



KNOWING OUR STUDENTS

Adult Learners

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	2
Supporting Adult Learners	3
What Is: A Closer Look at the Student Experience	4
Listening to Student Stories.....	4
Ashley Ardis.....	4
Jenae Parker	4
Commonly Encountered Barriers.....	5
Structural Barriers.....	5
Policy and Process Barriers	7
Cultural/Attitudinal Barriers	8
What Works: Strategies To Address Adult Learners' Challenges	9
What Wows: Effective Approaches Implemented in the Field	10
Finger Lakes Community College (New York): HyFlex Course Format	10
Cuyahoga Community College (Ohio): Flexible Eight-Week Programs	11
Recommendations and Implementation	12
Understanding the Adult Learner Population.....	12
Holistic Student Supports	12
Flexible Learning Opportunities	15
Family and Work Support	16
Simplified College Policies and Procedures	17
Enhancing Community Partnerships	18
Conclusion.....	19
Acknowledgements	20
References and Resources	21



INTRODUCTION

Achieving the Dream's Guide [**Knowing Our Students: Understanding and Designing for Success**](#) provides critical information and strategies to help colleges understand the diverse students they serve and provides tools to organize this important work on campuses.

The purpose of the supplemental guides is to highlight the importance of population-specific challenges on college campuses. This guide identifies challenges and barriers emphasized by adult learners during interviews or described in literature and shares recommendations from the field for this population as well as examples of colleges that are serving their adult learners well.

These supplemental guides are organized into sections that leverage the **student-centered design process**, referenced in the original guide, to help colleges fully understand the challenges and to focus on designing processes that support student populations who have been historically marginalized or have not been prioritized, such as adult learners.

These guides also integrate the **framework for change** concepts — the structures, processes, and attitudes that sometimes create barriers for students. This framework helps colleges design student-centered and equitable structures, policies, and processes to serve their students better.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide on adult learners begins with a discussion about who adult learners are, the importance of a comprehensive approach in understanding an adult learner population, specific challenges that adult learners face, and general strategies for combatting these challenges.

We profile an adult learner at Central Carolina Technical College (South Carolina) and another who returned to postsecondary education at Columbus State Community College (Ohio). We then present two case studies of community colleges doing dynamic work with adult learners: Finger Lakes Community College (New York) and Cuyahoga Community College (Ohio). The guide concludes with specific recommendations for community colleges looking to begin or expand their work serving adult learners.



SUPPORTING ADULT LEARNERS

Adult learners in the United States span a diverse group and are often first-generation or economically marginalized individuals who pursue higher education later in life while balancing multiple responsibilities such as work, family, and personal commitments. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), adult learners compose a significant portion of community college enrollment. Over 1.4 million adult learners attended community colleges in fall 2021, with one-third of those students 25–29 years of age. The other two-thirds consisted of students age 30 and older (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Adult learners represent a growing demographic within higher education, with many seeking to improve their skills, advance their careers, pursue career changes, or fulfill personal aspirations. The National Student Clearinghouse reports that the “Some College, No Credential” (SCNC) population is approximately 40.4 million students nationwide (Causey et al., 2023). The report also posits that “Community colleges are the most common type of institution of last enrollment, reenrollment, and first credential attainment for SCNC students.”

Disruptions to the U.S. labor market and economy as well as widening gaps in education, income, and wealth outcomes — all exacerbated by the COVID pandemic — have heightened the need for postsecondary systems designed to meet the needs of adult learners so that more adults can acquire postsecondary credentials with value in the labor market (Geary, 2022). At present, almost 90 million adults in the United States are without a postsecondary credential, including approximately

40 million, or 45%, who started but have not completed a credential (Merisotis, 2020).

An adult learner's decision to return to college is often multifaceted and influenced by various personal, professional, and educational factors. Adult learners often possess a strong intrinsic motivation to pursue further education, driven by personal and professional goals, aspirations for career advancement, or a desire for personal growth. Adults have accumulated life experience,

skills, and knowledge through their work, family, and personal experiences, which can enrich classroom discussions, provide real-world context to academic concepts, and contribute to a diverse learning environment.

Despite these many benefits, the decision to return to college has its challenges. Factors such as family obligations, work, financial and time constraints, academic proficiency, career goals,

and overall doubt about the ability to complete a degree program must be considered.

Success rates of adult learners depend on addressing their unique challenges to promote equity and access to education, as these students often face barriers different from those of traditionally aged college students. Supporting adult learners aligns with broader societal goals of workforce development, upward mobility, and lifelong learning. By recognizing the distinct needs and experiences of adult learners and implementing targeted strategies to support their educational goals, institutions can enhance educational outcomes and contribute to the overall well-being and success of these students.

Adult learners represent a growing demographic within higher education, with many seeking to improve their skills, advance their careers, pursue career changes, or fulfill personal aspirations.



WHAT IS: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

There are various approaches to understanding the adult learner experience. Institutions can look at quantitative data on student identities, experiences, outcomes, and progression. They can also leverage qualitative data, acquired through interviews and focus groups, to provide a fuller understanding of their goals, strengths, and needs (both academic and personal).

Engaging and elevating the student voice is critical to an accurate understanding of the student experience. Sections III and IV of the *Knowing Our Students Guide* provide strategies and tools for colleges to use in pursuit of a richer understanding of their students that will set them up for a successful design process.

nursing but paused her education to support her sister. She is determined to not only complete her degree but also help others in her community realize they can achieve their goals.

“You can choose to let your past and hardships define you, or you can choose to be the hero of your own story.”

