

FROM ENROLLMENT TO EMPLOYMENT

A TOOLKIT FOR ADULT LEARNER SUPPORT

Strategies, Resources, and Best Practices



AFSCME LOCAL 3930

UDW



JANUARY 2026

California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office | Sonya Christian, Chancellor

A11Y 2/10/26

2025-26 A TOOLKIT FOR ADULT LEARNER SUPPORT

Prepared By

The Center for Economic Mobility at WestEd
in Partnership with the California Community
Colleges Chancellor's Office and United
Domestic Workers



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INTRODUCTION



The California Community Colleges' Vision 2030 underscores a central truth: California's economic vitality and equity goals depend on expanding educational opportunity to adult learners. The report projects that meeting future workforce needs will require not only increased enrollment, but also stronger persistence and completion among working adults, parents, veterans, immigrants, and other students historically underserved by higher education. This shift calls for institutions to intentionally design systems that address the realities of adult students' lives—from balancing work and caregiving to navigating career transitions—and to ensure that adult-serving programs are integrated into core college strategies, not treated as add-ons.

“California cannot meet its workforce goals without fully engaging adult learners.”
— *Vision 2030, California Community Colleges*

Why Adult Learners Require Distinct and Intentional Design

Adult learners are not simply older versions of traditional students—they are a distinct population whose lived realities and ways of learning require tailored approaches. As community colleges work to expand access and equity, designing with working adults at the center is not a niche strategy; it is a necessary response to evolving student demographics, workforce demands, and the imperative to drive economic mobility.

In the United States, nearly 40% of undergraduate students are over the age of 25, and many are parents, working full-time, returning after long absences, or pursuing education part-time.¹ These situational characteristics significantly influence how adults interact with college systems: time, finances, and care responsibilities are not peripheral—they are primary. Programs that do not account for these realities risk inadvertently excluding the very students they aim to serve.

Beyond logistics, adult learners also engage with education differently. According to the widely studied theory of andragogy, first introduced by Malcolm Knowles and refined over time, adults are more likely to succeed when programs reflect six key learning principles:²

- **Need to Know:** Adults engage more fully when they understand why the learning matters, especially in relation to their work or life goals.
- **Self-Directedness:** They want agency in how they learn, set goals, and track progress.
- **Lived Experience:** Adults bring rich personal histories and expect those experiences to be honored and integrated into their learning.
- **Readiness:** They are most engaged when learning is immediately relevant and applicable.

1 Lumina Foundation & rpk GROUP. (2023). Modernizing postsecondary policy to better support adult learners.

2 Knowles, M. (1978). Andragogy: Adult Learning Theory in Perspective. *Community College Review*, 5(3), 9-20.

- **Orientation to Learning:** Adult learning is problem-centered, not content-centered—practical application trumps theory.
- **Internal Motivation:** Adults are driven more by intrinsic goals—career growth, family aspirations—than by grades or external pressure.

This foundational perspective is echoed in recent institutional research. Colleges that treat adult-serving programs as core, not peripheral, are more likely to sustain them, achieve equitable outcomes, and expand their impact.³ Programs that integrate flexibility, relevance, and clear value propositions consistently see stronger persistence and completion outcomes among working adults.

Ultimately, recognizing adult learners as a unique population is the first step toward designing systems that work. This toolkit responds to that challenge, offering colleges a roadmap to assess, redesign, and sustain programs that meet working adults where they are and help them get where they want to go.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF LOW-WAGE ADULT LEARNERS

To build effective programs and support systems for adult learners, colleges must begin with a clear understanding of who they are serving. Working adults are not a monolith. They bring diverse life experiences, educational backgrounds, work histories, and aspirations to campus. However, many share common barriers—such as low wages, caregiving responsibilities, and prior disruptions in education—that can make navigating postsecondary systems especially difficult.

Within the UDW Adult Learner Demonstration Project, three key student profiles have been identified that reflect the range of readiness and support needs present among low-wage adult learners. These profiles can help institutions tailor services, design pathways, and allocate resources more strategically and also serve as a reminder that equitable design begins with people, not systems or policies.

The following profiles are grounded in the real experiences of working learners. To make the profiles easier to reference throughout the toolkit, short, memorable labels are provided that capture their core characteristics. These clustering of characteristics allow colleges to quickly connect strategies, supports, and outcomes back to the learner type most relevant to their student populations. ³ California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. (2023, September 29). California Community Colleges Partners with United Domestic Workers to Bring Workforce Training and Instruction to Underserved Population

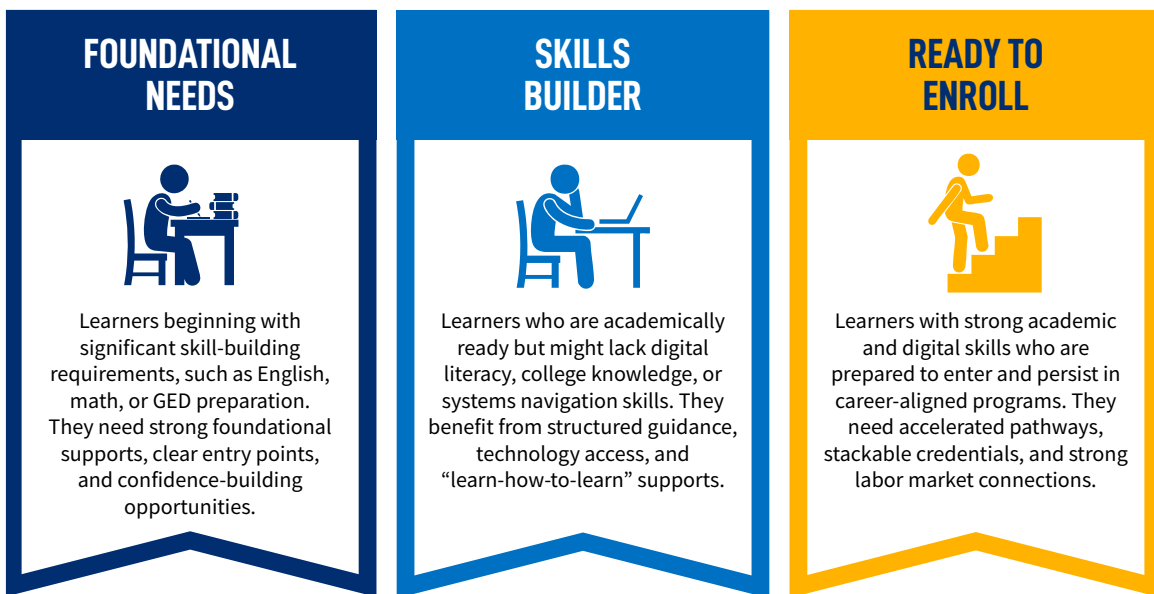
- **Profile 1: Foundational Learners** – Learners beginning with **significant skill-building requirements**, such as English language le, math, or GED preparation. They need strong foundational support, clear entry points, and confidence-building opportunities.
- **Profile 2: Skills Builder** – Learners who are **ready to enroll** in courses but may lack

³ California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. (2023, September 29). California Community Colleges Partners with United Domestic Workers to Bring Workforce Training and Instruction to Underserved Population

digital literacy, college knowledge, or systems navigation skills. They benefit from structured guidance, technology access, and “learn-how-to-learn” support.

- **Profile 3: Ready to Enroll** – Learners with strong **academic and digital skills** who are prepared to enter and persist in **career-aligned programs**. They need accelerated pathways, stackable credentials, and strong labor market connections.

By organizing strategies around these student profiles, colleges can create more responsive and inclusive programs that meet learners where they are. This approach not only supports stronger enrollment and completion outcomes but also affirms the dignity, potential, and lived experience of every adult learner.



THE COLLECTIVE FRAMEWORK: PEOPLE, PROGRAMS & JOBS

Across today’s evolving landscape of workforce development and adult education, colleges and their partners are exploring new ways to meet adult learners where they are, acknowledging their lived experiences, strengths, and aspirations for economic mobility. This work calls for approaches that connect education, training, and employment more intentionally to create pathways that are accessible, equitable, and aligned with real opportunities in the labor market.

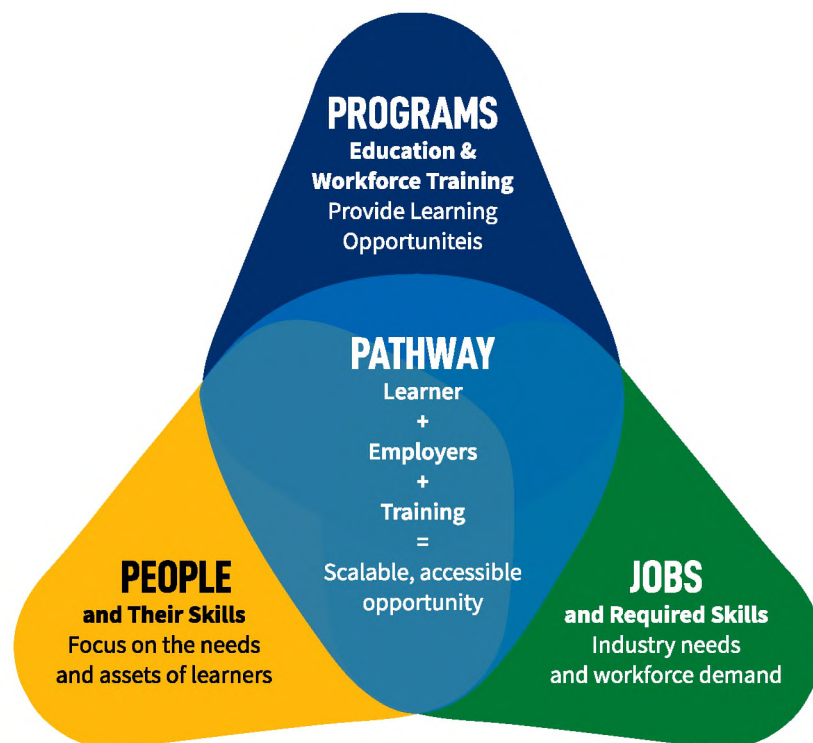
Developed by **WestEd’s Center for Economic Mobility**, the **3D Pathways Model** offers a research-informed framework for supporting adult learners through collaboration among educators, workforce providers, and employers. The “3D” reflects three interconnected dimensions: **People, Programs, and Jobs**. Together, these dimensions provide a more complete understanding of how learning and work intersect. These dimensions, also referred to as pillars, illustrate how aligning learner supports, educational design, and job connections can help adults advance toward meaningful, sustainable careers.

- **People** – Understanding who we are serving and recognizing their unique goals, needs, and assets.
- **Programs** – Mapping educational opportunities that support working adults through accessible, stackable, and responsive learning pathways.
- **Jobs** – Identifying the skills and competencies required by industries and ensuring educational programs are connected to current and emerging workforce needs.

By weaving these three dimensions together, the model highlights the importance of partnerships that bridge systems and create seamless transitions from education to employment. It encourages institutions to use data, lived experience, and labor market insights collaboratively to design programs that truly respond to learners and communities.

The model has been applied through a **partnership between the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office (CO), the United Domestic Workers (UDW), WestEd, and participating colleges.** Together, this partnership supports union members, many of whom are women of color with deep caregiving expertise, in identifying college programs that build on their existing skills and open pathways to higher-wage, high-demand careers. Through this work, the 3D Pathways Model demonstrates how aligning people, programs, and jobs can expand opportunity, strengthen the workforce, and promote economic mobility across regions.

Figure 1. The 3D Pathway Model



PEOPLE: UNDERSTANDING THE LEARNERS WE SERVE

At the heart of any successful educational initiative is a deep understanding of the people it aims to serve. Adult learners come from diverse backgrounds, bringing with them varied experiences, challenges, and aspirations. Grounding this work in **human-centered design** means starting with empathy—asking:

- Who are we trying to serve?
- What are their goals, needs, and assets that we need to understand?

This pillar emphasizes the importance of a learner-centered approach, recognizing that adults often balance multiple responsibilities such as work, family, and financial constraints. Identifying their motivations, barriers, and strengths allows institutions and workforce partners to tailor supports that enhance retention, persistence, and success.

