



California Adult Education Program Implementation Meeting

January 15, 2026 ♦ 1:00pm-3:00pm

Meeting Agenda

Agenda Item		Purpose	Person(s) Responsible	Timeframe
I.	Introduction	A. Welcome B. Director's Report	Thatcher	5 min
II.	Minutes	A. Approval of Minutes for November and December 2025 meeting.	Board	5 min
III.	Public Comment	A. Community Comments	Community	5 min
IV.	Action Item	A. Approval for GlendaleLEARNS to Apply for ELL Healthcare Vocational Career Pathways Grant Round 3, and for GCC to be Administrative Entity	Board	10 min
V.	Professional Development	<i>Making Space to Belong: Research Informed Strategies for Cultivating Community in Adult Education: Leveraging Local Findings to Strengthen Institutional Practice and Advocate for Equity at the State and Federal Level</i>	Thatcher	95 min
VII.	Next Meeting	A. Next meeting date: February 12, 2026: 1:00-3:00pm		
IX.	Adjourn	A. Adjournment		

Our Mission: The Glendale Community College Regional Consortium welcomes adult learners of all abilities and provides accessible pathways to skill acquisition and education towards viable employment, through multiple career partners.



Adult Education Implementation Virtual Meeting
December 18, 2025 ♦ 1:00pm-2:30pm

Attendees: Hilda Ghazarian, Laura Isaacs-Galvan, Ani Khachikyan, Ewa Lichwa, Marina Malekstepanians, Jane Ja Young Moreno, Juan Noguera, Jonathan Pelletier, Josefina Santiago, Rosemarie Shamieh, Mia Titilah, Chris Wilson, Anna Yegiyants

Board Members: Thatcher Weldon

Coordinator: MaryAnn Pranke

Meeting Notes

Agenda Item		Outcome
I.	Welcome	A. Welcome 1. MaryAnn welcomed the group and opened the meeting.
II.	Minutes	A. Approval of Minutes 1. Minutes were tabled until January meeting due to absence of quorum.
III.	Community Comments	A. No public comments were submitted.
IV.	Professional Development	A. <i>Drive It Like You Mean It! Tips for Smarter Storing & Sharing with Google Drive:</i> presented by Chris Wilson, MSCIA 1. MaryAnn will send out pdf of training session to all attendees.
B.	Next Meeting	Next meeting will be held: January 15, 2026 from 1:00-3:00pm.



Adult Education Implementation Virtual Meeting

November 20, 2025 ♦ 1:00pm-2:30pm

Attendees: Gamid Akhmedov, Hilda Ghazarian, Narine Hovhannisyan, Laura Isaacs-Galvan, Ani Khachikyan, Marina Malekstepanians, Jane JaYoung Moreno, Anyuta Nazaryan, Caryn Panec, Jonathan Pelletier, Kimberli Perner, Josefina Santiago, Erika Vasquez, Jacqueline Vega, Kassandra Wilson

Board Members: Thatcher Weldon, Judith Velasco

Coordinator: MaryAnn Pranke

Meeting Notes

Agenda Item		Outcome
I.	Welcome	<p>A. Thatcher welcomed the partners and opened the meeting.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thatcher reported that he attended a Vision 2030 Los Angeles Region meeting in October. He stated it was very productive and hopes to attend additional meetings in the future. 2. Thatcher shared that the Healthcare Pathway Grant was released and he hopes to put together an application package for the grant. 3. He also introduced Marina Malekstepanians who will be providing account support to Garfield. .
II.	Minutes	<p>A. Approval of Minutes</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Board members approved the August and September minutes.
III.	Community Comments	<p>A. No public comments were submitted.</p>
IV.	Professional Development	<p>A. MaryAnn reviewed the meeting schedule with the group and pointed out that the next professional development session will be in the December meeting on Google Workspace.</p> <p>B. REAS: Refugee Employment and Acculturation Services</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. JVS SoCal presented their services under REAS. 2. The goal of REAS is employment, self-sufficiency and community integration.

Agenda Item		Outcome
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Funds for services come from the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which is administered by Los Angeles County Department of Social Services. 4. The target population is Afghani, Ukrainian, Cuban, Armenian, Parolee, and survivors of trafficking victims. 5. During the year, JVS SoCal serves more than 3,000 through the program, and services, which cover all of Los Angeles County. 6. They also have services for older refugees, the citizenship preparation and ESL civic courses; senior networking and community engagement activities.
C.	Partner Updates	<p>A. Verdugo Jobs Center (VJC): Ani announced that VJC will be holding a recruitment event on December 3, 2025.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The employer is Dignity Memorial; not the Dignity Hospital but a funeral service provider specifically for one of their locations in North Hollywood. 2. The position they are promoting is outside sales professional. 3. The employer will be on site doing in-person interviews as well as providing more information about the position. 4. The position is full-time paying \$17.87 an hour plus any commission from the sales. 5. Primary location of the position is in North Hollywood inside that location but there will be travel required for business, and in that case, mileage will be reimbursed as well. 6. Minimum requirements is high school diploma, basic computer skills, and being able to pass the background clearance and drug screening. 7. Other Programs: VJC is still enrolling for the adult priority of service population, dislocated workers, and for individuals who were impacted by the LA wildfire requires; they can reach out to VJC for services. <p>B. International Rescue Committee (IRC): Hilda reported that IRC continues to provide assistance with green cards and currently, there are no fees for this assistance.</p>



Agenda Item	Outcome
	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. IRC continues to offer citizenship classes at various libraries in Los Angeles.2. IRC also offers non-credit ESL classes twice per week.3. Financial capability coaching continues to be offered as well as digital literacy.4. IRC also offers support services to Aghan female youth. Partners are encouraged to refer participants who are Afghan female youth. <p>C. Glendale Youth Alliance (GYA): Laura noted that GYA continues to offer employment and work experience services to youth ages 14-24, including Garfield students 18-24. They still have openings to serve youth and young adult participants.</p> <p>D. Department of Rehabilitation (DOR): DOR continues to help individuals with limitations and barriers to employment to either obtain maintain or advance in employment.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Referrals only need to complete a couple quick application forms, but they will need to provide medical documentation to verify the barrier to employment. <p>E. Lanterman Regional Center: Erika shared that Career Coordinated Pathway Services continue.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Services target individuals that are served by the regional center and that are two years prior to graduating, exiting high school or their transition program.2. Participants will receive customized employment services.3. MaryAnn will connect Erika with Aaron from TRAKK which serves transitioning students from GUSD. <p>F. Home Healthcare at Garfield: Kassandra reported that her students just finished their eight-week caregiver course.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Students completed their final skills and their final examination.2. Two hiring agencies came to the class and interviewed students and passed out applications.3. Kassandra also shared that the next course is going to be an accelerated one. It's going to start December 4th and complete on December 18th.

Agenda Item		Outcome
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Classes will be six hours on Thursdays from 830 to 230 and some online classes as well. 4. MaryAnn will connect Kassandra with Ani to coordinate potential paid work-based learning opportunities.
D.	Next Meeting	Next meeting will be held: January 15, 2025 from 1:00-3:00pm.



GlendaleLEARNS Monthly Meeting: Thursday, January 15, 2026

RECOMMENDED MOTION

It is recommended that the GlendaleLEARNS Board of Directors take the following action:

Approve the establishment of a team to explore the English Language Learner Healthcare Vocational Pathways Grant Round Three and submit a proposal for funding if GlendaleLEARNS meets all grant requirements and designate Glendale Community College as the administrative entity for the grant funds.

Type of Motion: Grant Application

OVERVIEW:

On December 18, 2025, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, in partnership with the California Department of Education, announced the release of the Request for Application (RFA) solicitation for the English Language Learner (ELL) Healthcare Pathways Grant: Round Three. This initiative solicits proposals from California Adult Education Program (CAEP) Consortia to establish Centers for Innovation and Impact in Health Careers. Under CAEP, GlendaleLEARNS operates as the Consortium for the Glendale Community College District. Initiatives funded under this grant are intended to supplement and align with California's broader adult education and workforce development systems, as well as the Governor's Master Plan for Career Education.

According to the RFA, GlendaleLEARNS falls under Funding Band 3, which allows the Consortium to apply for \$3 million to \$5 million for this project. The award period is for 36 months from July 1, 2026 through June 30, 2029. The application deadline is March 18, 2026 at 5:00pm; therefore, it is recommended that a team be established to complete the grant application in order to meet the aggressive deadline. Applications will be submitted in the NOVA system. The Intent to Apply Letter must be submitted in the NOVA system as well.

Funds may be used to support costs associated with the development of ELL Healthcare Vocational Pathway Programs, including program and curriculum planning and development, program materials, instruction, equipment, and support activities. Grant funds may not be used for student stipends, internships, or other methods to pay students for participation in healthcare pathways. Match funding is not required; however, consortia and members are encouraged to show how other funds will be leveraged. Required partners included K-12 school, community college, and workforce development agency.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The grant will generate between \$3 million to \$5 million over a 36-month period beginning July 1, 2026, to establish a Center for Innovation and Impact in Healthcare, which is a focus of both Glendale Community College and GlendaleLEARNS. Required partners are eligible for funding; however, any funding will be determined by the grant team as it develops the grant budget, including leverages for the project. If the GlendaleLEARNS meets all grant requirements, the team will submit the application by March 18, 2026 at 5:00pm.

**Meeting Schedule
Program Year 2025 - 2026**



Month	Date	Partner Presentation
July	July 17, 2025	Strategic Planning
August	August 21, 2025	Final Annual Plan
September	September 18, 2025	Labor Market Information
October	October 16, 2025	CAEP Orientation
November	November 20, 2025	JVS SoCal
December	December 18, 2025	Drive It Like You Mean It! Tips for Smarter Storing & Sharing with Google Drive Presenter: Chris Wilson
January	January 15, 2026	Making Space to Belong: Research Informed Strategies for Cultivating Community in Adult Education: Leveraging Local Findings to Strengthen Institutional Practice and Advocate for Equity at the State and Federal Level - Thatcher Weldon
February	February 19, 2026	Career-Ready Accounting: Our Approach, Our Courses, Our Results Presenter: Annette Amirian
March	March 19, 2026	21st Century Skills
April	April 16, 2026	Labor Market Information
May	May 21, 2026	CAEP Annual Planning
June	June 18, 2026	CAEP Annual Planning



Healthcare Job Fair



Tuesday, February 10, 2026
9:30AM - 11:30AM



Pacific Community Center
501 S. Pacific Ave.
Glendale, CA 91204

For more information
contact or visit:



(818) 937-8000



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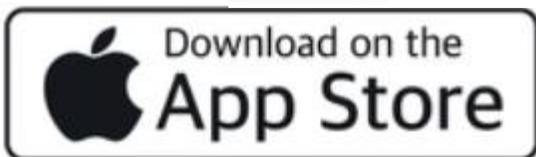
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Topics will include:

- Phone call basics
- Sending texts
- Managing contacts
- Installing apps
- Camera usage
- E-mail and internet
- Settings & Safety



Perfect for beginners,
seniors, adults

Apple iPhones,
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STV 83 - Cell Phone Basics
(for everyone)

T & Th - 1-5pm - 1/6 to 1/15/26

STV 84 - Intermediate Android
(for Android users)

Tue - 1-5pm - 1/20 to 2/10

STV 85 - Intermediate Apple iPhone
(for iPhone users)

Thu - 1-5pm - 1/22 to 2/12

All classes held at:

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terms!**

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Part of Dental Front Office Program

Classes are remote:
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Tuesday/Thursday 9am–12pm

Upon successful completion of the course, you will receive a
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CAREGIVERS ARE IN DEMAND!



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February 17 - March 28, 2026

Thursdays - 8:30 AM - 12:30 PM
Room - Somerset 103
(+4 hours remote per week)
Ticket# 3298 / STV 206

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STV 60: Pathways to Health Careers gives you the roadmap to explore, plan, and succeed!

Spring 2026

February 17 – March 14

**5:30 pm - 8:30 pm in person
(Room: s0103) Ticket # 3279**

May 18 – June 10

**8:30 am - 12:30 pm in person
(Room: s0103) Ticket # 3280**

**Register at: garfield.glendale.edu or
by calling 818-240-1000 X 5690**

***Gain Real-World Skills in Customer Service, Business Communication, and Employment Strategies!
Spring 2026***

***STV 50- Customer Service
2/17- 2/28***

Tuesdays/Thursdays from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm-remote/hybrid

Learn how to meet customer expectations, communicate effectively, stay positive, handle conflict, manage change and stress, and work well on a team. You'll also explore workplace ethics—skills that help you succeed in any job!

***STV 40- 21st Century Employment Strategies
3/2- 4/11***

Tuesdays/Thursdays from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm-remote/hybrid

Gain practical career skills: write strong resumes and cover letters, ace interviews, build your LinkedIn profile, and navigate real workplace topics like office politics, employment laws, and staying positive on the job.

***STV 35- On the Job Communication
4/20- 5/2***

Tuesdays/Thursdays from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm-remote/hybrid

Strengthen your workplace communication by recognizing barriers, enhancing understanding, and adapting to different communication styles.

***STV 40- 21st Century Employment Strategies
5/4- 6/10***

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Tuesdays, 10:00 am – 12:00 pm

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LOCATION	DAY	CLASS DATES	TIME	INSTRUCTOR
CASA VERDUGO	MONDAYS	January 5, 12, 26 February 2, 9, 23 March 2, 9	1:00 PM - 3:00 PM	Ray
MONTROSE	TUESDAYS	ONGOING	11:00 AM - 1:00 PM	Sherry
CENTRAL	TUESDAYS	January 6, 13, 20, 27 February 3, 10, 17, 24	11:00 AM - 1:00 PM	Laurel
CENTRAL	WEDNESDAYS	January 7, 14, 21, 28 February 4, 11, 18, 25	6:00 PM - 7:30 PM	Judy
CENTRAL	FRIDAYS	January 9, 16, 23, 30 February 6, 13, 20, 27	9:00 AM - 11:00 AM	Ray
CENTRAL	FRIDAYS	ONGOING	1:00 PM - 3:00 PM	Ray

ADULT LITERACY CONVERSATION LOUNGE

CENTRAL	WEDNESDAYS	ONGOING	12:00 PM - 1:00 PM	Staff
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For more information or to register, please contact the Literacy Center at (818) 548-6450 or email us at Literacy@GlendaleCA.gov



ENGLISH CONVERSATION LOUNGE



- Improve your communication skills

- Learn about mainstream American culture

Open to Beginner
to Advanced
English Learners

- Share your cultural traditions

- Make new friends

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For more information or to sign up, please contact the Literacy Center at (818)548-6450



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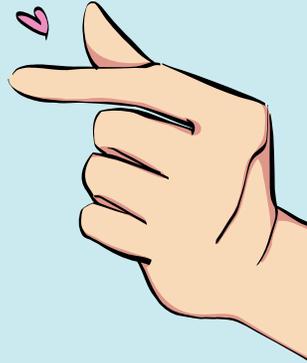
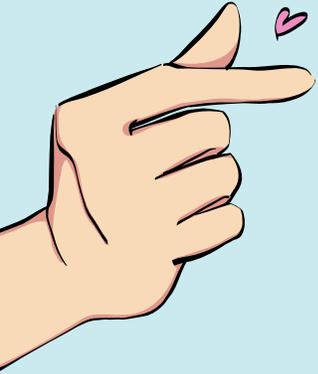
Classes begin Tuesday, January 13, 2026 at Pacific Park Library and continue every Tuesday until March 31, 2026.

6:30 PM - 8:00 PM

Classes are free and hosted by the International Rescue Committee.

Space is limited to 15 students; registration is required.

To register, or for more information please contact the Literacy Center at **(818) 548-6450** or Pacific Park Library at **(818) 548-3760**



LEARNKOREAN THROUGH K-CULTURE

Classes are every Tuesdays, January 27 - April 7, 2026

*No class March 24

Central Library ReflectSpace Annex | 6:30 PM - 7:45 PM



In this class we will utilize K-Pop lyrics, Korean Drama and movies, Korean landmarks, Korean geography and history to learn the language.

Basic Korean reading and writing will be interwoven through the class, but the focus will be conversational.

Books will be provided through the Korean Education Center in Los Angeles.

A basic understanding of Hangeul (the Korean alphabet) is required.



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Community Building Among Transnational Adult Students in California Adult Education Programs: A Critical Phenomenological Study

Dr. Thatcher Weldon

California State University, Fresno - Dissertation



Who am I?

Thatcher Weldon

- California Adult Education Program Administrator
 - Focus on data outcomes and fiscal reporting
 - Emphasis on fiscal outcomes tied to adult education programs
 - K-12 student success tied to CAEP
- Educator/Administrator/Immigrant-Resident of Another Country/Culture Enthusiast
 - Focus on connection/belonging for participants
 - Emphasis on individual development and growth
 - Sense of community and belonging



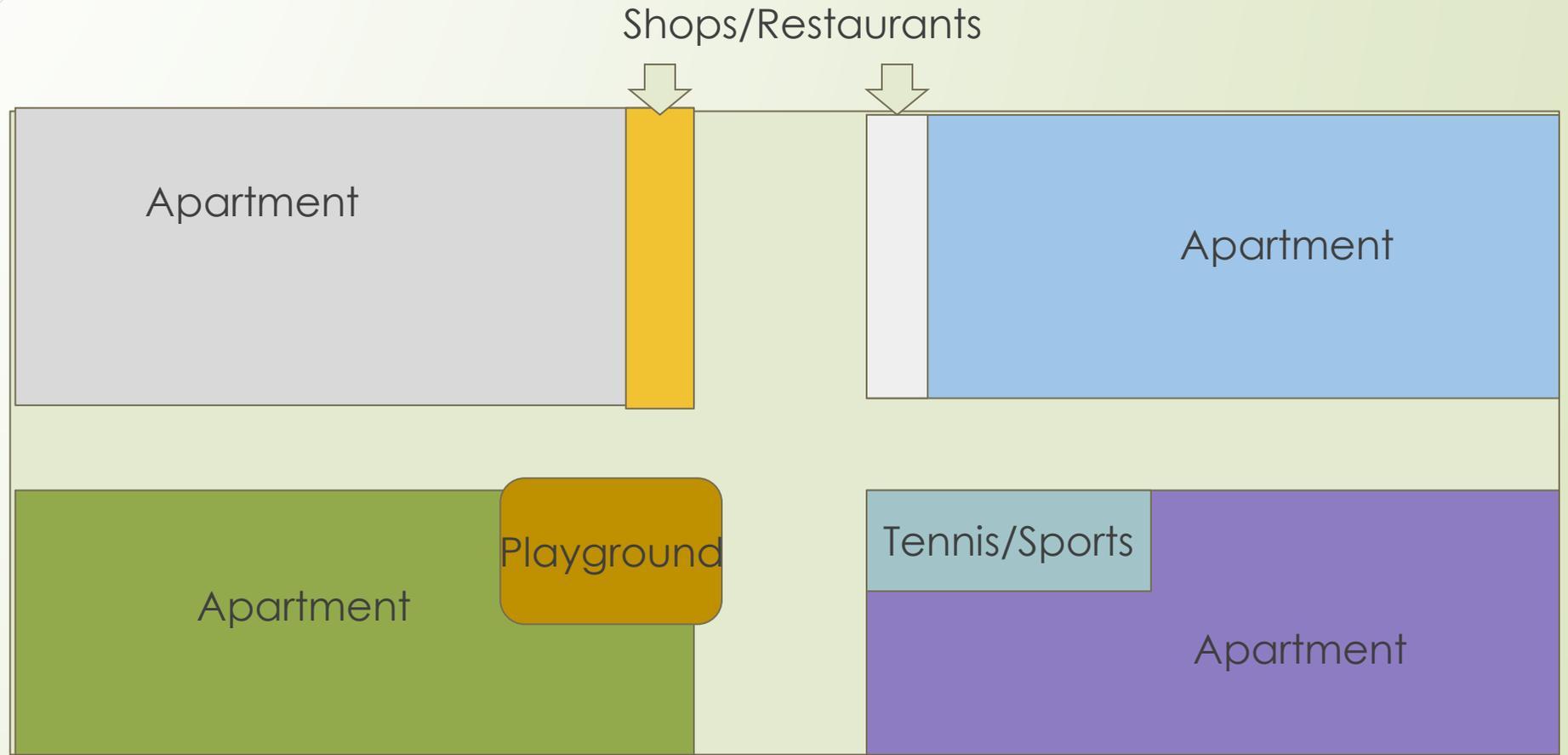
What is the Problem I saw?

