

## Demographic Trends and Student Progress in the San Jose City College ESL Program, 1982-1987

- In the past 10 years immigrant ESL students have become a growing presence on community college campuses throughout California. Because the need for ESL was at first regarded as temporary and because its growth has been so rapid, there has been little opportunity to assess the progress and prospects of students and programs. This study follows 1,000 students entering a credit ESL program over 10 semesters—from fall, 1982 to spring, 1987. It also examines the overall demographic trends of the program. Finally, it makes recommendations primarily to ensure equity in issues affecting ESL programs.

Within the past 10 years, the ESL program at San Jose City College has grown dramatically. This growth is not surprising when the changing demographics of the state of California are considered. The Master Plan for Higher Education notes that the area of ESL is the single largest category with the largest enrollment of any segment of education in California (Joint Committee for Review of the Master Plan for Higher Education, 1987, p. 15). ESL was not even mentioned in the Master Plan of 1960, yet it is destined to play an important role in all segments of California education at least through the turn of the century.

The increase in ESL enrollment at San Jose City College and throughout the state has been so rapid that there has been little time to assess data in order to formulate decisions. This study is an attempt to examine the data on a random sample of 1,000 ESL students who enrolled at San Jose City College over a 5-year period from fall, 1982 to spring, 1987. The study is the first of its kind in this district and the state. It examines the characteristics of the students of the San Jose City College ESL program as to national/ethnic origins, linguistic backgrounds, length of time in the United States, and local high school attendance. It determines the rate at which ESL students receive AA degrees and transfer to four-year institutions. It also looks at the reasons why ESL students attend San Jose City College and the number

of semesters they attend. Additionally, the study examines the age, gender, and district geographical distribution of the subjects but, in the interest of brevity, this information, has been left out of this report.

### Method

Incoming ESL students fill out a student information profile at the time they take the ESL placement test. The questions on the profile have varied over the semesters for the purpose of simplification, but they have generally contained questions on national origin, language background, and length of time in the United States. Some semesters' profiles also contain information on years of education completed and high school attendance in the United States. Enough data on these categories exist to make some generalizations.

One hundred profiles of students who took the ESL placement test were randomly selected from each semester's group based on the fourth digit of their telephone numbers. As only 49% to 69% of each semester's group actually enrolled, it was necessary to complete the sample by continuing the process of random selection.

The profiles were examined for each category. Additionally, student records were obtained with the assistance of the Registrar. These records were examined to extract information about the students' careers at San Jose City College, data not available from the student information profile.

The most difficult aspect of tracking the students has been following them beyond San Jose City College. San Jose State University, through its Relations with Schools Office, supplied the names of all SJCC students in attendance and their grade point averages. Names, however, like their owners, become Americanized; so it was sometimes difficult to recognize the Jennifer of San Jose State's records as the Ngoc-Dung of the study. Fortunately, social security numbers could be used for verification.

The records of the University of California system are not as comprehensive as those of the CSU system. Through the President's Office of the University of California, it was possible to obtain only the number of SJCC students transferring to the University of California system as of fall, 1985 (a total of 5). Fortunately, by maintaining personal ties to students long after they left SJCC, I was able to list some of the individuals from the sample who transferred to the UC system and to institutions outside the state. Because of this reliance on personal contact, it is probable that the transfer of ESL students to four-year institutions is actually underestimated.

### History of SJCC's ESL Program

From its modest start during the early 1970s, the San Jose City College ESL program swelled with the influx of Vietnamese boat people after 1978. In fall, 1984 when fees of up to \$50 per semester were imposed, the ESL program became the largest in the two-college district, while enrollments in the other areas declined. From an almost

exclusively Indochinese population in 1980, the program now serves students from 57 language backgrounds and 76 countries. The first census enrollment in fall, 1985 stood at 1995. Two years later (fall, 1987) it was 1990. In that semester, SJCC's ESL staff consisted of 7 full-time and 25 part-time teachers, reflecting an imbalance of part-time to full-time staff, an imbalance endemic in ESL programs. Classes are now offered mornings, afternoons, and evenings Monday through Thursday, mornings and afternoons on Friday, and on Saturday mornings. The classes are taught on campus and at two satellite locations.