— Ashley Ardis

Watch Ashley read her [“I Am From”](#) poem at ATD’s DREAM 2024 conference:

Ashley states, “I have this opportunity thanks to a college who treats me [as] more than just a number and works around my schedule, realizing that not every college student has the luxury of just worrying about their degree.”

Ashley’s positive outlook on life and a strong sense of determination push her to help women, particularly single mothers, see their potential and strength. Ashley is the definition of resilience;

she now works more than 60 hours a week, while attending school full-time, to support herself and her daughter.

Listening to Student Stories Ashley Ardis

Ashley Ardis graduated high school in 2001. She is a first-generation college student. Ashley had to initially stop out of college and take on two jobs to support her family. After many years, she was finally able to begin again as a single mother reentry student and adult learner, and she is now, at the time of publication, finishing an accounting certification at Central Carolina Technical College (South Carolina). Ashley plans to open her accounting firm specializing in helping small women-owned businesses.

Despite facing setbacks throughout her educational journey, Ashley sees herself as a survivor rather than a victim. She originally studied

Jenae Parker

Jenae Parker is a first-generation college graduate who is a master’s student at Western Governors University studying human resources management. Prior to returning to college, Jenae was a single mother, working full-time. She was also taking care of her two younger brothers due to the untimely death of her mother. When she decided to resume her college studies, she struggled to navigate child care and applied for state assistance to cover child care expenses as a student at Columbus State Community College (CSCC) in Ohio. She is also an adult learner and mother who works full-time for Achieving the Dream in its human resources department.



By securing parenting student housing and student services, such as tutoring and professional leadership development, Jenae was able to complete her A.A.S. in human resource management and business administration at CSCC and go on to complete her B.S. in human resource management at Franklin University. As an adult learner, Jenae's professional network and the supportive community partners in Columbus helped her achieve her dream of obtaining a degree and becoming gainfully employed in the human resources field.

"Education has exposed me to opportunities I had never imagined for myself, redirecting the trajectory of my life path. I am a firm believer that all things are possible through education, determination, and support. My legacy encompasses my educational journey, one that I am extremely proud of, as I am setting an example and providing guidance for my children, family, and community."

— Jenae Parker

(CCCSE) highlights these struggles, revealing that many community college students lack

crucial information about their chosen fields (Weissman, 2024). According to the survey conducted in spring 2023, 42% of students reported that their colleges taught them "very little" or "not at all" about in-demand jobs in their regions. Furthermore, 46% of students indicated that their college provided them with little to no information about the average earnings in their chosen careers.

These limitations in advising and support services can impact the

colleges' ability to effectively serve adult learners, potentially affecting retention rates and academic performance.

Commonly Encountered Barriers

Structural Barriers

ADVISING AND SUPPORT SERVICES TAILORED TO ADULT LEARNERS

Adult learners in community college have specific desires for career and pathways advising that address their unique circumstances. They seek holistic career counseling that goes beyond course selection, providing guidance on long-term career planning and academic programs that support their goals. Adult learners also want access to labor market data, job demand, and salary information for their perspective fields.

Colleges strive to adapt their approaches but encounter difficulties in implementing effective advising on career pathways, academic programs, job demand, and salary prospects for their students. A recent report from the Center for Community College Student Engagement

FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS

Adult learners seek information about flexible pathways with multiple entry and exit points, allowing them to progress through various levels of education and employment opportunities. Community colleges face challenges in implementing flexible pathways with multiple entry and exit points for adult learners. Designing curricula that allow for seamless transitions between noncredit and credit courses, as well as between different levels of education and employment opportunities, is complex and resource intensive. Colleges must constantly update their offerings to align with rapidly evolving industry needs and labor market demands, which can strain faculty expertise and institutional resources. Creating articulation agreements between institutions to facilitate smooth transfers and credit recognition adds another layer of



complexity. Additionally, effectively communicating these flexible options to adult learners and providing the necessary support services to guide them through these pathways can be challenging, especially with limited resources.

ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL LITERACY SUPPORTS

Many adult students enter community college programs needing support to gain critical digital literacy skills. When it comes to adult education practitioners, a one-size-fits-all approach does not support adult learners. There are institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers that working learners face in gaining skills. The digital literacy gap presents a unique struggle for community colleges, as they must address both the academic needs and the technological proficiency of their adult learner populations.

One challenge is the limited access to technological resources and infrastructure. Some community colleges rely on a single person for all their IT needs, regardless of that person's official role. This scarcity of resources can hinder

the effective integration of technology into adult education programs and limit the level of support they provide to students. Additionally, community colleges often face funding constraints that make it difficult to maintain or upgrade existing technology.

Another challenge is the digital literacy of instructors themselves. Many teachers may not possess strong digital literacy skills, making it challenging for them to effectively teach these skills to their adult students. This gap in instructor proficiency can lead to limited support for nontraditional students using technology, potentially leaving them ill-prepared to complete coursework.

The high number of adjunct professors employed by community colleges also presents a roadblock to technology adoption. These part-time instructors may have limited access to professional development opportunities or may not be as integrated into the college's technological infrastructure, further complicating efforts to provide consistent digital literacy support to adult learners.



Policy and Process Barriers

FINANCIAL AID ELIGIBILITY

Adult learners often encounter significant challenges in accessing financial aid due to eligibility criteria that are primarily designed with traditional-aged students in mind. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is an application form used by the U.S. government to determine eligibility for financial aid. This includes access to Pell Grants and other institutional aid and work study programs.