- Decline in community engagement in U.S. society (Putnam, 2000)
More Isolation
- Transnational adult students face unique challenges in community building:
Cultural and linguistic barriers
Navigating new social networks
Balancing multiple community identities
- Adult education programs' role in community integration is under-examined
- Need for understanding how transnational adult students define, experience, and build community in California Adult Education Programs



Community Centered Design

Major Street



COMMUNITY BUILDING AMONG TRANSNATIONAL
ADULT STUDENTS IN CALIFORNIA ADULT
EDUCATION PROGRAMS: A CRITICAL
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Thatcher Weldon

B.A. (University of California, Davis) 2003

M.A. (California State University, Fresno) 2007

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctorate in Education

Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at Fresno State
Kremen School of Education and Human Development

California State University, Fresno
May 2025

Thatcher Weldon
May 2025
Educational Leadership

COMMUNITY BUILDING AMONG TRANSNATIONAL
ADULT STUDENTS IN CALIFORNIA ADULT
EDUCATION PROGRAMS: A CRITICAL
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Abstract

This critical phenomenological study examined how transnational adult students build community within California Adult Education Programs. In an era characterized by individualism and virtual interaction, there is a profound hunger for authentic community, particularly among those navigating the complex landscape of migration and education. Drawing on my experiences as both an adult education administrator and former transnational educator in South Korea, I explored how seven women from Armenia and Ukraine perceive, construct, and engage in community within educational spaces and beyond.

Through in-depth interviews, participants revealed sophisticated strategies for community building across diverse contexts. Their narratives illuminated how physical infrastructure, institutional practices, professional identities, and age-related differences shaped possibilities for connection. Educational spaces emerged as crucial sites for cross-cultural engagement, while transportation limitations, safety concerns, and administrative barriers often restricted community formation opportunities.

This study challenges simplistic narratives about immigrant integration while highlighting both persistent barriers and creative community-building strategies. Analysis revealed distinct age-related approaches: younger participants prioritized peer relationships and cultural belonging; mid-career adults focused on

professional community reconstruction; and established adults often served as cultural bridges. These findings support theoretical frameworks regarding community cultural wealth and transnational social fields while complicating traditional notions of social capital.

The research suggests that adult education programs have significant untapped potential to serve as community anchors—spaces where diverse individuals can build meaningful connections while pursuing educational goals. Realizing this potential requires reimagining these programs not just as sites for skill development, but as crucial infrastructure for community formation. Recommendations include physical space redesign, administrative reforms that remove unnecessary barriers, programmatic approaches supporting diverse forms of community, and policy frameworks recognizing community building as a legitimate educational outcome.

By recognizing and supporting the sophisticated community-building work that transnational students already perform, adult education programs could better fulfill their promise as sites of transformation—not just for individual students, but for the broader fabric of American society.

California State University, Fresno
Kremen School of Education and Human Development
Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

This dissertation was presented

by

Thatcher Weldon

It was defended on

April 21, 2025

and approved by:

David Low (Chair) Literacy, Early, Bilingual, and Special Education

Rohit Mehta Curriculum and Instruction

Carolyn Zachry California Department of Education

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank my wife, Hyeyoung Kim, for her support for the past three years while I worked on my EdD as well as my dissertation while also taking on a new job at a new college. Thank you for your support as well as for listening to me brainstorm and share ideas and thoughts with you. Thank you for sharing with me your experiences living in Southern California as well. I would not be here without you.

I would also like to thank my colleagues throughout adult education, especially the participants in this study. Adult education is often seen as being inferior to other areas of education. This couldn't be further from the truth. The faculty, staff, administrators, and students who make up our programs come from some of the most diverse backgrounds you will find. We bring incredible experiences and knowledge to our schools, districts, and communities. One thing that you will surely find at the vast majority of adult education schools is a strong sense of community. The seven participants in this study showed just how true this is. In my opinion, this strong sense of community is one of the most important qualities of a positive education environment.

I want to thank my parents, Pam and Andy Weldon, for instilling a love of reading in me. I remember trips to the downtown Fresno library when I was a child to read and check out books. I believe that reading can help us all learn important thoughts and ideas about culture and community in addition to allowing us to learn about other cultures and beliefs. Reading helps us develop empathy and an understanding of others.

Lastly, I want to thank my dissertation chair and committee members for the devotion of their time to this dissertation process. Thank you for sharing your expertise in various areas and for providing positive feedback throughout this

process. You all have shown how important it is to stay focused on equity and inclusion throughout education going forward.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In an era typified by individualism, automation, and virtual/online interaction, there is a hunger for community, a desire to navigate the world's joys, trials, and tribulations with others. This yearning for togetherness may be particularly resonant among transnational students navigating the complex landscape of adult education in the U.S. The problem is multifaceted: citizens and residents of the United States face a societal shift towards individualism, as highlighted by Putnam (2000) and other scholars, while simultaneously seeing community (re)defined in nebulous terms for varying purposes.

At issue is the fact that we have multiple, often competing conceptualizations of community to contend with. Is community a space? (e.g., a clubhouse or bookstore). Can community exist offline? (e.g., in an internet forum or social media platform). Is community a group of people who organize (or are organized) around a set of beliefs or identity characteristics? (e.g., “the Jewish community,” “the Black community,” or “the LGBTQ community”). Is community fluid or static, real or imagined? Is community a marketing tool to be used by institutions and corporations selling us an idea? All these questions lead us to a larger one: In what ways is community imagined and enacted across various contexts?

Competing definitions of community may be further complicated by the unique challenges faced by transnational students in forging connections and establishing a sense of belonging in academic settings. In this study, I focused on a specific form of community that emphasizes shared space, mutual support, and collective engagement. This concept of community goes beyond mere proximity

or shared identity characteristics. It involves participation in shared experiences, the development of social bonds, and the creation of supportive networks that transcend individual differences. This type of community is characterized by regular face-to-face interactions, shared responsibilities, and a sense of belonging that is actively cultivated through ongoing engagement and mutual care.

This dissertation explores the experiences of transnational adult students as they work to define and build community within and beyond adult education programs in California. These programs serve a diverse population of transnational students, each with distinct cultural backgrounds, linguistic resources, and educational goals. Adult education programs, while primarily focused on academic and vocational skills, also play a crucial role in the social integration and community-building processes of their students. However, the varied visions and implementations of these programs can lead to inconsistent experiences for transnational students in their quest to define, enact, and practice community.

The desire for community among transnational students is particularly acute, as they navigate not only the challenges of adult education but also the complexities of cultural adaptation and identity formation in a new country. Transnational students in adult education programs are not only often learning a new language in their new home but also tackling new ideas and thoughts about what community is. With students ranging in age from 18 to over 100 years old and coming with different languages and cultures, the concept of community can differ greatly from one adult education student to the next. The importance of allowing adult education students to come together and define what community and connection mean to them, and what these should look like within their adult education programs, is that it encourages self-empowerment. It invites students to

actively manifest community engagement in and beyond the programs they are enrolled in. This intersection of educational pursuits and broader societal integration presents a unique context for examining the processes of community building and belonging within American society.

Purpose Statement

In this study, I set out to conduct a phenomenological study of the experiences of transnational adult students working to make community in a California Adult Education Program. This research sheds light on the lived experiences of these students, exploring how they perceive, construct, and engage in community within their educational journeys. As an administrator in California Adult Education Programs for the past 10 years, I have often seen programs and policies that address ideas that decision-makers at the top have felt what community, connection, and belonging should mean to adult education students, specifically transnational students in our programs.

Policy and decision-making have been mainly focused on providing transnational adult education students with quick and efficient pathways to careers and language skills to navigate everyday life in the U.S. However, when one walks through an adult education provider throughout the state of California, they will likely find that the connection and community within English as a Second Language Programs are stronger than in other state-sponsored school programs. One issue that many adult education providers deal with is ensuring that our students feel motivated to progress in their education and their careers through pathways through community college and beyond. These are policies and goals that the state has emphasized, and providing these pathways to our students is important in ensuring providers are focused on equity for transnational students. However, many students resist moving on because of the strong sense of

community that they develop in their adult education programs. Perhaps providing adult education students a larger seat at the table to determine the importance of future goals and policies for adult education could not only strengthen outcomes that are already in place within the California Adult Education Program but could also create new pathways for our programs and other education programs that emphasize the importance of connection and community as well as involvement in the decision-making within our communities.

Research Questions

Given the complex relationship between state-mandated goals and outcomes, adult students' sense of community, and the need for greater student involvement in decision-making, I decided it was important to explore the intricate experiences of transnational adult students in California Adult Education Programs. The following research questions aimed to uncover how adult students perceive and construct community, the role of educational programs in this process, and how students navigate the intersection of their educational experiences with broader community integration:

1. How do transnational adult students in California Adult Education Programs talk about their experiences of community-building and belonging, and their perceptions about the nature of community?
2. What role does an adult education program play in facilitating or hindering the development of community for its students?
3. How do transnational adult students identify and navigate the intersection of their educational experiences with broader community integration and invention?

Researcher Positionality and Personal Narrative

My journey to these research questions is deeply personal and professional, bringing together my background in applied linguistics and my experiences teaching and living abroad, particularly in South Korea. With a foundation in linguistic studies, I developed a keen awareness of the role language and culture play in shaping social interactions and community formation. This academic background provided me with the theoretical tools to analyze the complex linguistic landscapes explored by transnational students. This experience is a strength I bring to the current work I do as the Dean of Continuing Education at a community college in southern California. In this work, I advocate for meaningful programs and services for non-traditional college students, which include many transnational ESL students who have varying degrees of education and professional experience in their home countries. As the dean in charge of the non-credit programs at our college, I work with faculty, staff, and students to ensure that their voices are heard when developing new programs and building upon policies that support the success of all students in our community.

My years spent teaching and living in South Korea offered a firsthand experience of the contrast between collectivist and individualist societies. In Korea, I witnessed and participated in a culture where community was central to daily life, from shared meals to collective engagement in professional settings. For instance, eating a meal alone at the cafeteria may seem normal for many people in the United States. Yet, when I ate alone in South Korea, many Korean faculty, staff, or students would join me and ask why I was eating by myself. In Korean culture, it is extremely important to be a part of a group and to be together with others. I am not saying that this is always a positive for people in the community,

including Korean nationals, but in my observations as a white, male foreigner, there tended to be fewer people isolated and alone in their daily lives.

My time in South Korea was mainly spent in Jeonju, a medium-sized city with a population of about 650,000, and Seoul, the capital of South Korea with a population of just under ten million. Because South Korea has limited land, Koreans built their communities in urban areas up, in high-rise buildings one would find in the larger cities in the United States. This has allowed for more small businesses to open and thrive in locations due to large populations within small areas of space. Residents often know their local grocery store staff, butchers, bakers, and dry-cleaners. In addition, communities have built parks, walkways, and recreation centers in their communities due to residents being able to walk to local businesses. This, plus the benefit of robust, efficient, and safe public transportation, has harbored communities where people are active and engaged during all times of the day and night. It is common to walk through the neighborhoods and see children playing with their families, co-workers having a drink or meal together, couples going on a date, and friends of all ages meeting and playing together.

Because of the limited space, Korea has utilized public spaces where many U.S. communities have seen reductions in public spaces. Putnam (2004) wrote about how public pools used to be a place for many in the United States to meet, exercise, and cool down on a hot day and how these public spaces are shrinking in number throughout our country. Finding a pool in a private single-family residence in Korea would be almost unheard of. Likewise, in Japan, many schools have the students do the janitorial work. This is thought to not only provide students with work experience and structure in their time management, but it also reinforces their understanding of respecting property and taking care of shared

spaces, since they will be the ones who must clean or take care of any issues on the campus.

To me, community is the idea of sharing spaces and respecting those shared spaces with others. With the United States culture emphasizing individualism, many people want their own things and spaces, much of the time having much more than they need while others struggle to have their basic needs met. When we create an understanding that our public institutions are shared spaces that we all “own,” we create a feeling of respect for these spaces and value them within our communities.

Community, in the sense of this research, is the idea of people co-constructing spaces that can be shared by others in comparison to developing exclusive spaces that can only be shared by those invited or those with the financial means to pay for use or existence within a space. It is the belief of this researcher that co-constructing more publicly funded spaces for all members of our community would not only create greater feelings of connection and togetherness but could also decrease many of the issues we face as a society (violent crime, addiction, homelessness; see Zoellner, 2011).

As a previous transnational myself, I have personally navigated the complexities of establishing a sense of belonging in a new country. This experience illuminated the critical role of social capital, as conceptualized by Bourdieu (1986), in navigating new cultural and educational landscapes. I experienced the challenges of building networks, understanding unwritten social norms, and finding my place within existing community structures. However, unlike many transnational students who come through adult education programs in California, I had the privilege of being able to leave South Korea and return to my home country at any time. I was not seeking asylum or in a financial situation

where I felt stuck and hopeless in my situation in South Korea. Although I did have the experience of being turned away from an overnight sauna because I was told it was for Koreans only, which was technically illegal at the time, I did not face the barriers and social structures that hinder many transnationals in the United States.

My experiences highlighted the cultural dimensions of community-building and the challenges that transnational students might face when moving between different cultural paradigms of social interaction. In the U.S., I have met many adult education students who have been told to get a GED or a high school diploma, even though they hold a professional degree in their home country. They are simply told to finish these tasks because the people in positions to help them have not had the training to provide and support the transnational students with the resources that they need.

The way I was treated in Korea as an American transnational teaching at a university was very different than a manual laborer from a country in South East Asia. I was looked at by the society in general as a person who was providing knowledge to the students in the university system. Educators are held in very high regard in South Korea, so I benefited from having a Master's degree as well as being a white western male from the United States. Many transnational adult education students are treated like children because of their language skills no matter what level their education and career in their home country (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). This experience exemplifies the concept of volatile privilege, where an individual's social status and advantages can shift dramatically across different cultural and sociopolitical contexts (Kim, 2015).

All these varied experiences have shaped my understanding of the multifaceted challenges and opportunities faced by transnational students in co-

constructing community, as well as reminding me of the limitations of my own experience in generating generalizable knowledge. My experiences have, however, instilled in me a deep empathy for the struggles and resilience of those who seek to create a sense of belonging in new environments. This personal connection to the research topic as well as my professional connection as an administrator of adult education programs drives my commitment to exploring and understanding the experiences of transnational adult students in California's Adult Education Programs.

My positionality as both an insider (through my transnational experience) and an outsider (as a researcher, educator, and white American man) provide a unique vantage point from which to approach this study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). This dual perspective aligns with what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) describe as "inquiry as stance," where practitioners leverage their insider knowledge while maintaining a researcher's critical lens. This stance allowed me to relate to the experiences of the participants while maintaining a critical analytical perspective and recognizing my separateness. I am aware that this positionality may introduce potential biases, which I addressed through rigorous reflexivity throughout the research process. As Low (2024) suggests, acknowledging and critically examining one's own positionality is crucial in navigating complex social dynamics in educational settings.

Methodology Overview

This study employed a critical phenomenological approach, as outlined by Cannella et al. (2016) in *Critical qualitative inquiry: Foundations and Future*. This methodology allows for an in-depth exploration of lived experiences while maintaining a critical lens on power dynamics and social structures that impact transnational students' community-building efforts.

Data collection primarily consisted of in-depth interviews, conducted in students' native languages, with 15-20 transnational adult students enrolled in California Adult Education Programs. The study also incorporated elements of autoethnography, weaving in my personal and professional experiences to provide additional context and insight.

Significance of the Study

This research has the potential to inform policy and practice in adult education programs, particularly in their approaches to supporting community-building among transnational students. By understanding the lived experiences of these students, educators and administrators can develop more effective strategies for fostering a sense of belonging and community within their programs. Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader academic discourse on community formation in diverse educational settings, adding to our understanding of how transnational students navigate the complex intersections of education, culture, and social integration.

Limitations

While this study provides rich, contextual data on the experiences of transnational adult students in California, its generalizability to other geographical or educational contexts may be limited. Additionally, the focus on students' subjective experiences means that the study may not have captured all systemic factors influencing community-building in adult education settings.

Chapter Summary

In the following chapters, I will expand on the foundation laid here. Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive literature review, delving into key areas such as transnational education, adult learning theory, and community-building in

educational contexts. This review will situate the current study within the broader academic discourse and highlight the gaps in existing research that this study aims to address. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth exploration of the research methodology, detailing the qualitative approach employed, including the specific methods of data collection. It also outlines the data analysis procedures, emphasizing the use of thematic analysis to interpret the gathered information. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the ethical considerations and measures taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings. Chapter 4 presents the findings from phenomenological interviews with seven transnational adult students from Armenia and Ukraine. Through their narratives, I explore how these women navigate, construct, and reimagine community within Southern California Adult Education Programs. The chapter analyzes key themes that emerged from the data, including the role of shared educational spaces in fostering connection, how physical infrastructure shapes community possibilities, the significance of professional identity in community formation, and the different approaches to community building across age groups. These findings illuminate both barriers and creative strategies for community building while challenging simplistic narratives about immigrant integration. Chapter 5 discusses the theoretical implications of these findings, connecting participants' experiences to broader scholarly discourse on social capital, community cultural wealth, and transnational social fields. The chapter presents practical implications for adult education programs, including recommendations for physical space design, administrative reforms, and programmatic approaches that support multiple forms of community. Finally, I address the limitations of the current study and suggest promising directions for future research that could expand our understanding of community building among transnational adult students and its broader social

impact. Together, these chapters provide a thorough understanding of the theoretical framework and methodological approach underpinning this study on transnational adult students' experiences in building community within California's adult education programs.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Historical Overview of Community and Belonging among the Transnational Community

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the literature relevant to community building among transnational adult students in educational settings. The review is organized into three main categories: theoretical frameworks of community and social capital, adult education and transnational students, and critical perspectives in adult education.

To conduct this review, I employed a systematic search strategy using academic databases such as ERIC, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. Search terms included combinations of “transnational students,” “adult education,” “community building,” and “social capital.” I critically evaluated each source for relevance, methodological rigor, and applicability to the California context. Publications from the past 2 decades were prioritized, with influential works included regardless of publication date.