This includes offering **flexible learning schedules**, providing **wraparound support services**, and ensuring **cultural responsiveness** in program delivery. By investing time in truly understanding the learner demographic, institutions can create a supportive ecosystem that meets learners where they are and equips them with the tools needed to navigate their educational and career pathways effectively. This understanding becomes the foundation for the strategies highlighted later in this toolkit—such as Welcome Centers, Student Services Hubs, and integrated supports—that bring the “people” dimension of the 3D model to life.

PROGRAMS: STRUCTURING EDUCATION FOR CAREER SUCCESS

A well-designed educational system must provide clear and accessible pathways that allow adult learners to transition seamlessly through different stages of skill development. The second pillar of the 3D Pathway Model focuses on ensuring that students have access to entry-level and continuing educational programs that align with their long-term goals.

Key questions guiding this pillar include:

- What are the entry-level and continuing educational programs to support adult learners’ journey(s)?
- How can the program be designed with the learner at the center?

Education is not a one-size-fits-all solution. For working adults, programs must be stackable, flexible, and relevant to industry demands. This means creating structured pathways that include:

- Foundational skill-building (e.g., literacy, digital skills, career exploration)
- Technical and vocational training aligned with industry certifications
- Work-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships and internships
- Continuing education and upskilling options for career advancement

By designing programs that meet learners at different stages of their educational journey, institutions can provide clear roadmaps to credentials, degrees, and workforce readiness. This approach fosters long-term economic mobility and ensures that individuals can continuously build on their skills to remain competitive in the labor market.

JOBS: CONNECTING EDUCATION TO WORKFORCE DEMAND

Education must be meaningfully linked to employment opportunities to ensure that students can secure quality jobs that provide economic stability and career advancement. The final pillar of the 3D Pathway Model focuses on aligning skills development with regional industry needs.

To achieve this, we must answer the following questions:

- What are the skills and competencies required by industry?
- How do we connect programs to regional industries and quality jobs that are in demand?

This pillar highlights the critical role of industry partnerships in shaping educational pathways. Employers play a key role in defining workforce needs, and collaboration between education and industry ensures that training programs remain responsive to evolving job market demands.

Strategies for strengthening these connections include:

- Labor market analysis to identify in-demand occupations, emerging industries and prospective employers
- Industry advisory partnerships to provide direct input on curriculum and skill expectations
- Integrated work-based learning experiences such as internships, apprenticeships, and job shadowing
- Career navigation supports that help students transition from education to employment

By fostering strong education-to-employment pipelines, the framework ensures that working adults graduate with the skills, competencies, and networks needed to succeed in the workforce. Additionally, it helps close equity gaps by providing clear pathways for historically underserved populations to access high-quality job opportunities.

IMPLEMENTATION PHILOSOPHY

The 3D Pathway Model serves as a framework for creating learner-centered, industry-aligned education and workforce systems. By focusing on people, programs, and jobs, this approach ensures that adult learners receive the support they need to successfully transition from education to meaningful employment. For institutions, policymakers, and workforce leaders, implementing this framework means:

- Centering the needs of working adults in program design
- Developing structured educational pathways that offer flexibility and career mobility
- Building strong employer connections to align training with workforce demands

By leveraging this collective framework, the state can create sustainable solutions that empower adult learners, strengthen local economies, and build a more equitable and responsive workforce system for the future.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

Welcome to this comprehensive resource designed to transform how we serve adult learners. This toolkit represents years of research, innovation, and real-world testing to create pathways that truly work—moving adult learners from education to meaningful careers with the support they need at every step.

Built for Action, Designed for Impact

This isn't just another collection of best practices. Each section builds on proven frameworks that have generated measurable results, offering you concrete tools, assessment guides, and implementation strategies you can put to work immediately. Whether you're launching a new program, refining existing services, or scaling successful models, this toolkit meets you where you are and guides you forward.

Your Roadmap to Success

The five sections work together as an integrated system, but you can also dive into specific areas based on your immediate needs:

- **Start with People (Section 1)** to build the foundational relationships and support systems that make everything else possible. When adult learners feel welcomed, understood, and supported from day one, they're positioned for success throughout their journey.
- **Design Responsive Programs (Section 2)** that flex to meet learners' real lives and career goals. These aren't one-size-fits-all approaches—they're frameworks for creating education that adapts to working parents, career changers, and learners balancing multiple responsibilities.
- **Connect to Real Opportunities (Section 3)** by building genuine partnerships with employers and industry leaders. This section shows you how to move beyond transactional relationships to co-create programs that lead directly to quality jobs with advancement potential.

- **Measure What Matters (Section 4)** with data systems that tell the full story of learner success. Go beyond completion rates to track the outcomes that actually matter—employment, wage growth, career advancement, and long-term economic mobility.
- **Build for the Long Term (Section 5)** with sustainability and scaling strategies that ensure your innovations outlast grant cycles and leadership changes. Create institutional change that becomes part of your organization’s DNA.

TOOLKIT APPLICATIONS

This toolkit serves multiple audiences and purposes:

- **For College Leaders:** Strategic guidance on building institutional capacity, securing sustainable funding, and creating cross-departmental coordination that embeds adult learner success in institutional planning.
- **For Program Designers:** Practical frameworks for redesigning programs with flexibility, stackability, and industry alignment while maintaining academic rigor and transfer pathways.
- **For Student Services Professionals:** Evidence-based approaches to creating Welcome Centers, implementing case management, and providing holistic supports that address the complex lives of adult learners.
- **For Faculty and Instructional Leaders:** Strategies for flexible delivery, work-based learning integration, and curriculum design that honors adult learners’ prior knowledge while meeting industry standards.
- **For Data and Research Teams:** Frameworks for developing metrics, building data cultures, and using evaluation to drive continuous improvement and demonstrate impact.

ADAPTING TO YOUR CONTEXT

This toolkit is designed for flexible implementation based on your institution’s unique needs, priorities, and capacity. Use the assessment tools in each section to identify your strengths and improvement opportunities, then focus your efforts where they will have the greatest impact.

Choose your starting point based on institutional priorities:

- **Enrollment and access challenges:** Focus on Section 1 (Welcome Centers and support systems)
- **Program design and delivery gaps:** Prioritize Section 2 (flexible, stackable pathways)
- **Employer engagement and job placement:** Emphasize Section 3 (industry partnerships)

- **Data and accountability needs:** Begin with Section 4 (metrics and tracking systems)
- **Sustainability and growth planning:** Start with Section 5 (scaling and funding strategies)

Adapt approaches to your institutional context:

- **Small institutions:** Leverage virtual and hybrid models, focus on community partnerships
- **Large systems:** Prioritize data integration, cross-campus coordination, and scalable processes
- **Diverse populations:** Implement multilingual services and culturally responsive strategies throughout
- **Resource-constrained environments:** Begin with low-cost, high-impact strategies and build incrementally
- **Well-resourced institutions:** Consider comprehensive implementation across multiple sections simultaneously



In the appendix you will find five assessment tools and there are implementation guides, and frameworks throughout the guide to support adaptation and application of the practices tested through real-world application. Improving the success of adult leaders depends on honest self-assessment, strategic priority-setting, and adapting proven strategies to fit your students, community, and institutional culture.

For a comprehensive list of additional resources please refer to Appendix C1-C17

SECTION 1: PEOPLE – BUILDING INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS



Adult learners often navigate college while balancing work, caregiving responsibilities, and frequently are returning to education after time away. These students bring valuable lived experience but face disproportionate barriers to access, persistence, and completion. Traditional college onboarding systems—often fragmented, rigid, or inaccessible—can deter adult learners from enrolling or re-engaging.

To transform outcomes for these students, colleges must build inclusive, human-centered environments that support learners from their very first contact with the institution.

A high quality, thoughtful **Welcome Centers serve as a powerful starting point for adult learners.** Whether physical, virtual, or hybrid, they act as the connective tissue between college services and the complex lives of adult learners. This section outlines two essential practices for creating inclusive and supportive environments:

- 1. Creating One-Stop Entry Points**
- 2. Providing Holistic Supports and Case Management**

Each practice includes evidence from the field, an assessment rubric, and implementation resources to support local adaptation.

CREATING ONE-STOP ENTRY POINTS

A one-stop Welcome Center provides a critical foundation for supporting adult learners through an accessible, streamlined, and human-centered experience. Whether offered in person, online, or in a hybrid format, holistic models consolidate services that are typically scattered across campus—application support, financial aid, academic and career advising, basic needs referrals, and more—into a single, coordinated entry point.

Why One-Stop Centers Matter for Adult Learners

For adult learners who frequently balance college with work, caregiving, and other responsibilities, coordinated service delivery isn't just convenient—it's essential. Working adults bring significant strengths to the college environment, including:

- Resilience and goal orientation
- Diverse professional and life experiences
- The ability to connect learning to real-world contexts

Welcome Centers that recognize and build on these assets position adult learners not only as participants in the educational process, but as contributors to the campus community. In practice, this means engaging them as peer navigators, inviting them into program feedback loops, and leveraging their lived experience to improve programs. **Supporting adult learners effectively creates benefits that extend far beyond this population.** When institutions design systems to increase effectiveness, access, and potential success for adult learners, these improvements often enhance the experience for all students. Universal design principles, streamlined processes, flexible service delivery, and holistic support models benefit traditional students, first-generation learners, and other populations facing barriers to success.

Key Characteristics of Effective One-Stop Welcome Centers

Centrally Located or Easily Accessible Service Points

- Physical hub on campus, user-friendly virtual welcome page, or mobile units for rural communities
- True accessibility includes location, navigability, and psychological safety

Cross-Trained Staff and Peer Navigators

- Staff equipped to support multiple needs or quickly coordinate with other departments
- Minimizes the need for learners to repeatedly self-advocate
- Peer navigators with lived experience provide relatable, affirming guidance

Flexible Scheduling and Modality Options

- Evening and weekend hours
- Virtual drop-ins and asynchronous supports (chatbots, video tutorials)
- Accommodates learners with rigid work or family schedules

Multilingual and Culturally Responsive Services

- Translated materials and language access lines
- Hiring practices that reflect community diversity
- Builds trust and reduces cognitive load on non-native English speakers

Human-Centered, Inclusive Design

- Reflects adult learners in aesthetics, tone, and interaction design
- Childcare-friendly waiting areas and private consultation spaces
- Signage that affirms all ages, backgrounds, and educational histories

Colleges that embrace these characteristics signal to adult learners: **you belong here, and we've made space for you.**

Implementation Models

Creating a one-stop Welcome Center represents a strategic redesign of how adult learners experience their entry into college. While the core goal remains consistent—providing coordinated, accessible, and human-centered onboarding—colleges often approach implementation differently. Two primary models have emerged:

Dedicated Welcome Center

A physical space specifically branded and resourced as the onboarding hub for new students.

Features:

- Central location with visible signage
- Well trained and cross-trained staff for admissions, financial aid, advising, and basic needs
- Clear channel of communication or identified support staff for key areas
- Peer navigators or ambassadors with lived experience
- Childcare-friendly and private consultation spaces

This model functions as a standalone, clearly branded hub that consolidates key services into one coordinated space. It signals to adult learners that their needs have been anticipated and that the institution has intentionally created a front door designed with them in mind.

Student Services Hub (with or without concierge/ambassadors)

A shared service area that integrates onboarding into existing student services.

Two approaches:

- With concierge/ambassadors: Designated staff or peers greet and guide adult learners through each required step
- Without concierge/ambassadors: Self-directed navigation within the hub, supported by wayfinding tools and integrated service desks

This model leverages current infrastructure while enhancing it through coordinated intake processes, shared information systems, and proactive follow-up. It's particularly effective for institutions with limited space or resources.

Both models benefit from the same foundational principles: accessibility, cultural responsiveness, proactive communication, and a commitment to building on adult learners' strengths.

Why One-Stop Models Work

Adult learners often approach postsecondary education with urgency and limited bandwidth. Systems requiring multiple office visits, duplicate forms, or extended waiting periods become significant barriers.