The U.S. Department of Education provides access to federal student aid for college students. Understanding the various components of this aid can be challenging. For example, eligibility, award amount, lifetime eligibility, ability to benefit, and satisfactory academic progress are all components to maintaining federal aid eligibility status. This can be difficult for adult learners who are balancing school with work, family, and other responsibilities, leading to confusion about how they maintain their aid status.

Adult learners may rely on a variety of financial aid options, including state and institutional grants, scholarships, and part-time enrollment assistance, to help cover tuition, books, and other educational expenses. These resources can support students as they balance work, family, and other responsibilities, but they may face challenges

in accessing enough aid to stay on track toward degree completion.

SATISFACTORY ACADEMIC PROGRESS POLICIES

College policies relating to satisfactory academic progress (SAP) can present significant reenrollment barriers for many community colleges that serve a diverse student population, including adult learners who often navigate complex life circumstances. According to the U.S. Department of Education's [Federal Student Aid](#) website, SAP requirements include maintaining a certain grade point average and completing a set percentage of attempted credits. Adult learners may be balancing family obligations, work, and other responsibilities while trying to maintain satisfactory academic progress.

One of the most common challenges at community colleges is communication. When information about SAP is unclear or insufficient, it can lead to confusion and frustration among students. Institutions may be providing adequate resources and guidance to help adult learners understand the requirements of satisfactory academic progress and the implications on their financial aid, but institutions may still struggle to ensure that this information reaches all adult learners effectively, as varying levels of engagement and differing life circumstances can impact how students access and process critical information.



PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCES POLICIES

Community colleges often face challenges in fully recognizing and validating the prior knowledge and experiences of adult learners. Many institutions struggle to shift from a traditional, youth-focused mindset to one that appreciates the rich life experiences and skills that adult students bring to the classroom. The evaluation of prior learning is inherently subjective and resource intensive, making it difficult to standardize across institutions. This subjectivity can lead to inconsistencies in how prior learning is assessed and credited. This can lead to a disconnect between the institution's approach and adult learners' expectations, potentially causing feelings of disengagement and delay in degree completion.

ATTENDANCE POLICIES FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Community colleges face several challenges in implementing attendance policies that accommodate the unique needs of adult learners while maintaining academic standards. Traditional attendance policies, often designed for younger, full-time students, can create barriers for adult learners who juggle multiple responsibilities, such as work and family obligations. These students may struggle with rigid class schedules, mandatory in-person attendance requirements, or policies that penalize absences without considering the complex circumstances adult learners often face.

Community colleges must navigate the delicate balance between maintaining academic rigor and providing the flexibility adult learners need to succeed. This challenge is further complicated by the need to ensure that relaxed attendance policies do not compromise the quality of education or inadvertently disadvantage other student populations. As a result, many institutions struggle to develop attendance policies that are equitable, flexible, and supportive of adult learners while still meeting accreditation standards and promoting student success.

Cultural/Attitudinal Barriers

UNDERSTANDING ADULT LEARNER NEEDS

Adult learners juggle work, family, and educational responsibilities and require tailored support to navigate through higher education. Adult learners are often compared to traditional students, which overlooks their unique life experiences and responsibilities. Stereotyped attitudes can affect how adult learners are treated and perceived in the college environment. There is also the tendency to focus on adult learner challenges instead of focusing on strengths they bring into the classroom.

SENSE OF BELONGING

A sense of belonging refers to the feeling of security and support that comes from being accepted, included, and valued as a member of a group or community. This emotional need is fundamental to human flourishing, ranking high in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and is linked to improved mental and physical health, academic engagement, and overall well-being. In higher education, a sense of belonging involves feeling connected to peers, staff, and the institution, being valued and accepted, and experiencing a sense of safety and community. For adult learners in community colleges, fostering a sense of belonging is crucial, as it can enhance their academic persistence, motivation, and success.

Community colleges face challenges in fostering this sense of belonging among adult learners. These students often have limited time on campus and fewer opportunities for social interaction, making it difficult for them to feel connected to their peers and the institution. Additionally, traditional campus activities and support services may not align with the schedules and needs of adult students, further exacerbating feelings of isolation. Addressing these challenges requires a shift in institutional culture and practices to create inclusive environments that value and support adult learners' unique experiences and contributions.



WHAT WORKS: STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS ADULT LEARNERS' CHALLENGES

A thoughtful exploration of the challenges that adult learners face in higher education poses a wide range of innovative strategies to create a more supportive and inclusive campus environment for these students. Starting with the often-difficult decision to return to college, followed by the need to navigate college processes and then to balance course loads with family responsibilities, the hurdles faced by each adult student must be met with the necessary supports to ensure their success.

Effective advising is pivotal in the decision-making process for adult learners considering a return to college. In an ideal scenario, advisors can provide personalized guidance, support, and resources to navigate the complexities of returning to college.

By understanding the learner's background, motivations, and challenges, advisors can offer individualized recommendations and strategies to facilitate informed decision-making. They can provide comprehensive information about academic options, program requirements, admissions processes, and financial aid opportunities, helping learners navigate paperwork, deadlines, and requirements. Advisors can also assist in exploring different academic pathways and program options, considering the learner's interests, career goals, and lifestyle needs to make informed choices about their educational journey. They are able to help connect learners with career pathways that lead to social and economic mobility, emphasizing opportunities for continued professional learning to advance in the workplace.



WHAT WOWS: EFFECTIVE APPROACHES IMPLEMENTED IN THE FIELD

Finger Lakes Community College (New York): HyFlex Course Format

Finger Lakes Community College (FLCC) is a small, rural institution located in upstate New York. A significant portion of its student population, 66%, consists of adult learners — students over the age of 21. However, the region presents geographical challenges that complicate in-person attendance for these learners. The lack of bridge access across local lakes and heavy snowfall can transform a typical 35-minute summer commute into a daunting 2.5-hour journey in winter.

