Equity in Action: Reconnecting Adult Learners to Community Colleges in North Carolina

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As part of the myFutureNC initiative, the state of North Carolina has a goal of ensuring two million North Carolinians receive a high-quality post-secondary degree or credential by 2030. Intentionally engaging adult learners, particularly those from historically and systemically underserved communities at North Carolina community colleges, will not only help the state move toward this goal, but also create a more educated and prepared workforce for the state. This case study explores how North Carolina community colleges engage and support adult learners on their journeys to higher education in order to help community colleges become better equipped to serve adult learners. Our findings highlight strengths, opportunities, and challenges involved in five pilot institutions' efforts to recruit and retain adult learners, including opportunities to approach adult learners through an equity-minded lens and use success coaches to support this unique population. We conclude with practical recommendations for community college stakeholders and researchers.

Keywords: adult learners; equity; community college; reconnect program

Adult learners currently represent 40% of higher education's student population (Achieving the Dream, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Often defined as college students over the age of 25, adult learners also include those who attend part-time, are financially independent, and/or those who did not enroll in a post-secondary degree program immediately following high school (Panacci, 2015). These adult learners juggle multiple roles while attending college, including employee, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and/or community member (Iloh, 2019). With these competing interests, adult learners historically have lower graduation rates than students who enrolled

in community college right out of high school (Markle, 2015). Regardless of when and how they enter college, adult learners are a diverse group from various backgrounds and walks of life who can succeed if afforded the right opportunities and support systems throughout their college journeys.

While some community colleges already view adult learners as significant to their campus environments, other campuses are now starting to see the tremendous value in recruiting adult learners. First, with the decline of birth rates in the United States (Gawe, 2021), all colleges will face enrollment declines in students ages 18–24, making adult learners an important population to target. Second, some institutions already recognize how engaging adult learners from various racial (i.e., Black and Latin* students), socioeconomic (i.e., low-income and working-class students), and geographical (i.e., rural, urban, suburban) contexts is equity work in action (Smith Morest, 2013). Campuses that encourage adult learners from all backgrounds to complete a post-secondary degree or credential present a significant opportunity to create a more educated workforce able to meet the needs of the coming decades, particularly in the state of North Carolina (Nichols & Barger, 2021).

In North Carolina, myFutureNC, a statewide nonprofit organization created by leaders in education, business, and government, developed an ambitious goal to ensure 2 million North Carolinians have a high-quality post-secondary degree or credential by 2030. The

vision is to aid in boosting attainment rates, closing historical equity gaps, and ensuring the state remains economically competitive (myFutureNC, 2021). Engaging adult learners at community colleges is critical to reaching this goal.

Reconnect Programs Across the Country

Historically, reconnect programs are free-college or scholarship programs that aim to enroll adult learners in community colleges to increase post-secondary attainment amongst adult learners (Collom et al., 2021). Several states, including Tennessee, Washington, Michigan, and Ohio, have instituted reconnect programs specifically for adult learners to ensure pursuing or returning to college is attainable and cost-effective. Starting in fall 2018, the Tennessee Reconnect (TNR) grant was launched, financially supporting eligible adult learners who enrolled in certificate and associate degree programs at one of Tennessee's community or technical colleges (Collom et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2019). Specifically, TNR is a last-dollar grant that covers eligible students' tuition and mandatory fees that have not already been funded by other federal, state, or institutional aid sources. As a result, Tennessee witnessed increases in adult-learner enrollment statewide, despite the nation's continued trend of decreased college enrollment (Collom, 2022; Collom et al., 2021). In their two-year longitudinal study with 23 TNR grant recipients, Collom and colleagues (2021) learned that access to

the TNR sparked an interest in college and increase in college education aspiration among adult learners. They also observed that it improved the college-going structure of adult learners' families. From a financial standpoint, the TNR also alleviated the financial barriers that caused participants to leave college during their first and second attempts. However, this study did reveal that, while last-dollar grant programs like the TNR do help financially, barriers to campus connection and struggles to adapt to college life still persist.