Throughout this review, I maintain a critical stance, examining not only the findings but also the methodologies and underlying assumptions of the literature. Particular attention is paid to how different scholars conceptualize community and how these conceptualizations align with or diverge from the experiences of transnational adult students.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on several interconnected concepts of community, belonging, and social capital, situated within the context of adult education.

Community and Social Capital

Anderson's (2006) concept of "imagined communities" provides a foundation for understanding how transnational students might construct their sense of community in a new cultural context. Anderson argues that communities, particularly those larger than face-to-face villages, are imagined because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (p. 6). This idea is particularly relevant when considering the experiences of adult learners bridging the complexities of language acquisition and cultural integration, as they may be forming connections with a broader imagined community of fellow learners or immigrants. Suárez-Orozco et al. (2008) further expand on this concept in the context of immigrant students, noting that these learners often construct their identities and sense of belonging through a complex interplay of past experiences, current realities, and future aspirations within their new cultural landscape.

Anderson's (2006) concept of imagined communities can be further complicated when we consider "nation" in both literal and metaphorical terms. If we think of nation metaphorically, as a 'tribe' or group identity, it raises questions about the nature of community itself. Does community require a monolithic identity? How do we define 'our people'? How is access negotiated? These questions are particularly pertinent in the context of transnational students, who may be navigating multiple 'imagined communities' simultaneously. Hames-Garcia (2011) offers a perspective that challenges traditional notions of community, asserting that "one's own people are those with whom one has made a common cause" (p. xv). This view suggests a more fluid and inclusive understanding of community formation.

The possibility of pluralistic communities that do not share various identities is a critical consideration. Scholars like Hames-Garcia (2011) argue that “one’s own people are those people with whom one has made common cause” (p. xvi) while Yuval-Davis (2006) argue for a conceptualization of community that allows for multiple, intersecting identities and affiliations. These perspectives challenge the notion that community must be based on a single, shared identity and opens possibilities for understanding how transnational students might forge connections across diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Putnam's (2000) work on social capital offers crucial insights into the decline of community engagement in American society and its implications for civic life and individual well-being. Putnam (2000) argues that social capital – the connections among individuals and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them – has been declining in the United States. This analysis serves as a backdrop for understanding the importance of fostering community within adult education settings, particularly for transnational students who may be seeking to build new social networks.

Putnam (2000) identifies several factors contributing to the decline of social capital in the United States. These include increased mobility and suburbanization, which disrupt community ties; the rise of technology and mass media, particularly television, which he argues privatizes leisure time; generational change, with newer generations less civically engaged than their predecessors; and changes in work patterns, including the entry of women into the workforce, which leaves less time for community involvement. Putnam's (2000) analysis provides a crucial backdrop for understanding the challenges faced by transnational students in building community within this broader societal context of declining social engagement.

Bourdieu's (1986) theorization of multiple forms of capital provides a nuanced understanding of how transnational students navigate social structures and accumulate capital through their educational experiences. Bourdieu identifies three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. For transnational students, the acquisition and conversion of these forms of capital are crucial processes in their integration into new educational and social environments. Cultural capital, in particular, which includes educational qualifications and cultural knowledge, is highly relevant when considering the challenges faced by immigrant adult learners in adapting to a new educational system.

While Putnam (2000), Bourdieu (1986), and Anderson(2006) provide foundational concepts, it is crucial to consider diverse perspectives on social capital, cultural capital, and community. Mignolo (2011b) argues for "remapping the order of knowing," emphasizing the importance of recognizing knowledge systems outside the Eurocentric paradigm (p. 160). This aligns with Yosso's (2005) critique of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as potentially deficit-oriented when applied to communities of color. Yosso proposes a model of Community Cultural Wealth that recognizes the multiple forms of capital that exist within these communities, including aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. This perspective is particularly relevant when considering the experiences of transnational students who may bring diverse forms of cultural wealth to their educational experiences in a Eurocentric system. Moll and González (2004) further support this view through their "funds of knowledge" approach, which recognizes the rich cultural and cognitive resources that students from diverse backgrounds bring to their learning environments. This approach challenges deficit thinking and emphasizes the importance of leveraging students' existing knowledge and experiences in multicultural education settings.

Scholars like Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) offer a “transnational social fields” perspective that complicates traditional notions of community and belonging. They argue that (im)migrants often maintain simultaneous connections to multiple societies, challenging the binary of “origin” and “destination” communities. This perspective is crucial for understanding how transnational adult students might steer multiple, overlapping communities and identities. To that end, Ghiso and Campano (2013) further expand on this idea, introducing the concept of "border thinking" to explain how immigrant students negotiate discourses of immigration in educational settings. They argue that these negotiations involve complex interactions between coloniality, education, and identity formation. Additionally, Campano et al. (2013) propose the idea of "coalitional literacy practices" as a means of fostering educational justice for transnational learners, emphasizing the importance of community-based research and collaborative approaches in addressing the unique needs of these students.

We can see tensions between Putnam's (2000) emphasis on declining social capital in the U.S. and Yosso's (2005) recognition of the rich forms of community cultural wealth that persist in marginalized communities. Similarly, Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) transnational perspective adds nuance to Anderson's (2006) concept of imagined communities, suggesting that transnational students may be navigating multiple, overlapping 'imagined communities' simultaneously. Furthermore, scholars like Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) explored the concept of social capital in immigrant communities, highlighting both its positive aspects (such as mutual support and information sharing) and its potential downsides (like excessive claims on group members and restrictions on individual freedoms). Their work provides a more distinct understanding of how social capital operates

in transnational contexts, which is crucial for this study's examination of community-building among transnational adult students.

These diverse perspectives on community, social capital, and transnationalism provide a rich theoretical framework for situating the complex experiences of transnational adult students in California Adult Education Programs. They highlight the need to consider multiple forms of community and capital, the transnational nature of many students' experiences, and the potential tensions and synergies between different conceptualizations of community and belonging.

Adult Education and Transnational Students

The landscape of adult education for transnational students is shaped by complex historical and policy contexts. The Annual California Adult Education Program Allocation data provides crucial information on funding and policies that impact adult education programs in California (California Adult Education Program, n.d.). Understanding this context is essential for situating the experiences of transnational learners within the broader educational system. CAEP funding is intended to provide opportunities for adult populations to access language, basic skills, and career education to find sustainable employment. In addition to these opportunities, many adult education students find a strong sense of community and engagement within their programs. This provides an opportunity to co-construct a sense of belonging and community outside of our classrooms.

Recent studies have highlighted the multifaceted nature of community building in adult education settings. Garcia and Martinez (2021) explored family experiences in adult education programs, emphasizing the importance of considering the broader family context when examining adult learners'

experiences. Their study found that adult education programs can serve as a bridge not only for individual learners but for entire families, fostering a sense of community that extends beyond the classroom. Similarly, Rodriguez and Ramirez's (2020) research on the intergenerational impact of adult education programs underscores the far-reaching effects of fostering a sense of community among adult learners. They found that parents' participation in adult education programs can have positive effects on their children's educational aspirations and achievements, highlighting the broader community impact of these programs.

The factors influencing sense of belonging for transnational adult learners are diverse and complex. Linguistic and cultural differences, and the challenge of building new social networks, and systemic barriers such as xenophobia, linguistic hegemony, and white supremacy culture all play significant roles in shaping students' experiences of community. These systemic factors can create hostile environments that impede transnational students' integration and sense of belonging. Linguistic hegemony can marginalize students whose first language is not the dominant one, while white supremacy culture may manifest in educational settings through Eurocentric curricula and cultural norms that devalue diverse experiences and knowledge systems. Fan and Chen's (2001) meta-analysis on parental involvement and students' academic achievement, while focused on K-12 education, provides insights into the importance of family engagement in educational success. These findings can be extrapolated to the adult education context, suggesting that fostering connections between adult learners' families and educational institutions may enhance both academic success and community integration. However, it is crucial to recognize that these connections must be built in ways that challenge existing power structures and value the cultural wealth that transnational students bring to their educational environments.

Zoellner's (2011) *A Safeway in Arizona* offers a broader sociocultural perspective on community dynamics in the United States, providing context for understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by immigrant communities in integrating into American society. Zoellner's work highlights the complexities of cultural integration and the ways in which public spaces can become sites of both community building and conflict.

Critical Perspectives in Adult Education

To fully understand the experiences of transnational students in adult education, it is crucial to incorporate critical perspectives that examine power dynamics, social structures, and historical contexts. The field of critical theory in education has its roots in the Frankfurt School of social theory (Giroux, 1983) and has evolved to include various branches such as postcolonial theory (Said, 1978; Mignolo, 2011a) and critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Andreotti (2011) provides a framework for applying postcolonial theory to education, emphasizing the need to challenge Eurocentric knowledge systems and recognize the lasting impacts of colonialism on educational structures. This perspective is particularly relevant when considering the experiences of transnational students exploring educational systems that may not fully recognize or value their diverse knowledge and experiences.

Critical race theory, as discussed by Cherland and Harper (2007), offers another vital lens for examining the experiences of transnational students. This approach highlights how systemic racism and other forms of discrimination can shape educational experiences and outcomes. Offshoots such as AsianCrit and LatCrit provide more specific frameworks for understanding the unique challenges faced by different groups of transnational students.

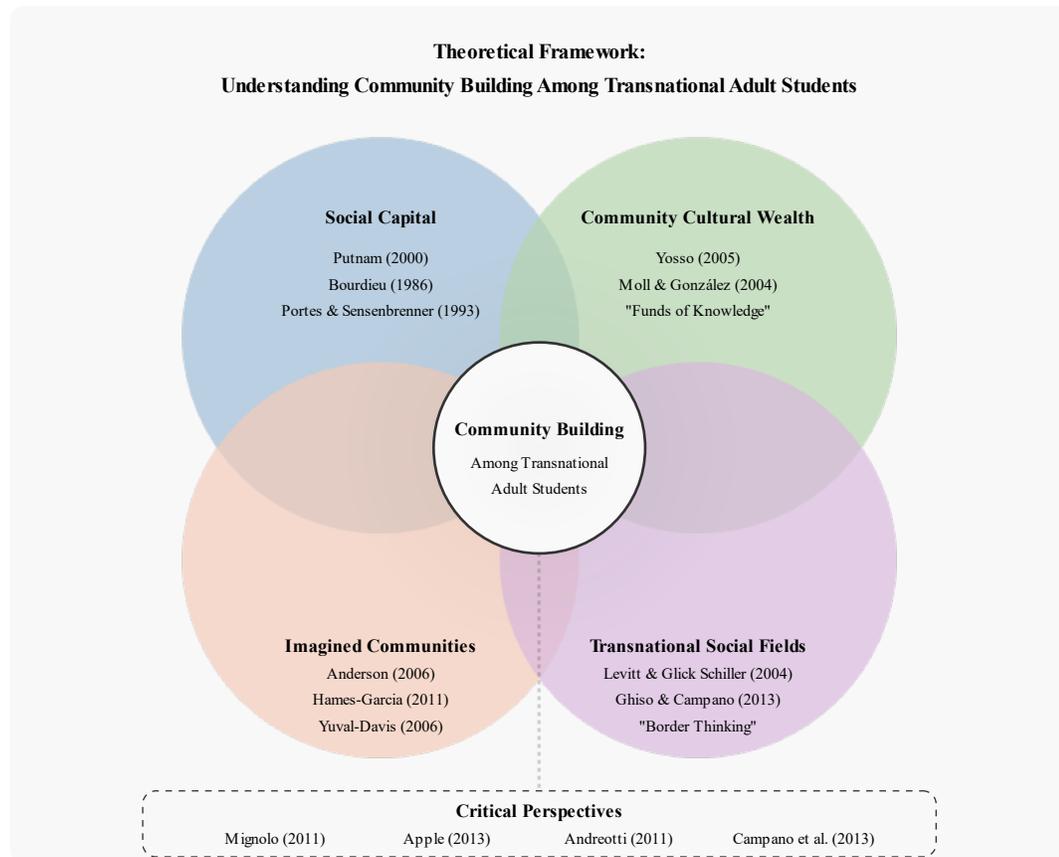
Building on these critical perspectives, Cannella et al. (2016) advocate for an approach that examines how power dynamics and social structures impact transnational students' experiences of community-building. This approach aligns with the work of scholars like Apple (2013), who emphasizes the importance of considering the political and economic contexts of education.

Apple (2013) argues that education is not a neutral enterprise and that it is deeply implicated in the production and reproduction of social inequalities. This perspective is particularly relevant when examining the experiences of transnational students, who often face systemic barriers and inequities in their educational journeys. By adopting a critical lens, this study aims to uncover and analyze the power structures that shape transnational students' experiences of community-building within adult education programs.

While Apple (2013) provides a crucial critical lens on education, it's important to consider a range of voices in adult education scholarship. Paulo Freire's (1970) seminal work on critical pedagogy laid the groundwork for understanding education as a potentially liberating force. His emphasis on dialogue and problem-posing education resonates with the experiences of many transnational adult learners.

Building on Freire's (1970) work, scholars like Mezirow (1991) developed transformative learning theory, which explores how adults can critically reflect on and revise their assumptions and worldviews through education. More recently, Brookfield (2005) emphasized the importance of critical theory in adult education, arguing for approaches that challenge power structures and promote social justice. These perspectives provide a rich framework for understanding the potential of adult education to not only provide skills and knowledge but also to foster critical consciousness and community empowerment among transnational students.

Figure 1 illustrates the interconnected theoretical frameworks that guide this study on community building among transnational adult students. The diagram represents four key theoretical domains: Social Capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993; Putnam, 2000), Community Cultural Wealth (Moll & González, 2004; Yosso, 2005), Imagined Communities (Anderson, 2006; Hames-Garcia, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2006), and Transnational Social Fields (Ghiso & Campano, 2013; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). These overlapping circles demonstrate how these theoretical perspectives intersect and mutually inform one another, creating a multifaceted lens through which to understand community formation. At the center is this study's specific focus—Community Building Among Transnational Adult Students—positioned at the nexus of these theoretical traditions. The diagram also acknowledges the Critical Perspectives (Apple, 2013; Andreotti, 2011; Campano et al., 2013; Mignolo, 2011a) that inform the study's approach, connected by a dotted line to represent how critical theory provides a foundation for analyzing power dynamics within these theoretical constructs. This visual representation emphasizes the non-hierarchical relationship between these frameworks and illustrates how they collectively provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation for examining the complex processes of community building in transnational educational contexts.

Figure 1*Theoretical Framework***Gaps in the Literature**

While existing literature provides valuable insights into community building, social capital, and adult education, there remains a gap in understanding the specific experiences of transnational adult students in California's Adult Education Programs. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how these students navigate the complex process of community-building within and beyond their educational settings.

Additionally, this research aspires to explore the intersections of these theoretical frameworks, as discussed earlier, to include critical theory and

transformative learning theory, as well as to explore ideas of social and cultural capital. By exploring these intersections, we identified tensions of where these lenses might overlap and where they do not. These points of tension can be profoundly instructive and offer spaces for deeper investigation and illumination of the complex realities facing transnational adult learners. This literature review has provided a comprehensive overview of both theoretical literature regarding community building in the U.S. for transnational adult students and current research associated with the transnational adult student experience.

Chapter Summary

I have discussed social capital, cultural capital, and imagined communities as well as critical perspectives in adult education, and have articulated a framework in which to explore these issues iteratively. In Chapter 3 I will turn to a methodological approach to addressing the questions raised by this conceptual framing. I will describe the research design and systematically outline the nature of the data collection and analytic approaches to illuminate the questions raised by this review. Through examining the theoretical literature, in Chapter 3 I will illustrate how the methodology I have chosen operationalizes the conceptual framework from this review and situates itself within a coordinated theoretical space.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design and methods for this study on community building among transnational adult students in California Adult Education Programs. It begins with an overview of the research topic, reiterates the problem statement and purpose, and presents the research questions that guide this investigation. The chapter then delves into the chosen methodology, participant selection criteria, data collection methods, and analytical approach.

Methodology

This study employed a critical phenomenological approach to exploring the experiences of transnational adult students in California Adult Education Programs. The choice of critical phenomenology is informed by the work of Cannella et al. (2016), who emphasize the importance of considering power dynamics and social justice issues in educational research.

The phenomenological aspect of this study, as described by Creswell (2014) and Denzin and Lincoln (2018), allows for a focus on the lived experiences of participants. This aligns with the study's aim to understand perceptions of community and belonging among transnational adult students. Phenomenology aims to explain the shared understanding that multiple individuals have of their personal experiences related to a particular concept or phenomenon. (Creswell, 2014). In this case, the phenomenon under study is the process of community-building as experienced by transnational adult students.

This study draws on the phenomenological traditions established by Husserl (1913/1983) and further developed by scholars such as Heidegger (1927/1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962). Their emphasis on lived experience

and the subjective nature of reality aligns well with this study's focus on how transnational students perceive and construct their experiences of community.

The critical component of the methodology draws on the work of Kincheloe and McLaren (2011), who argue for the importance of examining how power relations shape educational experiences. This critical lens will be particularly important when considering the experiences of transnational students within the broader sociocultural context of the United States. Critical phenomenology allows for an examination of how systemic factors, institutional structures, and societal norms impact students' abilities to form and engage with communities. By blending these approaches, this study provides a nuanced understanding of transnational students' experiences while also addressing broader issues of power, equity, and social justice in adult education.

Participant Selection and Context

The recruitment process for this study evolved differently than initially planned. While I had hoped to secure a linguistically diverse sample representing multiple regions, the realities of my site of practice led to a more homogeneous participant pool. I used purposive sampling through established networks at the adult education center where the study took place. My recruitment began with presentations to multiple intermediate to advanced English as a Second Language classes, where I shared a PowerPoint similar to my dissertation proposal explaining the research topic and purpose. Following these presentations, I invited interested students to volunteer for participation through multiple channels: scanning a QR code, emailing me directly, or signing a hard copy form that instructors would return to me electronically. When potential participants expressed interest, I communicated via email to arrange convenient interview days, times, and locations. I also informed all participants that they would receive

their transcripts to review for accuracy and would be invited to a lunch and presentation of the final findings if interested.

I had initially planned to apply the principle of data saturation as discussed by Creswell (2014) to determine my final sample size, continuing recruitment until new themes ceased to emerge. However, the constraints of my research time frame made this approach challenging to implement fully. Though I had anticipated recruiting 15-20 participants with varied backgrounds, the final sample consisted of seven women primarily from Armenia, with one participant from Ukraine. This outcome reflects both the demographic composition of the adult education program and the practical limitations of recruitment within a compressed timeline. Despite this homogeneity, the seven participants represented diverse ages, professional backgrounds, and migration circumstances, providing rich data on community-building experiences within this specific transnational community. This focused sample ultimately allowed for deeper analysis of cultural patterns while acknowledging the limitations in generalizability to other transnational groups.

The study was conducted within the context of California Adult Education Programs, with attention paid to the specific institutional and community settings of the participants. This included consideration of the program structures, available resources, and community demographics that influenced students' experiences of community-building.

This study also incorporated elements of autoethnography, which is a qualitative research method that Elias and Demara (2002), Packard and Leavy (2013) and Ellis et al. (2011) define as theoretical and creative writing that unlike more traditional narrative approaches grounded in autobiography, autoethnography utilizes the self to turn a critical eye on culture. The approach is

particularly relevant and necessary for this study: I was able to provide additional context and nuance by grounding my discussion in my lived experiences as an educator, reflecting on my positionality, and understanding how my identity (in this case, as an immigrant educator) informs my interview with no terms left vague. It is situated epistemologically at the intersection between ethnography and autobiography.