To enhance access to courses for adult learners in rural areas, FLCC has adopted the HyFlex (Hybrid-Flexible) course format. This innovative approach offers students exceptional flexibility in how they attend classes. Here is how it works:

- **Multiple Attendance Options:** Students can choose to attend classes in person, participate online in real time, or watch recorded lectures at their convenience.
- **Flexible Participation:** Students can engage with course content, class discussions, and assignments in the way that best fits their learning style and life circumstances, whether that means

participating in real-time, contributing asynchronously, or switching between formats as needed.

- **Success Coach:** Each student participating in HyFlex courses are assigned a success coach — a dedicated point of contact who provides guidance on navigating the college's systems and services, whether virtually or in person.

Micropathways are short, focused educational programs designed to provide students with the skills and certifications needed for in-demand jobs.

The HyFlex pilot program initially focused on advanced manufacturing courses, with FLCC collaborating with local partners to donate time, space, and broadband access as course hosts. Through these partnerships, FLCC faculty deliver course content to students at various locations using FLCC technology for synchronous live learning. These collaborative efforts not only connect adult learners with employers but also create

pathways for immediate employment upon course completion through micropathways. These micropathways are short, focused educational programs designed to provide students with the skills and certifications needed for in-demand jobs. These pathways typically range from three to nine months and offer targeted training in specific fields, such as advanced manufacturing, health care, or technology.



In addition, FLCC's Growing Rural Infrastructure Together (GRIT) program provides in-person instruction at partner sites throughout the community, enabling rural learners to benefit from face-to-face learning if they choose. This innovative approach has yielded strong results, demonstrating both educational success and economic impact. Course completion for the 2022 GRIT pilot was 92%, the local economic impact due to job placement was \$ 6.3 million, and 91% of the students were employed in their desired sector within 30 days of completion.

Cuyahoga Community College (Ohio): Flexible Eight-Week Programs

Cuyahoga Community College (CCC or Tri-C), established in 1963, holds the distinction of being Ohio's first community college and is located in Cuyahoga County. Adult learners constitute a vital segment of Tri-C's student body, making up 41% of the enrollment, with 39% hailing from low-income households. Additionally, 44% identify as persons of color (BIPOC), 59% are female, and 56% are the first in their family to attend college.

However, enrollment among adult learners at Tri-C is experiencing a decline, mirroring broader trends in higher education. In the academic year 2023–2024, 56% of graduates (2,000 out of 3,550) were aged 25 or older. Notably, about half of all Tri-C students are employed while attending classes, and 75% are enrolled part-time. Among those in for-credit programs, 46% test at the developmental education level in math and English, indicating a need for additional support to meet academic requirements.

To address these challenges and enhance enrollment, Tri-C is actively working to attract more adult learners through flexible eight-week programs and initiatives aimed at removing financial barriers to entry. The college is collaborating with College Now Greater Cleveland to leverage the expertise of advisors trained to meet the unique needs of adult learners, offering free programs focused on career exploration.

In addition to these efforts, Tri-C hosts various non-credit community programs designed to equip adult learners with the skills needed for further education. These programs include career planning seminars, expungement clinics, basic computer skills training, and foundational topic sessions. Many of these offerings are specifically tailored for low-income individuals and those who may not have previously excelled in their education.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Understanding the Adult Learner Population

Achieving the Dream's *Knowing Our Students* guide is crucial for fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment, particularly for adult learners. By understanding the unique backgrounds, needs, and aspirations of adult students, institutions can tailor their programs, support services, and policies to address the specific challenges these learners face. Adult learners often juggle multiple responsibilities, including work and family obligations, which can impact their educational journey.

Understanding our students allows colleges the opportunity to identify barriers and develop strategies that promote academic success and persistence. The strategies to address the structural, policy/process-related, and cultural/attitudinal obstacles faced by adult learners can be categorized into various themes, including holistic

student supports, flexible learning opportunities, family and work support, community and belonging, and academic progress and policies. Implementing a combination of these strategies can contribute to a more supportive and inclusive environment for adult learners, enhancing their ability to succeed academically while navigating the challenges associated with parenting.

Holistic Student Supports

Dedicated Support Center: A dedicated support center for adult learners is essential in addressing their unique educational and personal needs. Such centers offer tailored academic advising that considers the specific circumstances and goals of adult students, such as career changes, family responsibilities, and previous educational experiences. Academic advisors can help adult learners navigate their academic pathways, choose appropriate courses, and create manageable schedules that accommodate their busy lives.



Mental health resources are also a key component of the center, providing counseling services to support adult learners in dealing with stress, anxiety, and the challenges of balancing multiple roles. In-person and virtual workshops and peer support groups on stress management, work-life balance, and self-care further enhance the mental well-being of these students. A welcoming environment within support centers allows adult learners to connect with peers and share experiences, fostering a sense of community and belonging. Overall, dedicated support centers play a pivotal role in empowering adult learners, helping them overcome barriers to their education and achieve their academic and career goals.

Career Advising: Early career advising is crucial for supporting adult learners as they navigate their educational and professional pathways. Working adults who choose to enroll in a certificate or degree program need clear information about earning potential upon completion. Academic and career advisors should provide adult learners with starting salaries and median wage information based on their geographic location. Advisors can provide tailored guidance that aligns with adult students' unique career goals, skills, and experiences.

