag hanging in the lunch room and in the ESL lab and felt validated in their cultural identity. Connecting previous experiences, whether cultural or otherwise, are seen as keen aspects in integrating an older adult ELL in the community college environment.

### **Connecting Experiences at the Community College**

Adult students learn from connecting their competencies and life experiences with their academic and intellectual pursuits in the classroom (Kutz, 1991). Clear connections with previous experiences need to be gradually made with older students to prepare them for the high demands of the academic world. Students already meet high demands in their lives, many whom work and raise a family in addition to studies. Therefore, the addition of academic pursuits should relate to their other high demand life responsibilities to bridge and mesh with previous

experiences. A study on adult community college students enrolled in ESL courses found some instances of these life demands, such as a lack of help with child care, inhibiting to attending community college. In other cases, lack of simple procedural knowledge such as completing forms was also a consistent challenge (Crepeau, 1991)

This procedural knowledge of resources is keen for older students to integrate into the community college. For example, students who work full-time may be unaware of financial aid benefits that they may be eligible for if they switched to part-time employment, thus providing time for studies (Curry, 2001, p. 10) Indeed, many immigrant students require a vast amount of financial need, but most lack information about how to apply for such benefits (Teranshi, 2011, p. 157). In addition to the absence of knowledge about institutional procedures, many older immigrants lack a cultural capital of academic procedures within the community college.

A 2001 study found that immigrant students who were the first to drop academic writing courses did not possess the same economic and cultural capital, such as previous experience with higher education, as the ones who finished the course (Curry, 2001). Knowledge of classroom culture and technology such as the internet were contained in some groups of students who had more money or economic capital, yet those with jobs and families did not have the same time to spend learning the internet at school and had to work to support a family.

In addition, an area that community colleges directly mediate the needs of older immigrants is within academic advising and support services. Insufficient advice provided by an academic counselor is a strongly negative determinant for immigrant students to continue their studies. Contrarily, high quality advising leads to successful integrations within the community college environment (Avalos & Pavel, 1993). There is a high need for more research specifically

on counseling among immigrant student populations. While this study does not focus solely on this mediating aspect, it is considered in the realm of structures that may support or inhibit older immigrant ELLs.

Exploring what structures or experiences of the community college help connect being a student with the background of an older immigrant ELL is a key focus of the current study. This was achieved by exploring elements of the community college by interviewing staff, faculty, administrators, as well as exploring available literature that discusses the college's students from an older immigrant background. This compared with the perspectives of the students help explain how the older immigrant needs are met or not met as they pursue academic studies.

### **The Role of Learning English as an Older Immigrant**

One of the biggest challenges that older immigrant ELLs face is the learning of English as a Second Language. In this context, their cultural capital of having a non-English first language directly challenges the learning of English. In regards to pursuing ESL in a credit program, one of the goals is a command of academic language, which along with classroom culture and norms, is a challenge for some of these students. However, ESL studies in community colleges are still developing and more literature is needed in this area.

In terms of ESL programs in community colleges, many studies have been exploratory in nature. Belcher (1988) published one of the first reports on ELLs in community college in response to the overall growth of these programs over the years. Throughout the 1990s, issues in community college ESL garnered some attention but more as an overview of ESL programs rather than the experience of immigrant ESL students themselves (Ignash, 1995, Kuo, 1999). Others have focused on the pressure of learning English, the curriculum implications of ESL

programs and the attachment of English learning to economic development (Kuo, 1999). Studies of this nature provide great insights and background into immigration's impact on ESL programs, yet conclude that the impact of ESL programs is unknown and more research needs to be done. By focusing on a particular group, older immigrant ESL students, the current study hopes to find some characteristics that may apply broadly to ESL programs and community colleges, but also to help this particular subset of students within the multiplicity of student identities that community colleges bring together.

In terms of the ESL program, connecting older immigrant student experiences within the curriculum can help bridge the transfer for students to academic courses (Kuo, Analysis of..., 1999). What the students are learning and how it relates to their lives is important for motivation. The cultural capital of student experiences is essential for older immigrants to adapt as students. Furthermore, learning English as an adult is a major transition for older immigrants that native English speaking adults typically do not encounter in their academic studies (Chisman & Crandall, 2007 p. 2). The obtaining of strong academic English is the cultural capital that is perceived as a pathway to continuing studies and transitioning into the next phase of their life for students (Becker, 2011). Seeing how the learning of English mediates the student is a key component the current study explores. The next section will explore the qualitative methods used in this study.

## **Methods**

Previous research using qualitative data collected from interviews among immigrant and ELL populations include Becker (2011) *Noncredit to credit...* Portes and Rumbaut (2001) *Legacies...* and Rhoads, R. A. & Valadez, J. R. (1996) *Democracy, multiculturalism, and the*

*community college*. In each of these particular cases, interviews were a valid method to gain rich data and learn about the immigrant experience in different contexts. In order to examine how the community college serves the needs of adult immigrant ESL students, a series of qualitative interviews of current older community college immigrant students took place at Community College of New Jersey (CCNJ).

### **Sample Recruitment**

The participants in my sample were selected purposely through my role as an ESL tutor at CCNJ. Recruitment of the participants for this study consisted of selecting student names from the ESL department roster lists based on age and country location and contacting the student about potentially being interviewed for this study. Participation was dependent on the student's understanding of the study and willingness to participate as well as logistical factors such as scheduling availability. The interviews themselves took place at the community college in an office located in the ESL department.