A program similar to the TNR, Michigan's Reconnect (MIR), launched in spring 2021 to increase the number of working-age adults with credentials or a degree (Quealy, 2021). The MIR provides free-tuition scholarships to adult learners enrolled in a degree or Pell-eligible skill certificate program. However, outcomes data and scholarship on the impacts of Michigan and other states' reconnect programs remain scarce due to many of them being institutionalized within the last two to three years.

NC Reconnect

To support myFutureNC's goal, the John M. Belk Endowment (JMBE, 2022)—a leading philanthropic organization focused on preparing North Carolina's future workforce—launched the NC Reconnect program in fall 2021; this program focus on preparing North Carolina's future workforce, addressing educational inequities, and closing historical achievement gaps (Breeden et al., 2022; myFutureNC, 2022). Currently,

two cohorts of five colleges each are leading this effort with the hopes of expanding the number of colleges in future years. Beginning in July 2021, the first cohort (Cohort 1) began implementing a variety of marketing efforts to attract adult learners and brainstorming ideas to retain adult students and help them be successful throughout their educational journeys. These institutions recognized the challenges of engaging or reengaging this unique student population.

North Carolina's NC Reconnect program for Cohort 1 utilized private philanthropic dollars to fund a four-prong approach to reach out to adult learners that included: (a) direct outreach to and coaching for adult learners from InsideTrack, an educational-management and student-services coaching firm; (b) dedicated digital marketing from Crisp Communications, a leading national marketing firm; (c) cohort-based professional development from the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research and the North Carolina Community College System; and (d) mini-grants for customized programming for each college. This approach helped to identify the ambitions adult learners may have and barriers they might face prior to reenrollment. North Carolina's state-wide adult-learner initiative is a tiered approach to institute the NC Reconnect program in all 58 community colleges in the state over the next several years.

North Carolina's unique conceptualization of a reconnect program drives our work. The purpose of this study was to

gauge the impact of various initiatives implemented by the five institutions in Cohort 1 to recruit, enroll, and support adult learners at community colleges in North Carolina. One primary research question guided this work: For the community colleges engaging in the NC Reconnect Program, what are the strengths, opportunities, and challenges associated with engaging with adult learners?

Review of Literature

The section that follows includes a review of literature that provides a working definition of the term "adult learners," in addition to strategies that exist to directly support them. Next, we provide an overview of research related to new reconnect programs that engage adult learners and the impact of those programs.

Adult Learners Defined

While no sole definition completely encompasses adult learners, these students are commonly referred to as students 25 years and older pursuing higher education for the first time or returning after some time (Hagedorn, 2014; Nichols & Barger, 2021). Within this group are adult learners with a myriad of experiences and characteristics accompanying them along this journey (Van Noy & Heidkamp, 2013). For example, not all adult learners are enrolled as full-time students; many adult learners attend their institutions as part-time students. Adult learners

are also spouses, parents or guardians, employed full-time, financially independent of their parents or guardians, or a combination of the four. Furthermore, adult learners initially pursue or return to higher education for many reasons; for example, some are full-time workers looking to gain credentials for career and financial advancement and some are returning students looking to earn their associate's degree to meet their educational goals, among other scenarios (Post University, 2020).

The number of adult learners has grown exponentially over the years and currently represents 40% of the student population in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). In line with the growth of percentage of adult learners, research on adult learner success is a growing topic. Scholars have highlighted potential factors and barriers that could prevent adult learners from reaching their educational goals (Jameson & Fusco, 2014; Ritt, 2008). Adult learners may run into conflict with competing obligations, such as work and family commitments, that encroach upon the time they could dedicate to their studies. The increasing cost of attendance and possible lack of financial assistance has also proved to be a barrier to college access for adult learners, especially those who are financially independent and, therefore, must pay for their college education themselves (Ritt, 2008).