Career assessments can help identify strengths and interests, enabling advisors to recommend suitable academic programs and job opportunities. Resources such as resume workshops and interview preparation sessions equip adult learners with essential skills for entering or advancing in the workforce. Networking opportunities, including job fairs and alumni connections, may facilitate relationships with potential employers and industry professionals.

Additionally, the advising process can include discussions about work-life balance and strategies for managing career commitments alongside educational pursuits. A comprehensive approach to early career advising empowers adult learners to make informed decisions and pursue fulfilling career paths while successfully balancing their academic responsibilities.

Technology and Digital Literacy Supports:

Technology and digital literacy supports are vital for empowering adult learners in today's educational landscape. Institutions can offer training on essential software and online learning platforms to enhance students' technical skills and confidence. Workshops may focus on navigating learning management systems, utilizing



productivity software, and developing online communication skills. A technology loan program for laptops and tablets provides adult learners with the necessary tools to access coursework and complete assignments. Resources such as instructional videos and online tutorials can supplement hands-on training, allowing students to learn at their own pace. Support staff should also be available to assist with technical issues and provide ongoing digital literacy resources. This comprehensive approach to technology and digital literacy supports enables adult learners to engage fully in their studies and enhances their overall academic experience.

Sense of Belonging: A sense of belonging is essential for fostering community among adult learners in higher education. Institutions can organize networking events that connect adult students with peers, alumni, and industry professionals to build relationships and share experiences. Mentorship programs pair adult learners with faculty or experienced professionals, providing guidance, support, and encouragement throughout their educational journey. Inclusion training for faculty and staff can promote awareness of the diverse experiences and challenges faced by adult learners, equipping them

with the skills to create an inclusive classroom environment. Social events, workshops, and community building activities further enhance connections among students, helping them feel valued and engaged. Resources for facilitating peer support groups encourage adult learners to connect over shared experiences and challenges. This multifaceted approach to fostering a sense of belonging empowers adult learners to thrive academically and socially, ultimately contributing to their persistence and success in higher education.

Financial Aid Support: Financial aid support is essential for helping adult learners navigate the complexities of funding their education. Institutions can develop workshops that provide comprehensive information on various financial aid options, including grants, scholarships, and loans tailored to the needs of adult students. These workshops should cover topics such as application processes, eligibility requirements, and strategies for maximizing financial aid opportunities. A dedicated financial aid navigator role can be created to offer personalized assistance, guiding adult learners through the financial aid process and addressing any questions or concerns they may have. This navigator can also help students understand their financial options and develop



budgets to manage educational expenses effectively. Additionally, resources such as online tools and informational brochures ensure that adult learners have access to essential financial aid information at their convenience. These strategies help institutions empower adult learners to pursue their educational goals with greater confidence and security.

Flexible Learning Opportunities

Scheduling and Course Flexibility: Flexible scheduling options are essential for accommodating the diverse needs of adult learners. Colleges can implement evening and weekend courses to provide students with the opportunity to attend classes outside of traditional working hours. Hybrid courses can also be offered, combining online and in-person instruction to enhance accessibility and convenience. Accelerated programs may be introduced to enable adult learners to complete their degrees more quickly, allowing them to focus on fewer courses at a time while still making progress toward graduation.

Colleges should also create a variety of course delivery methods to cater to different learning styles and schedules. This might include offering asynchronous online courses that allow students to complete coursework at their own pace. Additionally, institutions can develop cohort-based programs, where groups of students progress through a sequence of courses together, fostering a sense of community and support.

Colleges should develop year-long academic schedules that allow adult learners to develop a course schedule for an entire academic year. Balancing family and work obligations is much more challenging for students when their class schedule changes every semester.

Advising services can be expanded to help adult learners navigate course options and develop personalized academic plans that align with their individual goals and responsibilities. Data should be collected to assess student preferences and demand for various scheduling options, informing future course offerings. By prioritizing scheduling and course flexibility, colleges better support adult learners in balancing their educational pursuits with work and family obligations, ultimately enhancing their overall academic success.

Transfer Credits and Credit for Prior Learning:

Colleges can streamline the transfer credit process and establish a prior learning assessment (PLA) framework to recognize work and life

experiences. Institutions that award credit for prior learning (CPL) acknowledge the extensive knowledge that adult learners accumulate from their personal and professional lives. CPL enables these learners to apply for college credits based on experiences comparable to community college courses, including career training programs, industry credentials, certifications, military training, and exams. CPL helps adult learners save money, earn degrees faster, avoid redundant

learning, and fosters a greater sense of belonging within the academic community.

Colleges can improve credential progression and completion by implementing CPL and promoting its benefits throughout marketing/recruitment, application, and onboarding. An equity-minded CPL approach enhances access by using clear, jargon-free language, minimizing fees, and encouraging all eligible students to apply. To support adult learners — who often have limited time and need flexible options — CPL processes should eliminate unnecessary steps, clearly communicate decision criteria upfront, and offer multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge, such as tests, papers,

Balancing family and work obligations is much more challenging for students when their class schedule changes every semester.



portfolios, interviews, oral submissions, or live demonstrations.

Colleges can gather input from adult learners to evaluate the current CPL process and outreach strategy, integrating CPL into existing processes that adult learners navigate. Advisors and faculty should receive training to effectively promote CPL and utilize their time with adult learners to champion the value of CPL for these students.

Shortened Academic Terms: Shortened academic terms are condensed versions of traditional semester-length courses, typically lasting five to eight weeks instead of the standard 15 to 16 weeks. These terms are designed to allow students to focus intensively on fewer classes at a time while maintaining full-time status across the academic year. The implementation of shorter academic terms is a well-established practice in higher education. Most colleges offer classes during shorter summer terms, and many provide various short-term courses for students who need to catch up or begin their studies after the traditional semester has started.