### **Participants and Protection**

The original design of this research intended to interview 10-20 adult immigrant ELLs currently enrolled in the ESL program and 5 staff members of the college. However, due to limitations in the availability of students and various scheduling conflicts, the total number of student participants involved was shortened to six and the number of staff interviews was shortened to three. The participants asked to be involved were selected from those currently enrolled in Level II or higher in the ESL program to gain the perspective of those closer to completing the program as well those who may be taking classes at the college that are outside of the ESL program. An effort was made to ensure representation across gender, country/language

and major that represented this group at this community college. Since this particular ESL program has 40 percent of its older students with a Spanish first language background, an effort was made to include a significant sample whose first language is Spanish. The other participants attempt to reflect the diverse population of students that originate from all regions of the globe. The minimum age for interview was 30 years of age. In addition, three formal interviews with community college staff, teachers and administrators took place to assess factors that are in place to assist older immigrant students. Participants selected included teachers, tutors, and an ESL program coordinator who shared insights on the various services the community college provides for older immigrant students. These participants were selected via a snowball method.

Before the interviews took place, informed consent forms were given that explaining the study and the protection of the interviewees' identifying features in their responses, such as names, origins and ages, which are be altered in typed transcriptions. Participants also were aware that they could choose not to discuss any topic that may arise and that they may stop the interview at anytime. In addition, all participants were aware that recordings would be deleted upon the completion of this study.

### **Methods: Research Design**

The interviews themselves were semi-structured data (Weiss, 1994 p. 3) with the use of an interview protocol (please see attached appendixes). Notes were also taken during the interviews. Semi-structured interviews that use a protocol follow a certain number of prearranged questions or areas of interest to probe in the interview, however, the semi-structured design allows for some digression from the proposed areas if it is relevant to the research. By letting go of uniformity, these types of qualitative interviews are able to reach a fuller

development of data (Weiss, 1994 p. 3). Within the protocol itself, the areas of interest currently include student background, community college experience and language.

After the data was collected through recorded interviews, a transcription of each interview was typed using the recordings, which was done using a digital voice recorder. The recordings themselves were kept secure in a password protected folder and were deleted upon the final completion of the study. The typed transcriptions were then uploaded to a computer program known as Atlas.ti. This program allows the user to code texts based on themes and can help in the analysis of this qualitative study. The coding procedure used was an open coding process (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which is a process of going through line by line of the transcription to build concepts for this research from the collected interview data (Khandakar). Atlas.ti helps accomplish this by providing the ability to highlight text and labeling the text or quotation with a code relevant to a potential concept or theme.

This process was done until potential themes emerged and data began to repeat itself. An analysis of making comparisons and inquiries as part of the open coding process (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) allowed for the ability to categorize the data into themes. Initially, the specific items of interest were language usage and in what capacity, previous academic, life and family experiences, and perceptions of studying at a community college, both while on campus and off, and factors contributing to success or failure in pursuing community college ESL studies -- such as social relations and knowledge of the academic culture. The aim was to locate specific themes related to the immigrant cultural capital and the mediating institution factors of the community college that support or inhibit the addition of academic cultural capital.

## **Methods: Benefits**

A pragmatic benefit of this study provided the subjects with a chance to utilize and build upon English conversation skills. Subjects who participate in this study also engaged in the opportunity to talk about themselves and share their story, culture, language and experience in the United States and in an American community college. For educators, it is the chance to see how older ELLs connect previous and current experiences (cultural capital) in a community college context. This study provided a basis or a way into seeing how this phenomenon occurs in a higher education setting.

### **Methods: Limitations**

A main limitation of my sample was that it was limited to the participation of those who are interested and wish to volunteer as an interview subject, as consent forms were used to explain the study to the participants. In addition, the study focused on students currently in the community college, while those who have dropped out and are not at the community college also have valuable information that relates to this study. Moreover, students that were contacted with full time schedules with family, school and employment could not afford to participate in this study or had to cancel their meetings. This limitation affected this study's role to include students across a varying array of experiences and how those experiences relate to community college studies. Another limitation was the small selection of only six interview subjects. This sample cannot be representative of the population of older immigrant students at this community college. However, this study is interested in understanding these particular immigrant experiences within the community college.

### **Research Site**



The interviews for this study were conducted with current adult ESL students at CCNJ. The community college site is located in a Northeastern US region with a population approaching one million. This area is largely comprised of suburban settings with a few mid-urban environments. The site is also within commutable distance of major metropolitan cities. The average course enrollment for this college is around 16,000 students (About NCC Fact Sheet, 2011). CCNJ offers both free non-credit ESL courses in addition to a credit ESL program of four levels that prepares its students for American college-level studies. For the purposes of understanding an adult immigrant ELL student's adaptation to the culture of an academic environment, the ESL credit program is the research focus for this study. In any given semester, the ESL student enrollment averages around 150 students who represent 35 countries of origin and 28 different languages; however Spanish is spoken by about 40% of the ESL student body (source left out to protect institution identity). Because CCNJ is one of the few community colleges in the US to offer on campus housing, 20% of the ESL program consists of non-immigrant international students who come to the US on student visas. Yet because many studies combine international and immigrant groups, this particular research looks solely at the remaining 80% of CCNJ's ESL students who have immigrated to the US, the average age of which is 28, and 25% have gone through a non-credit ESL program (source left out to protect institution identity).