With more adult learners pursuing higher education for various reasons, community colleges have become an ideal place for adults to make significant

progress in their academic and career trajectories (Van Noy & Heidkamp, 2013). Community colleges typically have lower tuition costs, convenient locations, and flexible scheduling; all factors that favor adult learners in balancing multiple obligations, compared to universities (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Furthermore, community colleges are known to offer short-term degree and credentialing programs, making them attractive to adult learners looking to quickly gain skills before moving on to the next phase of their careers.

The Emergence of Adult Learner Reconnect and Promise Programs

As community colleges across the United States look to engage or re-engage adult learners, statewide reconnect and promise programs aimed directly at supporting adult learners have emerged (Person et al., 2020). While community colleges have begun to implement free-tuition and promise programs for prospective students, many of these offerings have targeted traditional-aged or high school graduates in their state, leaving out support for adult learners (Pingel et al., 2016). In response, these programs often aim to alleviate financial barriers, strengthen campus support specific to the needs of adult learners, and increase the production of college-educated and credentialed workers to meet the goals and labor demands of their state (Breeden et al., 2022; Carlson & Laderman, 2018; Collom, 2022; Collom et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2019; Person et al., 2020). Among the states with these

programs are Tennessee, Michigan, Indiana, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Washington, North Carolina, California, Idaho, Kentucky, and Ohio.

Conceptual Framework

Community colleges are an accessible entry point for adult learners throughout North Carolina, with approximately 39% of undergraduate students in the state enrolled in a community college (Tippet & Kahn, 2018). With such a high percentage of students enrolled in a community college, it should be the aim of community college leaders to cultivate campus environments that embrace adult learners. With this perspective in mind, we adopted the Loss/Momentum Framework (LMF) to understand adult-learner experiences (Achieving the Dream, 2016; Completion By Design, 2014; Rassen et al., 2013). This framework seeks to help institutions identify where additional resources can be used to support student retention, as well as identify the roadblocks faced by students that deter them in their journey toward progress or completion. While this framework is not typically used in the context of adult learners, we believe it applies to this student population because the phases of the journey are the same for adult learners as they are for students just out of high school.

The LMF (Figure 1) explores five phases of a student's post-secondary journey: connection, entry, progress, completion, and transition (Rassen et al., 2013). The *connection* phase of the LMF refers to the student's initial interest in a

particular institution. Here, the student engages with the idea of attending college, gathers information and resources about college, and eventually submits an application to the institution(s) of interest. The student then transitions to the *entry* phase, which refers to the steps the student takes to complete an institution's enrollment process, as well as any required "gatekeeping" or general education courses that the institution may require. The enrollment process typically includes, but is not limited to, engaging with an institution's admissions and financial aid offices, and placement test centers. Next, the student transitions into the *progress* phase, where they move on from their initial engagement with the college to a long-term commitment to their particular program of study. This transition includes the completion of program requirements and enrollment in the primary courses required for their degree or certificate program. The fourth phase of the LMF is referred to as the *completion* phase, where students move through the final stages of their educational journey. Specifically, students complete the requirements for their credential, certificate, or degree program and begin planning for the next phase of their life's journey. Last, Achieving the Dream added the *transition* phase to the LMF, referring to a student's successful transition into the next phase of their life's journey. For adult learners at community colleges, this could be successfully transitioning to a four-year institution or into the workforce.

As students engage with their institutions across these five phases, each phase has the potential to either boost (momentum points) or hinder (loss points) their momentum towards completion. Momentum points refer to any interaction that encourage a student's completion of a program, credential, and/or transfer to a four-year institution, such as a positive interaction with an academic advisor. In contrast, loss points refer to any interaction that may delay a student or encourage a student to not continue with post-secondary education, such as a decrease in or loss of financial support. In the LMF, identifying momentum and loss points helps practitioners locate and examine experiences unique to their students that may boost or hinder the students' collegiate progression. As the guiding framework for this research, the LMF assisted in framing our support for the five institutions in Cohort 1 and the development of interview questions used to explore each institution's experiences with the NC Reconnect program and engagement with their adult learner population.

