

Shasta College's ACE Program: Scaling a Successful Pilot To Serve Adult Learners



Context and Rationale

Shasta College launched the Accelerated College Education (ACE) program in 2016 to better serve adult learners returning to higher education. The college's service region includes a higher-than-national-average share of adults over age 25 who have some college but no degree. College leaders recognized that traditional academic structures, fixed schedules, limited flexibility, and fragmented support, did not align with the realities of working adults balancing jobs, caregiving, and school. With few other postsecondary options in the region, Shasta committed to creating a student-centered pathway that would enable adults to return, persist, and complete their degrees at Shasta College.

ACE began as a small pilot serving 50 students, designed to test whether accelerated pacing paired with proactive support could improve access, persistence, and completion among adult learners. Early demand was strong, signaling unmet need, but implementation revealed structural challenges that limited scalability and consistency. These conditions prompted a redesign of the academic model to better align and scale instructional delivery, financial aid processes, and student support with adult learner needs.



COLLEGE PROFILE

Classification: Two-year, midsize, suburban

**Total undergraduate enrollment
fall 2023: 8,081**

Faculty union: Yes

Scope and Design Decisions

The original ACE model featured students taking two courses at a time, one online and one in person, at the same time each week. While this format offered flexibility, it also created operational and instructional challenges, including faculty scheduling variability, financial aid misalignment, and rigid course sequencing that limited student choice.

To address these issues, Shasta transitioned to a block model with two eight-week blocks per semester, separated by a one-week break.

What changed:

- Continuous enrollment was replaced with predictable eight-week blocks
- Course scheduling was standardized to support faculty workload and student planning
- The academic calendar was aligned with financial aid cycles, reducing manual processing
- Students were able to take two courses per block and maintain momentum toward timely completion



What deliberately did not change:

- The program's focus on adult learners remained central.
- High-touch, proactive student support continued to anchor the model.
- Academic rigor and pathway coherence were preserved through data-informed course decisions.

Today, ACE supports more than 250 students across multiple pathways, including business, psychology, sociology, early childhood education, and health information technology.



Leadership and Cross-Functional Coordination

ACE was developed and sustained through shared leadership across academic and student support divisions. A cross-functional team of deans, faculty, advisors, and support staff designed, refined, and scaled the program.

Key features of this coordination included:

- A dedicated counselor and student success coordinator providing end-to-end case management
- Strong alignment between instructional planning and student services
- Ongoing collaboration with institutional research to assess outcomes and inform adjustments

Support services extend beyond academics to include financial aid and registration assistance, SAP appeals, connections to tutoring, mental health referrals, and connections to wraparound resources. This integrated structure enabled the college to address barriers proactively and holistically rather than reactively.



Instructional and Student Support Implications

The ACE model required faculty and staff to adopt more intentional, relationship-centered practices. Faculty were selected not only for content expertise but also for their ability to engage adult learners and to support accelerated learning environments.

Instructional and support shifts included:

- Professional development focused on instructional rigor, equity-minded pedagogy, and workload management in accelerated terms.
- Use of student performance data to determine appropriate course length, with some high-demand or high-risk courses (e.g., statistics, human biology) offered in full-term formats.
- Expansion of general education offerings in eight-week formats across multiple disciplines, reflecting growing faculty buy-in.



Student-facing staff adopted a proactive, high-touch approach, monitoring registration daily, conducting personalized outreach to hundreds of students each term, and meeting with students during nontraditional hours, including brief work breaks. These practices reinforced belonging and reduced the likelihood of disengagement.

Operational and Systems Alignment

Operational alignment was critical to the successful scaling of ACE. The college implemented several system-level strategies to create a predictable and navigable experience for adult learners:

- For the small number of courses with a synchronous component, courses are offered in consistent evening hybrid schedules (e.g., Tuesday/Thursday), allowing students to plan around work and family responsibilities.
- Students typically enroll in two courses per block and are encouraged to attend summer sessions, supporting degree completion within 24 months.
- A long-term planning tool helps students visualize individualized course sequences and timelines.
- Staff monitor enrollment daily and intervene early to sustain momentum.



These operational choices reduced uncertainty, increased persistence, and allowed students to focus on learning rather than logistics.

Communication and Change Messaging

ACE's growth has been supported by intentional, student-centered communication. Rather than emphasizing speed or acceleration alone, messaging emphasized consistency, connection, and responsiveness, values that resonate strongly with adult learners.

Key communication strategies included:

- Regular, predictable outreach each term to reinforce belonging and provide timely updates
- Transparent communication about early challenges and subsequent shifts to the eight-week model, framed as direct responses to student feedback
- Relationship-driven recruitment and advising conversations that positioned ACE as a supportive learning community rather than an alternative or remedial pathway

This transparency helped build credibility and trust, reinforcing ACE's identity as an adaptive, student-responsive program.

What Practitioners Should Notice

Shasta's ACE program offers several lessons for institutions designing accelerated models for adult learners:

- **Start small and iterate:** Piloting allowed the college to identify constraints and assess and refine the model before scaling.
- **Align calendars with financial aid:** Misalignment creates barriers to persistence; predictable block scheduling supports stability.
- **Predictability drives success:** Consistent schedules reduce cognitive and logistical load for working adults.
- **Case management builds belonging:** High-touch, personalized support helps students navigate both academic and life challenges.
- **Flexibility must be intentional:** Data-informed decisions about course length and modality improve outcomes.
- **Faculty development must evolve:** As accelerated models grow, ongoing professional learning is essential to ensure instructional consistency and equity.