Autoethnography allows for a nuanced understanding of participant-researchers' complexities as they build communities of practice while crafting identities that sit at the intersection of their multiple selves. Autoethnography may situate this study into the Interpretive Phenomenology Realm as it assumes the role of researchers as interpreters and highlights our responsibility to understand participants' lived experiences. My interpretation of their narratives considered the commutations of my own lived experiences and understanding of immigrant educators' ontological and epistemological stances. Moreover, I balanced the autoethnographic component with the participants' narratives to ensure that this study was participant-centered.

Data Collection

The first source of data was in-depth, semi-structured interviews in participants' language or dialect of choice. Using Weiss's (1994) principles for qualitative interview studies, I designed interview questions based on my research questions and the theoretical framework (see Appendix). Drawing on Putnam (2000), Bourdieu (1986), Anderson (2006), and Yosso's (2005) work on community cultural wealth, the interviews provided rich descriptions of participants' experiences, perceptions, and sense-making with a community orientation. When I was interviewing participants and they answered or spoke in a language other than English, I used Google Translate to get a general idea of the

translation and worked with the student to ensure that what was transcribed was accurate. Using back-translation techniques, I ensured the accuracy of the translation. I also provided translated transcripts to participants for review to ensure that their experiences and perspectives were accurately reported.

For the autoethnographic component of this work, I marked my thoughts separately from the voices of my participants, employing my reflections to contextualize interview transcripts, thus offering additional insight into participants' experiences. I regularly reflected on my own lived experiences and how they influenced my interpretation of participants' accounts in my analysis. By using in-depth, semi-structured interviews and autoethnography, I provided a rich, nuanced, multifaceted account of transnational adult education students' community-building experiences.

Data Analysis

I conducted the data analysis following the steps outlined by Creswell (2014) for qualitative research. After obtaining participant permission, I recorded each interview using Skype. I then used Otter AI to assist with transcribing the interviews, as this software allows for tagging different speakers within the transcription. Following the automated transcription, I reviewed each transcript while listening to the recordings, making corrections where Otter AI had misheard or misinterpreted speech due to accents or audio quality issues. This verification process was crucial for ensuring accuracy, particularly with participants speaking English as an additional language.

As part of member checking, I emailed the individual transcripts to each participant to verify accuracy and invite corrections. The participants generally found the transcriptions to be accurate, with only three instances where participants requested minor word alterations to better reflect what they had

intended to communicate in English. I incorporated all these requested changes before proceeding with analysis.

I organized and prepared the data for analysis by compiling the finalized transcripts and field notes. Then, I read through all the data to develop a general sense of participants' experiences and overall patterns. For the coding process, I used NVivo software to systematically analyze each transcript and create nodes based on themes that emerged relating to community and belonging. The coding involved multiple phases: I began with open coding to identify initial concepts and categories that emerged directly from participants' language. This was followed by axial coding to explore relationships between these initial categories, allowing thematic connections to emerge organically.

I employed both in vivo codes derived directly from participants' language (such as "four walls" and "feeling like an outsider") and a priori codes developed from my theoretical framework (such as "social capital" and "community cultural wealth"). While NVivo facilitated efficient coding and pattern identification across multiple interviews, I maintained close contact with the data throughout the process, using the software as a tool to enhance my analysis rather than allowing it to drive my interpretations.

After developing initial codes, I identified key themes and descriptive categories through an iterative process of reviewing and refining the coded data. These themes were then organized into broader analytical categories that addressed my research questions while remaining grounded in participants' experiences. Finally, I interpreted these themes in relation to my theoretical framework, developing an integrated analysis that connected participants' lived experiences to broader scholarly discourse on community building, transnationalism, and adult education.

Ethical Considerations

I adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2018) for qualitative research. I paid particular attention to issues of power dynamics and representation, given the focus on transnational students. This included:

- Obtaining informed consent from all participants
- Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity
- Being sensitive to cultural differences and potential vulnerabilities of participants
- Providing opportunities for participants to review and comment on their interview transcripts and the researcher's interpretations

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

I employed several strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of my findings throughout the research process. First, I engaged in co-construction of data with participants primarily through email correspondence, supplemented by in-person meetings when needed. This process involved sharing transcriptions and preliminary interpretations, inviting participants to clarify, correct, or elaborate on their responses. Rather than simply asking participants to verify quotes, I encouraged them to respond to my emerging analyses, particularly regarding community formation patterns and institutional barriers (Low & Pandya, 2019). These discussions, though mainly conducted via email due to scheduling practicalities, proved invaluable when Elena (pseudonym) challenged my initial interpretation of language barriers, helping me recognize how professional identity intersected with language acquisition in ways I had overlooked.

I conducted regular peer debriefing sessions specifically with my chair throughout the research process. These consultations took place via email and Zoom, providing consistent opportunities to discuss my developing analysis and

interpretations. During these debriefing sessions, I explicitly solicited challenges to my emerging interpretations, which led to productive reconsideration of how age and professional background influenced community building approaches. These conversations with my chair helped me recognize my tendency to overemphasize cultural factors while sometimes overlooking generational differences.

Throughout the research process, I maintained a reflexive journal documenting my reactions, questions, and evolving interpretations. This practice was particularly important given my positionality as both an administrator in adult education and someone who had experienced being a transnational educator. When interviewing Larisa about her dance instruction, for instance, I noted my immediate connection to my own experiences teaching in South Korea, which helped me recognize how this personal resonance might influence my interpretation of her narrative. This reflexive practice allowed me to explicitly incorporate these insights into my analysis while maintaining clear boundaries between participants' experiences and my own.

By employing these rigorous approaches to trustworthiness and reflexivity, I worked to ensure that my findings accurately represented participants' experiences while acknowledging how my own positionality shaped the research process.

Limitations

While this study provides rich, contextual data on the experiences of transnational adult students in California, its generalizability to other geographical or educational contexts may be limited. The focus on subjective experiences means that the study may not capture all systemic factors influencing community-building in adult education settings. Additionally, the reliance on participants' self-

reported experiences may not fully capture unconscious processes or broader structural influences on community-building. Despite these limitations, the methodological approach that the study takes promises to provide detailed, nuanced, and thoughtful insights into the experience of community-building among a group of transnational adult students, who are much under-examined in the existing adult-education literature; in-depth interviews, autoethnography, and discourse analysis provide useful and complementary methods that hold promise for this study.

Chapter Summary

While I transition into Chapter 4, where the wealth of information gathered through these methods is presented, I will examine the study's findings, focusing on the rich data collected from participants and providing a detailed account of their narratives, the themes that emerge from our analysis, and complex ways in which participants envisage, negotiate and shape community in their lives as transnational adult students. By carefully analyzing and interpreting this narrative data, I will bring to light the complexities of community-building and belonging in transnational adult education and may open new and deeper areas of research in the experience of adult education.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS/OUTCOMES

Introduction

This chapter presents the experiences of seven transnational adult students who navigated, constructed, and reimagined community within a Southern California Adult Education Program during 2024-2025. Their narratives revealed both challenges and possibilities in creating shared spaces across cultural boundaries, while highlighting how institutional structures facilitated, hindered, and transformed community building in complex ways. As someone who had experienced being a transnational as an educator in South Korea, albeit with different privileges and circumstances as a white male English instructor, I approached these findings with a partial understanding of how community could be both imagined and enacted in educational spaces.

Understanding the Participants

The seven women who shared their journeys brought diverse perspectives shaped by age, professional background, and migration circumstances. While their stories were individual, they illustrated broader patterns in how transnational students experienced and created community in adult education settings.

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the seven transnational adult students who participated in this study. The table organizes key characteristics including pseudonym, age, country of origin, length of time in the United States, migration pathway, and professional background. This systematic presentation highlights both commonalities and differences among participants, revealing the diversity within the seemingly homogeneous sample. The predominance of Armenian participants (six out of seven) is evident, while the range of ages (19 to early 50s) and varied professional backgrounds illustrate important dimensions of

diversity that influenced participants' community-building experiences. This demographic overview provides crucial context for understanding the findings presented in this chapter and allows readers to connect participant quotes and experiences to their specific backgrounds.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Country of Origin	Time in US	Professional Background	Migration Pathway
Nadia	19	Armenia	5 months	Student	CBP program via Mexico, joining family members
Gayane	19	Armenia	1 year	Student	Family reunification with father who prepared for 3 years
Ani	Late 20s	Armenia	Recent arrival	Philologist, TV announcer, HR, court assistant	Family-based migration
Larisa	Mid-30s	Ukraine	Since 2022	Dance instructor	Refugee (following Russian invasion), via Germany
Maria	40s	Armenia	Since 2020	Mid-career professional	Through husband's government work
Susana	40s–50s	Armenia	Not specified	Not specified	Family reunification
Nare	40s–50s	Armenia	Most recent	Not specified	Previously lived in France

Young Adults Navigating Multiple Worlds

Nadia, who arrived in Southern California just 5 months before our October 2024 interview, embodied the energy and uncertainty of young adulthood. At 19, she came through the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) program via Mexico, joining family members who had established themselves in California over the previous 25 years. Her narrative centered on the search for friendship and

belonging, particularly with peers her age. Despite strong family connections, she struggled with initial isolation due to her parents' and her concerns about crime rates and unfamiliarity with the area -- concerns that stemmed from moving from a small Armenian village where, as she noted, "everyone knows each other" to an urban American environment. This transition highlighted how perceptions of safety in public spaces could significantly impact community building opportunities, especially for young women:

It was a very difficult time for me because I'm a teenager. I need friends, I need to go out, hang out. And I felt disconnected from community that time because I was in the house, within those four walls in my room, and I wasn't going anywhere.

Gayane, also 19, arrived a year earlier from Armenia to reunite with her father who had spent 3 years preparing for the family's migration. Her story revealed the emotional complexity of building community as a young adult. Despite previous international experience living in Germany, she expressed deep uncertainty about belonging in the U.S., often comparing community structures across the three countries she had called home. Her perspective was particularly valuable in understanding how younger migrants navigated multiple cultural frameworks: "I feel like I'm not a person who is meant for the US... I like my country more, and I feel that I could do more things in my country than here."

This sentiment revealed the complex emotional work of community building for young adult immigrants, particularly those who, like Gayane, had experienced life in multiple countries. Her comparison of opportunities between Armenia, Germany, and the U.S. highlighted how perceptions of belonging intersected with age and life stage to shape community engagement. Being treated like a child in South Korea due to my limited language skills was quite frustrating for myself, and I can only imagine how frustrating it is for a young adult working

on their education and skills to begin their first steps towards a career while feeling like others are telling you your limits.

Professional Identity and Community Building

Ani, in her late 20s, brought the unique perspective of a professional philologist attempting to translate her expertise into a new context. Her background in Armenian languages and experience in multiple professional fields – from television announcing to human resources – shaped her approach to community building. Her observations about public space and community interaction were particularly insightful: "What I noticed that's strange for me is that nobody is in the street, nobody walking, everybody only driving... I can't walk. And even in the summer, until 10 o'clock, every cafe, everything is closed."

This observation highlighted how urban design choices could facilitate or hinder community formation, especially for someone like Ani who had been accustomed to more pedestrian-friendly environments. Her experience demonstrated how seemingly mundane aspects of infrastructure could profoundly impact one's sense of belonging and community access. In fact, this could be one of the major reasons that Ani felt a sense of community and belonging in places like Las Vegas, Beverly Hills, and Disneyland. When I first heard this answer, I felt as if Ani maybe did not understand the question, but I am thankful that I let her continue to communicate what she felt without interjecting because the more I think about this, the more I can understand people feeling a sense of belonging and community in these spaces. In this interview, I learned that not interjecting my biases into the conversation and reflecting on the discussion can open up new thoughts and ideas about what the theme or topic in discussion is. I hold no monopoly on what community and belonging are.

Larisa, in her mid-30s, offered crucial contrast as the only Ukrainian participant. Her journey through Germany to California following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine highlighted how professional identity could anchor community-building efforts. As a dance instructor with over 20 years of experience, she actively worked to create community through her profession: "We have practice every Saturday, and sometimes we have big concerts, small concerts, a small community... I want to start with Ukrainian dancers and then make it bigger."

Her efforts to rebuild her professional practice while creating community spaces revealed how cultural expertise could serve as a bridge-building tool in new environments. Unlike many participants, Larisa demonstrated how she actively constructed new community spaces rather than simply adapting to existing ones. She wanted to start with Ukrainian dancers, since that would be most of the community at the Ukrainian Cultural Center, at which she works, and to eventually open up a dance studio to teach anybody in the community looking to learn. Our identities as individuals stem from much more than the country that we come from. We grow through our jobs, our recreational spaces, and the people we interact with in our free time. One major frustration that I faced in South Korea was when people would assume I would find something in common with somebody simply because they were from the U.S. Larisa's ability to create community through not just a hobby, but from her prior professional work shows the importance of holding on to our "identities" from our home countries.

Established Adults Building Bridges

Maria, who arrived in 2020 through her husband's government work, approached community building with the perspective of a mid-career professional. Her experience highlighted how family responsibilities intersected with personal

growth and community engagement. Her observation about American friendliness revealed subtle cultural differences in community formation:

In Armenia, we don't greet people who are not familiar to us, but it was a wonderful moment for me when we were moving into the new apartment and someone was walking with his dog, and he said, "Welcome to the neighborhood."

This experience demonstrated how small social interactions could significantly impact one's sense of belonging, particularly for those navigating cultural transitions. Maria's appreciation for this seemingly minor gesture reflected her openness to new community norms while maintaining connections to her home culture. As a person who was born in California and has lived here most of my life, I remember finding it strange that people didn't acknowledge each other on the street when I first arrived in South Korea. In fact, I remember a former international student of mine from South Korea who was studying in California once told me that she went up to one of the greeters at Walmart to ask if she knew them after they said hello to her when she walked through the door. Although I and other U.S. born citizens may find these acts and gestures to be simply parts of our culture in which we are "going through the motions" of having a conversation, it can seem nice and welcoming to me as well.

Susana, who arrived through family reunification, brought perspectives shaped by both her Armenian heritage and Jehovah's Witness faith. Her dual cultural and religious identities influenced how she navigated community spaces and built connections. Her insights about polite conversation topics revealed deeper cultural differences: "It's very strange, because I still don't understand why we can't speak about religion, speak about politics, speak about other problems... And we can talk about weather or celebrity."

Her observation highlighted how seemingly simple social norms could reflect deeper cultural values and assumptions about community interaction. At first I felt as if she may have been comparing casual conversations in the U.S. with more intimate conversations she may have had with friends and family in Armenia, but I still wanted her to speak about her feelings openly. I am no expert on the social and conversational formalities of Armenia, but there are definitely different taboos in every culture and country. This conversation resonated with my own experience of reverse culture shock upon returning from Korea, where I had to readjust to not only American norms of social interaction and behavior, but a new form of American norms and social interaction and behavior after moving to West Texas. This emphasizes that not only can we have cultural norms as a country, but even within a country those norms will vary, as stated by many of the interview participants in this study who moved to other areas of their home country.

Nare, who arrived most recently after living in France, brought a unique comparative perspective shaped by migration through multiple European contexts. Her appreciation for American cultural institutions highlighted how public spaces could foster democratic access: "And I respect the US for these two things: good libraries and open culture for anyone - rich or poor people, this is democratic."

This perspective offered a counterpoint to some participants' concerns about public space accessibility, demonstrating how different types of public institutions could fulfill varying community needs. Her experience illustrated the importance of cultural and educational spaces in facilitating belonging, particularly for those with intellectual interests. This perspective also shows the variety of thoughts and ideas there are about community and belonging, even within a group of participants all from Eastern Europe.

These seven women's experiences, while distinct, wove together to create a rich tapestry of how transnational students experienced and created community in adult education settings and within their broader social contexts. Their stories challenged simplistic narratives about immigrant integration while highlighting both persistent barriers and creative strategies for community building.

Returning to the research questions that guided this study:

1. How did transnational adult students talk about their experiences of community-building and belonging?
2. What role did adult education programs play in facilitating or hindering community development?
3. How did participants navigate the intersection of their educational experiences with broader community integration?

The following analysis explores these questions through key themes that emerged from participants' narratives.

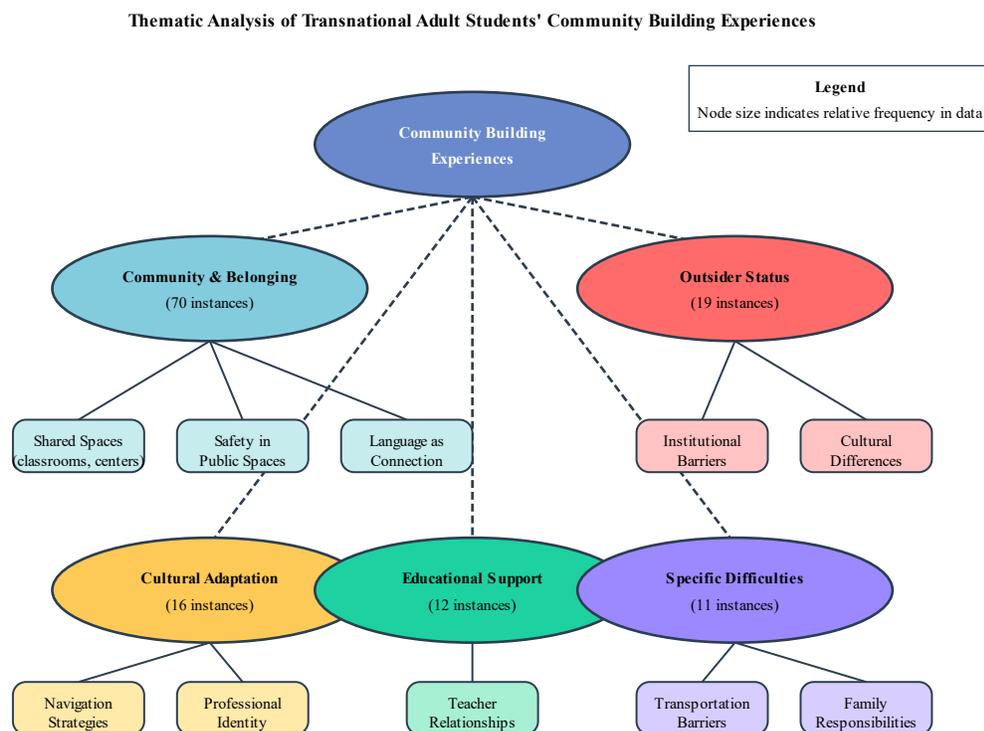
Major Themes from Data Analysis

Analysis of interview transcripts, using an iterative coding process, revealed several interconnected themes. Through careful review and recoding of participant narratives with the NVivo software, patterns emerged that illuminated their experiences of community building. Community and belonging dominated the analysis with 70 distinct instances across interviews, as expected with this being the topic and main theme of the study. This was followed by experiences of outsider status (19 instances), cultural adaptation (16 instances), educational support (12 instances), and specific difficulties (11 instances). These frequencies helped guide the organization of findings while ensuring participant voices remained central to the analysis.