The curriculum itself has undergone two changes, converting it from a model appropriate to adult education to one that concentrates on separate skills, a more appropriate curriculum for a credit program. Currently, 20 different classes at six levels through freshman English are offered. The English proficiency at each of the levels is as follows:

*Level 0* (adult education referral): These learners have insufficient background in English to profit from instruction in the lowest of ESL classes at SJCC. These learners are referred to adult education centers in the community.

*Level 1*: Learners at this level are able to function in most survival situations. They are literate in the English alphabet and able to read simplified materials and to understand slow, simplified speech.

*Level 2*: Learners at this level have progressed beyond the survival stage and can read and converse about a limited range of topics.

*Level 3*: Low intermediate level learners are able to function in certain selected courses outside of the ESL program, such as mathematics. A shift in emphasis from listening/speaking to written skills begins at this level in the SJCC program.

*Level 4*: High intermediate learners are able to converse with increasing fluency. Emphasis on writing skills becomes heavier. The learner may enroll in vocational courses.

*Level 5*: Advanced learners are able to converse in fluent, if accented, English. Emphasis on writing increases as learners' final course essays are board graded with those of native English-speaking students. Learners are deemed ready for academic courses.

*Level 6*: The curriculum at this level continues to emphasize writing. Students are expected to write 8,000 words in the form of a documented research paper and essays. Board grading of final essays with those of native English speakers continues.

## Program Trends

### National/Ethnic Origin

Throughout this study, the largest group of students entering SJCC's ESL program has been from Vietnam. However, this number has decreased from 86% in fall, 1981 to 35% in fall, 1987.

The second largest group from fall, 1981 through spring, 1986 has been Chinese from the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and various Asian nations in which Chinese have settled.

In fall, 1986 the total percentage of entering ESL students from all of Latin America (Mexico, Central and South America) exceeded the Chinese percentage and continued to do so through fall, 1987. However, in view of the size of the Spanish-speaking population in San Jose, this population is underrepresented in the college and among those receiving AA degrees and/or transferring to four-year institutions. Other underrepresented groups in this study include Filipinos and Portuguese.

The Korean and Chinese communities in San Jose appear to be growing while the number of Laotians has decreased by 90% due to out-migration.

**Table 1**  
**National/Ethnic Origin of Entering SJCC**  
**ESL Students, 1981-1987**

	F81	F82	S83	F83	S84	F84	S85	F85	S86	F86	S87	F87
Vietnam	86%	65%	59%	46%	48%	54%	45%	50%	35%	48%	34%	35%
Mexico	5%	3	4	4	7	7	6	9	10	15	10	10
Africa	—	3	1	6	5	5	5	4	10	2	5	6
China, Hong Kong, Taiwan	—	4	4	7	8	8	5	8	14	6	7	6
SE Asia (minus Vietnam)	3%	7	17	13	13	7	13	8	3	5	9	8
Europe	—	3	—	2	1	—	1	—	3	3	1	—
Central Africa	1%	2	2	2	4	6	3	3	3	6	2	6
South America	—	2	4	2	2	2	5	2	6	2	5	4
Middle East	1%	2	—	7	4	6	5	3	4	4	7	7
South Asia	—	1	2	3	4	1	3	2	3	3	6	6
Korea	2%	5	3	6	2	4	8	5	4	—	7	6
U.S.	2%	—	3	1	—	—	—	1	2	3	2	2
Japan	—	1	1	—	—	—	1	1	—	—	—	—
Phillippines	—	2	—	1	2	—	—	4	3	3	5	4
Vietnamese												
Chinese	21%	18	10	6	7	17	14	15	4	11	8	8
Total Chinese	21%	23%	19%	17%	17%	27%	20%	27%	19%	17%	15%	16%
Total												
Latin Amer.	6%	7%	10%	7%	13%	15%	14%	14%	19%	23%	17%	21%
Total Asian	91%	84%	84%	73%	73%	74%	72%	76%	59%	62%	63%	59%

Although the number of Asians in this study has declined from 84% in fall, 1982, it has hovered around 60% since spring, 1986. Asians represent 73% of those in this study who received AA degrees and 58% of those in this study who transferred to four-year institutions.