Shortened academic terms allow adult learners more flexible options for immediate credit recovery

in the event of learning disruptions. These terms also equitably serve nontraditional learners while mitigating costs and saving time for adult students. Institutions can facilitate easier access to accelerated course options by redesigning courses for greater flexibility in selection and completion.

The redesign of the semester structure into shorter terms enables students to enroll in courses at least five times throughout the calendar year and to focus on fewer courses for shorter durations. The redesign of course offerings allows students to take a few classes each term while remaining continuously enrolled, helping part-time students stay on track and complete their programs more quickly. Leaders should be presented with a case for shortened terms, accompanied by new policies and procedures to support this initiative.

Family and Work Support

Family Responsibilities: Colleges can offer on-campus child care services to provide convenient support for adult learners with children. Institutions can also establish partnerships with local child care providers to expand options for families and ensure affordability.



Colleges can offer workshops, social events, and family-oriented activities to foster family participation and enhance a sense of belonging for students and their families. These events help adult learners connect with one another, share experiences, and build networks of support. Colleges should promote these family-friendly initiatives through effective marketing strategies to ensure that adult learners are aware of the resources available to them.

Support for family responsibilities can also extend to academic policies, such as allowing flexible attendance and participation options for adult learners who may need to balance coursework with family obligations. Institutions can provide designated family spaces on campus, offering comfortable areas for parents to study or attend meetings with their children nearby. Colleges should create a supportive environment that acknowledges the complexities of adult learners' lives and help support these students through their educational journey.

Workplace or Career Opportunities: Colleges can collaborate with local businesses to develop flexible internship and co-op programs tailored for adult learners. These partnerships create opportunities for adult students to gain practical experience while accommodating their academic schedules. Institutions can also provide workshops

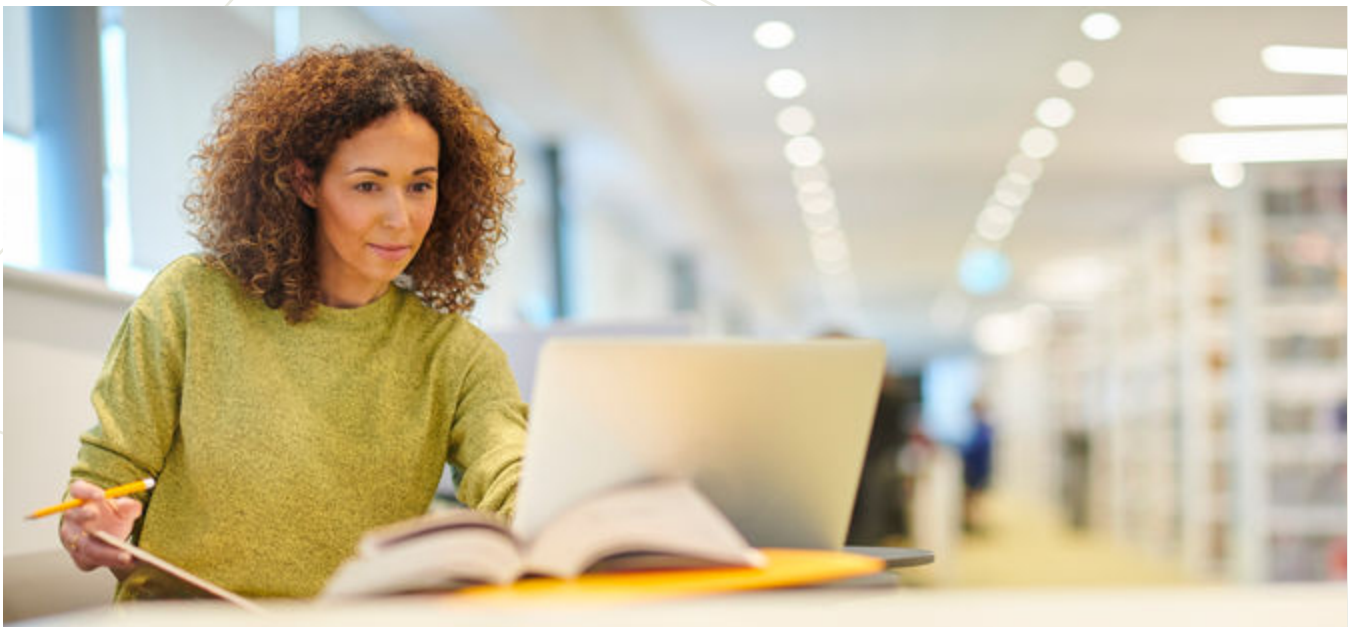
focused on balancing work and school, equipping adult learners with strategies to manage their dual responsibilities effectively.

Workshops should cover topics such as time management, stress reduction, and effective communication with employers about academic commitments. Colleges can invite local employers to participate in these workshops, fostering a dialogue that highlights the needs and challenges faced by adult learners in the workplace.

Mentorship programs connect adult learners with professionals in their fields, offering guidance and support as they navigate their careers while pursuing education. These flexible work arrangements and career exploration opportunities help adult learners integrate their educational and professional goals.

Simplified College Policies and Procedures

Simplified Admissions Processes: Colleges can simplify admissions processes to make them more accessible for adult learners. For example, institutions can streamline application forms by reducing unnecessary steps and clearly outlining required materials, making the application experience more student friendly.



An online application system allows adult learners to submit their applications easily and track their progress in real-time. Additionally, institutions should provide clear guidelines and resources to help adult learners understand admission requirements and deadlines, minimizing confusion and anxiety during the process.