Figure 2 visualizes the key themes that emerged from participant interviews regarding community building experiences. The central theme of "Community Building Experiences" branches into five main themes, with the size of each node indicating frequency in the interview data. "Community & Belonging" emerged as the most prominent theme (70 instances), reflecting participants' emphasis on feeling connected to both physical spaces and social groups. This primary theme includes three sub-themes: shared spaces, safety in public spaces, and language as connection. Other significant themes include "Outsider Status" (19 instances), "Cultural Adaptation" (16 instances), "Educational Support" (12 instances), and "Specific Difficulties" (11 instances). The relationships between these themes

Figure 2

Thematic Analysis



illustrate how participants' community building experiences are shaped by both structural factors and personal strategies. This analysis reveals that community building is a multifaceted process influenced by participants' ability to navigate challenges while leveraging available resources and support systems.

Shared Spaces and Community Formation

The most prominent theme centered on how participants experienced and created community through shared spaces. This alignment with Anderson's (2006) concept of imagined communities revealed how participants simultaneously maintained connections to multiple imagined communities—their Armenian or Ukrainian cultural identities, their emerging American identities, and the specific communities formed within educational spaces. Beyond simply envisioning national belonging, participants actively constructed multifaceted community identities that transcended geographic boundaries, demonstrating how Anderson's framework operates in transnational educational contexts where identity formation occurs at the intersection of multiple cultural affiliations.

Educational Spaces as Sites of Connection

Participants consistently identified classrooms as crucial sites for cross-cultural connection. Maria's enthusiasm highlighted the centrality of these spaces: "I feel like I am waiting for the day when we have classes... at the end of the week I'm getting so excited. 'Oh, tomorrow is Monday, and I'm going to go to the class to see people.'"

This sentiment was echoed by Nadia, who emphasized the dual benefits of language learning and social connection: "Those 3 hours during the day were very important for me because they are my friends already, and they help me improve

my English." These experiences supported Yosso's (2005) argument about community cultural wealth, demonstrating how students leveraged educational spaces to build multiple forms of capital simultaneously. Yosso's (2005) argument about community cultural wealth was particularly evident in how participants leveraged educational spaces as sites for multiple forms of capital development simultaneously. Beyond simply acquiring linguistic capital through language instruction, participants actively cultivated social capital through peer relationships, navigational capital through shared information about institutional systems, and familial capital by creating supportive networks that extended beyond classroom walls. The classroom environments functioned as incubators for these varied forms of capital, creating structured opportunities for students to recognize and build upon each other's community cultural wealth in ways that might not have occurred in less structured community settings. The classroom environment provided structure for connections that might not have occurred naturally in other settings, creating what Moll and González (2004) term spaces for "funds of knowledge" exchange.

Public Institutions and Democratic Access

Several participants noted the importance of public institutions in fostering community. Nare's observation about libraries and cultural venues revealed complex dynamics of access and exclusion: "I respect the U.S. for these two things: good libraries and open culture for anyone – rich or poor people, this is democratic." However, this perspective was complicated by Ani's experience of limited public space access: "Nobody is in the street, nobody walking, everybody only driving... And even in the summer, until 10 o'clock, every cafe, everything is closed."

These contrasting experiences echoed Zoellner's (2011) analysis of how urban design affects community possibilities, while also suggesting what Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) term "simultaneous embeddedness" in multiple cultural frameworks. The differences in perspective also highlighted how previous experiences shaped participants' expectations and interactions with American public institutions.

Cultural Centers and Community Gathering Places

Cultural centers and religious institutions served multiple functions in community formation. Larisa described how the Ukrainian cultural center provided both connection and opportunity: "We have practice every Saturday, and sometimes we have big concerts, small concerts, a small community." Whereas Susana found community through religious spaces to connect with her Armenian community, while also feeling comfortable in newer spaces engaging with native English speakers as shown when asked if she ever feels like an outsider: "I go to our meetings. I'm Jehovah's Witness. But they Armenians are all speak Armenian... I feel comfortable because my teachers do everything, and college do everything for it."

Her answer shows that she has become comfortable in any environment due to her engagement in school and church. These spaces exemplified what Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) term "transnational social fields," where participants maintained simultaneous connections to multiple communities. Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) concept of "simultaneous embeddedness" was powerfully illustrated in participants' nuanced navigation of multiple cultural frameworks. Rather than experiencing community building as a linear progression from "home" to "host" country identification, participants maintained active connections across

transnational social fields, creating new hybrid forms of belonging that drew from both contexts simultaneously. For instance, Ani's observations about public space usage reflected not just personal preference but a deeper cultural orientation toward community interaction shaped by her previous experiences in Armenia. This simultaneous embeddedness allowed participants to draw upon multiple cultural resources when developing community connections, creating rich and complex forms of belonging that transcended simple binaries of integration or assimilation.

Safety and Public Space Navigation

The perception and experience of safety in public spaces emerged as a crucial factor shaping community engagement, particularly for younger participants. This manifested differently across age groups and previous living experiences. Nadia, who had moved from a small Armenian village to urban California, explained: "I didn't go anywhere, didn't go alone around here because my parents are very strict parents, and they were afraid for me. Here there are many dangerous things that aren't in Armenia." This experience resonated with Gayane's observations: "In my village, all relatives, all know each other, and I wasn't afraid of anything or any people who could be dangerous for me."

These perspectives highlighted how perceptions of safety shaped possibilities for community engagement, connecting to broader patterns Putnam (2000) identified in declining social capital. This perception of safety also connects directly to Putnam's (2000) analysis of declining social capital in American society, where reduced public space usage creates a self-reinforcing cycle of isolation. As fewer people occupy public spaces, these environments become perceived as less safe, further decreasing usage and limiting opportunities for organic community formation. The contrast between participants' previous

experiences in communities with active street life and their current navigation of American suburbs highlights how Putnam's concerns about declining civic engagement materialize in the lived experiences of transnational students seeking community connections. This perception of safety also connected to my observations of public space usage in South Korea, where dense urban neighborhoods and active street life created natural community surveillance. The contrast between participants' previous experiences of community safety and their navigation of American public spaces revealed how urban design and social norms intersected to shape possibilities for community building.

Institutional Access and Barriers

The intersection of institutional structures with community building revealed complex dynamics of access and exclusion. As Mignolo (2011a) argues, institutional practices often reflect and reproduce colonial power relations by privileging Western knowledge systems while marginalizing others. This colonial dynamic manifested when participants encountered administrative structures that failed to recognize their existing educational credentials or professional expertise. The implicit assumption that transnational students must begin anew, regardless of their previous accomplishments, reproduces what Mignolo (2011a) terms the "coloniality of knowledge"—systems that position Western credentials as universally valid while treating non-Western education as inherently deficient. These institutional practices not only created practical barriers to community engagement but also reinforced subtle hierarchies that positioned participants as recipients rather than contributors to educational communities, despite their sophisticated knowledge and expertise.

Administrative Challenges

Participants encountered various institutional barriers that affected their community engagement. Gayane's experience with college enrollment illustrated these challenges:

I was like, “Okay, I live here, but I can't learn.” It's strange to apply to a college or university based on residency. In Armenia, we have to take exams to apply somewhere, but here you should be a resident.

This frustration was echoed by Nare, who faced misunderstandings about her legal status: "But this woman said to me, 'You're an illegal individual person.' But I'm not an illegal person because I moved to United States from Ukraine, and I moved through the airport."

These experiences aligned with Campano et al.'s (2013) analysis of how institutional practices can marginalize transnational students. Campano et al.'s (2013) analysis of how institutional practices can marginalize transnational students was particularly evident in participants' experiences with administrative barriers. Their framework highlights how educational bureaucracies often embody what they term "institutional unwelcoming"—administrative procedures that, regardless of individual staff members' intentions, create systemic patterns of exclusion. Nare's experience of being incorrectly labeled an "illegal individual" exemplifies this concept, showing how administrative misunderstandings about immigration status can transform routine institutional interactions into profoundly alienating experiences that undermine community belonging. Campano et al. argue for institutionalizing what they call "coalitional literacy practices" that center the experiences of transnational students in administrative design, rather than treating them as exceptions to standardized systems. As an administrator in adult education, I have seen how our systems, often unintentionally, create obstacles for the students they aim to serve. These barriers particularly affected

participants' ability to build community through educational institutions, highlighting the need for more responsive administrative practices. I can only imagine what it would feel like to be told that I am an illegal person and how that could affect the way I see myself.

Professional Identity and Community Formation

The role of professional identity in community building emerged as a significant theme, particularly as participants navigated the translation of their professional expertise into new contexts. This process revealed complex intersections between cultural capital, institutional barriers, and community formation strategies. Larisa, who fled Ukraine during the 2022 Russian invasion, described how she leveraged her professional background as a dance instructor to create new community connections: "I want to start with Ukrainian dancers and then make it bigger... I have a lot of experience in Ukraine. I worked in a very famous Ukrainian dance group that's almost 50 years old." Similarly, Ani's background as a philologist shaped her approach to community: "My profession is philologist. I'm a philologist in Armenian languages. I have worked in many fields. First, my job was in TV as a TV announcer. Then I got a job at economic court as assistant of bankruptcy manager."

These experiences connected to Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of cultural and social capital, particularly through his related concepts of habitus and doxa. Participants like Ani and Larisa encountered what Bourdieu would term a "disrupted habitus"—their internalized dispositions, professional identities, and tacit knowledge developed in one field (their professional contexts in Armenia or Ukraine) suddenly became misaligned with the unspoken rules (doxa) of American professional environments. This disruption required them to consciously

reconstruct their professional habitus while simultaneously attempting to convert their existing cultural capital into forms recognized in their new context. Larisa's strategic use of her dance expertise represented a successful navigation of this challenge, as she identified a field (the Ukrainian Cultural Center) where her embodied cultural capital retained its value, creating a foundation from which she could gradually build new forms of capital recognized in broader American contexts. Her efforts to rebuild her professional practice while creating community spaces resonated with my observations of how activity-based communities in Korea fostered natural connections across cultural boundaries. However, unlike my experience as an English instructor in Korea, where my professional status granted certain privileges, many participants faced significant barriers in translating their professional expertise, whereas I was invited to South Korea because of my professional expertise.

Generational Perspectives on Community Formation

Analysis of participant narratives revealed how age and life stage profoundly influenced approaches to community building. This finding particularly resonated with my administrative experience in adult education, where I've observed how different age groups navigate institutional spaces. Three distinct patterns emerged:

Young Adult Navigation (Ages 18-25)

Participants like Nadia and Gayane prioritized peer relationships and cultural belonging, often expressing more emotional responses to cultural differences. Gayane reflected: "I feel like I'm not a person who is meant for the U.S. I like my country more, and I feel that I could do more things in my country

than here." This contrasted with Nadia's focus on peer relationships: "That was my big problem - to find friends. So I joined the classes with my big hope to find friends my age." Their experiences highlighted unique challenges:

- Balancing family expectations with desires for independence
- Navigating safety concerns in new environments
- Building peer networks while managing cultural transitions

These experiences aligned with Suárez-Orozco et al.'s (2008) findings about how young immigrant students navigate multiple worlds simultaneously. Their research identifies what they term "social mirroring"—the process by which young immigrants develop their sense of belonging through reflections of themselves in new social contexts. For young adult participants like Nadia and Gayane, the intense focus on peer relationships represented not merely social preference but a crucial developmental process of identity formation through this social mirroring. Suárez-Orozco et al. emphasize how this navigation is particularly complex for those who migrate during late adolescence and early adulthood, as they must simultaneously complete crucial developmental tasks of identity formation while adapting to new cultural contexts. This explains why Gayane's questioning of belonging ("I feel like I'm not a person who is meant for the U.S.") reflects not just cultural preference but a profound developmental challenge of reconstructing identity across disrupted contexts.

Mid-Career Adaptation (Late 20s-30s)

Participants in their late 20s and 30s focused more on professional identity reconstruction. Ani described this process: "Now I'm attending community college, learning, improving my English. My goals are to speak and know English

fluently, to easily communicate with people, to learn, and then to get a new job, new profession." Their strategies included:

- Leveraging professional expertise for community building
- Creating new professional networks
- Balancing career goals with community engagement

This group demonstrated what Yosso (2005) terms "aspirational capital" in their community building approaches.

Established Adult Bridge-Building (40s-50s)

Older participants often served as cultural interpreters. Maria's perspective on community evolved through multiple migrations: "When I went [back to Armenia], I felt that I really miss my country, but then when I returned [to the US], I felt like I'm returning home." Their approaches revealed:

- More settled views on cultural identity
- Focus on family and intergenerational relationships
- Active roles in community development

This group exemplified Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) concept of "simultaneous embeddedness" in their community building strategies.

Language and Community Formation

Language proficiency significantly affected community participation. Maria explained: "I think the reason why I may feel that way, like I'm an outsider, I don't belong here, was because of a language barrier... American English was still very difficult for me to understand." However, participants also developed creative strategies for language learning. Nare described using literature: "The first step for adaptation in a foreign country and for studying foreign language, for me, number

one is library... I took 'The Alchemist' by Paulo Coelho." This connected to Yosso's (2005) concept of linguistic capital as a community resource. Participants demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness in leveraging multiple linguistic strategies to build community connections, from formal language classes to self-directed learning approaches.

Public Space Access and Community Formation

The relationship between transportation infrastructure and community building emerged as a significant theme, echoing patterns I had observed during my time in Korea, where robust public transportation and walkable neighborhoods fostered natural community interaction. In California, participants described how car dependency and limited public transportation affected their ability to build community. Ani observed: "What I noticed that's strange for me is that nobody is in the street, nobody walking, everybody only driving... And, for example, I like walking, and when I came here, that first thing was very strange." Maria noted how transportation affected community gathering: "We used to go for hikes a lot of time. And another thing that was different from my experience back in my country was that people were greeting each other during when they meet."

These observations highlighted how urban design choices could either facilitate or hinder community formation. This connected to Zoellner's (2011) analysis of how built environments shape social interaction, while also revealing how participants' previous experiences of public space influenced their community building strategies in new contexts.

Cultural Navigation and Adaptation Strategies

Throughout their interviews, participants described developing sophisticated strategies for navigating cultural transitions, often drawing on what Yosso (2005) terms "navigational capital." Their approaches revealed both the challenges and creativity involved in building community across cultural boundaries. Susana reflected on navigating different communication norms: It's different here about polite and impolite discussion topics... I still don't understand why we can't speak about religion, speak about politics."

Maria observed shifts in social interaction:

In Armenia, we don't greet people who are not familiar to us, but it was a wonderful moment for me when we were moving into the new apartment and someone was walking with his dog, and he said, "Welcome to the neighborhood.

These experiences exemplified what Ghiso and Campano (2013) term "border thinking" – actively negotiating between different cultural frameworks. This concept extends Anzaldúa's (1987) foundational work on *mestiza* consciousness and *nepantla*, which conceptualizes the psychological and spiritual state of existing between cultures. Anzaldúa's *nepantla*—a Nahuatl word describing the "in-between space" where transformation occurs—provides a powerful framework for understanding how participants like Maria and Susana experienced community building not as a linear progression from one cultural identity to another, but as a creative process of developing new consciousness that transcends binary cultural categories. Their sophisticated navigation of different communication norms and social expectations exemplifies what Anzaldúa termed the "consciousness of the borderlands"—a heightened awareness developed through the daily practice of cultural translation and negotiation. Participants developed nuanced strategies for maintaining cultural connections while adapting

to new community norms, demonstrating remarkable resilience and creativity in their community-building efforts.

Educational Support Systems and Community Development

Within adult education programs, formal and informal support systems played crucial roles in community formation. Drawing on my experience as both a transnational educator and current administrator, I recognized how institutional practices could either nurture or inhibit community building. Teachers, in particular, emerged as key facilitators of community connections. Nadia described how one teacher's actions fostered belonging: "She just added me to her classes without waiting so much time because I was there early. After that, I started to study hard because I understood that she chose me out of so many students." Maria emphasized how classroom dynamics supported learning: "When you are in the classroom, you're learning from your classmates. It's more of a live experience, and you're sharing your knowledge." Educational spaces also facilitated cultural exchange. Maria described a field trip: "We had very meaningful, very interesting conversations, exchanging our cultural experiences from our countries... one of them was from Ukraine, and one of them was from Thailand." This illustrates what Andreotti (2011) terms "critical literacy" in transnational educational contexts. These experiences demonstrated the potential for educational spaces to serve as sites for meaningful community building when intentionally structured to support cross-cultural interaction.

Synthesis of Findings

Analysis of participant narratives revealed complex interactions between physical spaces, institutional structures, and community formation. Several key patterns emerged across themes:

Intersecting Factors in Community Building

Many of the major themes that participants discussed intersected with each other in how participants could sense, develop, and participate in community.

Space and Safety

Physical infrastructure significantly shaped community possibilities. While participants valued public institutions like libraries, safety concerns and transportation limitations often restricted their community engagement. As Nadia noted: "I felt disconnected from community that time because I was in the house, within those four walls in my room." This isolation connected to broader patterns Putnam (2000) identified in declining social capital, while also revealing how gender and age intersected with safety concerns. The contrast between participants' previous experiences of public space usage and their navigation of American environments highlighted how urban design choices could profoundly impact community building opportunities.

Professional Identity and Institutional Access

Professional background influenced how participants approached community building. Larisa and Ani's experiences demonstrated both the potential and limitations of leveraging professional identity. Larisa stated "I want to start with Ukrainian dancers and then make it bigger" and Ani stated "My profession is philologist... I have worked in many fields." These efforts to translate professional capital across contexts revealed what Bourdieu (1986) terms the "field-specific" nature of cultural capital. Participants with professional backgrounds faced unique challenges in rebuilding their professional identities while simultaneously constructing new community connections.

Age and Adaptation Strategies

Age significantly influenced how participants navigated cultural transitions:

- Younger participants (Nadia, Gayane) focused on peer relationships and cultural belonging
- Mid-career adults (Ani, Larisa) emphasized professional community
- Established adults (Maria, Susana, Nare) often served as cultural bridges

This generational pattern suggested different ways of mobilizing what Yosso (2005) terms "navigational capital." These age-related differences highlighted the need for differentiated approaches to supporting community building across different life stages.

Table 2 synthesizes the distinct patterns of community building observed across different age groups among the study participants. The table organizes findings into three age cohorts—young adults (18-25), mid-career adults (late 20s-30s), and established adults (40s-50s)—detailing their priorities, key concerns, community building strategies, and representative quotes. This structured comparison demonstrates how life stage significantly influenced approaches to community formation, with younger participants prioritizing peer relationships and cultural belonging, mid-career adults focusing on professional identity reconstruction, and established adults often serving as cultural bridges. The inclusion of direct quotes from participants grounds these patterns in their lived experiences, illustrating how age intersected with other factors to shape community building possibilities. This table provides an important analytical framework for understanding the generational dimensions of transnational community formation.