Aside from a small portion of programs such as Radiography, CCNJ upholds the open access policy akin of most community colleges. Adult immigrant students also self-choose into the ESL program and they also can *stop out*, meaning they are able to take time off and reenroll in a later semester (Almon, 2010). However, for students to enroll in the mainstream writing course, English I, the college requires students to pass an English Placement Test (EPT). There is

also a placement test for ESL, however, there is no policy stating that students must take ESL rather than remedial English. If a student scores very low on the EPT, and they stated that their first language (L1) is not English, then advisors may suggest these students to consider the ESL program. Likewise, remedial English instructors may also recommend ESL to students who may benefit more from that program. Students can retake the EPT at anytime during their ESL program and most pass it upon completion of the ESL program. For those who do not, they may take a remedial course and upon passing the recommended courses, they may enter English I. In addition, many adult ESL students enter the credit ESL program after completing coursework in the non-credit program designed for survival English.

### **The Credit ESL Program at CCNJ**

The credit ESL program at CCNJ is divided into 4 levels, ESL I, II, III, and IV. An ESL placement test, as well as an oral and written assessment, is given to assist the administrator in determining which level is appropriate for the student. No student is denied access to the program based on the test's measurement of their English ability. ESL I is a 6-credit, 15 week course that meets for 7 ½ hours per week and combines reading, writing and speaking. Levels II and III are separated into 3-credit classes that have a skills focus on reading, writing and speaking. Level IV, an advanced three credit class, designed as the final preparation for English I, combines the skill areas of reading, writing, grammar and discussion. There are also elective courses in American Culture and accent pronunciation. Students are encouraged only to focus on ESL if placed into levels I and II, but many combine college level courses in levels III and IV. The academic coordinator of the ESL program acts as academic advisor until a student is more advanced in their major and has a program advisor. In addition to advising, the ESL program offers one-on-one tutoring for one hour per week. ESL tutors work with students in the ESL

department and the college Learning Center department offers tutoring in content areas. Upon advancing from the ESL program, students can go on to complete an associate's degree, certificate or specialized diploma. Associate of arts or science degrees are intended for transfer, while associate of applied science are intended for immediate employment. Of the 96 programs the college offers, only 19 are transferable (NCC, 2012).

## **Findings**

The findings from this study are taken from six one-hour to two hour interviews conducted with students and three 30 minute to one hour interviews conducted with staff and faculty of the community college. Because of limitations on reaching students, scheduling constraints and time conflicts, interviews with additional students could not be conducted. In addition, a common trait among all participants was that they were not currently employed, which allowed them the time to participate in this study. However, the findings from these interviews are still valuable and pertinent for the insights into the community college experience of the older adult immigrant. After introducing the participants, this section highlights aspects of the community college that were found to be either “road blocks” or “bridges” for older adult ESL students within the community college system, yet there was no definite answer of the community college being an institution systematically helping or debilitating older adult ESL students.

## **Vignettes of the Participants**

The students that were able to participate in this study each originated from a unique country. Four were from Spanish speaking countries in Central and South America, including Mexico, Bolivia, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic. One was from Egypt and one was

from a West African nation (West African nation is used at request of the student participant). The youngest participant was 38 years while the oldest was 52. This section briefly details some the personal history (pseudonyms are used), education background and goals of each of my participants.

*Safi* (age 38), from Egypt, identifies with his Christian faith and heritage as a Coptic-Egyptian. He described immense discrimination being a minority Christian in a majority Muslim country. He left Egypt for the United States via the diversity lottery with his wife and son in 2008, and has since had a second child, a daughter. He obtained his high school degree in Egypt in 1992, as well as a specialized degree in land reclamation in 1994. However, after a few years of unemployment, his main areas of employment in Egypt were found in government positions and a supermarket business he founded. This is his second semester taking ESL at the community college and is currently in the business management program. Because of a back injury he is currently not working and hopes to find work in a non-labor intensive position. Safi's main outside interests are rooted in volunteer work with blind people. He did this work for 12 years before coming to the US.

*Ester* (age 44) is from El Salvador and has been in the US for 30 years. She left El Salvador with her mother during her country's civil war. Her father, a math teacher, committed suicide after she moved to the US. She has a sister who recently completed a program in social work at Penn State. She has two daughters from a previous marriage with a Salvadoran man, whom she divorced for infidelity. She is currently married to an American. She left El Salvador during high school and completed her GED in the US. Her decision to attend community college came after her family encouraged her to do so and because she no longer needed to work to help

provide for the family. She is in level two of ESL and does not know what she would like to do long term with her studies and struggles with her progress in English.

*Thema* (age 52) is from West Africa and has lived in the United States for 19 years. Originally she moved to the US for marriage, but has since been divorced and is a single mother of two teenagers. She has been taking ESL classes at the community college since 2000 with breaks in between and is currently auditing the ESL IV course. She hopes to eventually pursue a master's in public health and work with a development project in her country. She volunteers heavily with her church, which provided a support service for her when she first arrived in the US. She also volunteers her time as well in a women's prison. She reflected on the various dialects of her country as a primer for experiencing the various accents, dialects and personalities in the United States.

*Pia* (age 45) is from the Dominican Republic and came to the US in 1979 (in 1980 she went to Puerto Rico to finish her high school diploma in Spanish) as her father immigrated and brought her large family of 12 over, one by one. All but one of her brothers and sisters has pursued college degrees. Pia, living in New York City at the time, started going to school to be a pediatrician but later dropped to work various jobs in the Rockefeller Center, including maintenance staff position and elevator operator. She now is interested in improving her English and is interested in opening her own day care. Her decision to come to the community college was influenced from a family counselor, who encouraged her to enroll to help her separate from a marital violence situation that she is facing at home.