Over 52% of the students entering SJCC's ESL program are refugees. At its peak in 1981, this group comprised 90% of the program's enrollment.

Students from 76 countries have studied in SJCC's ESL program. This diversity reflects changing realities in the world and promises continued enrollment and importance to the ESL program in the future.

### Linguistic Background

Since fall, 1982 students entering SJCC's ESL program have come from 57 language backgrounds. For the purpose of this study, the major languages of the current ESL population are the most relevant. As of spring, 1987 over 80% of this group speaks one of the following languages: Vietnamese (27%); Spanish (19%); Chinese (16%); Persian, including Dari (11%); Korean (7%); and Cambodian (5%). Although the percentage of Korean and Cambodian speakers seems small, the level of English proficiency of these groups dictates a need for some first language assistance in getting through the maze of procedures to enroll in the college.

### Length of Time in the United States

Length of residence in the United States was examined and five categories were established: 1 year or less; 1-2 years; 3-4 years; 5-9 years; 10+ years. To determine actual trends, however, it was more meaningful to combine certain categories.

In the earliest semesters of this study—through spring, 1983—the largest percentages of entering ESL students (79% and 75% respectively) resided in the United States for 2 years or less. Starting in spring, 1986 a new pattern began to emerge. Entering students who had resided in the United States 3 to more than 10 years consistently represented 54% of the sample. In fall, 1987 that group represented 63% of all new students.

This trend indicates that first time entrants in SJCC's ESL program have been in the United States longer than their counterparts entering the program before fall, 1985. One explanation of this trend is that these students may have taken adult education classes and then decided that a move to a community college was their next step. Because of the length of time they have spent in the United States, their comprehension and fluency may also be greater than that of earlier groups. The implications of this fact for placement testing and teaching are great. Testing methods will have to include an assessment of these skills through an oral interview and a reconsideration of the present testing instrument.

Since many of these individuals have undoubtedly taken adult education classes emphasizing life skills, the curriculum focus of SJCC's program should continue to explore and accommodate the range of their increasingly subtle and sophisticated language needs.

It should be noted that the shift in enrollment to those who have lived in the United States 3 or more years coincides with increased foreign language advertising by SJCC's ESL program.

### Previous Educational Background of Entering SJCC ESL Students, 1981-1983.

Although data on previous educational background were not gathered for eight semesters of this study, earlier data show that an average of 55% of the students entering SJCC's ESL program finished 12 years of education abroad.

An average of 22% attended universities abroad—9% appear to have received degrees, while 2% did some graduate work. The figure on university attendance may be understated because of the mistaken belief on the part of some ESL students that access to the community college is denied university graduates.

There appears to be a marked relationship between previous educational background and success in SJCC's academically oriented ESL program.

### Entering SJCC ESL Students Who Have Attended American High Schools

Since spring, 1986 questions about high school attendance in the United States have been added to the student information profile. A steady 17% of those taking the placement test in the fall have attended American high schools compared to a steady 11% who take the exam in the spring. A slightly higher percentage of high school attendees who are fall candidates for ESL classes place at lower levels of ESL classes than their spring semester counterparts.

Between 76% and 89% of incoming ESL students who have attended 4 years of high school in the United States placed below ESL Level 5 (pre-Subject A). This figure is higher than the college's estimated 65% of American born, English-speaking students who place at this level.