The one-stop model reduces fragmentation by providing:

- Coordinated, predictable experiences
- Fewer handoffs and clearer pathways
- Increased confidence from the first interaction

When learners feel confident, supported, and respected from their first interaction, they are far more likely to persist.

Tangible Outcomes

A growing body of research confirms that when community colleges adopt centralized, student-centered entry points, adult learners experience greater clarity, support, and follow-through with measurable improvements in both learner outcomes and internal systems:

- 1. Increased Onboarding-to-Enrollment Conversion:** Students engaging with Welcome Center staff early are more likely to complete orientation, placement, FAFSA/CADAA submission, and course registration.⁴
- 2. Improved First-Term Persistence and Sense of Belonging:** Adult learners report higher satisfaction and stronger commitment when they feel seen, supported, and clearly guided during enrollment.⁵
- 3. Enhanced Internal Coordination and Accountability:** Co-located services encourage departments to share responsibility for outcomes, improving staff collaboration and reducing duplication.⁶
- 4. Strengthened Trust with Underserved Communities:** Welcoming, multilingual, and culturally responsive entry points help rebuild trust with communities historically excluded from higher education.⁷

The approach of centralizing access for learners aligns with other national and statewide initiatives, including:

- **California Guided Pathways Framework** identifies streamlined student intake as essential to equitable outcomes⁸
- **California Adult Education Program (CAEP)** promotes integrated service models for returning learners, immigrants, and low-wage workers⁹
- **California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office** elevates centralized onboarding through Vision for Success and Vision 2030¹⁰

4 Perry, L. (2022). One-stop enrollment management service: An evaluation (Doctoral dissertation). California State University; The RP Group. (2025). Results From a Comprehensive California Community Colleges Online Education Study. A report to the 2024-2025 California State Legislature.

5 Crede, M., & Niehorster, S. (2012). Adjustment to college as measured by the student adaptation to college questionnaire: A quantitative review of its structure and relationships with correlates and consequences. *Educational Psychology Review*, 24(1), 133–165.

6 Brown, P. A. (n.d.). *Degree-Attainment-for-Adult-Learners*. American Council on Education.

7 VanZoest, E. R., Harry, D. T., & Breeden, S. (2023). *Equity in Action: Reconnecting Adult Learners to Community College in North Carolina*. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*.

8 The RP Group. (2020). Student Experience Crosswalk: Where Student Support (Re)defined and Guided Pathways Meet.

9 California Adult Education Program. (2024). Closing the Equity Gap for Adult Learners in California: 7 Promising Practices to Advance Student Outcomes.

10 California Community College Chancellor's Office. (2023). Vision 2030.

A growing body of research and practice highlights one-stop service models as promising strategies for adult learner success. While formal statewide evaluations are limited, initiatives such as California’s Guided Pathways framework, the California Adult Education Program (CAEP), and local adult learner reengagement pilots consistently elevate centralized entry points as effective in addressing common barriers to enrollment and persistence.

Evidence and field experience point to three recurring areas of impact:

- **Improved learner navigation through simplified processes and integrated supports.** Fragmented systems are a known barrier, and streamlined intake processes reduce duplication and increase enrollment conversion.
- **Stronger institutional alignment through cross-departmental collaboration.** Colleges report that integrating onboarding services fosters better communication across departments, shared data use, and more consistent follow-up with students.
- **Increased engagement and trust among historically underserved populations.** Welcoming, multilingual, and culturally responsive entry points build confidence among adult learners, signaling that their needs and strengths have been anticipated and valued.

Evidence from the Field

1. Learner Navigation and Reduced Complexity

Research shows adult learners are more likely to enroll and persist when institutional systems are easy to understand and navigate. Fragmented services, inconsistent information, and unclear processes significantly deter learners returning after time away from education.

“Adult learners often disengage due to the complexity of navigating multiple systems. Streamlining service delivery through coordinated entry points can dramatically improve learners’ ability to persist beyond initial interest.”

— WestEd, Adult Learner Research Synthesis, 2022

This need for clarity and reduced complexity is evident across all three learner profiles. Foundational Needs learners often face the steepest barriers when navigating multiple systems, as they are simultaneously rebuilding academic confidence. Skills Builders may be academically prepared but still lose momentum if digital or college navigation support is fragmented. Even Ready to Enroll learners, while more prepared to persist, benefit from streamlined processes that accelerate their momentum and minimize bureaucratic delays.

2. Institutional Coordination and Service Integration

One-stop models foster internal collaboration and accountability. Departments traditionally operating in silos begin sharing data, co-creating workflows, and jointly supporting adult learners through intake and transition.

Colleges implementing integrated student support structures demonstrated:¹¹

- More consistent student follow-up
- Better documentation of services received
- Increased alignment between academic and non-academic support efforts

A strong Welcome Center is built on intentional collaboration across campus teams. In particular, outreach staff should be deeply embedded in the Welcome Center’s design and daily operations. When outreach and Welcome Center teams work hand in hand, students experience the Welcome Center not as a separate department, but as the natural next step in their educational journey. This integration helps maintain continuity of relationships, ensures students do not feel “handed off,” and allows institutions to leverage the trust already built during recruitment. On some campuses, outreach is formally part of the Welcome Center team, creating a seamless bridge from first contact to enrollment and support services.

3. Higher Engagement and Equity Gains

Adult learners are more likely to participate in orientation, complete intake steps, and meet early milestones when interacting with centralized Welcome Centers.¹² These spaces prove especially effective in building trust with first-generation students, parents, immigrants, and low-wage workers.

“Colleges that create centralized and culturally responsive entry points are more likely to enroll, support, and retain working adults and returning learners. A clear, welcoming, and human-centered front door can be the difference between engagement and attrition.”¹³



To complete an assessment of the accessibility for adult learners, see **Assessment A: Adult Learner Welcome & Access Systems, in Appendix A of this toolkit.** This brief survey can help to surface blind spots, track implementation progress, take stock in areas of strength and help to build shared ownership of adult learner onboarding. Results can be used to inform strategic planning, staffing, partnership development, and continuous improvement. The checklist can be revisited annually to monitor growth and celebrate progress.

11 The RP Group. (2020). Student Experience Crosswalk: Where Student Support (Re)defined and Guided Pathways Meet.

12 California Adult Education Program. (2024). Closing the Equity Gap for Adult Learners in California: 7 Promising Practices to Advance Student Outcomes.

13 California Adult Education Program. (2024). Closing the Equity Gap for Adult Learners in California: 7 Promising Practices to Advance Student Outcomes.

HOLISTIC SUPPORTS AND CASE MANAGEMENT

While Welcome Centers serve as the front door for adult learners, case management ensures that support continues well beyond initial enrollment. Effective case management provides continuity of care, helping learners access holistic services such as food, housing, legal aid, mental health, and transportation assistance. Colleges can choose to provide case management directly—assigning staff or peer navigators to guide each learner through their first term—or strengthen their capacity by partnering with trusted community organizations like URC. In these models, colleges and agencies work side by side to align resources, reduce duplication, and extend the reach of wraparound supports. Whether delivered internally or through community partnerships, case management creates the proactive follow-up and relational continuity adult learners need to persist, particularly those who may not self-advocate or who have had negative prior educational experiences.

Understanding Holistic Support Models

Adult learners, especially those juggling employment, caregiving, and financial insecurity, often require more than academic guidance. They benefit from integrated support systems that address basic needs, build belonging, and reduce the invisible labor of navigating complex institutions.

Core Components:

Designated Case Managers or Navigators

- Staff who proactively follow up with learners
- Coordinate across services and serve as consistent points of contact

Integrated Basic Needs and Referrals

- Direct access or connection to housing, food, transportation, mental health services, childcare, and public benefits
- Often implemented through partnerships with local CBOs or county agencies

Data-Informed Support Tracking

- Early alert systems, service logs, or case management software
- Monitor learner progress and follow-up needs

Embedded Communication and Trust-Building

- Regular check-ins with multilingual and culturally affirming engagement
- Transparency about student rights and available support

Cross-Departmental Collaboration

- Shared intake forms, data sharing, and co-created service plans
- Departments work together on behalf of the learner

Model	Description	Strengths	Considerations
College-Led Case Management	College staff or peer navigators provide direct case management and follow-up for adult learners.	- Builds strong in-house capacity and institutional knowledge- Seamless alignment with academic advising and student services- Direct accountability to college leadership	- Resource-intensive (staffing and training)- May be limited by budget constraints- Risk of service duplication if community supports exist
Partner-Supported Case Management (e.g., URC)	College partners with trusted community agencies to deliver case management and wraparound supports.	- Expands reach without duplicating services- Leverages community trust and cultural competence- Brings expertise in holistic supports (housing, legal aid, etc.)	- Requires coordination and data-sharing agreements- Shared accountability can complicate oversight- Success depends on strength of partnership
Hybrid Case Management	Combines internal navigation and advising with community-based wraparound services. Colleges guide enrollment and academics, while partners provide specialized supports like housing, childcare, or legal aid.	- Balances institutional ownership with expanded service capacity- Allows colleges to focus on core academic advising while leveraging partner expertise- Creates a seamless continuum of care for learners	- Requires clear protocols for referral, communication, and shared case notes- Needs ongoing collaboration and role clarity- Data-sharing agreements are essential to prevent gaps or duplication

The Shift from Transactional to Relational

Holistic case management transforms the college experience from transactional to relational. Rather than sending students through disconnected offices for different services, these models assign a single point of contact or small support team to help learners navigate their academic, financial, and personal pathways.

Key Features:

- Data-informed tracking and follow-up systems to track supports, academics and progress
- Peer navigators and warm handoffs to the most appropriate support staff member
- Wraparound service coordination that centers the learner’s whole experience

This approach honors the complexity of adult learners’ lives while removing systemic barriers to their success.

Evidence from the Field

Research across California’s community colleges and adult education consortia confirms the importance of holistic support in increasing persistence and completion rates for adult learners, particularly when integrated with high-contact advising and early momentum strategies.

UDW Adult Learner Demonstration Project Findings

The UDW Adult Learner Demonstration Project (2024) identifies holistic case management as a cornerstone strategy for improving adult learner outcomes. This project provides valuable insights into how case managers function most effectively with adult learner populations.

The Case Manager's Role in Practice

Case managers in the UDW model serve as **relationship builders and system navigators**, going far beyond traditional academic advising. They function as:

- **Trusted Coaches** - Providing regular coaching sessions that address both academic and life challenges
- **Proactive Screeners** - Conducting basic needs assessments to identify barriers before they become crises
- **Cultural Bridges** - Often serving as multilingual navigators who understand the cultural contexts of diverse learner communities
- **System Advocates** - Helping learners navigate institutional processes while advocating for policy changes that remove systemic barriers

What Makes Case Management Different

Unlike traditional counseling or advising models that often wait for students to seek help, effective case managers for adult learners operate proactively. They:

- **Initiate Contact** - Reaching out to learners at critical junctures rather than waiting for students to ask for help
- **Build Comprehensive Understanding** - Taking time to understand each learner's full life context, including work schedules, family responsibilities, transportation challenges, and financial constraints
- **Coordinate Across Systems** - Serving as the central point of communication between academic departments, student services, and external community partners
- **Maintain Continuity** - Providing consistent support across terms and transitions, reducing the need for learners to repeatedly explain their circumstances

Key Implementation Elements:

- **Personalized success plans** that account for both academic goals and life circumstances
- **Proactive follow-up** on action steps between terms, not just during crisis moments
- **Cross-functional coordination** with faculty, advisors, and community partners
- **Integrated documentation** through shared case notes and communication channels that preserve learner stories and reduce repetitive intake processes

Documented Outcomes: The UDW model demonstrates that when case managers support adult learners, especially foundational learners and skill builders in a comprehensive, relationship-centered way, results include:

- Learners receiving wraparound support were more likely to persist term-to-term
- Higher rates of re-enrollment after stopping out
- Increased completion of academic or career pathways
- Adult learners reported increased confidence in navigating college systems
- Greater clarity in academic and career plans
- Stronger connections to peer and professional networks

The Empowerment Effect

Beyond persistence metrics, holistic case management creates what evaluators call an “empowerment effect.” Adult learners develop increased confidence in navigating college systems, gain greater clarity in their academic and career plans, and build stronger connections to peer and professional networks. By pairing individualized support with systems-level coordination, case managers help transform college from a series of disconnected transactions into a coherent, supportive journey that honors the realities and aspirations of working-age adults.