Table 2*Age Specific Strategies*

Age Group	Primary Concerns	Community Building Strategies	Institutional Support Needed	Exemplified By
Young Adults (18–25)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer relationships • Cultural belonging • Safety concerns • Balancing family expectations with independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking peers with similar experiences • Navigating cultural identity • Using digital platforms • Participating in structured activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age-appropriate social activities • Safe transportation options • Peer mentorship • Flexible scheduling for family obligations 	<p>“That was my big problem - to find friends. So I joined the classes with my big hope to find friends my age.”</p> <p>– Nadia</p>
Mid-Career Adults (Late 20s–30s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional identity reconstruction • Career advancement • Balancing work and education • Building professional networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leveraging professional expertise • Creating new professional networks • Pursuing credential recognition • Engaging in skill development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional networking events • Credential evaluation services • Career counseling • Industry-specific language support 	<p>“I want to start with Ukrainian dancers and then make it bigger... I have a lot of experience in Ukraine.”</p> <p>– Larisa</p>
Established Adults (40s–50s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural interpretation • Family responsibilities • Intergenerational connections • Long-term community development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serving as cultural bridges • Building intergenerational support • Developing community resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural exchange opportunities • Family-inclusive programming • Leadership development • Community service 	<p>“When I went [back to Armenia], I felt that I really miss my country, but then when I returned [to the US], I felt like I’m returning home.”</p> <p>– Maria</p>

Key Insights

The following key insights emerged from the study’s analysis, highlighting how transnational adult students engage with educational spaces, institutional structures, and each other to build community. These themes reflect the complex interplay between identity, space, and agency across participants’ lived experiences.

1. Community building involved simultaneous navigation of multiple spaces and identities, supporting Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) concept of "transnational social fields."
2. Educational spaces served complex functions beyond instruction, acting as sites for what Moll and González (2004) term "funds of knowledge" exchange.
3. Physical infrastructure and institutional practices created both opportunities and barriers for community formation, reflecting Zoellner's (2011) analysis of built environment impacts.
4. Participants actively constructed community through various strategies, demonstrating agency while navigating structural constraints.

These findings challenged simplistic narratives about immigrant integration while highlighting the need for nuanced understanding of how different factors shaped community building possibilities. Figure 3 represents the frequency of words by participants in the study.

Figure 3's word cloud visualization represents the relative frequency of key concepts mentioned by participants when discussing community building. The size of each word corresponds to its prevalence in the interview data, with "Community," "Belonging," and "Education" emerging as the most dominant concepts. Medium-sized terms including "Language," "Safety," "Identity," "Connection," "Support," and "Spaces" represent secondary themes that significantly influenced participants' experiences. Smaller terms reflect the diverse factors that shape community building, from "Professional" concerns to "Transportation" barriers. The visualization effectively captures the multidimensional nature of community building, highlighting both tangible

2024-2025. Through analysis of their narratives, informed by my own experiences as both a transnational educator and current adult education administrator, several key findings emerged that both supported and complicated existing theoretical frameworks.

The frequency and pattern of themes revealed through coding – community and belonging (70 instances), experiences of outsider status (19 instances), cultural adaptation (16 instances), educational support (12 instances), and specific difficulties (11 instances) – highlighted the complex nature of community building for transnational students.

Key findings demonstrated:

1. Physical spaces profoundly shaped community possibilities, supporting Zoellner's (2011) analysis of how built environments affect social connection. While public institutions provided democratic access points, as theorized by Anderson (2006), safety concerns and transportation limitations often restricted community engagement, particularly for younger participants.
2. Age and life stage significantly influenced how participants approached community building:
 - Young adults navigated peer relationships and cultural belonging
 - Mid-career adults focused on professional community reconstruction
 - Established adults often served as cultural bridges
3. Educational spaces served multiple functions beyond instruction, acting as crucial sites for what Moll and González (2004) term

"funds of knowledge" exchange. However, institutional practices sometimes created unintended barriers to community formation.

4. Professional identity played complex roles in community building, with participants navigating what Kim (2015) terms "volatile privilege" as they sought to translate their expertise into new contexts.

These findings suggest that supporting community building requires attention to both structural factors and individual agency. As Gayane observed, "If we want to have a better life for us or for our future generation... we should do something ourselves to make things better." However, individual initiative alone cannot always overcome systemic barriers.

Chapter 5 will explore these theoretical implications further while developing detailed recommendations for policy and practice in adult education programs that could be proposed by the state and modeled for use at various adult education providers throughout the state and country.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings presented in Chapter 4, examining their theoretical implications, practical applications, and directions for future research. The experiences of the seven transnational adult students illustrated complex processes of community building that both support and complicate existing theoretical frameworks. By connecting these findings to broader scholarly discourse, I hope to showcase how adult education programs might better support community formation while addressing systemic barriers that shape students' experiences.

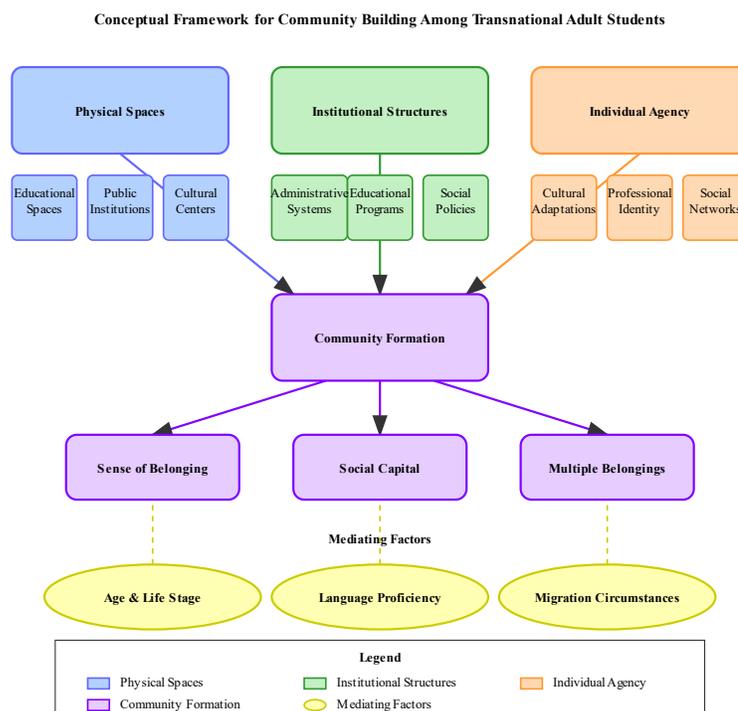
Theoretical Implications

Figure 4 illustrates the complex interplay of factors that influence how transnational students form connections in their new environment. Drawing from interview data and existing literature, this framework identifies three primary components—physical spaces, institutional structures, and individual agency—that collectively contribute to community formation. Physical spaces include educational settings, public institutions, and cultural centers where interactions naturally occur. Institutional structures encompass administrative systems, educational programs, and social policies that can facilitate or hinder community development. Individual agency reflects the personal strategies students employ, such as cultural adaptations, professional identity construction, and social network building. These three components converge to foster community formation, which ultimately leads to three key outcomes: a sense of belonging, increased social capital, and the development of multiple belongings across transnational contexts. Importantly, these processes are mediated by factors including age and life stage,

language proficiency, and specific migration circumstances, acknowledging that community building experiences vary significantly based on individual characteristics and contexts. This framework provides a holistic understanding of how transnational adult students navigate and construct community in their host society while maintaining connections to their countries of origin.

Figure 4

Conceptual Framework



Reimagining Social Capital in Transnational Contexts

The findings of this study resonated with Putnam's (2000) analysis in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, which documented declining social capital in American society. Putnam's core concern—

that Americans are increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and democratic structures—was reflected in participants' experiences of isolation in public spaces. As Ani observed, "Nobody is in the street, nobody walking, everybody only driving." This echoed Putnam's (2000) alarm about the deterioration of community spaces where social bonds traditionally formed. This reflected the core reason I found this topic to be of interest for my dissertation when comparing community between South Korea and the U.S.

However, participants' experiences also complicated Putnam's (2000) framework in important ways. While Putnam (2000) focused primarily on declining social capital among native-born Americans, this study revealed how transnational students actively constructed new forms of social capital despite structural barriers. Larisa's efforts to build community through the Ukrainian Cultural Center demonstrated what Putnam (2000) might call "entrepreneurial social capital"—the active creation of new community structures rather than simply joining existing ones.

Participants' narratives also suggested that Putnam's (2000) distinction between "bonding capital" (connections within homogeneous groups) and "bridging capital" (connections across diverse groups) operated differently in transnational contexts. Maria's description of her field trip illustrated how educational spaces could facilitate bridging capital: "We had very meaningful, very interesting conversations, exchanging our cultural experiences from our countries... one of them was from Ukraine, and one of them was from Thailand." These experiences align with what Zoellner (2011) described as "organic community formation" which emerges when public spaces facilitate natural interaction across diverse groups. My observations in South Korea, where dense urban neighborhoods fostered constant community interaction, provided a useful

contrast to the American suburban landscapes that Putnam (2004) identified as detrimental to social capital formation.

Community Cultural Wealth and Institutional Barriers

Participants' experiences strongly supported Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth, demonstrating how transnational students leveraged multiple forms of capital in their community-building efforts. Nare's use of literature for language learning illustrated linguistic capital, while Larisa's professional dance expertise exemplified navigational capital. These strategies revealed the rich resources that transnational students brought to their educational experiences.

However, these forms of capital often went unrecognized by institutional structures. Gayane's experience with college enrollment illustrated this disconnect: "I was like, 'Okay, I live here, but I can't learn.' It's strange to apply to a college or university based on residency." The tension between community cultural wealth and institutional barriers supports Mignolo's (2011a) critique of how educational systems often reproduce colonial power relations by privileging certain Western forms of knowledge and experience while marginalizing others. When institutions fail to recognize the valuable cultural capital that transnational students bring, they miss opportunities to foster richer community building.

Transnational Social Fields and Multiple Belongings

The findings aligned with Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) concept of transnational social fields, which suggests that migrants maintain simultaneous connections to multiple societies. Maria's reflection captured this complexity: "When I went [back to Armenia], I felt that I really miss my country, but then

when I returned [to the U.S.], I felt like I'm returning home." This experience of multiple belongings challenges binary notions of integration that expect immigrants to simply assimilate into their new society. Instead, participants actively negotiated what Ghiso and Campano (2013) describe as "border thinking"—creating new forms of belonging that drew on multiple cultural frameworks.

Anderson's (2006) concept of imagined communities proved valuable for understanding how participants constructed their sense of belonging across national boundaries. However, their experiences suggested that these imagined communities were not just national but incorporated multiple scales—from the classroom to cultural centers to transnational networks.

Connections to Research Questions

Revisiting the research questions that guided this study reveals how participants' experiences illuminate broader patterns of community building among transnational adult students.

Research Question 1: Experiences of Community Building and Belonging

The first research question asked how transnational adult students in California Adult Education Programs talked about their experiences of community-building and belonging. Participants described multifaceted experiences shaped by age, professional background, migration circumstances, and access to public spaces. Their narratives revealed sophisticated strategies for community building, from leveraging educational spaces to creating cultural centers to developing professional networks.

The frequency with which community and belonging emerged in the coding (70 instances) underscored its centrality to participants' experiences. However, their understandings of community varied significantly. For younger participants like Nadia and Gayane, community centered on peer relationships and cultural identity. For mid-career adults like Ani and Larisa, professional identity provided an anchor for community building. For established adults like Maria, Susana, and Nare, community involved building bridges between different cultural worlds. These varied experiences suggest that adult education programs need multifaceted approaches to support community building that recognizes different priorities across age groups and life stages.

Research Question 2: Role of Adult Education Programs

The second research question explored the role adult education programs played in facilitating or hindering community development. Participants' experiences revealed that educational spaces served multiple functions beyond instruction. Classrooms provided crucial sites for cross-cultural connection, as Maria described: "When you are in the classroom, you're learning from your classmates. It's more of a live experience, and you're sharing your knowledge." Teachers emerged as key facilitators of community, with Nadia emphasizing how one teacher's support fostered her sense of belonging. These positive experiences align with Moll and González's (2004) concept of "funds of knowledge" exchange in educational settings.

However, institutional barriers sometimes hindered fuller community engagement. Administrative challenges with enrollment, language expectations, and credential recognition limited participants' access to educational opportunities.

These barriers reflect what Apple (2013) identifies as the political dimensions of education that can reproduce social inequalities despite well-intentioned programs.

Research Question 3: Navigation of Educational and Broader Communities

The third research question examined how participants navigated the intersection of their educational experiences with broader community integration. Participants described complex relationships between educational spaces and wider community engagement, often using the skills and connections developed in educational settings to build broader community networks.

Larisa's development of the Ukrainian Cultural Center exemplified this process, as she leveraged both her professional expertise and educational connections to create new community spaces. Maria's participation in field trips demonstrated how structured educational activities could facilitate broader community exploration. However, participants also described significant barriers to connecting educational and broader community experiences. Safety concerns, transportation limitations, and unfamiliarity with public spaces often restricted their community engagement beyond educational settings. Nadia's experience of being confined to home highlighted how these barriers particularly affected younger students: "I felt disconnected from community that time because I was in the house, within those four walls in my room."

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study suggest several important implications for adult education programs seeking to support community building among transnational students.

Reconceptualizing Adult Education's Purpose

Perhaps the most significant implication is the need to broaden our understanding of adult education's purpose beyond narrow vocational or academic goals. The findings suggest that adult education programs have significant potential to serve as community anchors—spaces where diverse individuals can build meaningful connections while pursuing educational goals.

This expanded vision aligns with Putnam's (2000) call for revitalizing social capital through institutional renewal. Rather than measuring success solely through degree completion or job placement, adult education programs could also consider their impact on community formation, social capital development, and broader social integration.

By explicitly recognizing community building as a core function of adult education, programs could potentially address multiple social challenges simultaneously:

1. Reducing isolation and its associated mental health impacts
2. Creating cross-cultural understanding that might reduce xenophobia
3. Building networks that support economic and social mobility
4. Fostering civic engagement in local communities
5. Reducing crime through stronger community bonds

This approach resonates with my observations in South Korea, where educational institutions were deeply embedded in community life rather than separate from it. The density of social connections fostered through these institutions created natural support systems that addressed many social challenges before they became crises.

Physical Space Design for Community Building

Participants' experiences highlighted the crucial role of physical space in facilitating or hindering community formation. When Ani noted the emptiness of American streets, she identified a broader pattern of how urban design affects community possibilities. Similarly, Nadia's concerns about safety limited her community engagement beyond educational settings.

Adult education programs could address these challenges through intentional space design:

1. Creating flexible learning spaces that support both formal instruction and informal interaction
2. Developing gathering areas where students can build connections outside scheduled class times
3. Ensuring safe access to campus facilities, particularly in evening hours
4. Considering transportation needs in program scheduling
5. Designing spaces that accommodate intergenerational interaction

These approaches align with Zoellner's (2011) analysis of how built environments shape social interaction. By creating what urbanists like Oldenburg (1999) term "third places"—locations beyond home and work where community naturally forms—adult education programs could foster the kind of organic community development I witnessed in Korean urban spaces. Adult Education centers often serve students and members of the community from cradle (Parent Education) to career (ESL, High School Diploma, Career Courses) and beyond (Lifelong Learning). This diverse student population provides opportunities to engage all members in a community with each other.

Support for Multiple Forms of Community

Participants' diverse approaches to community building suggest the need for programs that support multiple forms of community engagement. Rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach, adult education programs could develop varied opportunities that align with different student needs:

1. Age-specific community-building activities that recognize different priorities across life stages
2. Professional networking opportunities that leverage students' expertise
3. Cultural exchange programs that build on transnational connections
4. Family-oriented activities that recognize the importance of intergenerational relationships
5. Community service projects that connect educational experiences to broader civic engagement

These varied approaches would reflect what Yosso (2005) terms "community cultural wealth"—recognizing and building on the diverse forms of capital that transnational students bring to their educational experiences. This framework challenges deficit perspectives and highlights the strengths embedded in students' lived realities, networks, and cultural knowledge.

Recognizing and Supporting Diverse Manifestations of Belonging

A crucial insight from this research is that belongingness is fundamentally a subjective consideration. Participants enacted spaces of belonging differently based on their individual backgrounds, personalities, and circumstances. While some found connection through vibrant classroom participation, others cultivated belonging through quieter, more selective interactions or cultural-specific

activities. This variability highlights the need for adult education programs to develop flexible, responsive approaches to community support (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The "one-size-fits-all" approach to community building fails to address the diverse needs of transnational adult students. For instance:

- **Supporting students experiencing depression or isolation:**
Students navigating mental health challenges may require different pathways to community than those who naturally gravitate toward social interaction. Programs might implement "low-pressure" community options such as drop-in resource centers, peer mentoring, or activity-based gatherings that don't require sustained verbal participation (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008).
- **Addressing experiences of harassment or discrimination:**
Students who have experienced harassment based on their national origin, accent, religious identity, or other factors may be hesitant to engage in community spaces. Programs must develop clear anti-harassment policies, cultural sensitivity training, and safe reporting mechanisms while creating affinity spaces where students can process these experiences (Ghiso & Campano, 2013).
- **Accommodating digital community preferences:** Some students, particularly younger participants, may prefer online or hybrid community spaces. Rather than viewing digital engagement as inferior to in-person interaction, programs could develop structured online community opportunities through moderated discussion forums, virtual cultural exchanges, or hybrid events (García & Kleifgen, 2018).

Adult education programs might consider implementing what could be termed a "community concierge" approach—meeting students where they are and helping connect them to resources and communities aligned with their specific needs and preferences. This might include:

1. Comprehensive intake assessments that explore students' community preferences and needs
2. Diverse community engagement options ranging from highly structured to self-directed
3. Regular check-ins with students who demonstrate limited community engagement
4. Flexibility in recognizing and supporting student-initiated community forms

By acknowledging that belonging manifests differently across individuals and contexts, adult education programs can develop more inclusive and effective community-building strategies that support the full spectrum of transnational student experiences (Hames-Garcia, 2011).

Administrative Reform

Institutional barriers significantly affected participants' community building efforts. Gayane's struggle with enrollment and Nare's experience with misunderstandings about her legal status highlighted how administrative systems could hinder community engagement. Addressing these barriers requires systemic reform:

1. Developing clear pathways for students with different residency statuses
2. Providing multilingual administrative support

3. Training staff on immigration documentation and credential evaluation
4. Creating comprehensive orientation programs that address both academic and community needs
5. Building flexible systems that recognize diverse educational backgrounds

These reforms align with Campano et al.'s (2013) call for educational justice through institutional transformation. By removing unnecessary barriers to participation, adult education programs could better fulfill their potential as sites for community building.

Challenging Policy as Barrier to Student-Centered Approaches

A notable finding from this study was how institutional representatives often invoked "policy" to shut down conversations about student needs. Phrases like "this is policy" or "our policy states" frequently served as conversation-enders that prioritized institutional convenience over individual student circumstances. This administrative approach directly contradicts the student-centered philosophy that should underpin adult education programs (Campano et al., 2013). Addressing this issue requires multi-level interventions:

1. **Policy literacy training:** Administrators and staff need comprehensive understanding of which policies are genuinely immutable (e.g., legal requirements, safety regulations) versus those that permit discretion or interpretation. Many "policies" are actually practices or procedures that can be modified (Apple, 2013).
2. **Exception documentation system:** Programs should develop transparent processes for requesting policy exceptions based on

student needs, with clear documentation of decisions made. This creates institutional memory of flexible responses while ensuring consistency.

3. **Regular policy review with student input:** Establishing semester or annual policy reviews that include transnational student representatives can help identify which policies create unnecessary barriers to community building and educational access (Freire, 1970).
4. **Reframing administrative mindset:** Professional development should emphasize that policies exist to serve student needs, not administrative convenience. Staff should be encouraged to ask "How can we accommodate this student within our framework?" rather than defaulting to denial.
5. **Hiring culturally responsive staff:** Recruitment should prioritize administrative staff who bring cross-cultural competence and experience navigating complex systems, ideally including individuals who have themselves experienced transnational education (Andreotti, 2011).