Methods

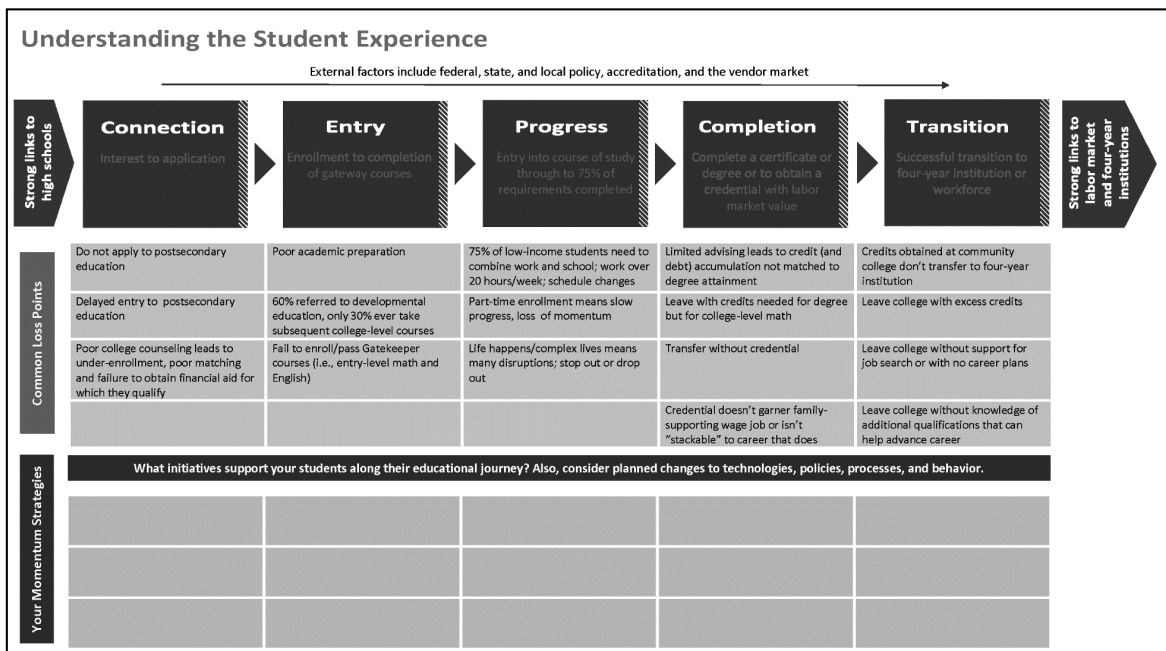### Participants

This study follows a qualitative research design, using an embedded single-case-study approach (Yin, 2012) to explore the experiences of adult learners on their journeys to enter or re-enter a community college, as well as the ways community colleges are working to recruit and retain adult learners. The single case is defined as institutional participation in the NC Reconnect

Figure 1

Achieving the Dream Adaptation of the Loss-Momentum Framework

Understanding the Student Experience

External factors include federal, state, and local policy, accreditation, and the vendor market

Strong links to high schools

Connection	Entry	Progress	Completion	Transition
Interest to application	Enrollment to completion of gateway courses	Entry into course of study through to 75% of requirements completed	Complete a certificate or degree or to obtain a credential with labor market value	Successful transition to four-year institution or workforce