Essential Elements of Effective Case Management

Proactive Outreach

- Regular check-ins initiated by the case manager, not just when problems arise

Personalized Success Planning

- Goal-setting and progress tracking tailored to each learner’s academic, career, and personal circumstances

Integrated Service Coordination

- Collaboration with faculty, advisors, financial aid, basic needs staff, and community partners

Shared Case Notes and Communication Channels

- Ensures every staff interaction builds on the learner’s existing story and avoids repetition

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Support

- Services delivered in the learner’s preferred language and grounded in cultural understanding

Strengths-Based Approach

- Recognizing and leveraging the skills, experiences, and resilience adult learners bring



Effective case management requires building a responsive and coordinated system that keeps adult learners engaged, supported, and progressing toward their goals. **Assessment B: Adult Learner Case Management & Ongoing Support in Appendix A of this toolkit** helps colleges examine the structures, tools, and habits that support successful outreach and follow-up, including case management infrastructure, proactive student success interventions, life balance and barrier mitigation, and success tracking systems. The assessment can be used alone or in combination with the following action plan.

PEOPLE-FOCUSED QUICK START GUIDE

Welcome Systems & Case Management

Goal: Create welcoming, supportive systems that help adult learners navigate and persist through completion.

30 Days: Immediate Wins

Week 1-2: Assess & Plan

- Complete Assessments A & B from Appendix A
- Survey adult learners about service gaps and frustrations
- Assemble team: admissions, counseling, financial aid, adult learner advocate

Week 3-4: Launch Quick Improvements

- Establish evening/weekend office hours for working adults
- Create emergency aid fund with same-day approval process
- Train front-line staff on adult learner communication strategies
- Implement “warm handoff” protocols between departments

90 Days: System Building

Month 2: Service Integration

- Co-locate or coordinate advising, counseling, and financial aid appointments
- Launch peer mentoring program pairing successful adults with new students

- Create adult learner-specific orientation addressing common concerns
- Establish crisis intervention protocols with community resource connections

Month 3: Case Management

- Implement systematic case management with manageable caseloads (1:100 maximum)
- Create early warning system for attendance, grades, and financial issues
- Develop proactive outreach schedule with regular semester check-ins
- Launch support groups and online community spaces for adult learners

6 Months: Sustainability

Demonstrate Impact

- Track 10% improvement in adult learner retention
- Document 90% same-day emergency aid processing
- Achieve 85% satisfaction with support services

Institutional Integration

- Embed adult learner support in base budget allocation
- Update policies to reflect adult learner needs and flexible scheduling
- Scale successful practices to additional student populations

Success Indicators

- 30 Days: Emergency aid operational, extended hours established, staff trained
- 90 Days: Case management system functioning, early warnings operational
- 6 Months: Improved retention documented, sustainable funding secured

Quick Troubleshooting:

- Staff resistance? Start with willing champions, show early wins with data
- *Limited resources? Use group advising and peer support to extend capacity*
- *Adult learners won't seek help? Integrate support into required activities*

SECTION 2: PROGRAMS: STRUCTURING EDUCATION FOR CAREER SUCCESS



Adult learners don't just need programs, they need pathways. When colleges design with adult learners at the center, education becomes a powerful engine of change. Colleges provide more than just training, they offer hope, direction, and tangible progress toward a better life.

By embedding flexibility, stackability, and industry relevance into every stage of the educational journey, and by aligning programs to the needs and goals of adult learners, community colleges can transform lives and anchor regional economic vitality.

In today's dynamic labor market, adult learners return to college with diverse experiences, needs, and aspirations. As the profiles introduced earlier suggest, adults come with lives that are complex. Many are working parents, career changers, or underemployed individuals seeking upward mobility. To support them effectively, community colleges must offer programs of study that are not only responsive to the realities of adult life but also intentionally designed to promote career success. The second pillar of the 3D Pathway Model, Programs: Structuring Education for Career Success, underscores the importance of accessible, flexible, and industry-relevant learning pathways. It challenges institutions to create programs that build from entry-level skill development to long-term advancement opportunities, ensuring that every educational step counts toward a learner's goals.

CORE PRINCIPLES

Effective education is built on foundational principles that recognize the distinct needs, strengths, and circumstances of adult learners. These core principles fundamentally reshape how institutions approach program design, delivery, and support. Rather than asking adults to fit into systems designed for traditional students, these principles demand that educational structures adapt to honor adults' complex lives, extensive prior experiences, and career-focused motivations.

The four principles outlined below, starting where learners are, designing for real-world flexibility, connecting to meaningful employment, and building pathways for advancement, work together to create educational experiences that are both immediately valuable and sustainably transformative. When institutions embrace these principles as the foundation of their adult programming, they create environments where adults don't just participate in the educational process, but thrive within it and beyond.

1. Start Where Learners Are

What it looks like:

- Recognizing diverse entry points and prior experiences
- Providing multiple on-ramps with clear connections to career pathways
- Integrating support services from day one

“Starting with where learners are, not where we expect them to be, is fundamental to adult learner success.”¹⁴

Adult learners rarely enter postsecondary education on a traditional path. Some may need to build foundational skills in literacy, numeracy, or digital technology. Others might be returning to formal education after years in the workforce or attempting to translate military experience into civilian credentials. Programs of study must therefore be designed around a learner’s starting point, not just an ideal endpoint. For example, what a college would design for a student who is not yet proficient in digital literacy (profiles 1 and 2) would not be the same for a learner who is ready for online learning (profile 3).

Effective programs begin with inclusive on-ramps that provide contextualized foundational skills, career exploration, and bridge programs connecting basic education to industry pathways with integrated academic and career preparation. Importantly, these on-ramps must be connected to broader pathways, so that learners understand how to move from exploration to credentials and employment.

These on-ramps must be designed to integrate learner support from the time they start engaging with the college and include personalized advising, connections to community-based supports, and access to financial guidance. Early and sustained access to financial assistance (including FAFSA completion), WIOA eligibility screening, and emergency aid programs can increase the likelihood that adult learners persist beyond initial entry.

To support this, colleges must ensure transparency in their program design. Tools like guided pathways maps, career ladders, and personalized advising help learners visualize their journey. At every stage, adult learners should be able to answer:

- Where am I now?
- Where can I go next?
- What will it take to get there?

2. Design for the Real World

What it looks like:

- Building flexibility into scheduling, modality, and pacing
- Creating stackable credentials that add immediate value
- Enabling stop-out and re-entry without penalty

¹⁴ Strawn, J. (2021). [Credential Currency: How States Can Build Credentials of Value for All](#). Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success at CLASP.

“When learners see how today’s certificate connects to tomorrow’s promotion, persistence improves.”¹⁵

Adult learners often need to stop and start their education in response to work, caregiving, or health needs. Program design must reflect this reality. One of the most effective strategies for supporting adult learners is the use of stackable credentials that allow learners to earn short-term certificates that align to labor market value while also counting toward longer-term goals such as degrees or licensure.¹⁶ Stackable credentials also allow learners to make progress toward career goals while balancing work and family responsibilities. They offer momentum: each credential adds value in the labor market, while also keeping the door open for further advancement.

To make stackability meaningful, institutions must go beyond listing sequential certificates on paper. They must align coursework across programs, eliminate redundant or disconnected offerings, and ensure that foundational credentials articulate clearly into more advanced ones.

Flexibility is equally important and fosters engagement. Flexibility means offering evening, weekend, hybrid, and online options and building seamless transitions between noncredit and credit pathways, recognizing prior learning, and enabling multiple start points throughout the year. Sustained engagement is supported when adult learners can see that their previous coursework, job experience, or military service counts toward their goals. Embedding automatic enrollment in advising and career navigation services can further reduce the friction of staying enrolled. Adult learners need scheduling options that fit their lives, night classes, weekend intensives, hybrid and online formats, and accelerated terms. A well-structured program honors the many ways adult learners bring experience to the classroom and acknowledges and builds on their prior knowledge and skills.

3. Connect to Real Jobs

What it looks like:

- Aligning programs with regional labor market demand
- Embedding regionally-relevant, industry-recognized certifications
- Integrating work-based learning opportunities

¹⁵ Ganzglass, E., Bird, K., & Prince, H. (2011). [Giving Credit Where Credit Is Due: Creating a Competency-Based Qualifications Framework for Postsecondary Education and Training](#). CLASP.

¹⁶ Daugherty, L., Bahr, P. R., Nguyen, P., May-Trifiletti, J., Columbus, R., & Kushner, J. (2023). Stackable credential pipelines and equity for low-income individuals: Evidence from Colorado and Ohio

“Everyone suffers when credentials and economic needs don't align.”¹⁷

Programs that lead nowhere are barriers disguised as opportunities. Even learners who are building foundational skills need to have a plan to progress towards increased opportunity. Colleges must build offerings that align tightly with regional labor market demand and embed industry-recognized certifications and work-based learning such as internships and apprenticeships. Strong partnerships with employers, workforce boards, and labor unions help ensure that curriculum is not only aligned to industry standards but also responsive to real-world shifts in demand.

To ensure learners succeed, program structures should include co-design with employers to guarantee relevance. Strong feedback loops from alumni and industry partners strengthen relevance and enable programs to adapt to shifting needs. When learners know that a program leads to available jobs with high growth wages, they are more likely to stay the course, even when personal and financial barriers arise.

Work-based learning opportunities, such as internships, apprenticeships, and clinical placements, should be integrated into programs of study whenever feasible. These experiences provide adult learners with critical opportunities to apply their skills, build networks, and gain confidence in their career transitions. They also allow colleges to deepen employer partnerships and create more seamless pathways from classroom to employment.

Programs should also integrate career readiness and job placement support as part of the curriculum, not as an optional add-on, ensuring that learners are equipped to navigate transitions and re-engage in upskilling later in their careers.

To support continuous improvement, programs must be informed by real-time labor market data and student outcome metrics. Institutions can use this information to identify which programs yield high-value credentials, where equity gaps exist, and how to better serve adult learners at each stage of their journey.

4. Build for Advancement, Not Just Entry

What it looks like:

- Creating clear pathways from certificates to degrees
- Designing programs that support career progression, not just entry
- Maintaining connections for lifelong learning

¹⁷ Strohl, J., Mabel, Z., & Campbell, K. P. (2024). [The great misalignment: Addressing the mismatch between the supply of certificates and associate's degrees and the future demand for workers in 565 US labor markets](#). Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

“Advancement isn’t just about what learners can do next, it’s about helping them imagine they belong there.”¹⁸

For many adult learners, the goal is not just to enter the workforce, but to advance within it. For students who are building foundational skills and for those who are ready for career-focused courses now, programs must be designed with upward mobility in mind, offering transparent pathways from short-term certificates to degrees, and clear transfer options to four-year institutions when appropriate. This means colleges must design programs that support continuing education and upskilling, not just entry-level employment. Whether through embedded transfer pathways, bachelor’s degree partnerships, or advanced certifications, programs should create ladders, not cul-de-sacs, of opportunity.

Embedding continuing education opportunities, specialized training, or employer-sponsored learning into program pathways signals to learners that their education does not end with one credential. Institutions must make advancement visible and achievable, ensuring that advisors and program faculty communicate long-term planning from the start.

This requires an institutional culture that sees adult learners not as temporary or transactional students, but as lifelong learners who bring value to the college community. It also means building support ecosystems that include access to holistic support. Such ecosystems can further sustain adult learners through longer-term programs and keep advancement pathways open, evolving with the learner’s needs as they progress.

Implementation Approach: Building a System that Works for Adult Learners

Designing programs for adult learners requires a systemic approach grounded in equity, data, and lived experience. These core principles are actions not just ideas. It is not enough to expand access, colleges must rethink structures, supports, and delivery models that enable adult learners to enroll, persist, and advance in careers that offer economic mobility. This approach for building adult-centered programs is grounded in field-tested practices and current research and requires a phased implementation strategy centering student success. The following section outlines a three phase change process in developing an adult learner-centered program.