*Eva* (age 43) is from Bolivia and immigrated to the United States 13 years ago. She has 5 brothers and sisters, all of whom remain in Bolivia. She has two children from a previous

marriage in Bolivia and currently is married to a husband from the US. Because of a car accident, she currently holds a disability status and receives state support and funding to pursue her studies. She had the accident when she was 7 months pregnant and lost the baby. She wants to improve her English and is interested in studying culinary arts. Previously, she worked varying catering positions in Virginia before recently moving to Pennsylvania with her husband. She reflected on Bolivia with great joy; “My life was good there, I spent more time with family. Everyone is like a family. Strangers are even hospitable and we talked a lot with neighbors and borrowed items like tomatoes. When it’s dark, people go outside to stay cool and talk while children play in the street.”

*Rosa* (age 45) is from Mexico and has lived in the US since 1991. She came to the US with her mother and older brother and sister. She currently is married to a husband from the US and has two sons. She completed her high school degree in Mexico, but also completed a GED in the United States. She finished her ESL program last year and is graduating with an associate’s degree in Early Childhood Education.

### *Staff Perspectives*

In addition to student interviews, I conducted interviews with select staff and faculty to understand the perspective that the people working for the institution have about the community college experience of the older adult immigrant. For this series of interviews I had the chance to speak with Janis, who is the program coordinator of the ESL program; Camilla, who is an adjunct faculty in the ESL department as well as a part time tutor, and Bob, who was an adjunct faculty for Biology and College Algebra. From these interviews with the staff, I learned more

about the students who are missing from this study, particularly the ones who are working full time who were unable to meet with me.

To start, Janis who works as the main contact and advisor of ESL classes, typified the community college ESL student as, “everyone has a different situation”. Indeed, she recounted how one student this semester would work the night shift then arrive for morning ESL class and then go home to sleep. Another particular student was working so much that he was supporting his whole family, including brothers, sisters and uncles. Camilla discussed students in her class who rode the bus to school, yet because of the bus schedule, would on a regular basis have to arrive late and leave early for each class. Bob discussed a similar situation in his class, “They have daughters and sons. Sometime they come late or leave early or don’t show up. I’ve seen a lot. If the student is very responsible, he or she will finish.”

### **Responsibility More so than Age**

For some, being an older adult student reflected and shaped many of the challenges they perceived to have in their studies. Eva from Bolivia recounted, “When you’re older, you can’t memorize like you can 20 years ago”. However, Eva’s reflection was also mixed with the fact that there is more responsibility in her life. “I have more responsibility than when I was younger, and too much stress now. Crazy stress all the time”. In addition, Thema recounted an experience with a younger student: “One student came in to class early to campaign for the student senate election, to get people to vote. And I thought, wow, I would never have that kind of time to be involved on campus. Younger students have more time. I go home and am a parent. The day doesn’t stop.” While age was not necessarily a challenge to overcome in and of itself in pursuing college studies, the responsibilities associated with becoming older were direct challenges to

being community college students. This sentiment was also shared by the ESL program's professional assistant, Janis: "It seems as students get older, responsibilities naturally accumulate. There are very few older ESL students that have the time to be full-time students." While in many instances older adults balance family, work and school, the participants in my study all had family lives in addition to their school lives. Yet for various reasons, were currently unemployed. They were largely supported by their immediate families. The scheduling of classes was an issue for some of the respondents.

Thema, a student, recounted a request made to the ESL Professional Assistant, "I told Janis, they need to put more classes at night cause next semester I am going back to work. Before the classes did not fit my schedule, so I took breaks". The scheduling of classes was an issue that Janis currently was addressing as sometimes multiple sections of a class were offered at 4:00pm to 5:50pm. Yet, many students work until 5:00pm. This came to her attention through an advising session with some students, and through her workings with the registrar and the teachers, had a sections switched to the 6:30pm to 8:0pm time slot.

### **Family Environment**

In terms of family, the academic lives of my participants were connected in large ways to their families. Five of my participants were currently married with children, while one was divorced and currently a single mother of two. Three of the six participants were themselves from large families of five or more children. In some cases, immediate families were support systems which allowed students to complete their studies and offered examples of academic success. Pia, whose brother and sister completed an engineering and education degree respectively, said, "My siblings encouraged me a lot to go back to school if I want to. They say



it's the best idea". For Ester, whose sister was finishing a social work degree at Penn State, encouraging sentiments were also provided, "Yeah, she said, 'you can do it, you can do it, look I did it'".

Despite this positive influx from family members, daily tasks around maintaining the family presented immediate challenges for students and their studies. Pia said, "There are a lot of conflicts with going to school and having a family. Sometimes my son comes home with homework and needs help. I have to prepare dinner, clean the house. Then I can prepare for the next day of class." Rosa said, "I can only focus on my studies 10% of the time. I have to go home, take care of the house, the kids, the family. It's really hard to have a job, go to school, have a family. I go home, I don't have time to study or review". Ester describes, "when you have kids, husband, house, washing, every day, it's not only school. I don't work, but I work at the house". In addition, five of my six participants were mothers and some indicated there was a halt or break that prevented some from pursuing their education earlier because of child rearing responsibilities. Rosa, "I waited till my son started his full day of elementary education, in 2005, before coming to community college. Thema, "In 2000, my kids were in day care. So I was able to go to school at that time."