A strong relationship seems to exist between school attendance, length of time in the United States and advanced ESL placement. Students who attend high school and then go to work before entering SJCC seem to have a higher level of English proficiency. Not enough data is available to support this hypothesis at the present time. However, it is apparent that ESL support will be needed for students who have attended American high schools for some time to come.

### Interests of ESL Students Fall, 1982-Spring, 1987

Six patterns of study were established among the 1,000 subjects in this study: ESL only; ESL and general subjects; ESL and vocational

subjects; ESL, general, and vocational subjects; no ESL, only vocational; no ESL, only general.

An average of 60% of the subjects have gone on to take courses other than ESL, pointing to the fact that the ESL population of the college does not exist in and of itself but serves as a feeder to other courses and programs in the college and the district.

A surprisingly low 28% take vocational courses at the college. The reason for this is that students may be taking vocational courses through other private institutions because the courses are accelerated and require less English proficiency.

It is felt that a significant number of Level 1-4 students would have benefitted by taking courses with a credit/no credit option as their remedial English counterparts do instead of taking courses for letter grades. With this option, students' self-esteem would be enhanced and they would undoubtedly persist in their studies at SJCC for a longer time. Use of the credit/no credit option would also banish any claims of unfairness and the possibility of legal action against the district.

### Number of Semesters at SJCC

The average length of time spent at SJCC by the subjects in this study is 4 semesters. More than 18% persist for more than that number of semesters.

AA recipients spent 5+ semesters (2.7 years) before receiving their degrees while transfer students spent 6 semesters (3 years) at SJCC.

**Table 2**  
**AA Recipients and Transfer Students**

Starting Semester	AA	Transfer	Still at SJCC as of fall, 1987
Fall, 1982	4%	5%	9%
Spring, 1983	1%	2%	9%
Fall, 1983	—	6%	12%
Spring, 1984	2%	5%	9%
Fall, 1984	2%	4%	24%
Spring, 1985	1%	2%	24%
Fall, 1985	—	—	25%
Spring, 1986	—	—	28%
Fall, 1986	—	—	43%
Spring, 1987	—	—	50%
Average through Spring, 1985	1.66%	4%	

## AA Recipients and Transfer Students

Table 2 indicates the percentage of ESL students from this sample who received AA degrees and/or transferred to four-year institutions. Also included in the chart is the percentage of students from each semester's entering group who were still continuing their studies as of fall, 1987.

The average percentage of subjects from this study who receive AA degrees is 1.66%. The average percentage who transfer to four-year institutions is 4%. Data for the subjects in this study stops as of the spring, 1985 entering group so that final figures are not in for all groups. They continue to pursue their goals. Nine percent of the subjects from fall, 1982 and spring, 1983 were continuing at SJCC as of fall, 1987.

The transfer rate for ESL students in this study is probably higher than the transfer rate for their native English-speaking counterparts. Hard data on transfers from any of the local colleges is difficult to obtain. The most common practice is to use the statement of intent at the time of entrance to represent transfer rate.

Students from Ethiopia were over represented as 16% of the transfers in this study, a proportion exceeding their presence in the study. This fact may reflect the composition of SJCC's student population from that region. For the most part, they are under 35 years of age—still young enough to consider a university education—and were university bound students in their own countries who had their studies interrupted by civil disorder. Students from Vietnam and Latin America represented 33% and 4% of the transfer students in this study, proportions below their numbers in this sample. These under representations probably reflect the age span in these populations. In the case of the Vietnamese, the number of subjects with previous university degrees is reflected. The same factor operates for Latin Americans, coupled with a higher number of subjects at the lower end of the educational continuum.

The performance (measured by GPA) of subjects from this study at San Jose State University, where 45.8% of them have transferred, is on the whole above that of all SJCC transfers and all JSU students.

## Conclusions

The demographic trends in the San Jose City College ESL program have changed significantly in all of the areas considered in the 5-year period of this study. Prior to the completion of this study, some concern had been expressed that the decrease in Vietnamese enrollments in the college signaled the decline of SJCC's ESL program. To those experienced in international education, however, the diversification of a program's ESL population is viewed as a sign of health and a reflection of national and international realities. The ESL population at SJCC is bound to change as community trends and immigration patterns fluctuate.