Dedicated admissions counselors who are specifically trained to assist adult learners provide personalized guidance and address any concerns or questions. Workshops and information sessions should be organized to educate potential students about the admissions process and financial aid options available to them.

Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) Policies:

Colleges can review and revise Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) policies to better accommodate the unique challenges faced by adult learners. Additionally, institutions should conduct assessments to identify specific barriers that adult learners encounter, ensuring that policies reflect their needs and circumstances.

Colleges can implement an asset-based program that provides additional resources and guidance for adult learners who may be struggling to meet SAP requirements. This program can include regular check-ins with academic advisors, allowing for ongoing support and personalized strategies to help students stay on track.

Advisors can offer tailored interventions, such as academic tutoring, time management workshops, or referrals to mental health resources, to assist adult learners in overcoming challenges. Institutions should also create clear communication channels to ensure that adult learners are fully informed about SAP expectations and any available support services.

Advisors can offer tailored interventions, such as academic tutoring, time management workshops, or referrals to mental health resources, to assist adult learners in overcoming challenges.

Enhancing Community Partnerships

Collaborative Workforce Development: Colleges can form partnerships with local businesses and industries to develop workforce training programs tailored to the needs of adult learners.

These collaborations can lead to internships, apprenticeships, and job placement opportunities, ensuring that adult students gain relevant skills while having access to employment resources. Engaging with employers also helps institutions align academic programs with market demands, enhancing the employability of graduates.

Integrated Support Services:

Institutions should partner with community organizations, nonprofits, and social service agencies to provide holistic support services for adult learners. Such services may include access to child care, transportation assistance, financial counseling, and mental health resources. By creating a network of support, colleges address the diverse challenges adult learners face and foster a more conducive environment for academic success.

Community Engagement and Outreach: Colleges should strengthen ties with local communities through outreach programs that promote education and lifelong learning. Institutions can organize workshops, informational sessions, and community events that highlight the benefits of higher education for adult learners. Engaging community members helps demystify the college experience, reduces stigma, and encourages more individuals to pursue their educational goals.



CONCLUSION

Adult learners bring a wealth of experience and determination to their educational journeys. Many adult learners are motivated by a desire to set a positive example for their families and demonstrate that pursuing education is a worthwhile investment in their future. This commitment to personal and professional growth while navigating responsibilities fosters resilience and a strong sense of purpose. Adult learners can also benefit from connecting with supportive networks that understand their unique challenges and celebrate their achievements. By sharing their experiences,

they can inspire others and create a sense of community among fellow students. Emphasizing these strengths and cultivating supportive environments within the academic community enhance adult learners' self-esteem and motivation, ultimately leading to greater persistence and satisfaction in their educational pursuits. Recognizing and valuing the diverse paths that adult learners take enriches the academic experience for everyone and underscores the importance of their contributions to the educational landscape.

Emphasizing these strengths and cultivating supportive environments within the academic community enhances adult learners' self-esteem and motivation, ultimately leading to greater persistence and satisfaction in their educational pursuits.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The *Knowing Our Students: Adult Learners* guide is the culmination of a collaborative effort, and we would like to express our sincere appreciation to everyone who played a role in its development. We are especially grateful to our partners at the Advising Success Network for their unwavering support and commitment to improving the experiences and outcomes of adult learners.

Our deepest thanks go to Elizabeth Fischer and Dr. Paula Pitcher, with gratitude to Julia Lawton for her support. Their collective expertise and passion for adult education have shaped this valuable resource for colleges, highlighting the unique needs and challenges of adult learners and offering thoughtful, practical strategies to help institutions better serve this growing student population. We would like to thank Dr. Monica Parrish Trent, Dr. Mike Buccilli, and Paula Talley for reviewing this guide and providing invaluable feedback.

We also extend our appreciation to our adult learners, Ashley Ardis and Jenae Parker, who shared their stories with us as a reminder of the importance of this work.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the many advisors, faculty, and staff, particularly those at Cuyahoga Community College (Ohio) and Finger Lakes Community College (New York). Their stories and perspectives have been vital in ensuring that this guide remains grounded in the real-life challenges faced by adult learners.

To everyone involved, thank you for your dedication to promoting equity and access for adult learners. Your efforts have made this guide a powerful tool for colleges working to create inclusive, student-centered environments that support adult learners in achieving their academic and career goals.

ABOUT THE ADVISING SUCCESS NETWORK

Formed in 2018, the Advising Success Network is a dynamic network of national organizations partnering to support institutions through a holistic approach to advising redesign that supports students' personal, academic, and career goals. The network addresses the multifaceted needs of colleges and universities to design a meaningful student experience and improve institutional retention and completion rates for Black, Latinx/a/o, Indigenous, Asian, Pacific Islander, and poverty-affected students.

The Advising Success Network would like to thank the many staff and coaches at Achieving the Dream who contributed to the development of this guide. In particular, we would like to thank the writers of the guide: Dr. Paula Pitcher, and Elizabeth Fischer. Most importantly, we are grateful to the students who shared their stories and the many institutions who are featured in this guide, not only for their willingness to share their expertise, but also for the tireless work they do for their students.