Though three of my six participants were married to Americans, there was no indication that these close familial bonds aided their own English studies, and some instances were a deterrent. Eva explained; "My husband doesn't speak Spanish, just two or three words. We speak in English, but sometimes we don't understand in each other". Ester from El Salvador said that she did not ask her husband for help with her homework because his answer was usually, "I know the answer, but I don't know how to explain it", so she never utilized her own native speaking husband or children for assistance in her studies. However, Rosa's own reliance on her

husband for daily tasks encouraged her to focus more on her studies: “My husband is American, but he’s working. I am not with him 24/7 so I cannot keep depending on him for everything. I set up in my mind, ‘I have to LEARN English!’ To take my kids to the doctor, to put gas in my car. After starting English classes I feel much more confident. I don’t have to wait for my husband to come to buy groceries or take my kids to the doctor. I became more independent.” While family social lives provided a mixed influence of positive and negative factors for learning English in the community college, the immediate community college classroom environment provided its own social challenges for older adult ESL students.

### **Community College Environment: Social**

Contrary to my hypothesis, other ESL students in the classroom generally were not associated with positive learning experiences. Rosa said, “We were helping each other, but at the same time not helping each other, because of our different accents.” Pia explained, “I don’t have a lot of friends here”. Safi detailed a frustrating experience with other students, “at times when the teacher is talking, the students are laughing. My teacher is not saying something funny. I came here to learn and that’s not education.” In addition, Safi went on to say, “If I want to say something, maybe students are laughing. Why are they laughing? They have to respect me when I am talking”. Ester, from El Salvador commented from the other perspective, “sometimes everybody say shhhh. The thing is Spanish, we can’t talk quiet. I don’t know why we are like that”. While some students’ personal tendencies to speak in class were bothersome, Safi commented on how he would never share or exhibit his own culture with others in the class because he knew other students were Muslim. “For me to talk about my Coptic background, it would hurt him.” Thema, in addition, recalled that some students in her class were ignorant about certain aspects of others cultures. Eva, with her disability, recounted a situation of direct

negativity from other students. “One day it was raining. I carried my umbrella, my books, and one person closed the classroom door in my face. It was another [younger] Spanish speaking ESL student.” These elements of classroom experience were disjointing experiences for participants in my study.

For those students who went on to take classes outside the ESL department, which were primarily attended by American-born students, experiences were different. Rosa said, “Speech communication class gave me a lot of confidence because I saw other American people having trouble during the speech and being confused or whatever. So I am not the only one. So later when I go to the other classes, I think, I was in that that other class and these guys are not better than me [laughing]. Safi recounted experiences in a statistics course, in which another student fell asleep: “If he is sleeping, why is here? We can’t do that in my country. I am not saying that that man is bad or good. But I know it’s a different culture”.

### **Community College Knowledge**

Some of my participants expressed a lack of knowledge of certain services that the community college afforded to them. Pia said, “Career counselors? I didn’t know they had those”. Safi recounted frustration with some of the services the community college provides. In terms of counselors, he said, “I don’t know the culture, and I don’t know what the outside needs. But I just don’t want to take anything. I take business management cause I started with a small business [in Egypt] and it grew.” He emphasized a lack of knowledge about what a business management degree really means.

From a staff perspective, older students have a different kind of knowledge. This sentiment was shared by staff and faculty members: Janis, Camilla and Bob. Janis recounted how

a lot of students may know how to cook complicated cuisines, speak multiple languages, or know complex skill from their jobs, yet, many struggle when sitting in front of a computer; “some would move the mouse to the edge of the desk and not know they could pick it up to give themselves more space to move the cursor”. This semester, the ESL lab started offering computer lessons. Camila, offered three levels of computer lessons from beginner’s to advanced level. However, this focus on technology may not be the most essential asset for older students to gain, as some struggle with communicating with teachers about struggles or issues.

Ester, in response to being asked if she ever seeks help from teachers, said: “For what? I talk with my husband and he says you can do it, no worries, I believe in you. He says that and it’s important. What are other people going to say, ‘oh yea you can do it’. But they can’t help. They can’t change your mind. Change your feeling. You know what I mean? Nobody help you. Nobody can help you. Something in your head and in your heart, it’s there.” While some felt assistance should be intuitive, others found the classroom environment as shaped by teachers to be very welcoming.

## **Teachers**

The teachers were regarded with positive accolades and were assumed to have immense benefits for my participants’ learning experience. They created environments that all of my participants regarded as productive and conducive for learning. Eva said, “She has everything ready before class. On the left side of the board, she puts what we have to do for the class. On the right side she puts what we have to do for homework.” Thema said, “outside of my ESL classes, there really is not a place I can ask questions”. Rosa said, “My teachers always try to help us. Safi, “with this semester I was very lucky. And in my statistics the class, the professor is good. I

told him my English is not like Americans' so please don't worry if I ask a stupid question and he reassured me that it is okay". All of the teachers were spoken about in high regards, which may be a factor of the advising services provided by the college.

### *Advising*

Janis handles the main advising duties for the ESL program at the community college and is usually the first person to assist new and prospective students. She emphasized that every student has different needs and different things going on in life. She attempts to help students her best with all facets of the registration and financial aid process. Sometimes students ask to take four classes for full-time status, which is when she usually starts asking questions; "Often times students don't know how many classes they should take. I ask if they work full-time, and try to talk to them. Some have never been to university or they went to university in their country, which could be quite different. I ask them about their family situation. I try not to pry, but if they have three kids at home that they provide for, I may then suggest taking fewer classes". For class advising outside of the ESL program, Janis keeps a running list of teachers that have been great for previous ESL students who continue on from the program. In addition, she keeps a "black list" of teachers that have been very strict, insensitive or too pop-cultural oriented for students who had not grown up in the US student. For example, this included a professor who utilized 1970s TV shows for pertinent examples of course content.