This process can unfold in three distinct phases: first, establishing foundational understanding through comprehensive assessment of learner needs and regional labor market demands; second, redesigning programs based on these insights; and third, implementing curriculum delivery methods optimized for both learners and employer partners.

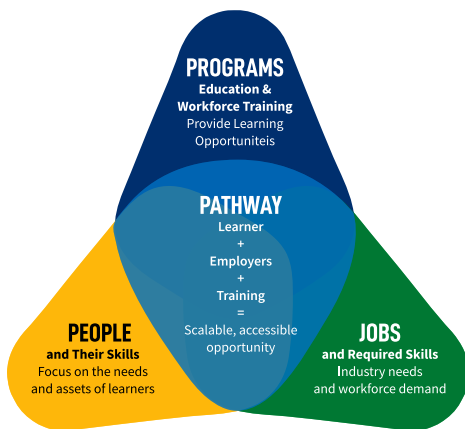
¹⁸ Ma, J., Pender, M., & Welch, M. (2016). [Education Pays 2016: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society](#). College Board.

Phase 1: Assessment and Foundation Setting

This foundational phase uses a triangulated approach to understand who adult learners are, what the regional economy demands, and how current programs can be redesigned to create clear pathways to living-wage employment. Rather than sequential steps, these three assessment areas inform and strengthen each other to build a comprehensive foundation for adult learner success.

Adult learners represent a significant and increasingly diverse segment of community college enrollment, with over 40% of California's community college students being 25 or older. These students navigate complex lives, balancing educational goals with employment responsibilities, family caregiving duties, and financial pressures. To serve them effectively, institutions must understand not only who these learners are and what barriers they face, but also how regional economic opportunities align with institutional capacity to create clear pathways to family-sustaining careers.

The Three-Dimensional Assessment Approach



Effective program redesign requires simultaneously examining three interconnected dimensions: learner characteristics and needs, regional labor market demands, and institutional program capacity. Each assessment area provides critical data that informs the others, creating a comprehensive picture that guides strategic decision-making.

Dimension 1: Adult Learner Profile and Needs Analysis

Understanding your adult learner population provides the foundation for all program design decisions, while labor market data helps prioritize

which learner populations to focus on first, and pathway mapping reveals where current programs succeed or fail in serving different adult populations.

- **Analyze current adult learner demographics and patterns:** Examine enrollment data, persistence rates, and completion outcomes disaggregated by key characteristics including age, income level, race/ethnicity, enrollment intensity, and employment status to identify trends and disparities.
- **Evaluate program-level performance for adult students:** Assess which academic and career pathways demonstrate strong completion rates and employment outcomes for adult learners, and which programs show persistent gaps or barriers to success.
- **Identify support service utilization and gaps:** Determine which wraparound services (financial aid, childcare, transportation, tutoring) are most critical for adult learner persistence, and where institutional capacity falls short.

Dimension 2: Regional Labor Market Opportunity Analysis

Labor market analysis reveals which career pathways offer the greatest potential for economic mobility, while learner data helps identify which populations are underrepresented in high-opportunity sectors, and program mapping shows where institutional offerings align with or diverge from economic demand.

Career pathway programs must reflect real opportunity. It is estimated that 30% of annual openings through 2031 will go to workers with a middle -skill credential (a certificate or associate’s degree) or some college but no degree.¹⁹ Despite this demand, significant gaps persist between credential production and workforce needs in high-paying middle-skills occupations. Using data your college already collects for federal and state reporting (CAEP, Strong Workforce Program, Perkins V, Education Master Plans), conduct a deep dive on labor demands in your region.

- **Review regional labor market data for growth occupations:** Use tools like Lightcast, Bureau of Labor Statistics, or regional Centers of Excellence to identify high-growth, high-wage occupations accessible through community college credentials.
- **Assess current program alignment with industry demand:** Cross-reference labor market opportunities with institutional program offerings to identify effective programs, outdated offerings, and gaps in high-opportunity occupations.
- **Analyze wage progression and equity patterns:** Examine which sectors offer clear advancement pathways and living wages, and identify where demographic disparities exist in high-opportunity fields.

Dimension 3: Institutional Program Capacity and Pathway Mapping

Program mapping reveals how current institutional structures support or hinder adult learner success, while learner data identifies where students get stuck or drop out, and labor market analysis shows which pathways lead to economic opportunity versus dead ends.

Many adult learners struggle to navigate disconnected or redundant programs that don't clearly lead to employment or advancement. Effective pathway design requires understanding how current programs function as a system and where gaps or barriers prevent adult learners from reaching their goals.

- **Create comprehensive pathway visualizations:** Map all credential offerings to show how programs connect to each other and to specific career outcomes, including wage ranges and advancement opportunities.
- **Identify structural barriers and misalignments:** Analyze curricular gaps, scheduling conflicts, prerequisite requirements, or support service limitations create obstacles for adult learners moving through programs.

19 Carnevale, A. P., Gulish, A., Morris, C., Campbell, K. P., Ahn, T., & Quinn, M. C. (2024). [After everything: Projections of jobs, education, and training requirements through 2031](#). Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

- **Assess stackability and articulation effectiveness:** Evaluate how well current programs allow for stop-out and re-entry, credit accumulation across programs, and seamless transitions between noncredit and credit pathways.

Synthesis and Strategic Planning

The culmination of Phase 1 involves synthesizing findings across all three dimensions to identify strategic priorities for program redesign. **This analysis should reveal:**

- Which adult learner populations face the greatest barriers to accessing high-opportunity career pathways
- Which regional economic sectors offer the best potential for creating family-sustaining career advancement
- Where institutional program capacity can be leveraged, expanded, or redesigned to better serve adult learners
- Which partnerships with employers, workforce agencies, and community organizations are most critical for success

This triangulated assessment provides the evidence base needed to make strategic decisions about program redesign, resource allocation, and partnership development in Phase 2.

Phase 2: Program Redesign

With foundational data in place, colleges can redesign programs to reflect the realities of adult learners' lives, building in flexibility, relevance, and support from the ground up. There is a readiness assessment at the end of this section to support redesign planning.

ESSENTIAL DESIGN ELEMENTS

Creating educational pathways that truly serve adult learners requires intentional design choices that address their unique circumstances and leverage their existing strengths. Adults bring rich life experiences, professional skills, and pressing real-world needs that demand a fundamentally different approach to program structure and delivery.

The four essential design elements outlined below represent evidence-based strategies that institutions can implement to improve access, persistence, and completion for adult populations.²⁰ From flexible entry points that accommodate complex schedules to financial navigation support that addresses the primary barrier to adult participation, these design elements work together to create educational experiences that honor adults' time, recognize their prior knowledge, and provide clear pathways to meaningful career outcomes. When implemented comprehensively, these elements transform institutional culture from one that asks adults to adapt to traditional models, to one that adapts to meet adults where they are.

20 Geary, C. (2023). [Bringing Adults Back to the Community College Playbook](#). New America.

1. **Flexible Entry Points**
2. **Engaging Prior Knowledge**
3. **Stackable Credential Architecture**
4. **Financial Aid and Navigation Infrastructure**

1. Flexible Entry Points

For adult learners, many of whom are working, parenting, or returning to school after years away, entry into a program must be easy, responsive, and adaptable to individual circumstances. The top factors influencing adults' decision to enroll include the total length of time required to complete a degree; the option for flexible, weekend or part-time scheduling; and the availability of online or hybrid programs.²¹ To effectively serve adult students, colleges should design flexible entry mechanisms that allow learners to start when they're ready, at a level that fits their skills, and with a clear view of where they're going.

Bridge Programs (4–8 weeks) act as onboarding ramps for adults who may not meet placement criteria or lack confidence in their academic readiness.²² These short, intensive offerings:

- Integrate basic skills (math, English, digital literacy) with introductory career content.
- Use contextualized instruction to make foundational learning relevant to a specific industry (e.g., healthcare or manufacturing math).
- Could be offered noncredit, credit-bearing, or adult dual-enrollment with noncredit - credit transitions.
- Often include career readiness components, like resume writing, goal setting, and understanding industry culture.



Tip: Embed proactive academic advising and a guaranteed “next step” (e.g., entrance into a credit-bearing course or credential program) to reduce drop-off after completion.

Career Exploration Modules are short, typically noncredit courses designed to help learners clarify interests and align their goals with viable education and career options before committing to a full program.²³ Effective modules:

- Are 1–3 weeks long and explore multiple career pathways through hands-on activities, guest speakers, and job market data.

21 Belzer, A., & Dashew, B. (Eds.). (2023). [Understanding the adult learner: Perspectives and practices.](#)

22 U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). [Bridge Programs for Low-Skill Adults.](#)

23 Borradaile, K., Martinez, A., & Schochet, P. (2021). [Adult education strategies: Identifying and building evidence of effectiveness](#) U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation.

- Can be stackable themselves, counting as part of a longer bridge or onboarding sequence.
- Provide opportunities for assessments of strengths and interests, such as the O*NET Interest Profiler or career mapping tools.
- Can serve as pre-requisites or decision points before formal enrollment, reducing the risk of learner misalignment or attrition.



Tip: Offer career exploration as part of orientation, in partnership with adult education providers, workforce agencies, or community-based organizations.

Multiple Start Dates including quarterly or rolling entry, help reduce wait times and lost momentum and allow those adult learners who cannot afford to wait to enroll.²⁴ Flexibility can be embedded through these approaches:

- Modularizing courses into shorter terms (e.g., 7- or 8-week sessions) that can be offered year-round.
- Establishing rolling admissions for select programs, particularly in high-demand or short-term credentials.
- Creating open-enrollment noncredit cohorts that articulate into credit programs without waiting for semester start dates.
- Aligning course delivery schedules with key milestones in workforce cycles (e.g., end of unemployment benefits, WIOA intake windows, or employer hiring surges).



Tip: Pair frequent start dates with “just-in-time” onboarding and orientation to maintain quality and readiness, even with accelerated timelines.

2. Engaging Prior Knowledge for Credit

Adult learners bring rich and varied life experiences to college: military service, work history, parenting, caregiving, community leadership, and noncredit training. Yet too often, they are asked to start from scratch. Valuing prior knowledge honors what learners already know, shortens time to completion, reduces cost, and improves motivation. It also affirms their identities as capable learners and professionals, an essential ingredient in adult learner persistence.

²⁴ WICHE. (2023, September 12). [How Your College Can Attract More Adult Learners to Enroll](#). WCET Frontiers.

Credit for Prior Learning (CPL): Recognizing the skills adult learners bring by offering structured opportunities to earn credit for relevant work or military is a critical element to engaging adult learners.²⁵ This includes portfolio-based assessment, where students receive faculty guidance to document learning aligned with course outcomes. This approach empowers learners to document and reflect upon their relevant work or life experiences, effectively mapping them to specific course-level learning outcomes. Institutions should integrate CPL awareness and advising into onboarding and education planning to ensure students don't repeat what they already know and ensure no eligible credit is left on the table.²⁶ Learners who earn CPL are more likely to complete their credentials and do so in less time, saving an average of \$1,500 in tuition and earning 17 more credits than peers without CPL.²⁷

CPL should not be a separate or burdensome process. To truly support adult learners, colleges must embed CPL into the program design, advising workflows, and catalog policies, and ensure faculty and staff are trained to support equitable and transparent CPL evaluation. This approach not only reduces redundancy but signals to learners that their experiences are valued, and can be leveraged toward meaningful progress.

Key strategies to engage prior knowledge include:

- **Standardized Exams:** Credit can also be granted through standardized exams (e.g., CLEP, DSST), industry certifications (e.g., CompTIA, EMT), and faculty-designed challenge exams. Accept passing scores from CLEP, DSST, or industry-recognized certifications (e.g., CompTIA, EMT, Child Development Associate) as credit toward applicable program requirements. Passing CLEP exams (a form of challenge standard exam) has been shown to increase completion likelihood and earnings.²⁸
- **Faculty-Designed Challenge Exams:** Faculty-designed challenge exams offer a rigorous, institutionally validated method for awarding credit to adult learners who already possess the knowledge and skills typically gained through a course. Faculty-designed assessments are a vital tool for institutions seeking to scale CPL while preserving academic standards and faculty governance.²⁹ This approach allows learners to demonstrate competency without sitting through content they've already mastered, saving time, money, and frustration. When implemented effectively, challenge exams promote equity by acknowledging the diverse, real-world learning that many adults acquire outside formal education.

