

*Advancing* **ALTELLA**  
**SNAPSHOT**

## **Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot: Get to Know Claudia Flowers**

Designing Assessments for  
Multilingual Learners with Significant  
Cognitive Disabilities

Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot No. 6

SEPTEMBER 2024

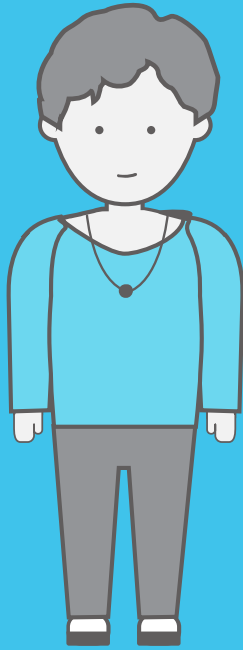
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Delis Cuéllar with Claudia Flowers  
[advancingaltella.org](http://advancingaltella.org)

### **About Advancing ALTELLA Snapshots**

The Advancing ALTELLA Snapshot is feature series. Advancing ALTELLA Snapshots are short, informative articles that highlight experts, educators, and topics of interest.





## Dr. Claudia Flowers: **THE FACTS**

### **TITLE:**

Professor of Research,  
Measurement, and  
Evaluation

### **AFFILIATION:**

University of North  
Carolina Charlotte

### **AREA OF INTEREST:**

Exploring evidence  
of technical quality  
assessments for students  
with significant cognitive  
disabilities, and evaluating  
testing accommodations

## Get to know Advancing ALTELLA Expert Claudia Flowers

Dr. Claudia Flowers is a professor at the University of North Carolina Charlotte and has over 100 publications in assessment, measurement, and applied research methods. She is interested in designing large-scale academic assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities that are accurate, informative, and accessible.

She and her expert colleagues explore questions like, “What does writing look like for students who cannot hold a pencil? What does speaking look like for students without verbal skills? What does reading look like for students with visual impairments?”

Flowers is a proponent of including a wide range of stakeholders in the creation of assessments for multilingual learners with significant cognitive disabilities. “Prioritizing what is important for the students requires bringing together special educators, English language teachers, [English language proficiency (ELP)] content experts, and parents to help provide a sound rationale for selecting the content and developing performance expectations,” she said.

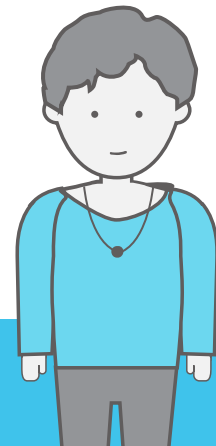
“A major challenge with assessing ELP for students with disabilities is teasing out the confounding issues of lack of English/communication skills and the impact of the disability on the student’s ability to show what they know and can do,” Flowers said. She notes that we can use research to answer this question by determining the amount of variance in student learning that can be accounted for by each of these issues.

“Thinking about how these two variables can either moderate or mediate the impact on learning allows a more sophisticated way of teasing out the effects,” Flowers explains. For example, does the student’s disability impact expressive communication for the student, which in turn impacts ELP level (mediating effect) and the effects on learning? Does the severity of the disability interact with the receptive ability in ways that impact ELP level (moderating effect)?”

Flowers believes it is imperative that we consider instruction in conjunction with large-scale assessments to improve the outcomes of multilingual learners with significant cognitive disabilities. She proclaims that multilingual learners with significant cognitive disabilities deserve “every opportunity to succeed,” in the same way as their peers who are not English learners. She also acknowledges that there is a lot of work to do. “This is a continuous process,” she states, “of improving the learning environment for students and realizing that students can do so much more than we ever expected.”

## Claudia Flowers’s recommendations for working with multilingual learners

- Set high expectations: “A common problem in the field is underestimating the students and setting low expectations. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard teachers say they were surprised their student could learn challenging academic content.”
- Teach a wide variety of skills: “Another assumption is students should not advance to higher level skills until they master earlier skills. This typically results in students doing the same thing over and over again. Given some of the splinter skills that students with significant cognitive disabilities have, it is important to keep teaching a wide variety of skills.”
- Seek information on student communication at home: “We need to understand how the student communicates at home. It might provide insight into any communication difficulties – for example, if the student can follow directions at home and has expressive and interpretive skills at home in their native language, the lack of English proficiency could be interfering with the student’s ability to engage in the learning process.”



## Learn more: Claudia Flower’s suggested resources

- The [Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing](#) (2014 edition) provides the gold standards for assessment practices.
- The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Center for Assessment produce [white papers and presentations](#) that inform stakeholders about what is happening in the field.
- The [Handbook of Accessible Instruction and Testing Practices](#) brings together national experts to write about current instructional and testing practices.
- [Accessible Teaching, Learning, and Assessment \(ATLAS\)](#) at the University of Kansas conducts high-quality research that examines accessible teaching, learning, and assessment systems.

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