### **Language**

The main reason why all the participants are in the community college is to study English and most felt that this endeavor was helping them in both their professional and personal lives. Some found that prior working experiences encouraged them to learn English, Eva, "I cannot do

anything till I learn good English”. Pia recounted that she volunteered for five years as teaching assistant with a poor level of English.

In some instances, the original language of my participants was discouraged. One of the strongest influences of culture and background was the students’ first language background. When I spoke with some of the student participants about whether they would switch completely to English and forget their first language if they could, most said they would not. However, all agreed they would prefer to speak stronger English than their first language. Ester, “Sometimes in the class we start talking in Spanish and the teacher would say, ‘No Spanish!’ Sometimes we forget, sometimes we don’t understand vocabulary or something. We want to try to understand and say it in Spanish. And she is like no. No Spanish. But we understand better like that, it’s funny.”

### **Discussion**

To understand how a community college aids a particular portion of its student body, this research sought to examine how older adult ESL immigrants from multiple cultural backgrounds adapt to the academic environment of the community college. Part of this study was to determine what factors of a community college are in place to help mediate an older adult immigrant into the life of academia and what particular characteristics a student of this background had that might aid this mediation. However, it could not be determined if the community itself is an absolute roadblock or bridge to gaining the advanced cultural capital of academia or higher education for older adult ESL students.

In many instances, the lives of these older immigrants as students were able to accommodate their current lives. Moreover, for many of my participants, family examples of

academic pursuits were commonplace, which was a finding in Becker's (2011) study. Many of the students had family members, such as brothers or sisters that have completed their advanced studies and have pursued professional careers in areas of engineering, education and mathematics. Some, like Safi, already possess an advanced degree. Yet, family identities and roles were also strong influences upon an older student's academic pursuits. Many of the students in this study had the time to pursue college studies, mainly because they had financial support from families. Yet, some aspects of daily routines associated with family could conflict with the community college experience and the time to commit to being a student.

Family identities and responsibilities were major influences for most of the participants. Including the family members into the school lives of the students might help increase the possibility for students to share this part of their life with their family. For instance, similar to immigrant experience of the Hull House in Chicago of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Polachek, 1991), creating events of acknowledgement or presentations of student's accomplishments or work that family can be invited to see and appreciate might help create positive energy at home, where students must reconcile their lives as family members and as students. This also may spur a kind of inspiration for younger (or older) family members to view higher education as a viable and accessible option. Yet, goal setting was also key aspect for many students in this study that already existed.

Key aspects for the students were plans for the future and goals that students had laid out for their studies ahead of time. Many were practical in nature and envisioned goals that were attainable and perceived as providing a sense of financial support. Goal minded individuals was a key attribute for all those who participated, except one, Ester. All participants but one had some sense of what they would like to pursue. Ester discussed frustration and fear in not

knowing what she would like to do after her English studies and even feared being unable to complete her studies. Yet, for her, as well as the students in this study already possessed a sense of what they wish to accomplish with their studies, knowing what do next was not clearly understood. Many students lacked knowledge of the appropriate advisors to see outside of the ESL department.

From the ESL department perspective, a clear sense of care and dedication to assisting the students was apparent. Efforts to include accommodating schedules and to understand the lives and stresses of students were also made. This helped begin the mediation of the students within the community college environment. Aspects such as helping ESL students learning technology, such as using the internet and language software, were discussed heavily by the staff as a main characteristic of the ESL lab's vision. For many older immigrant students, this may be an area that is hard to incorporate with their prior experiences, which coupled with learning English increase the difficulty in seeing the potential to accomplish their predetermined goals.

Promoting elements of the community college institution that are in place to aid students is important for the academic success of these students. Students of all backgrounds make many sacrifices to attend higher education. One aspect of the community college system is the transfer options, both within the community college and outside. ESL student require more time to complete their English studies and more time to begin an academic program and, if they desire, the ability to transfer to a 4-year institution and beyond. For those who are already, time is critical and ensuring all students know about all factors of the community college that can aid this process is keen. For those who have transferred from vocational ESL program and have relatively low levels of cultural capital in terms of higher education, these continuing transitions and ultimate goal of a college degree may seem daunting.



While age was not a direct factor linked to perceived challenges in attending community college, my participants recounted how age separated them from the other younger students. Unlike Becker's (2011) study of vocational ESL programs where students generally found the nature of learning English a bonding experience, those students all tended to be within the same older age bracket. However, when students of varying ages and backgrounds and in the same educational context, a generational conflict may occur, as espoused by some of the students in this particular study.

Yet this is the nature of the open access mantra of the community college. This characteristic of the community college brings a multiplicity of students together through affordable tuition and minimum academic requirements. But as seen in some of the older adult immigrant population, this may result in instances of negativity which could affect an older student group with a fragile sense of belonging as a student. Community colleges are beacons that join students from all walks of life and backgrounds. Creating instances of open dialogue for students to openly discuss areas of cultural conflict might help navigate areas of these kinds of cultural contentions. Family situations can also vary from student to student.