25 Palmer, I., & Nguyen, S. (2019). [Connecting adults to college with credit for prior learning](#). New America.

26 Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). (2025). Adult Learner 360.

27 Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). (2020). The PLA boost: Results from a 72-institution study of prior learning assessment and adult student outcomes. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

28 Boatman, A., Hurwitz, M., Lee, J., & Smith, J. (2019). The Impact of Prior Learning Assessments on College Completion and Financial Outcomes. Vanderbilt University, Andrew Young School of Policy Studies

29 Lane, P., & Leibrandt, S. (2023). Recognizing Prior Learning in the 21st Century: A Synthesis Brief. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE).

Design considerations:

- **Clarity and Transparency:** Clearly outline which courses are eligible for challenge exams, the format and criteria for passing, and any limits on the number of credits awarded.
- **Faculty Support:** Provide training and compensation for faculty involved in designing, scoring, and advising students on challenge exams.
- **Academic Integrity:** Ensure the exams are rigorous and mapped to course learning outcomes to maintain the credibility of awarded credit.
- **Accessibility:** Promote challenge exam options during orientation and advising, not just when a student happens to ask.

3. Stackable Credential Architecture

Stackable credential pathways are a critical tool for meeting the educational and economic needs of adult learners, especially those balancing work, caregiving, and other responsibilities. By design, stackable credentials allow learners to earn short-term, industry-recognized credentials that build toward higher-level certificates or degrees. Evidence shows that students who stack credentials reach middle wage income within six years.³⁰

This approach offers much-needed flexibility, enabling students to pause for life or work and return without losing momentum or credit for what they've already accomplished. For adults who must prioritize immediate employment and financial stability, these “stop-out and return” options increase both access and persistence in higher education.³¹

“Advancement isn’t just about what learners can do next, it’s about helping them imagine they belong there.”³²

The value of stackable credentials extends beyond convenience. Stackable credentials are also linked to stronger employment outcomes and wage progression. Students who start with certificates but then complete additional credentials in the same field—what we refer to as “stacking”—typically catch up in earnings to students who only complete a single, high-

30 Bohn, S., McConville, S. (2019). [Career pathways and economic mobility at California's community colleges](#). Public Policy Institute of California; Daugherty, L., Bahr, P. R., Nguyen, P., May-Trifiletti, J., Columbus, R., & Kushner, J. (2023). [Do Low-Income Students Benefit from Stacking Credentials? Descriptive Evidence from Colorado and Ohio](#). Research Brief. RAND Corporation.

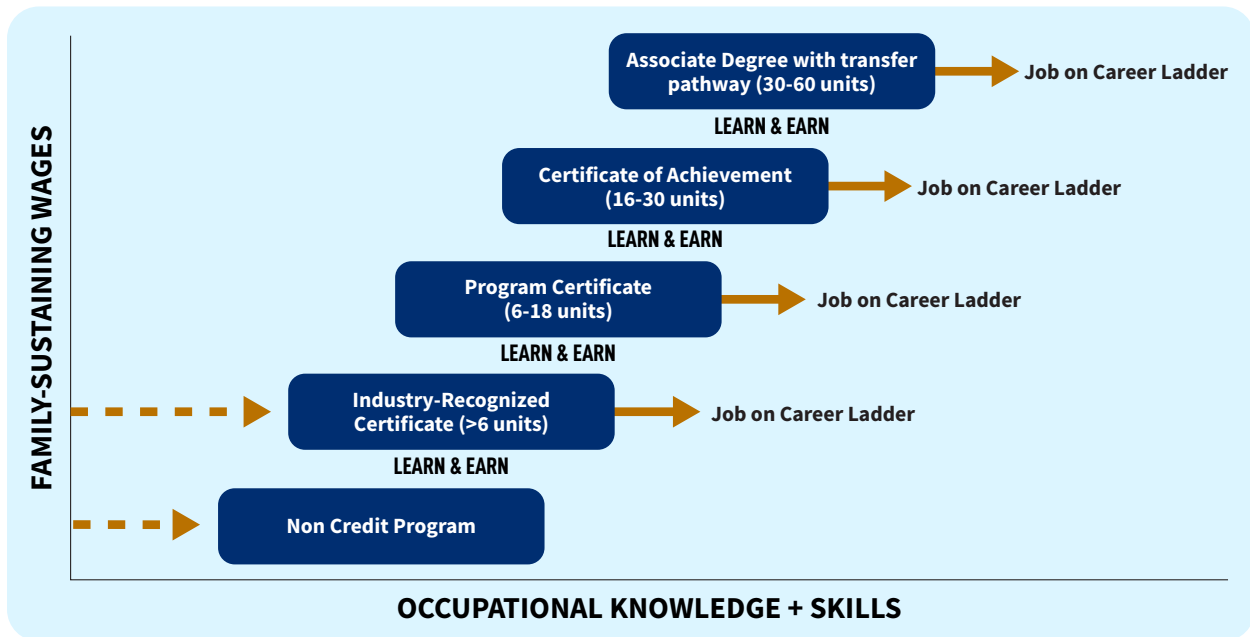
31 Wilson, B. (2016). [Stackable credential policy toolkit: Skills in the states](#). National Skills Coalition.

32 Wilson, B. (2016). [Stackable credential policy toolkit: Skills in the states](#). National Skills Coalition.

Ma, J., Pender, M., & Welch, M. (2016). Education Pays 2016: [The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society](#). College Board.

return credential.³³ However, not all pathways deliver the same value. Stackable systems must be intentionally designed, sequenced, labor market-informed, and transparent across institutions. Without clear pathways, adult learners often find their prior learning, especially from noncredit courses, is unrecognized, resulting in duplicated coursework, lost time, and increased costs.³⁴

Figure 2. Basic Career Pathway Model³⁵



Creating truly stackable programs requires alignment across departments, employer engagement, and strong data infrastructure. Career education programs vary widely across colleges when it comes to stackable credentials, even within the same discipline. Only about 15% of existing programs make explicit connections between credentials, highlighting the critical need for institutional coordination. An analysis of existing programs across the community college system suggests that well-defined pathways with clearly mapped course sequences and multiple exit and reentry points do increase the odds of students stacking credentials.³⁶

State-level policies that promote stackable credentialing, such as incentives, funding, and credit articulation, are essential to closing racial and economic opportunity gaps in credential

33 Bohn, S., McConville, S. (2019). [Career pathways and economic mobility at California's community colleges](#). Public Policy Institute of California; Daugherty, L., Bahr, P. R., Nguyen, P., May-Trifiletti, J., Columbus, R., & Kushner, J. (2023). [Do Low-Income Students Benefit from Stacking Credentials? Descriptive Evidence from Colorado and Ohio](#). Research Brief. RAND Corporation.

34 Wilson, B. (2016). [Stackable credential policy toolkit: Skills in the states](#). National Skills Coalition.

35 Adapted from Alliance for Quality Career Pathways, (2014). [Shared Vision, Strong Systems](#). CLASP.

36 McConville, S., & Bohn, S. (2018). [Stackable credentials in career education at California community colleges](#). Public Policy Institute of California.

attainment.³⁷ There is evidence that students in well-defined stackable credential pathways are 5 percentage points more likely to stack credentials compared to those in all other programs, and 16 percentage points more likely compared to students in programs with no defined stackable sequence.³⁸

At the institutional level, this means integrating noncredit and credit pathways, ensuring consistent advising, and mapping stackability across programs and sectors. The system's "two-pronged approach" to making sure programs connect to in-demand, high-return careers includes regional infrastructure, which includes regional labor market centers that provide colleges with data on local industries. The second area includes tools to help students better navigate their program choices, "while also trying to make transparent the earnings projections for students as they move into these career options". Strong data systems are essential, as linking records between community colleges and California's Employment Development Department. These data allow researchers to analyze economic returns on credentials and identify how "stacking" multiple, related credentials have economic benefits.

When done well, stackable credentials help adult learners achieve faster, clearer, and more equitable access to careers that offer mobility and meaning.³⁹ The evidence in California shows that nearly 200,000 students earned a short-term certificate as their first community college credential between school years 2000-01 and 2013-14. Nearly half of these students are aged 30 or older, and the vast majority (80%) started with a high school education or less, demonstrating the critical role these programs play for working adults seeking economic mobility.⁴⁰

Steps to Build a Stackable Credential Pathway

1. Define What “Stackable” Means for Your Institution

- Align on a shared definition of stackability across credit and noncredit programs.
- Clarify whether stackability refers to vertical (progressive levels, e.g., certificate → degree) or horizontal (cross-specialization) stacking.
- Determine how stackable credentials will be recorded, tracked, and transcribed.

2. Identify Priority Sectors Based on Labor Market Demand

- Use regional LMI and employer feedback to determine high-demand industries (e.g., healthcare, IT, manufacturing).

37 Wilson, B. (2016). [Stackable credential policy toolkit: Skills in the states](#). National Skills Coalition.

38 McConville, S., & Bohn, S. (2018). [Stackable credentials in career education at California community colleges](#). Public Policy Institute of California.

39 Education Strategy Group. (2023). [Stackability guide: Building credential connections within institutions](#).

40 McConville, S., & Bohn, S. (2018). [Stackable credentials in career education at California community colleges](#). Public Policy Institute of California.

- Focus on sectors where short-term credentials lead to jobs and where longer-term advancement opportunities exist.

3. Map and Align Existing Programs

- Audit all current credit and noncredit offerings in the priority sector(s).
- Identify gaps, redundancies, and misalignments in curriculum that create barriers to credential progression.
- Visually map how each credential could connect to the next step and identify steps to address each friction point—including those transitions between programs or institutions ideally ending in a degree or transferable credential.

4. Engage Employers and Industry Partners Early

- Validate the skillsets and certifications valued by employers at each level of the stack.
- Co-design curriculum modules where possible, especially for industry-recognized credentials.
- Establish or strengthen advisory boards to ensure stackability stays current.

5. Ensure Seamless Opportunities to Maximize Credit Accumulation

- Develop systems like auto awarding and systematic credit audits to ensure students receive the certificates for the work they have completed.
- Create formal articulation agreements between noncredit and credit programs.
- Develop stackable credential pathways that systematically evaluate and pre-qualify external training programs, allowing students to receive automatic CPL recognition for approved prior learning experiences.
- Integrate credit for prior learning processes into advising, onboarding, and degree audit systems.

6. Embed Student Supports

- Design advising models that guide students through stackable pathways from entry to employment and further education.
- Integrate financial aid, tutoring, child care, transportation, and career services into credential program design, especially for adult learners.
- Ensure program maps are student-friendly, transparent, and accessible.
- Align credentials with Success Coaches, Peer Case Management or Navigators to help students stay on track and get connected to resources, including having regular counseling appointments.

7. Develop a Data and Tracking Infrastructure

- Track learner progression across credentials, programs, and time (including stop-outs and re-entry).
- Use disaggregated data to identify equity gaps in progression and completion.
- Monitor employment and wage outcomes for each credential level.

8. Launch, Refine, and Scale

- Pilot stackable pathways in one or two sectors first.
- Collect student and employer feedback and refine program sequencing and support.
- Use early success to scale the model across other sectors or campuses.

4. Financial Aid and Navigation Infrastructure

For adult learners, cost is often the most significant obstacle to enrollment and persistence. The introduction of Workforce Pell in July 2026 and recent WIOA expansions create unprecedented opportunities to support adult learners across their educational journey—but only if institutions build the navigation infrastructure to help learners access and leverage these resources effectively.

Workforce Pell and Traditional Aid Integration

The expansion of Pell Grant eligibility to high-quality short-term programs represents a game-changer for adult learners,⁴¹ but requires strategic implementation to maximize impact.