Strong links to labor market and four-year institutions

Common Loss Points

Connection	Entry	Progress	Completion	Transition
Do not apply to postsecondary education	Poor academic preparation	75% of low-income students need to combine work and school; work over 20 hours/week; schedule changes	Limited advising leads to credit (and debt) accumulation not matched to degree attainment	Credits obtained at community college don't transfer to four-year institution
Delayed entry to postsecondary education	60% referred to developmental education, only 30% ever take subsequent college-level courses	Part-time enrollment means slow progress, loss of momentum	Leave with credits needed for degree but for college-level math	Leave college with excess credits
Poor college counseling leads to under-enrollment, poor matching and failure to obtain financial aid for which they qualify	Fail to enroll/pass Gatekeeper courses (i.e., entry-level math and English)	Life happens/complex lives means many disruptions; stop out or drop out	Transfer without credential	Leave college without support for job search or with no career plans
			Credential doesn't garner family-supporting wage job or isn't "stackable" to career that does	Leave college without knowledge of additional qualifications that can help advance career

Your Momentum Strategies

What initiatives support your students along their educational journey? Also, consider planned changes to technologies, policies, processes, and behavior.

Note. Achieving the Dream adapted this visual from Completion by Design's Loss-Momentum Framework. From *Loss-Momentum Framework: Revised*, by Achieving the Dream, 2016 (https://achievingthedream.org/loss-and-momentum-framework-revised/).

program, and each institution serves as an embedded unit of analysis (five total). Primary data collection was conducted through a total of 25 individual and focus-group interviews with 56 participants at the five Cohort 1 community colleges (Table 1). Participants were identified either through the president of a college or through a key point of contact within a president's office.

Data Collection

We used individual and focus-group interviews as methods to learn about the adult-learner experience at the colleges within Cohort 1. Interviews allow researchers to explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others, as well as learn to see the world from perspectives different than their own (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Relatedly, focus group participants were brought together by an interviewer to discuss their views and opinions on a selected topic with one another (Roulston, 2010). Interviews were conducted in-person or over Zoom, with the audio recorded for transcription purposes. The transcripts were then reviewed for accuracy.

Data Analysis

We approached analysis using a social-constructionist epistemology, which asserts that "the content of our

Table 1

Number of Community College Interviews by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder Group	Number of Interviews	Number of Participants
Presidents	11	5
Student Support Staff	5	35
Faculty	4	4
Adult Learner Students	5	12
Total	25	56

Note. Presidential interviews include one panel discussion at an in-person convening of Cohort 1 institutions.

consciousness, and the mode of relating we have to other, is taught by our culture and society; all the metaphysical quantities we take for granted are learned from others around us" (Owen, 1992, p. 386). As such, we socially constructed a shared reality based on the perceptions of the individuals we spoke with in our interviews. We used a combination of holistic analysis—an approach to examine an individual institution separate from the aggregate—and categorical analysis—an approach to identify similarities and differences across institutions (Josselson, 2011). For the holistic analysis, we assigned each researcher two colleges to analyze and engaged in open coding as a form of primary-cycle coding (Tracy, 2020) to identify themes within each transcript. We approached this coding process by highlighting and taking notes on interview data that helped address our research question (i.e., lessons learned, bright spots, etc.). We then came together and reviewed each transcript and subsequent codes as a research team to discuss the codes. From there, we wrote an institutional profile for each college. For categorical analysis, we each reviewed data for commonalities and discrepancies across participants and then met to discuss these findings as a group. We increased the level of trustworthiness of this study by collecting multiple forms of data (i.e., interviews, focus groups, and field notes) and collaborating with a community college leader who had expertise working with adult learners.

Using the LMF helped frame our findings in the context of common loss points and momentum strategies by identifying strengths, opportunities, and challenges encountered while implementing the NC Reconnect program at the five Cohort 1 institutions. Pseudonyms were created to remove all identifying information from each cohort college. As these are North Carolina colleges, we developed symbolically appropriate pseudonyms of native plants from North Carolina: Serviceberry Community College, Persimmon Community College, Silverbell Tech, Hoptree Community College, and Viburnum Tech.

Findings

Our aim for this study was to explore the experiences of adult learners on their journeys to enter or re-enter a community college in a way that was actionable for community colleges in their efforts to recruit and retain adult learners. We also sought to understand the barriers that exist to recruiting, enrolling, and supporting adult learners in North Carolina. Our findings are divided into three sections: strengths, opportunities, and challenges across the five institutions.