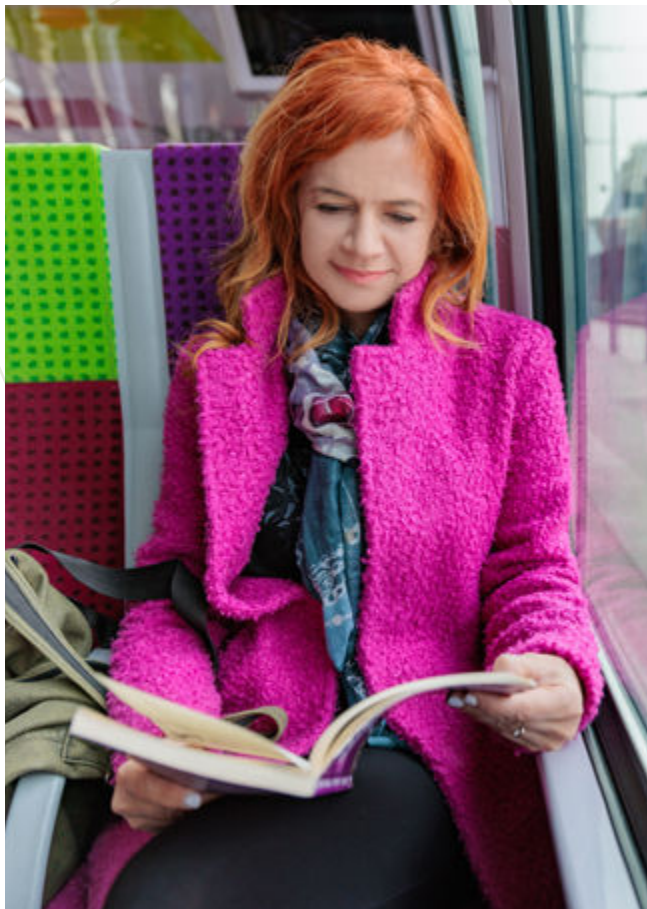


REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Achieving the Dream. (n.d.) *The Strategy Hub*. Retrieved from <https://strategyhub.achievingthedream.org/>

Allen, K. et al. (2024, April). Belonging in higher education: A twenty year systemic review. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 21(05). Retrieved from <https://open-publishing.org/journals/index.php/jutlp/article/view/767>

Causey, J., Gardner, A., Pevitz, A., Ryu, M., & Shapiro, D. (2023, April). Some college, no credential student outcomes: Annual progress report – Academic year 2021/22. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Retrieved from <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCNCReport2023.pdf>



Drekmeier, K., Sorrells, Mark., A. (2023, April). Community colleges face a crisis. Are former students the answer? *Community College Daily*. Retrieved from <https://www.ccdaily.com/2023/04/community-colleges-face-a-crisis-are-former-students-the-answer/>

Geary, C. (2022). Community college enrollment declines threaten to worsen educational inequity. *New America*. Retrieved from <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/community-college-enrollment/>

Geary, C. (2023). Bringing adults back to community college playbook: Strategies and recommendations to increase adult enrollment. *New America*. Retrieved from <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/bringing-adults-back-a-playbook-for-community-colleges/>

Geary, C. (2023). How community colleges can bring adults back to campus. *ACCT Now*. Retrieved from <https://perspectives.acct.org/stories/how-community-colleges-can-bring-adults-back>

Merisotis, J. (2020, September 15). A 'closing argument' for the national goal of 60% of adults having more than a high school diploma by 2025. *Lumina Foundation*. Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/a-closing-argument-for-the-national-goal-of-60-of-adults-having-more-than-a-high-school-diploma-by-2025/>

Sloane, T. (2023). Distributed learning The GRIT model: Growing rural infrastructure together. [Adult-friendly schedules and program delivery breakout session]. Finger Lakes Community College. Adult Learner Success Summit. Achieving the Dream. Retrieved from [Adult-Friendly Schedules and Program Delivery](#)



Success Center and Foundation for California Community Colleges (n.d.). Pathways to careers: A toolkit inspired by a California Community Colleges community of practice. Retrieved from <https://foundationccc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Building-Equitable-Pathways-to-Careers-Toolkit-1.pdf>

Sualehi, S. (2023, September). (Some) adults left behind: Digital literacy and the working learner. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2023(179). Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ace.20503>

Tuset, M. (2022, November). Overcoming barriers for adult learners. *Cael Pathways Blog*. Retrieved from <https://www.cael.org/resouces/pathways-blog/overcoming-barriers-for-adult-learners>

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Staying eligible. Federal Student Aid. Retrieved from <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/eligibility/staying-eligible>

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Trend Generator [How many students ages 25 and over enroll in postsecondary institutions in the fall?] Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/TrendGenerator/app/answer/2/8?f=1%3D4>

Weissman, S. (2024). Survey finds community college students need better career preparation. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/institutions/community-colleges/2024/04/24/report-community-college-students-need-more-career>

Whissemore, T. (2024). Helping adult learners re-enroll. *Community College Daily*. American Association of Community Colleges. Retrieved from <https://www.ccdaily.com/2024/04/helping-adult-learners-re-enroll/>





Achieving the Dream (ATD) is a partner and champion of more than 300 community colleges across the country. Drawing on our expert coaches, groundbreaking programs, and national peer network, we provide institutions with integrated, tailored support for every aspect of their work — from foundational capacities such as leadership, data, and equity to intentional strategies for supporting students holistically, building K–12 partnerships, and more. We call this Whole College Transformation. Our vision is for every college to be a catalyst for equitable and economically vibrant communities. We know that with the right partner and the right approach, colleges can drive access, completion rates, and employment outcomes — so that all students can access life-changing learning that propels them into community-changing careers.

LEARN MORE ABOUT ACHIEVING THE DREAM, INC.

Visit www.AchievingtheDream.org

Or contact us at info@AchievingtheDream.org or (240) 450-0075

Follow us on X [@AchieveTheDream](https://twitter.com/AchieveTheDream)