This shift from policy-centered to student-centered administration directly supports the community-building potential of adult education programs. When institutional representatives approach policies as flexible frameworks rather than rigid barriers, they create space for the organic development of community that participants in this study so clearly valued.

Implementation Strategies

The following strategies present short-term and long-term actions that adult education programs could develop and work on to create and develop community and belonging within their institutions:

Short-term Actions (0-6 months)

Based on Nadia's experience with supportive teachers:

- Create student advisory committees
- Train staff on documentation requirements
- Identify priority safety concerns
- Begin pilot mentorship programs
- Set up multilingual welcome center

Medium-term Goals (6-18 months)

Drawing from Larisa's cultural center success:

- Develop cultural exchange programs
- Create professional networking events
- Establish transportation support
- Build community partnerships
- Design flexible gathering spaces

Long-term Objectives (18+ months)

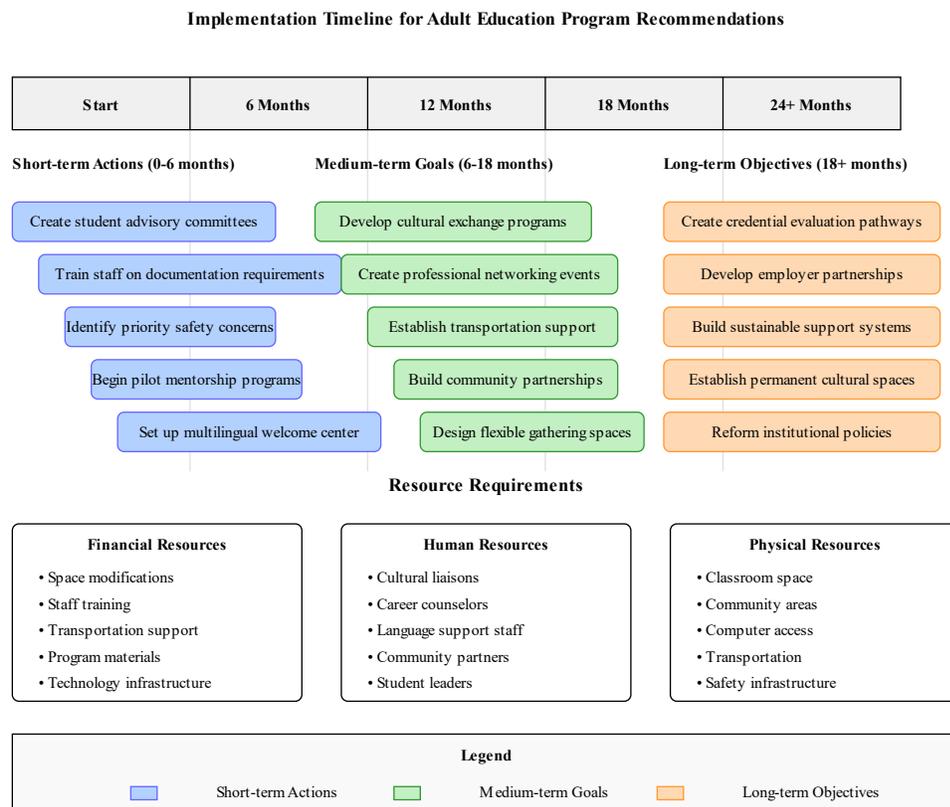
Addressing systemic barriers identified by all participants:

- Create credential evaluation pathways
- Develop employer partnerships
- Build sustainable support systems
- Establish permanent cultural spaces
- Reform institutional policies

Figure 5 presents a strategic approach to applying the recommendations for adult education programs serving transnational students. The timeline spans 24+ months, organizing interventions into three phases. Short-term actions (0-6 months) focus on foundational elements like creating student advisory committees,

Figure 5

Implementation Timeline



training staff on documentation requirements and establishing multilingual welcome centers. Medium-term goals (6-18 months) build upon this foundation through cultural exchange programs, professional networking events, and community partnerships. Long-term objectives (18+ months) address structural

changes, including credential evaluation pathways, sustainable support systems, and institutional policy reforms. The timeline acknowledges the necessary resources—financial, human, and physical—required for successful implementation. This phased approach recognizes that meaningful change requires both immediate interventions and sustained commitment to systemic transformation. It will require a multitude of resources for adult education programs to implement the development of community and belonging in their programs. It will be important for administrators and others involved in the process to begin to look for and ask for the following resources.

Resource Requirements

Most educators know that resources can be hard to come by at any institution, but adult education sites seem to have an even harder time than other institutions in resource acquisition. The following resources will be required for adult education schools to be able to implement strategies towards community building.

Financial Resources

To support meaningful community-building efforts, programs must consider essential financial investments. These may include the following.

- Space modifications
- Staff training
- Transportation support
- Program materials
- Technology infrastructure

Human Resources

Effective community engagement also relies on the availability of committed and culturally responsive personnel. Key roles may include the following list.

- Cultural liaisons
- Career counselors
- Language support staff
- Community partners
- Student leaders

Physical Resources

Finally, the physical environment plays a vital role in fostering a sense of belonging. Necessary resources might involve the following.

- Classroom space
- Community areas
- Computer access
- Transportation
- Safety infrastructure

Limitations of the Current Study

While this study provided valuable insights into community building among transnational adult students, several limitations should be acknowledged:

1. Demographic limitations: Participants came primarily from Armenia, with one participant from Ukraine. This limits the generalizability of findings to transnational students from other cultural backgrounds.
2. Geographic specificity: The study focused on one adult education program in Southern California. Experiences might differ

significantly in other regions with different demographic compositions.

3. Gender homogeneity: All participants were women, which may have shaped their experiences of safety, community access, and institutional navigation.
4. Timing constraints: Interviews were conducted during a specific time period, limiting exploration of how community building evolves over longer timeframes.
5. Researcher positionality: My own experience as a white male educator in South Korea shaped my interpretation of participants' experiences, potentially emphasizing certain aspects while overlooking others.

A significant limitation of this study concerns the intersection of racial and ethnic demographics. While the study focused on participants' experiences as transnational students, it is important to acknowledge how racial identities, in addition to gender, shape community building experiences. The participants, primarily from Armenia and Ukraine, navigate racial positionality in the United States that differs from transnational students from other regions.

Transnational students from various parts of the world bear racial identities that subject them to different forms of bigotry, discrimination, and xenophobia in the U.S. These experiences could profoundly impact how they perceive and enact community. For instance, transnational students who are visibly racialized as non-white may experience different levels of acceptance in public spaces and different interactions with institutional representatives than those perceived as white (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). Similarly, students from regions associated with

particular political tensions or media stereotypes may face additional barriers to community integration (Yosso et al., 2009).

These racial dynamics would likely influence not only students' community-building strategies but also the types of supports adult education programs need to consider. Future research should explicitly examine how racial identity intersects with transnational status to shape community formation possibilities, particularly for students from regions underrepresented in this study such as Latin America, Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Such research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how racial, ethnic, and national identities collectively influence community building in adult education contexts (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). These limitations suggest the need for broader, more diverse studies that could provide a more comprehensive understanding of community building among transnational adult students.

Directions for Future Research

Several promising directions for future research emerged from this study. These include examining the broader social and economic return on investment (ROI) of community-building efforts, exploring how community formation evolves over time through longitudinal studies, conducting comparative research across regions and demographic groups, and investigating how public policy shapes community-building opportunities for transnational adult students. Each of these areas offers potential to deepen understanding and strengthen adult education practice.

Return on Investment (ROI) for Community Building

Perhaps the most compelling direction for future research involves developing metrics to demonstrate the broader social and economic benefits of community building in adult education. While educational outcomes and career advancement are important, the potential returns on community investment extend much further. Future studies could explore:

- Relationships between community engagement and mental health outcomes
- Connections between strong community bonds and reduced crime rates
- Economic benefits of social networks developed through educational programs
- Healthcare cost reductions through stronger community support systems
- Civic engagement and democratic participation stemming from community connections

By quantifying these broader impacts, researchers could provide compelling evidence for legislators and policymakers about the comprehensive returns on investment in community-focused adult education. This approach would move beyond narrow economic metrics to recognize education's role in addressing multiple social challenges.

Longitudinal Studies of Community Formation

This study provided a snapshot of community building at a specific moment. Future research could explore how community formation evolves over time, examining:

- How initial community connections develop into lasting social networks
- The long-term impact of educational programs on community integration
- Intergenerational effects of community building across family systems
- Evolution of transnational connections over multiple years
- Development of leadership roles within communities over time

Comparative Studies Across Regions and Demographics

Future research could also address the demographic and geographic limitations of this study by examining:

- Community building among transnational students from diverse regions
- Regional variations in community formation across different U.S. contexts
- Gender differences in community building strategies and barriers
- Impact of varying community sizes on integration possibilities
- Rural vs. urban differences in community formation

Policy Impact Studies

Research could also explore how policy changes affect community building opportunities:

- Impact of immigration policies on community formation
- Effects of funding structures on community-building capacity
- Institutional policy reforms and their outcomes for transnational students

- Transportation and urban planning policies as they affect community access
- Housing policies and their relationship to community stability

Conclusion

This study examined how seven transnational adult students experienced and constructed community within California Adult Education Programs. Their narratives revealed sophisticated strategies for community building while highlighting significant barriers that shaped their possibilities for connection.

The findings suggest that adult education programs have significant untapped potential to serve as community anchors—spaces where diverse individuals can build meaningful connections while pursuing educational goals. Realizing this potential requires reimagining these programs not just as sites for skill development or credential attainment, but as crucial infrastructure for community formation in an increasingly fragmented society.

Drawing on Putnam's (2000) analysis of declining social capital, we might view adult education programs as potential remedies for the isolation and disconnection that characterize much of American society. By creating spaces where people from diverse backgrounds can develop meaningful connections, these programs could address multiple social challenges simultaneously—from mental health concerns to crime prevention to civic disengagement.

However, fulfilling this potential requires intentional design at multiple levels: physical spaces that facilitate natural interaction, administrative systems that remove unnecessary barriers, programmatic approaches that support diverse forms of community, and policy frameworks that recognize community building as a legitimate educational outcome.

As Gayane observed, "If we want to have a better life for us or for our future generation... we should do something ourselves to make things better." This call for action applies not just to individual students but to educational institutions and policymakers who shape the contexts where community building occurs. As we face a time in the U.S. where people seem to be divided more and more, perhaps we need to have difficult conversations and discussions to help better understand each other. So much of education at our institutions in the U.S. and elsewhere have focused on competition and rankings. Maybe as leaders in education we should also focus on some of the values we say are important, like empathy, caring for each other, and working together.

Oftentimes, it is a select few who make the major decisions of our direction as a society. Even when we want to include as many people as possible in decisions being made, there will still be institutional barriers making participation more difficult for some rather than others. These barriers could include language, transportation, and even self-confidence. However, by recognizing and supporting the sophisticated community-building work that transnational students already perform, adult education programs could better fulfill their promise as sites of transformation—not just for individual students, but for the broader fabric of American society when we involve them in the process of decision-making in the programs that they take part in. By allowing as many voices as possible to take part in our processes may make for some uncomfortable realizations, we will ultimately best serve our communities in this way. Or perhaps, not having diverse voices is what many at the top strive for.

Thus, in talking with a naval officer who had won a target competition with big naval guns, we asked, "Have you thought what happens in a little street when one of your shells explodes, of the families torn to pieces, a thousand generations influenced when you signaled Fire?" "Of course not," he said. "Those shells travel so far that you couldn't possibly see where they land."

And he was quite correct. If he could really see where they land and what they do, if he could really feel the power in his dropped hand and the waves radiating out from his gun, he would not be able to perform his function. He himself would be the weak point of his gun. But by not seeing, by insisting that it be a problem of ballistics and trajectory, he is a good gunnery officer. And he is too humble to take the responsibility for thinking. The whole structure of his world would be endangered if he permitted himself to think. The pieces must stick within their pattern or the whole thing collapses and the design is gone. We wonder whether in the present pattern the pieces are not straining to fall out of line; whether the paradoxes of our times are not finally mounting to a conclusion of ridiculousness that will make the whole structure collapse. For the paradoxes are becoming so great that leaders of people must be less and less intelligent to stand their own leadership.

John Steinbeck, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, (1951/1996, p. 36)

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APPENDIX: SENSE OF BELONGING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introductions

1. What is your name?
2. Could you tell me a little bit about where you are originally from?

Questions about experiences of community-building and perceptions of community

3. Can you describe what “community” means to you as an ESL adult student?
4. Can you share a specific experience where you felt a strong sense of belonging within your educational program or the community that you live in?
5. How do you maintain connections to your “home” or traditional community while building new connections here?

Questions about the role of adult education programs in community development

6. How has your participation in ESL adult education programs influenced your ability to form connections with others?
7. How do you think the ESL adult education program could better help community-building among students?
8. Can you share an example of a time when you felt the ESL adult education program either strongly supported or failed to support your sense of belonging within the community?

Questions about the intersection of educational experiences with broader community integration

9. In what ways has your participation in the ESL adult education program influenced your involvement with the broader community?
10. How has your participation in the ESL adult education program affected your ability to navigate American society?

11. What role do you think education should play in helping ESL adult education students integrate into the broader community?

Concluding Questions

12. How do you envision your ideal community, both within and beyond your school?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences of community-building as an ESL adult education student that we haven't covered?

Research Questions



1. How do transnational adult students talk about their experiences of community-building and belonging?
2. What role does adult education play in facilitating or hindering community development?
3. How do students navigate educational experiences with broader community integration?

Methodology Focus



- Critical phenomenological approach
- 7 women participants (6 from Armenia, 1 from Ukraine)
- In-depth, semi-structured interviews in preferred languages
- Diverse age groups (19 to early 50s) providing varied perspectives
- Thematic analysis revealed patterns across age groups and experiences

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

- In-depth, semi-structured interviews
 - Conducted in participants' preferred languages
 - Translation software for transcription
- Autoethnographic reflections
- Member checking for accuracy

Data Analysis

- Thematic Analysis
 - Open coding for initial concepts
 - Axial coding to explore relationships
 - Use of NVivo software for coding efficiency
- Discourse Analysis
 - Examining language use and narrative structures
 - Exploring how participants construct belonging and identity



Trustworthiness and Relationship with Participants

Co-construction of Data

- Collaborative theme identification with participants
- Member-checking of interpretations (Low & Pandya, 2019)

Peer Debriefing

- Regular discussions with committee members
- Solicitation of challenges to interpretations

Reflexivity

- Maintenance of a reflexive journal throughout the research process
- Critical examination of positionality and potential biases

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent in participants' preferred languages
- Confidentiality and anonymity protections
- Cultural sensitivity in all interactions



Looking at the language and meanings

Finding similarities throughout the interviews in words and meaning

What does community mean to people

How is community formed

How can schools help build community and belonging

What works and what doesn't

Anybody can participate

I will do my best to make sure translations are true and accurate

Checking with participants on translation and meaning

I have access to translation software so that all can participate in any language



Sample Interview Questions

1. Can you describe what "community" means to you as an ESL adult student?
2. Can you share a specific experience where you felt a strong sense of belonging within your educational program or the community that you live in?
3. How do you maintain connections to your "home" or traditional community while building new connections here?
4. How has your participation in ESL adult education programs influenced your ability to form connections with others?
5. In what ways has your participation in the ESL adult education program influenced your involvement with the broader community?
6. How do you envision your ideal community, both within and beyond your school?





Timeline



October - November 2024

- Finalize research proposal
- Obtain IRB approval
- Begin participant recruitment

December 2024 - January 2025

- Conduct interviews
- Begin transcription and translation process
- Start initial data analysis

February 2025

- Complete data analysis
- Begin writing dissertation chapters 4 - 5 and refining chapters 1-3

March 2025

- Complete first draft of dissertation
- Submit to committee for review

April 2025

- Revise dissertation based on committee feedback
- Defend dissertation
- Submit final version

Participant Demographics Table

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Country of Origin	Time in US	Professional Background	Migration Pathway
Nadia	19	Armenia	5 months	Student	CBP program via Mexico, joining family members
Gayane	19	Armenia	1 year	Student	Family reunification with father who prepared for 3 years
Ani	Late 20s	Armenia	Recent arrival	Philologist, TV announcer, HR, court assistant	Family-based migration
Larisa	Mid-30s	Ukraine	Since 2022	Dance instructor (20+ years experience)	Refugee (following Russian invasion), via Germany
Maria	40s	Armenia	Since 2020	Mid-career professional	Through husband's govt work
Susana	40s-50s	Armenia	Not specified	Not specified	Family reunification
Nare	40s-50s	Armenia	Most recent	Not specified	Previously lived in France

Note: This table summarizes demographic information of the seven participants, highlighting diversity in age, professional background, and migration circumstances that shaped their experiences.