Early Aid Determination and Strategic Timing: Build systems that help learners understand their aid eligibility before enrollment begins. Many adults will benefit from timing their enrollment for maximum aid advantage—for example, waiting until after July 1, 2026, to access Workforce Pell for qualifying programs. Create aid forecasting tools and counseling sessions that help learners map their educational pathway against aid availability.

Dual-Track Navigation Systems: Develop financial aid workflows that can simultaneously evaluate traditional Pell eligibility for longer-term, credit-bearing programs alongside Workforce Pell opportunities for shorter credentials. Train aid staff to understand how these programs complement each other and help learners sequence their education for maximum financial benefit.

Proactive Outreach for Non-Credit Learners: Many adults in workforce training programs have never completed a FAFSA and may not realize federal aid is now available for their pathway. Embed FAFSA completion into all adult education and workforce program orientations, with dedicated support for learners navigating aid applications for the first time.

41 <https://ticas.org/affordability-2/reconciliation-2025-pell/>

LEARNER PROFILE-SPECIFIC FINANCIAL STRATEGIES

Profile 1: Foundational Learners

Characteristics: Basic skills gaps, new to higher education, often starting with non-credit programs

Workforce Pell as Gateway Aid: For learners entering education for the first time, Workforce Pell can provide their first experience with federal financial aid while building toward longer-term educational goals. Design accessible entry-level pathways that qualify for Workforce Pell and create clear progression routes to traditional Pell-eligible programs.

WIOA Title II Integration: Integrate basic literacy, GED preparation, and digital skills training (supported through WIOA Title II) directly into career pathway programming. Build partnerships with adult education providers to create seamless transitions from foundational skills development to credentialed training programs.

Wraparound Financial Support: Beginning learners often need comprehensive support beyond tuition. Provide transportation assistance, childcare vouchers, and emergency aid funds as part of integrated support packages that address survival needs alongside educational costs.

Profile 2: Skill Builders

Characteristics: Some college experience, developing career focus, balancing multiple responsibilities

Flexible Aid Packaging: These learners benefit from aid packages that can adapt to part-time study, stop-out periods, and varying program lengths. Develop financial aid approaches that support both traditional semester-based learning and competency-based or accelerated formats.

Employer Partnership Integration: Many emerging learners are employed and can benefit from employer tuition assistance combined with federal aid. Build systems to coordinate employer benefits with Pell and Workforce Pell, ensuring learners maximize all available resources without jeopardizing eligibility.

Bridge Programming Support: Design financial support for bridge programs that help learners transition between basic skills and credential programs, or between non-credit and credit-bearing coursework. These transitional moments often require flexible funding approaches.

Profile 3: Ready to Enroll

Characteristics: Clear career goals, may be upskilling or changing careers, focused on specific credentials

Strategic Aid Sequencing: Help these learners understand how to sequence traditional Pell (for longer credentials like associate degrees) with Workforce Pell (for targeted certifications) to support comprehensive career advancement. Provide financial planning that considers both immediate training needs and longer-term degree goals.

Industry-Specific Financial Models: Develop targeted financial support for high-demand fields that require specific training sequences. For example, healthcare pathways might combine Workforce Pell for initial certifications with traditional aid for degree completion.

Advanced Career Services Integration: Link financial aid counseling directly to career advancement planning, helping learners understand the return on investment for different credential combinations and timing their education for maximum career impact.

WIOA Partnership Infrastructure

Co-Enrollment Pipeline Development: Build systematic co-enrollment processes between college programs and WIOA providers, allowing students to access comprehensive support including tuition assistance, case management, and wraparound services. Create shared intake processes and data systems that support seamless learner transitions.

One-Stop Center Integration: Maintain active partnerships with American Job Centers and local workforce boards to create warm handoff protocols. Train staff at both institutions on available resources and create shared case management approaches that prevent learners from falling through system cracks.

Shared Performance Accountability: Develop shared metrics and reporting systems with WIOA partners that track learner progression across both systems, ensuring accountability for outcomes while reducing administrative burden on learners.

Flexible Financial Models and Retention Support

Last-Dollar and Gap-Filling Strategies: While federal aid expansion is significant, many learners will still face funding gaps. Develop state and local scholarship programs that fill gaps for learners or programs not yet eligible for federal aid, with particular attention to supporting learners during the transition period before Workforce Pell implementation.

Hidden Cost Mitigation: Build comprehensive support for the non-tuition costs that derail adult learners—transportation, childcare, technology, and emergency needs. Integrate these supports into financial aid packaging rather than treating them as separate services.

Emergency Aid as Core Infrastructure: Maintain robust emergency aid programs that can respond quickly to one-time crises that threaten learner persistence. Build these funds into institutional budget planning rather than relying solely on external grants.

Implementation Strategies

- **Staff Training and Development:** Provide comprehensive training for financial aid staff on adult learner needs, including understanding of defaulted loans, mixed-status households, and non-traditional enrollment patterns. Cross-train staff on both traditional and Workforce Pell requirements.
- **Technology Integration:** Develop or upgrade student information systems to handle the complexity of multiple aid sources, varying program lengths, and non-traditional enrollment patterns that characterize adult learner populations.
- **Data Sharing and Coordination:** Build data sharing agreements and systems that allow for coordinated case management across financial aid, academic advising, and wraparound support services.
- **Timeline Management:** Create clear communication strategies that help learners understand aid application deadlines, program start dates, and optimal timing for different types of aid, particularly as Workforce Pell becomes available.

Phase 3: Delivery Innovation

To engage and retain adult learners, programs must be delivered in ways that reflect the complexities of their lives, work, caregiving, and other adult responsibilities, while maintaining instructional quality and alignment with employer needs. This phase emphasizes how programs are delivered, not just what is delivered as a core equity strategy that determines whether adult learners can persist and succeed.

Flexible Modality Options

Colleges must offer modalities for learners to engage in content, through formats that are flexible, predictable, and accessible. Flexibility allows adult learners to choose programs that work for their schedules, employment status, and learning preferences.

1. Hybrid Learning

Hybrid models combine the convenience of online instruction with the structure and engagement of in-person labs, simulations, or clinicals. This modality is particularly effective for technical programs, such as allied health and IT, where theoretical content can be delivered online, and hands-on practice takes place in person.

Research shows that well-designed hybrid courses improve both access and learning outcomes for nontraditional students, particularly when faculty engagement is high and navigation is clear⁴²

2. Weekend Intensives

Weekend bootcamps or block classes are ideal for adults who work during the week or provide weekday care. These programs condense material into full-day sessions across weekends, allowing students to focus deeply while maintaining other commitments.

Flexibility in Action: Several California community colleges have launched weekend-only business and healthcare pathways designed to accommodate working parents. These cohorts show stronger term-to-term persistence due to predictable scheduling.

3. Evening Cohorts

Evening programs offer consistency and community. By placing learners in scheduled evening blocks (e.g., 6–9 PM, two nights/week), colleges help working learners build routines and support networks.



Tip: Cohorted evening models also improve peer bonding and completion, especially when combined with embedded academic support and wraparound services.

4. Competency-Based Education (CBE)

CBE allows students to progress through material based on what they can demonstrate, rather than how many hours they've spent in class. This is ideal for adult learners with prior experience or strong self-direction.

Students in CBE programs, especially those with personalized coaching, show faster time-to-completion and strong satisfaction with career relevance⁴³

42 Van Wart, M., Ni, A. Y., Ready, D., Shayo, C., & Court, J. (2020). [Factors leading to online learner satisfaction](#). *Business Education Innovation Journal*, 12(1), 14–24.

43 Klein-Collins, R., & Olson, R. (2014). [Random access: The Latino student experience with competency-based education](#). Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL).

5. Asynchronous Online Learning

Asynchronous courses give learners maximum flexibility by allowing them to engage with content, assignments, and discussions on their own schedule—without required meeting times. This modality is especially valuable for adults balancing shifting work hours, caregiving, or multiple jobs. When paired with clear deadlines, instructor presence, and user-friendly platforms, asynchronous learning empowers students to move at their own pace while staying on track.

Research shows that success in asynchronous formats improves significantly for adult learners when colleges provide strong onboarding, regular feedback, and mobile-friendly access.⁴⁴

Work-Based Learning Integration

Career-connected learning doesn't just reinforce content, it increases motivation, confidence, and job placement. For adult learners, integrating work-based learning into the delivery model helps align education with real outcomes.

1. Apprenticeships

Paid, structured, and industry-aligned, apprenticeships allow learners to earn while they learn. Apprenticeships typically blend classroom instruction with on-the-job training, and are most effective when aligned with credit-bearing pathways.

Completion rates and wage gains are significantly higher for registered apprenticeship participants compared to peers in non-apprenticeship pathways⁴⁵

2. Internships & Clinical Placements

These are critical for fields like healthcare, education, and human services. Credit-bearing internships increase the perceived value of coursework and offer direct exposure to the workplace.



Tip: Ensure internship requirements are financially accessible by offering stipends, counting internships toward full-time credit loads to maintain financial aid eligibility, or coordinating paid placements with employers.

⁴⁴ Lu, Y. (2022). [Toward high-quality adult online learning: A systematic examination of factors and strategies that influence adult online learning](#). Sustainability, 14(4), Article 2257.

⁴⁵ Katz, B., Lerman, R., Kuehn, D., & Shakesprere, J. (2022). [Did apprentices achieve faster earnings growth than comparable workers?](#) Findings from the American Apprenticeship Initiative (ETA Opportunity and Performance Brief No. 41). U.S. Department of Labor.

3. Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Adult learners are often highly motivated by problem-solving. Embedding employer-sourced projects into curriculum builds applicable skills and meaningful portfolio artifacts.

“Project-based learning rooted in real-world challenges boosts adult learners’ autonomy, purposefulness, and meta-skills like project management—especially when aligned with workplace contexts. In one study with adult multilingual learners in ESL settings, PBL enhanced learner autonomy, contextualization, and project planning abilities.”⁴⁶

Delivery innovation is the mechanism that transforms adult learner potential into completion. Institutions that diversify modalities, integrate career skills, and prioritize accessibility and relevance position themselves not just as education providers, but as accelerators of economic mobility.



For comprehensive program design assessment, see **Assessment C: Adult Learner Program Design & Pathway Alignment in Appendix A of this toolkit**, which provides detailed evaluation criteria for flexible program structures, adult-centered curriculum design, career and transfer pathway clarity, and learner profile differentiation. The assessment can be used alone or in combination with the following action plan.

PROGRAMS-FOCUSED QUICK START GUIDE

Design & Industry Alignment

Goal: Redesign programs for adult learner success with direct industry connections leading to employment.

30 Days: Assessment & Engagement

Week 1-2: Evaluate Current State

- Complete Assessments C & D from Appendix A
- Identify 2-3 high-enrollment programs for priority redesign
- Analyze completion rates and employment outcomes by demographics

⁴⁶ Tang, A. F. (2023). Implementing project-based language learning with adult multilingual learners of English. *Scholar-Practitioner Journal of Adult Education and Literacy*.

Week 3-4: Launch Industry Engagement

- Schedule listening sessions with 8-10 regional employers
- Reactivate employer advisory committees or create new ones
- Map labor market demands and high-opportunity sectors

90 Days: Redesign Foundation

Month 2: Program Flexibility

- Implement multiple start dates (quarterly enrollment) for priority programs
- Establish Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) processes with portfolio assessment
- Create evening/weekend/hybrid delivery options
- Develop accelerated formats for experienced adult learners

Month 3: Industry Integration

- Launch 2-3 work-based learning partnerships (internships, apprenticeships)
- Integrate employer-sponsored projects into curriculum
- Establish industry mentorship connecting students with professionals
- Begin competency-based program elements aligned to industry standards

6 Months: Full Implementation

Program Redesign Complete

- Stackable credential pathways operational with clear career progression
- Industry-validated curriculum with real-world applications
- Faculty trained in adult learning principles and industry engagement

Demonstrate Impact

- 15% improvement in program completion rates
- 85% employment placement within 6 months
- Documented employer satisfaction with graduate preparation

Success Indicators

- 30 Days: Industry partnerships initiated, priority programs identified
- 90 Days: Flexible scheduling implemented, work-based learning operational
- 6 Months: Redesigned programs launched, employment outcomes improved

Quick Troubleshooting:

- *Faculty resistance? Start with champions, provide training, show student success*
- *Industry hesitation? Begin with low-risk partnerships, focus on solving employer problems*
- *Accreditation concerns? Work with accreditors, document competency thoroughly*

SECTION 3: JOBS – CONNECTING EDUCATION TO WORKFORCE DEMAND



The third pillar of the 3D Pathway Model supports the connection with workforce demand. This work ensures that adult learners can answer a fundamental question with confidence: ***Will this education lead to meaningful career opportunities?*** For working adults balancing education with employment, caregiving, and financial pressures, this connection isn't just important—it's essential.