Strengths

Using Creativity to Connect with Adult Learners

At each college, it was evident that adult learners came from various backgrounds (e.g., parents, veterans, dislocated workers, etc.) and needed diverse approaches to connect with their local community college. As a momentum strategy, student support staff leveraged a range of creative ideas to invite adult learners to re-apply. First, institutions were assisted by InsideTrack to text targeted messages to students who stopped attending (e.g., Are you interested in returning to school? What's keeping you from re-enrolling in school?). Second, colleges leveraged marketing campaigns through Crisp Communications to engage learners; here, they shared specific messaging about low tuition costs, program offerings, and short completion times (e.g., "Free College," "No application fee"). Third, each college engaged with its local community (e.g., Latin* community groups, faith communities, social services, unemployment offices) to recruit adult learners. All colleges used collective efforts—including targeted digital advertising, billboard signs, and word of mouth—to connect with students.

To capture the essence of this finding, we share a quote from a staff member at Persimmon Community College about ways they engaged the community in their recruitment efforts:

> [A community partner] hosts a food drive … and I would go there and pack food, and I'm allowed to put whatever I want in the boxes. So, I'm sending home our translated [in Spanish] materials with [campus] information and all of our contacts.

This creative outreach tactic represents the importance of meeting students where they are—in their communities, homes, and other meaningful spaces. Delivering information directly into students' hands makes it easier for them to learn about the offerings of the college.

Opportunities

Having Student Success Coaches Available Upon Entry

While connecting with adult learners was a smooth process, getting interested students to enroll and stay enrolled was a more difficult one, as some adult learners drop out in the first few days or weeks. Colleges understood

the need to provide immediate and pro-active coaching for adults from the point of enrollment. In our interviews, all colleges were starting to frame advising for adult learners as a significant area of focus. While each institution had various advising strategies, they leveraged funds to create case-management-based and early-alert-centered interventions to specifically support adult learners. Overall, momentum strategies included taking different approaches to advise adult learners, trying new initiatives, and hiring new staff. One Viburnum Tech staff member at a community college articulated this strategy by discussing the role of success coaches:

> And it goes above and beyond just advising. Like, the faculty advisors will be the ones that tell them, "Well, this is the class that you need to take." But a success coach is going to connect with you to say, "I understand you're having some issues, maybe with turning in your first assignment. Do you need a laptop? Hotspot? Childcare?" We really gotta go above and beyond.

This staff member stressed that student success coaches can provide individualized, holistic attention to all facets of an adult learner's journey—academic, personal, financial, and social—to help them persist and succeed.

Challenges

Professional Learning to Support Student Progress and Equity-Mindedness

Throughout the interviews, institutional leaders explained that adult learners were important to the success of their colleges; however, many college staff reported not adequately engaging with adult learners due to a focus on recent high school graduates. While institutions are making a shift to re-focus on adult learners, some staff noticed staff and faculty were not adequately prepared to work with this population. Regarding the importance of professional learning, the president of Serviceberry Community College stated:

> And I think for us—I know this sounds kind of crazy, but [it's] more about grace for deadlines than anything … and attendance.… It's grace for deadlines. Life happens. It's shorter terms. It's systemic things we need to work on. Asking faculty to be all things to all people … is challenging.

The president stressed the importance of professional learning for faculty and staff to flexibly and adaptively meet the needs of adult learners. Here, the president provides examples of providing grace and being mindful of life circumstances unique to adult learners.

Recommendations for Practice

Previous research has documented the challenges experienced by adult learners when they return to college for a degree or credential (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013; Sutton, 2016). Past studies have placed the onus of college success on the adult learner (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kasworm, 1990). In contrast, through the NC Reconnect initiative, we found that institutions can work to lessen the stress that adult learners experience by being intentional about recruiting and retaining these learners. Using the LMF, we assert that institutions must take a vested interest in the full life cycle of adult learners, from their initial connection to the campus to their transition into a new career. While the presence of support mechanisms is contingent upon their institutional context, we encourage institutions to use the LMF to help guide policy and practical decision making. In the following sections, we provide practical examples for practitioners to move forward.