Young Adults' Experiences of Community

Nadia (19, Armenia)

- Initially isolated within "four walls" due to safety concerns
- Quote: "It was a very difficult time for me because I'm a teenager. I need friends, I need to go out, hang out."
- Found community primarily through ESL classroom connections
- Viewed education as pathway to both language skills and friendship

Gayane (19, Armenia)

- Complex emotional work of adjusting to U.S.
- Quote: "I feel like I'm not a person who is meant for the US... I like my country more"
- Compared community structures across Armenia, Germany, and U.S.
- Struggled with educational system requirements different from home country



Mid-Career Adults' Experiences of Community

Ani (Late 20s, Philologist)

- Observed significant differences in public space usage
- Quote: "Nobody is in the street, nobody walking, everybody only driving... I can't walk."
- Found sense of belonging in tourist spaces (Las Vegas, Beverly Hills)
- Frustrated by early closing times limiting community gathering opportunities

Larisa (Mid-30s, Dance Instructor)

- Actively built community through Ukrainian Cultural Center
- Quote: "We have practice every Saturday... I want to start with Ukrainian dancers and then make it bigger."
- Used professional expertise to create new community spaces
- Emphasized cultural preservation while building new connections



Established Adults' Experiences of Community

Maria (30s-40s, Armenia)

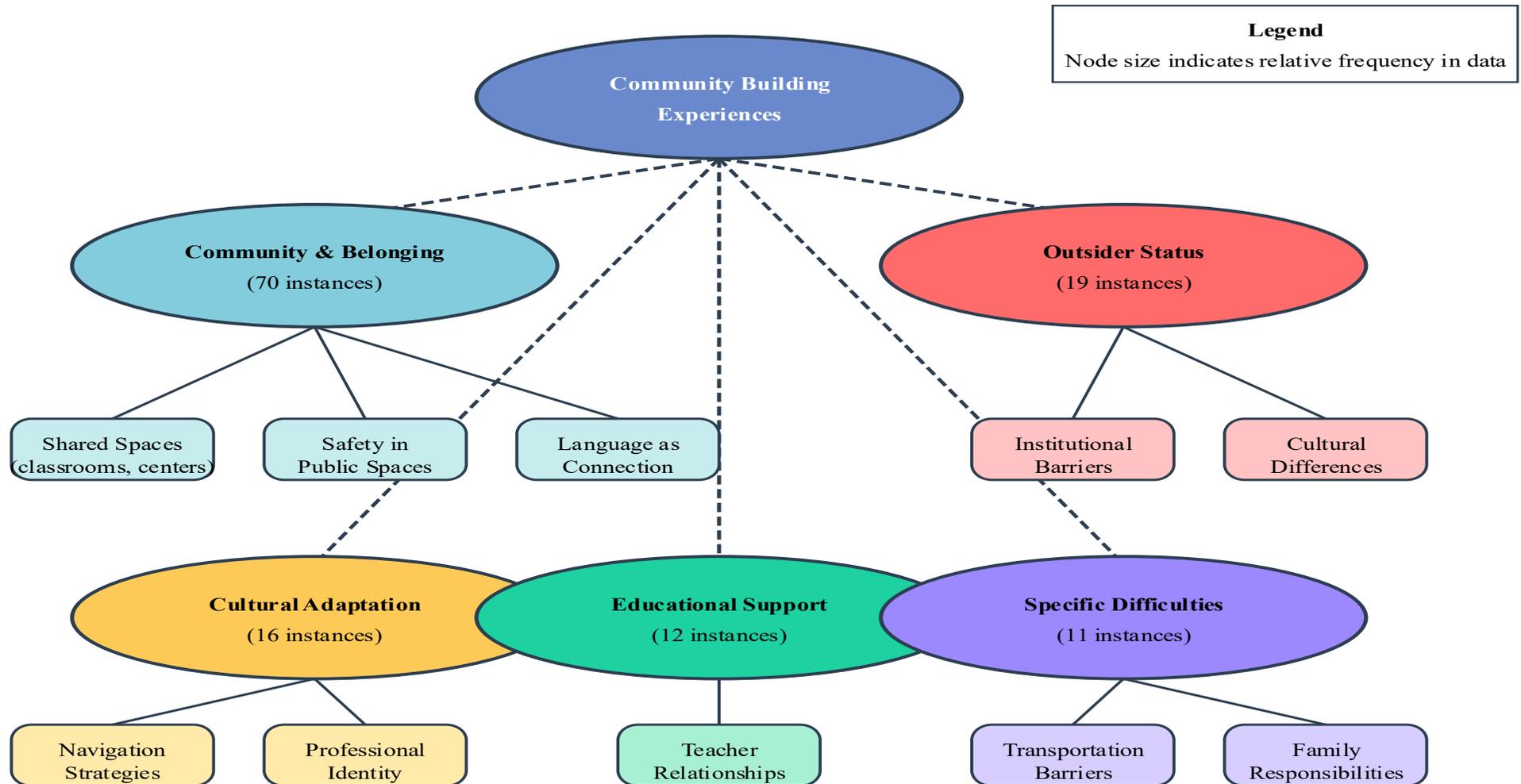
- Found small cultural differences meaningful
- Quote: "In Armenia, we don't greet people who are not familiar to us, but it was a wonderful moment for me when we were moving into the new apartment and someone was walking with his dog, and he said, 'Welcome to the neighborhood.'"
- Developed dual sense of home between Armenia and U.S.
- Prioritized educational spaces for meaningful cross-cultural exchanges

Susana & Nare (40s-50s, Armenia)

- Susana navigated dual cultural and religious identities
- Nare appreciated American public institutions
- Quote: "I respect the US for these two things: good libraries and open culture for anyone - rich or poor people, this is democratic."
- Served as cultural bridges across different communities

Thematic Analysis

Figure 1: Thematic Analysis of Transnational Adult Students' Community Building Experiences





Educational Spaces as Sites of Connection

- Classrooms emerged as crucial spaces for cross-cultural connection
- Quote (Maria): "I feel like I am waiting for the day when we have classes... at the end of the week I'm getting so excited."
- Quote (Nadia): "Those three hours during the day were very important for me because they are my friends already, and they help me improve my English."
- Structured environment created opportunities for organic community formation
- Teachers served as key facilitators of belonging



Public Space and Community Access



- Varying experiences of American public spaces
- Safety concerns limited younger participants' community engagement
- Quote (Nadia): "I didn't go anywhere, didn't go alone around here because my parents are very strict parents, and they were afraid for me."
- Transportation infrastructure shaped community possibilities
- Cultural centers and religious institutions provided important gathering spaces
- Quote (Nare): "And I respect the US for these two things: good libraries and open culture for anyone - rich or poor people, this is democratic."



Professional Identity and Community Building



- Professional background significantly influenced community approaches
- Larisa used dance instruction to create community connections
- Ani's philologist background shaped her perspective on language and belonging
- Institutional barriers often prevented recognition of existing expertise
- Quote (Gayane): "I was like, 'Okay, I live here, but I can't learn.' It's strange to apply to a college or university based on residency."

Age-Related Approaches to Community

Age-Specific Community Building Strategies

Age Group	Primary Concerns	Community Building Strategies	Institutional Support Needed	Exemplified By
Young Adults (18-25)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer relationships • Cultural belonging • Safety concerns • Balancing family expectations with independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking peers with similar experiences • Navigating cultural identity • Using digital platforms • Participating in structured activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age-appropriate social activities • Safe transportation options • Peer mentorship • Flexible scheduling for family obligations 	<p><i>"That was my big problem - to find friends. So I joined the classes with my big hope to find friends my age."</i></p> <p>- Nadia</p>
Mid-Career Adults (Late 20s-30s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional identity reconstruction • Career advancement • Balancing work and education • Building professional networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leveraging professional expertise • Creating new professional networks • Pursuing credential recognition • Engaging in skill development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional networking events • Credential evaluation services • Career counseling • Industry-specific language support 	<p><i>"I want to start with Ukrainian dancers and then make it bigger... I have a lot of experience in Ukraine."</i></p> <p>- Larisa</p>
Established Adults (40s-50s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural interpretation • Family responsibilities • Intergenerational connections • Long-term community development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serving as cultural bridges • Building intergenerational support • Developing community resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural exchange opportunities • Family-inclusive programming • Leadership development • Community service 	<p><i>"When I went [back to Armenia], I felt that I really miss my country, but then when I returned [to the US], I felt like I'm returning home."</i></p> <p>- Maria</p>

Note: This table synthesizes age-specific community building strategies and needs identified through interviews with transnational adult students, highlighting life-stage differences.

Word Cloud Analysis

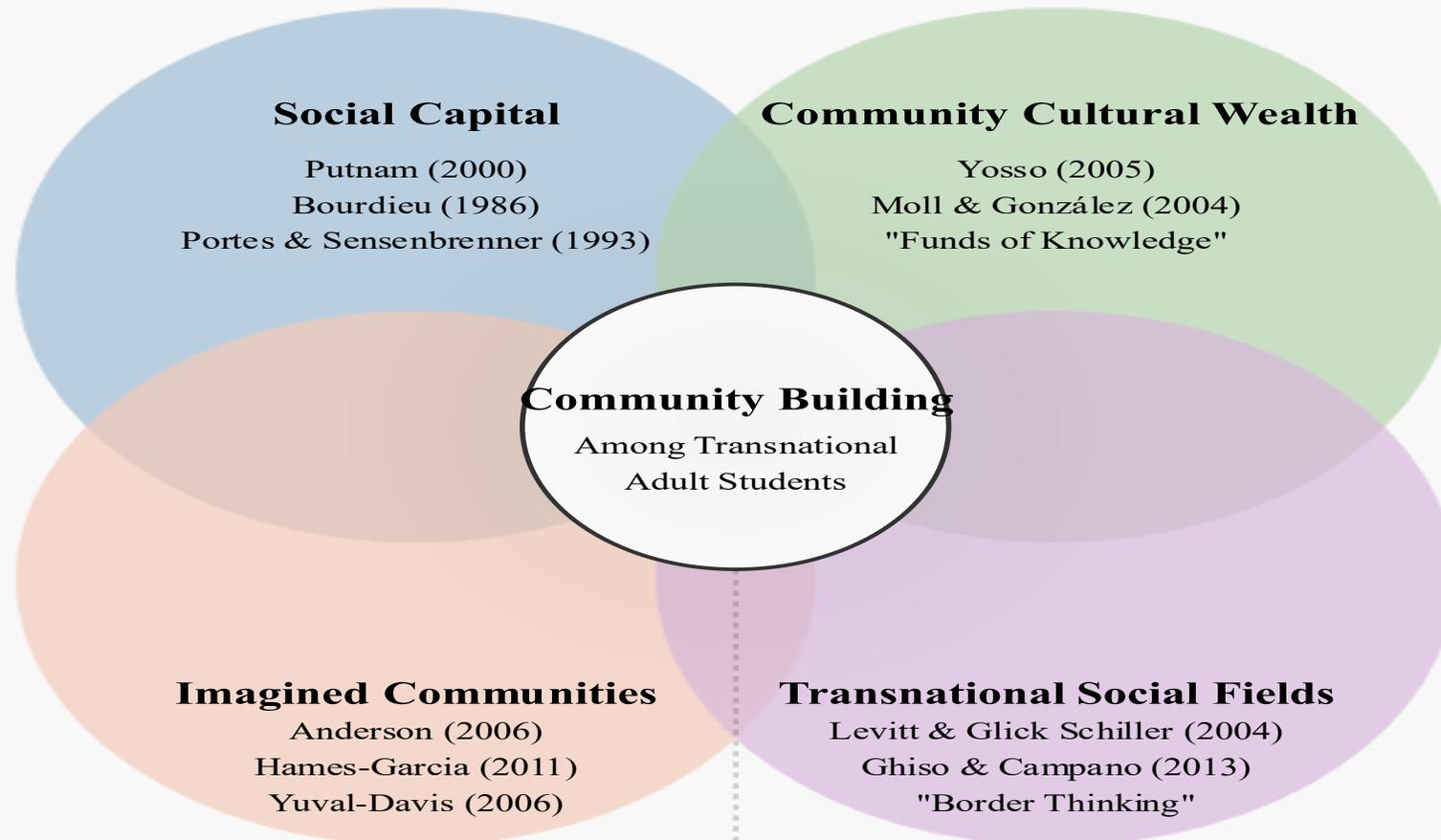
Key Concepts in Community Building for Transnational Adult Students



Word Size:

Based on frequency in interview data

Conceptual Framework



Critical Perspectives

Mignolo (2011)

Apple (2013)

Andreotti (2011)

Campano et al. (2013)



Benefits for Adult Education Programs - Practice

Direct Program Benefits:

- Increased student retention through stronger community bonds
- Improved learning outcomes through peer support networks
- Enhanced cross-cultural understanding among diverse student populations
- Greater program visibility and community partnerships
- More successful transitions to employment and further education

Practical Implementation Strategies:

- Create flexible learning spaces that support both formal and informal interaction
- Develop gathering areas for connections outside class times
- Consider transportation needs in program scheduling
- Design spaces for intergenerational interaction
- Leverage cultural expertise of students for program enrichment



Benefits for Adult Education Programs - Policy

Policy and Administrative Benefits:

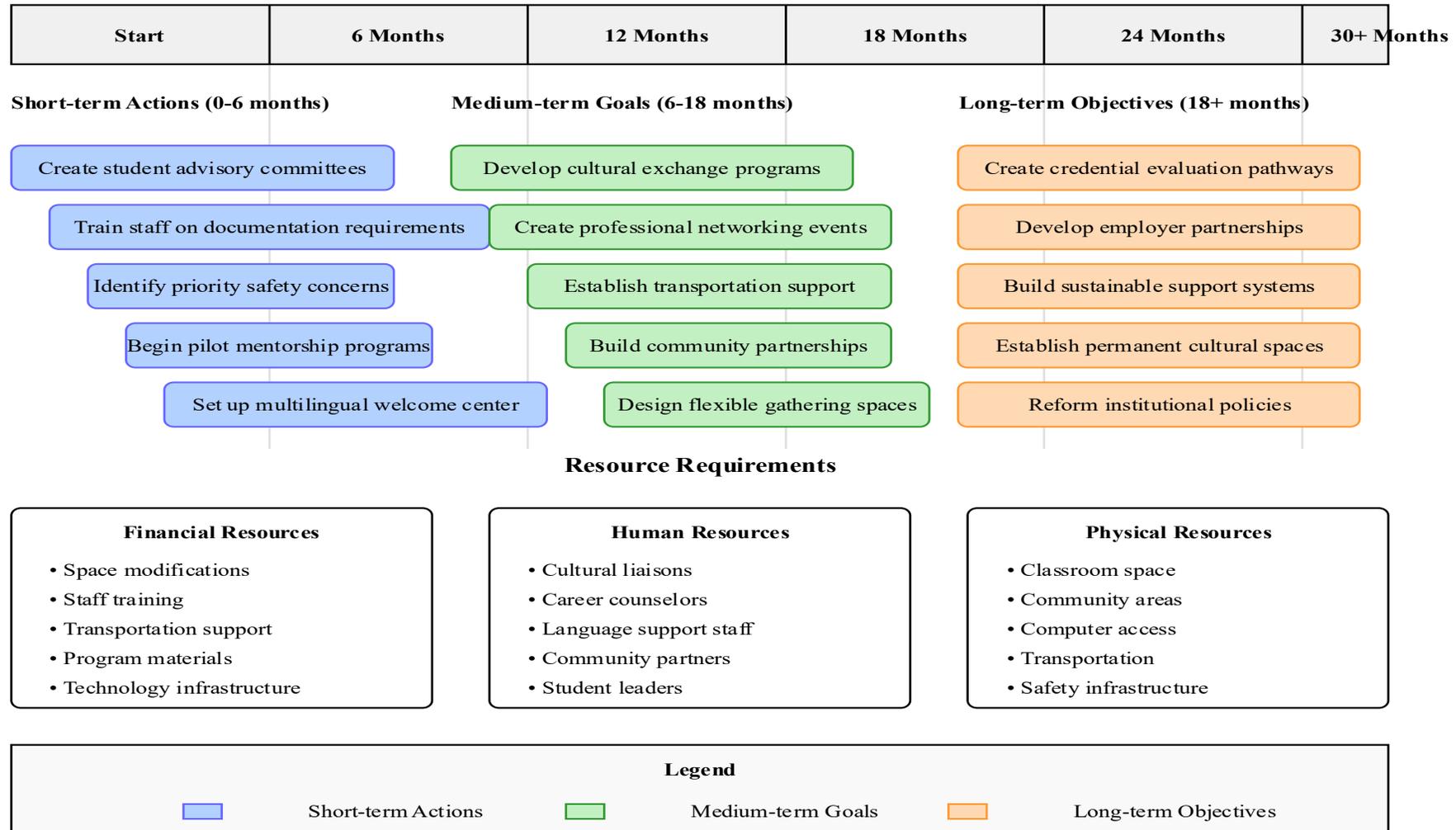
- Data-informed approach to resource allocation
- Stronger case for funding community-oriented services
- Metrics that go beyond completion to measure program success
- Framework for evaluating community impact alongside academic outcomes
- Potential reduction in costs related to student attrition

Research as a Model:

- Similar studies at other sites could:
 - Reveal site-specific community building patterns
 - Identify underutilized community resources
 - Highlight successful practices that could be shared
 - Generate student-centered program improvements
 - Build evidence base for advocacy at state and federal levels

Implementation Timeline

Figure 3: Implementation Timeline for Adult Education Program Recommendations





Return on Investment for Community Building

Quantifiable Benefits:

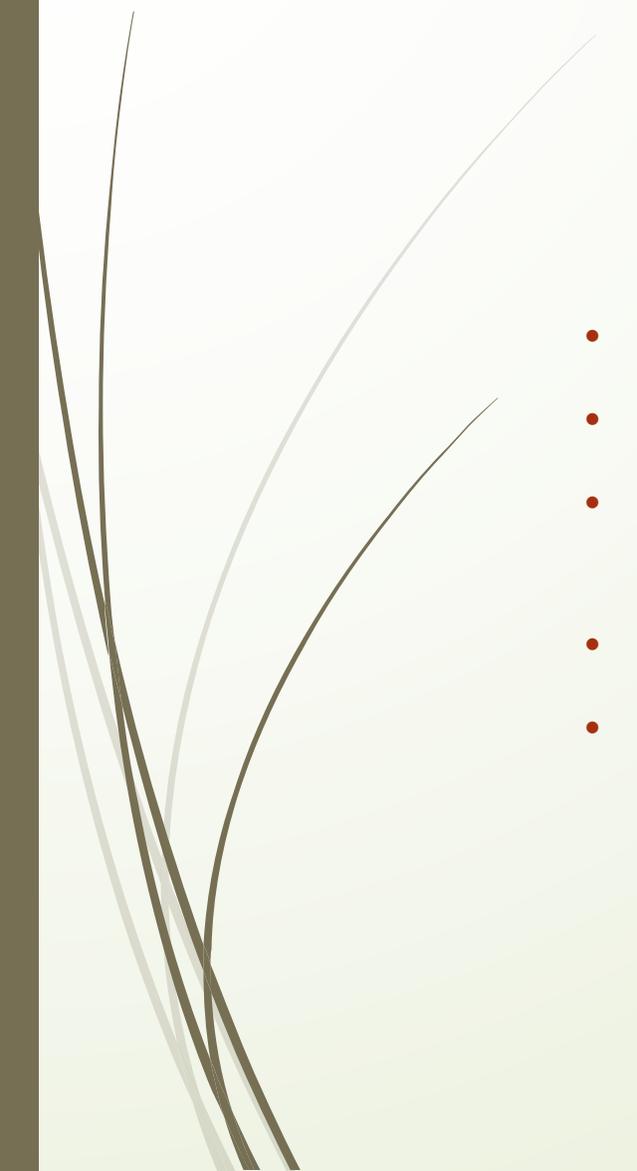
- Increased persistence rates translate to higher completion metrics
- Improved transitions to employment and further education
- Greater resource efficiency through peer support networks
- Potential multiplier effect through family and community impacts
- Reduced social service costs through stronger support networks

Qualitative Benefits:

- Enhanced sense of belonging leads to improved mental health outcomes
- Stronger civic engagement and democratic participation
- Intergenerational impacts on educational aspirations
- Development of adaptive social capital for economic mobility
- Creation of multi-cultural community assets



Conclusion



- Adult education programs have significant untapped potential as community anchors
- Participants demonstrated sophisticated strategies for community building
- Community building in adult education addresses multiple social challenges simultaneously
- This research provides both framework and practical strategies for implementation
- Quote: "By recognizing and supporting the sophisticated community-building work that transnational students already perform, adult education programs could better fulfill their promise as sites of transformation—not just for individual students, but for the broader fabric of American society."



Reflection



Thus, in talking with a naval officer who had won a target competition with big naval guns, we asked, "Have you thought what happens in a little street when one of your shells explodes, of the families torn to pieces, a thousand generations influenced when you signaled Fire?" "Of course not," he said. "Those shells travel so far that you couldn't possibly see where they land." And he was quite correct. If he could really see where they land and what they do, if he could really feel the power in his dropped hand and the waves radiating out from his gun, he would not be able to perform his function. He himself would be the weak point of his gun. But by not seeing, by insisting that it be a problem of ballistics and trajectory, he is a good gunnery officer. And he is too humble to take the responsibility for thinking. The whole structure of his world would be endangered if he permitted himself to think. The pieces must stick within their pattern or the whole thing collapses and the design is gone. We wonder whether in the present pattern the pieces are not straining to fall out of line; whether the paradoxes of our times are not finally mounting to a conclusion of ridiculousness that will make the whole structure collapse. For the paradoxes are becoming so great that leaders of people must be less and less intelligent to stand their own leadership.

John Steinbeck, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, 1951, p. 36

Questions?