The social interactions with older and younger students within the ESL classroom were sometimes inhibiting of the older students in my study. Younger students were perceived to have more time to devote to studies and could be involved on campus. In addition, some older students did not feel privy to such information and, in some instances, felt threatened or intimidated by students who possessed a higher command of English. In looking at mediating institutions (1992), this kind of interactions among the older and younger generations of students is inhibiting to the formation of an older adult's own sense of value as a student. Moreover, for those who are only taking ESL classes, there is little to no interaction among the other areas of

the community college or the rest of the student body, which may be further limiting an older adult's access to other options on the community college.

### **Conclusion**

In many ways what this study captured were insights of students who had substantial occurrences, or cultural capital, in their lives to accommodate a student role: a supportive family, a community college environment with supportive teachers and staff, and a healthy set of goals. Yet factors involved with the social dynamics of culture and age in the classroom as well as life responsibilities were key factors in inhibiting the student role. More likely a study involving more students who have more extreme challenges to academic life, such as ones who work the night shift before morning class, would add to a more robust understanding of the older adult immigrants and their unique situation within the higher education framework. In addition, inclusion of those students who decide to leave their programs or to take breaks would also provide a more thorough understanding of the experiences that lead to the decision to begin studies, and the decision for postponement or eventual ending of studies.

While focusing on aspects of cultural capital can be fascinating, there is no absolute way to definitely estimate or sometimes even recognize all occurrences of such capital. In some studies, the understanding of American jokes was appropriated to obtaining useful cultural capital that could assist Chinese international students in entering the American job market (Fong, 2011). Yet there could be many more minute areas impacting a student's experience in a new setting.

When looking at previous backgrounds among a younger and older generation, it may not be seen as entirely as differences of age, but more accurately as defining differences in overall

experiences. Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which consist of all the experiences that combine to give one a sense of the probable and improbable, natural or unnatural, can be used to help encompass all these minute aspects of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). It is why perhaps an older adult ESL student may experience community college as an event uncharacteristic of previous life experiences, while a younger ESL student may feel more validation from the community college experience as it relates to more recent school experiences. Perhaps such curriculum changes as mentioned previously, such as adapting curriculum to older adult experiences, may produce a jarring effect for younger students.

However, it is this balancing act of the community college to support so many students with different life experiences in varying ways. Where one group with a particular value set may be validated in the structure, it may be disarming for a younger generation to do assignments based on family recipes, or to have family members attend class. However, as a mediating institution, it is important for all members of the community college to learn and share experiences from one another, as it is the interactions among all members (students, teachers, advisors) that link newcomers and established residents (Lamphere, 1992). Yet, it is the community college that brings such diverse groups together.

With limited studies in community college experiences, more details and research is needed on the particular groups that are served by this growing institution and how they are served. As tuition becomes higher in most areas of higher education, community colleges will continue to support many students from varying backgrounds and life experiences. Yet, their growing stance in the realm of higher education is the sole opportunity for many older adult immigrants to shape and structure their goals and future plans.

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## CONSENT FORM

### Experiences of English Language Learners at a Community College

You are invited to be in a research study about **your experience in a community college as an English Language Learner**. You were selected as a possible participant because of **your community college ESL and adult immigrant background**. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

**This study is being conducted by:**

Thomas Janis, Graduate Student, College of Education, Lehigh University under the direction of Dr. Alex Wiseman, Associate Professor, College of Education, Lehigh University.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

The purpose of this study is to learn how a community college serves older ESL students. It also is to see how a community college supports students with different cultures from your perspective. I am interested to see how your experience in a community college as an ESL student connects with your previous and current life experiences. One goal of this study is to see how community colleges can better serve older ESL students.

**WHAT ARE THE PROCEDURES?**

**If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:**

Schedule a time to meet and discuss your background and community college experience. This interview will take 30 minutes to 1 hour and will be audio recorded.

**IS THIS STUDY CONFIDENTIAL?**

Yes. The information you provide in this study will be kept confidential. Your name will not be stored alongside any of the information you provide. Your name or identifying features will never be used in any reports or publications of this study's results. To protect your confidentiality, we will keep data for this study only on secure computer systems in locked offices. When the study is complete, all recorded data will be deleted.

**WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND BENEFITS ASSOCIATED WITH PARTICIPATION?**

We do not foresee any risks to you other than a possible breach of confidentiality. As outlined above, however, we take a series of precautions to protect against that risk. Benefits include a chance to use English and explain the community college experience from the perspective of an older ESL student.

**IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?**

**Yes. Participation in this study is voluntary:**

Your decision of whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Lehigh University or Community College of New Jersey. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**IF I HAVE QUESTIONS, WHO CAN I CONTACT?**

**The researchers conducting this study are:**

Thomas Janis, graduate student of College of Education, Lehigh University. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at Lehigh University, 484-225-5358 OR [tnj210@lehigh.edu](mailto:tnj210@lehigh.edu). You may also contact Thomas' thesis advisor, Dr. Alex Wiseman at (610) 758-5740 OR [aww207@lehigh.edu](mailto:aww207@lehigh.edu)

**Questions or Concerns:**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact Susan E. Disidore at (610)758-3020 (email: [sus5@lehigh.edu](mailto:sus5@lehigh.edu)) or Troy Boni at (610)758-2985 (email: [tdb308@lehigh.edu](mailto:tdb308@lehigh.edu)) of Lehigh University's Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have my questions answered. I consent to participate in the study. I consent to the audio recording of my responses.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix B – Student Interview Protocol

### GENERAL BIOGRAPHY & BACKGROUND

- How long have you been in the USA? Where were you before?
- Tell me about your upbringing, locations lived and how long,
- General description of current community. Previous communities?
- Family: parents, siblings, marriage, children
- Background on schooling experience: Primary school / Secondary school / schooling with family or at home? What were previous life goals?
- Tell me about your family background. Can you describe your cultural and national background? How do you describe your relationships and social background?
- How do you spend your time outside of the community college? Hobbies? Job? Family?

### SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

- Cultural representation on campus
  - In what ways do you see your culture represented on campus?
    - Symbols, events, professors, students, artwork, clothing, music, other ways
  - How do you feel about these representations? Or the absence of?
  - How do you share your experiences (cultural or otherwise) on campus?
- How about the social community within the community college?
  - How do you meet others on campus?
  - What does your social circle look like? How do you share your background with your friends?

### COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

- How and why education at community college was chosen?
  - Tell me about your first experience at CC
  - How long have you been studying at CC?
- Age: What impact on studies if any?
- What are your Educational goals and/or future educational and professional goals?
- Have you ever taken breaks in your study? What was the reason?
- How do classes and studying at community college fit into life outside the college?
- How do you communicate with your teachers? Classmates? Advisor? Tutors?
- What support services do you use at the community college, like tutoring or talking to the professor?

### LANGUAGE

- What's your Language background, including number of languages acquired/learned

- How many years learning English? What are your goals for your English studies?
- How often do you use native language/s compared with English?
- Where and when do you use English and with whom and where and when do you use native language/s and with whom?
- How do you feel when you are speaking English? How do you feel when you are speaking native language/s. How do you feel when you are speaking your native language in public on campus? On campus with others who do not speak the language? In public outside of campus? In private?

FINAL THOUGHTS ON ANY OF THESE TOPICS OR OTHERS



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## CONSENT FORM

### Experiences of English Language Learners at a Community College

You are invited to be in a research study about **the community college experiences of English Language Learners**. You were selected as a possible participant because of **your role as a staff, faculty or administrator that works with students at your community college who have an ESL and adult immigrant background**. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

**This study is being conducted by:**

Thomas Janis, Graduate Student, College of Education, Lehigh University under the direction of Dr. Alex Wiseman, Associate Professor, College of Education, Lehigh University.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

**The purpose of this study is** to learn how a community college serves older ESL students. It also is to see how a community college supports students with different cultures from your perspective. I am interested to see how the experiences of ESL students in a community college connect with previous and current life experiences. One goal of this study is to see how community colleges can better serve older ESL students.

**WHAT ARE THE PROCEDURES?**

**If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:**

Schedule a time to meet and discuss your professional role and office in working with older community college ESL students. This interview will take 15 minutes to 30 minutes and will be audio recorded.

**IS THIS STUDY CONFIDENTIAL?**

Yes. The information you provide in this study will be kept confidential. Your name will not be stored alongside any of the information you provide. Your name or identifying features will never be used in any reports or publications of this study's results. To protect your confidentiality, we will keep data for this study only on secure computer systems in locked offices. When the study is complete, all recorded data will be deleted.

**WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND BENEFITS ASSOCIATED WITH PARTICIPATION?**

We do not foresee any risks to you other than a possible breach of confidentiality. As outlined above, however, we take a series of precautions to protect against that risk. Benefits include a chance to discuss and elaborate on the work you do at the community college as it pertains to older ESL students.

**IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?**

**Yes. Participation in this study is voluntary:**

Your decision of whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Lehigh University or Pennsylvania Community College. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**IF I HAVE QUESTIONS, WHO CAN I CONTACT?**

**The researchers conducting this study are:**

Thomas Janis, graduate student of College of Education, Lehigh University student. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at Lehigh University, 484-225-5358 OR [tnj210@lehigh.edu](mailto:tnj210@lehigh.edu). You may also contact Thomas' thesis advisor, Dr. Alex Wiseman at (610) 758-5740 OR [aww207@lehigh.edu](mailto:aww207@lehigh.edu)

**Questions or Concerns:**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact Susan E. Disidore at (610)758-3020 (email: [sus5@lehigh.edu](mailto:sus5@lehigh.edu)) or Troy Boni at (610)758-2985 (email: [tdb308@lehigh.edu](mailto:tdb308@lehigh.edu)) of Lehigh University's Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have my questions answered. I consent to participate in the study. I consent to the audio recording of my responses.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D – Staff Interview Protocol

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: COMMUNITY COLLEGE STAFF

- What is your position and/or office on campus?
- What kinds of services or support do you, or your office, provide for ALL students?
- What specific challenges do adult immigrant students have? Can you describe an experience with a student with one of these challenges?
- Can you describe the kinds of support you, your office or the college at large offers for adult immigrant students?
- When was the last time you interacted with an adult immigrant student? Before then?
  - Can you tell me about the interaction?
  - How did the student know about you or your office?
- How does the community college benefit from having a population of adult immigrant students on campus?
  - Can you describe an example?

## Vita

*Thomas Janis*, M.A., is a 2012 recipient of a Fulbright grant to teach and research at Cumhuriyet University in Sivas, Turkey. He has 5 years' experience in International and Higher Education. He entered the field as a community college ESL tutor with students from over 135 countries and continued his experience as program coordinator with Fulbright scholars for Community Colleges for International Development. He has helped develop international affairs programs for Lehigh University while completing his graduate studies and thesis on older adult ESL students in community colleges. He holds a MA in Comparative and International Education from Lehigh University, a BA in Intercultural Communications and French from East Stroudsburg University, an AA in Political Science from Northampton Community College, and certificates from the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi and the University of British Columbia.