Despite concerns about the program's vitality, the size of the program (and indeed ESL programs statewide) does not appear to be diminishing. In fall, 1985 the program had 1995 enrollments. Two years later, in fall, 1987 that number held constant at 1990. In spring, 1988 it rose to 2,065, a 3.5% increase. In these three semesters, in fact in all semesters for the previous 5 years, there have been waiting lists of students who could not be accommodated by the SJCC ESL classes, oversized as they are. The San Jose City College ESL program is not only here today. It promises to be here for many tomorrows to come.

The changes that are chronicled in this study illustrate the dynamic nature of ESL in California caused by the differing characteristics and needs of the learners. Such volatility needs constant monitoring; as learners' preparation and requirements change, programs and institutions must modify their approaches and practices to remain responsive to their communities.

One of the considerations should, perhaps, be the manner in which institutions judge their success, namely, through the number of their students who transfer to four-year institutions. It should be borne in mind that pursuing an AA degree and transferring to a four-year institution are only two of the reasons students select a community college. The colleges are vital to their communities in providing vocational training and skills improvement, including the acquisition of English for the growing foreign born population, as well as for the educational enrichment of the population as a whole.

The importance of this study increases and can be generalized to other colleges in the state when the information it contains is matched to practices within other areas of the institution. With that in mind, the following recommendations are made.

## Recommendations

1. Examine your college's grading system. Are ESL students in beginning level classes graded on a credit/no credit or a letter grade basis? Are their options equal to those of their American born peers? What is the penalty for failing a course under either option? Are ESL students informed of their option to clear their status should they be put on probation or dismissed? Almost universally, the concept of second chance is unknown in the educational systems that ESL students have experienced.

2. Inform incoming ESL students of the full range of your college's vocational and academic offerings. Use multilingual brochures and information as necessary. Arrange presentations by counselors, vocational instructors, and students who have chosen specific majors or successfully transferred to four-year institutions to familiarize students with their options.

3. In the absence of multilingual staff to explain college procedures to incoming ESL students, make audiotapes or videotapes of orientation information available to incoming students in their own languages.

State the availability of these tapes in native language admissions procedures pamphlets.

4. Urge your administration to hire full-time certificated and/or classified personnel who speak the languages of your largest populations. Being able to give that individual's telephone number in foreign language advertising and knowing that new students will be dealt with courteously and effectively is extremely helpful to potential students and your college's staff.

5. Have instructors or trained aides in your program administer your placement test battery and spend time explaining your program to potential students. Enrollment in SJCC's ESL program decreased by 20% when ESL testing was turned over to the Testing Center. Whether it is the reassuring presence of actual teachers or ESL professionals' ability to speak "easy English," first contact is very important.

6. Make certain that your program is being supported with funds commensurate to those it earns for the college. Examine your budget for supplies on a per-student or per-enrollment basis. Compare the ratio of part-time to full-time faculty in your area with those in other areas of the college.

7. Conduct periodic needs assessments to see if your program is offering appropriate courses for your students at appropriate times and locations. A greater number of your students might profit more by advanced listening/speaking classes than essay writing. See that classes are offered at times that are convenient to the students' work schedules.

8. Be flexible in scheduling classes. As those who have worked in intensive ESL programs know, the exact turnout of students at each proficiency level cannot be predicted until the students appear and are tested. Community college schedules are usually made many months before the semester begins with a fixed number of classes at each level. If more beginning level students appear in a given semester than intermediate level students, provisions should be made to create additional sections of beginning level classes to balance the closed intermediate level classes as needed. This practice also calls for flexibility on the part of staff who must be prepared to teach where the need arises.

9. Serve on college committees and the faculty senate to make certain that the interests of ESL students and the ESL program are being served throughout the college. Being a good teacher is not enough. ■

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## References

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