Connection: How Will Adult Learners Connect with the College?

Before recruiting adult learners, colleges should think creatively about the *connection* process, using various methods, such as working with community partners (e.g., social services, religious centers); creating targeted events (e.g., sporting events, advertising using digital marketing); and sending customized text messages, letters, and phone calls.

In their messaging, colleges must try to encourage adult learners to return to college to enhance their skill set or achieve a lifelong dream for themselves or their families.

Entry: Who Will Adult Learners Talk to After Enrolling?

Upon adult learners' *entry* into and enrollment in college, institutions must ensure that they have quick and seamless access to financial aid, career coaching, and course planning provided by advisors and success coaches who are trained to work with adult learners. And institutions must ensure that these advisors and success coaches understand the multiple challenges that adult learners often face (e.g., loss of financial aid, veteran benefits, childcare support). Furthermore, implementing the use of success coaches, adult learner ambassadors, and adult learner centers can be beneficial for adult learners. These are useful tools for institutions in their initiative to intentionally focus on providing adult learners with the extra guidance they need to succeed.

Progress: Who Will Check in on Learners to Ensure They Are Making Adequate Progress?

To ensure *progress*, institutions should consider how to enhance academic advising services. It is not enough for adult learners to have access to trained academic advisors and success coaches. Institutions should increase the number of cross-trained advisors,

frequency of advising appointments, and availability of platforms used to engage with advisors both in-person and virtually. Additionally, adult learners want faculty who understand their experiences and need for flexible deadlines and increased support (Breeden et al., 2022). Faculty and staff who are ill-prepared to help adult learners are a barrier to student progress. Any unnecessary interruptions or inconveniences can contribute to students stopping out or dropping out. Colleges need to ensure that faculty and staff are flexible in accommodating the needs of adult learners and that programs are streamlined with adult learners in mind. This flexibility will help adult learners juggle busy schedules and move forward with their studies.

Completion and Transition: Who Will Ensure Adult Learners Finish and Leave with a Credential of Value?

Once adult learners progress through their courses and move toward *completion* and *transition*, institutions should provide career counseling to ensure that they are obtaining a credential that has value within their local community. For institutions with career centers, identifying paid opportunities (i.e., internships, experiential learning opportunities) that adult learners could pursue in tandem with an existing full- or part-time job would allow these students to gain necessary skills while accommodating their current employment. Furthermore, institutions should partner with local employers to create work-based learning programs and internships to provide adult learners with the opportunity to work in their career of interest.

Overall, our findings extend current literature and suggest that community colleges center new approaches and intentional improvements to meet the needs of adult learners, particularly those from historically and systemically underserved communities who might need more support. From this initiative, it is evident that institutions that try to understand the numerous needs of adult learners from various racial, socioeconomic, and geographical contexts can make informed decisions and remove barriers that impact enrollment, persistence, and success. Specifically, campuses that work to understand the complexities and realities of adult learners from diverse backgrounds can change policies and practices that block success for all students.

Conclusion

Understanding the strengths, challenges, and opportunities to engage adult learners in community colleges can aid in retaining and sustaining these students throughout the student lifecycle and beyond. Our findings demonstrate that by using creative methods to connect with adult learners, having student success coaches available to adult learners upon their entry into the college, and offering professional learning opportunities to college faculty and staff to support student progress and equity-mindedness, community colleges will be better

equipped to serve adult learners. The LMF affirms that community colleges can and should have a vested interest in the holistic life cycle of adult learners. By providing individualized attention to adult learners at the points of connection, entry, progress, completion, and transition, community colleges can promote equity for this student population and reduce barriers to help them succeed and thrive.

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