Adult learners often return to college with clear, urgent goals. They seek career advancement, family-sustaining wages, and the security that comes with in-demand skills.

Programs that fail to connect directly to quality employment opportunities risk becoming barriers disguised as solutions. When colleges engage employers and labor organizations as co-leaders in program design rather than customers for graduates, they create partnerships able to deliver pathways to economic advancement.

Effective workforce partnerships recognize the unique strengths adult learners bring to the workplace: life experience, clear motivation, problem-solving skills, and deep commitment to their goals. Industry partnerships that leverage these assets while addressing the realities of adult learners' lives create win-win outcomes for students, employers, and regional economic development.

INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT: START WITH JOBS

Partnerships with industry (employers and labor) represent a critical pillar in meeting the needs of adult workers and learners seeking near-term job placement or career progression through education and training. For industry, workforce partnership begins with their labor market need to build and sustain a talent pipeline of workers who enable them to compete within and across related industries. Getting right the analysis of regional industry needs—including actual job requirements, changes in technology or work processes, and evolving skills—is the foundational knowledge upon which everything programmatically necessary to build the talent pipeline to jobs and careers can follow.

Regional, industry-focused partnerships provide a means for on-going industry analysis; an interactive and iterative process that incorporates a variety of practices to analyze changing industry demand and trends.⁴⁷ Industry engagement that treats industry (employers and labor) as subject matter experts and co-leaders (not just customers) can be an incredible asset in enhancing curriculum alignment to industry needs and leads to productive industry participation that benefits colleges and adult learners. Engagement, and more importantly partnership with industry, leads to industry-valued certificates, credentials and degrees which are validated when they hire and retain workers with said credentials. For industry, the quality of credentials matters as much as attainment.⁴⁸

47 U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. (2021, December). [What the evidence says about employer engagement strategies: A brief report for the Evaluation and Research Hub](#). WorkforceGPS; California Workforce Development Board & UC Berkeley Labor Center. (2020). [The Industry Partnership Itself is a Priority](#).

48 California Workforce Development Board. (2016). [Credentialing Framework, Policy Statement By The Increasing Skills and Credential Attainment Workgroup of the California Workforce Development Board](#); Lumina. (2023). [Credentials of Value - State Strategies for Identifying and Endorsing Industry-Recognized Credentials](#); National Convergence Technology Center. (2018). [Implementing the Business and Industry Leadership Team \(BILT\) Model of Business Engagement - A Toolkit for Strengthening Industry Commitment for Technical Programs](#).

Connecting Industry Engagement to Adult Learner Profiles

Industry engagement must be tailored to serve different adult learner profiles effectively, recognizing that Foundational learners, Skills Builders, and Ready to Enroll adults require different levels and types of employer involvement:

Foundational Learners benefit from structured, entry-level industry exposure that builds confidence and career awareness:

- Employer-hosted career exploration sessions that showcase accessible opportunities
- Job shadowing experiences paired with basic skills development
- Industry mentorship programs that provide encouragement and realistic guidance
- Contextualized learning that integrates literacy and numeracy with industry vocabulary and concepts

Skills Builders are ready for substantive work-based learning that bridges academic preparation with workplace requirements:

- Pre-apprenticeships that combine skill building with industry exposure
- Cooperative work experience allowing part-time employment during credential completion
- Industry-sponsored project-based learning applying classroom concepts to real workplace challenges
- Employer-supported bridge programs transitioning learners from basic skills to technical training

Ready to Enroll learners can engage immediately with advanced industry partnerships:

- Registered apprenticeships providing paid training with guaranteed employment pathways
- Clinical placements and externships in specialized fields
- Capstone industry projects demonstrating job-ready competencies
- Leadership development tracks within incumbent worker training programs

Effective Industry Engagement Benefits Adult Learners

For adult learners, the opportunity to advance in their jobs and careers is a prime motivator of their participation in education and training. Adult learners understand education and training's connection to their own self-efficacy. They are driven by the belief that educational attainment combined with increased knowledge and skills increases their chances of finding career-related, higher wage employment, of improving their skills while on the job (so they may remain employed), and of realizing higher earnings over a lifetime. **Initial college**

engagement with adult learners should include consideration of career and employment aspirations and career advising. Career Services should be folded into onboarding activities at the start of their college engagement, not as a backend activity. This connection directly supports the People pillar (Section 1) by ensuring that career guidance is integrated into holistic support from day one. This is especially important because career advising and industry exposure will differ depending on each individual learner's profile. Foundational learners may require more career exploration activities, while those learners who are college-ready and seeking industry-valued skills will need immediate opportunities to engage industry and employers.

Adult learners recognize the changing demands of a knowledge-based labor market but often lack an awareness of industry occupational skills demand in their region, nor the avenues for industry-specific entrance and career pathway progression. Industry engagement and partnerships validate measurable skills gains and their reasons for enrollment in programs and courses, directly connecting to the stackable credential pathways described in Section 2.

Preparing disadvantaged young people and adults seeking new, high-quality career opportunities requires much more than a curriculum. It requires a coherent system of training and resources built on regional partnerships, standardized curriculum and credentials, mechanisms to calibrate the training of workers (i.e., labor market supply) with actual employment opportunities (i.e., labor market demand), and a wide range of supportive services to address barriers to employment.

BUILDING EFFECTIVE INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS: A FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESS

Effective industry partnerships require moving beyond transactional relationships to create genuine collaboration where employers and educators work together as co-leaders. This framework provides a clear pathway for developing partnerships that benefit adult learners, employers, and regional economic development.

Think of industry engagement in three parts: 1. Three core principles, 2. Two partnership approaches and 3. The role of intermediaries.

1. Three Core Partnership Principles

These principles guide all aspects of partnership development and implementation:

- 1. Industry-Led Problem Solving** Industry partners drive the partnership by identifying real workforce challenges and co-leading solutions. Rather than asking employers to hire from existing programs, colleges work with industry to understand actual skill gaps and design programs that address them.
- 2. Shared Accountability** All partners—industry, education, workforce development, and community organizations—align around common goals and share responsibility for learner outcomes including employment placement, wage progression, and career advancement.

- 3. **Formal Partnership Structure** Sustainable partnerships require written agreements, joint governance, and clear accountability mechanisms that ensure continuity beyond individual relationships.

2. Two Partnership Approaches

Before beginning partnership development, colleges must determine their strategic approach:

Sector Initiatives focus on industry-specific programs involving multiple employers within a single industry (e.g., healthcare, manufacturing, information technology).⁴⁹ This approach works well when:

- A dominant industry exists in the region
- Multiple employers share similar skill needs
- Clear career pathways exist within the industry

Cluster Initiatives address interconnected industries that share resources, suppliers, or markets within a regional economy. This approach works well when:

- The regional economy includes diverse but related industries
- Cross-industry skills are valuable
- Economic development focuses on industry clusters

3. The Workforce Intermediary Role⁵⁰

Successful partnerships require an organization that can coordinate multiple stakeholders and maintain ongoing relationships.⁵¹ This workforce intermediary role can be filled by:

- Community colleges with strong industry relationships
- Workforce development boards with regional convening power
- Economic development organizations with employer connections
- Community-based organizations with deep community ties

Key Intermediary Functions:

- Convene diverse stakeholders around shared workforce goals
- Facilitate communication between industry and education

49 Mathematica. (2023). [The Impact of Regional Sectoral Training Partnerships: Findings from America's Promise.](#)

50 Marschall, D. (2021). [Workforce intermediary partnerships: Key to success in high-performing labor markets.](#) AFL-CIO Working for America Institute and George Washington Institute of Public Policy.

51 California Competes. (2022, July). [Barriers & opportunities for building higher education–employer partnerships.](#)

- Coordinate services to reduce duplication and improve effectiveness
- Advocate for policy changes that support workforce development

Ensuring Mutual Value

Sustainable partnerships require clear value propositions for all participants:⁵²

For Industry Partners:

- Access to skilled workers trained to their specific needs
- Reduced recruitment and training costs
- Influence over curriculum and program design
- Connection to college resources and expertise

For Adult Learners:

- Training that leads directly to available jobs
- Industry mentorship and networking opportunities
- Clear pathways for career advancement
- Recognition of prior learning and work experience

For Colleges:

- Industry validation of program relevance
- Enhanced job placement rates and graduate outcomes
- Access to employer expertise and resources

EVIDENCE-BASED BEST PRACTICES - WORK-BASED LEARNING

Internships, Apprenticeships, and Experiential Learning

Work-based learning connects classroom instruction to careers by providing adult learners with opportunities to relate their classroom learning to the careers they aspire to, and to apply their learned knowledge, skills and abilities in a realistic environment. **Work-based learning also exposes adult learners to the possible career pathways in their chosen courses and programs, and elevates the profile of individuals and this group of workers to industry's talent pipeline.**

Through work-based learning, adult learners may work in an organization, sometimes without pay, to gain work experience or satisfy requirements for qualifications. **For adult**

52 Hollenbeck, K. M. (2012). [Return on investment in workforce development programs](#) (Working Paper 12-188). W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

learners, the need to earn some financial compensation or receive resource support during the internship may be paramount in their ability to participate. Work-based learning should clearly align with the learner's academic pathway and long-term goals. They must relate to desired occupations or industries, not just general experience. They should be intentionally designed into degree or certificate tracks with the possibility of credit for participation that counts toward academic credit. **These characteristics of work-based learning can increase motivation and reduce course loads of adult learners.**

Successful work-based learning must align partnerships with employers and industry who have a willingness to train and mentor adult learners, and employers and industry must be oriented to the developmental needs of adult learners. Either the college or other intermediary will need to broker placements, ensure quality and align placements with labor market demand. In addition, colleges will need to participate in and foster clear learning outcomes and evaluation of the placements built upon a mutual understanding of goals between adult learners, college, and employer to ensure meaningful experiences.⁵³

Types of Work-Based Learning

Internships - Any work-based learning opportunity that allows a learner to apply learned skills and theories to a hands-on employment environment. Internships may be unpaid or paid. Colleges may apply independent study to earn apportionment for students completing internships.

Apprenticeships - Hands on work-based learning that combines classroom technical instruction and on-the-job-training (OJT) standards developed by industry and registered with the State of California Division of Apprenticeship Standards or the U.S. Department of Labor.

Experiential Learning - Involves the active engagement of learners in real-world contexts. It includes hands-on experience for learners to engage in activities that simulate or involve real-life tasks, challenges, or work, and occurs in environments that reflect the actual conditions of the workplace, community, or field of study.

Examples of Experiential Learning Models include:

- Service Learning
- Research
- Project-Based Learning
- Clinical and Field Placements
- Entrepreneurship Education
- Capstone Courses
- Career and Technical Education (CTE) Labs
- Simulation-Based Training

53 National Governors Association. (2022). [Diversifying Partnerships for Success in Work-Based Learning](#).

Aligning Learner Profiles with Work-Based Learning Opportunities

Profile	Partnership Strategies	Example Work-Based Learning Fit
Foundational (e.g., Basic Skills/GED Acceleration)	Focus on employer-supported bridge programs that integrate literacy, numeracy, and basic digital skills with entry-level industry exposure.	Job shadowing, short paid internships with structured mentoring, contextualized ESL tied to industry vocabulary.
Skills Builder (Academically Ready, Needs College/Digital Skills)	Pair stackable short-term credentials with employer-led training that builds digital fluency and workplace readiness.	Pre-apprenticeships, work study, cooperative work experience, industry projects in hybrid courses, co-enrolled training in high-demand sectors.
Ready to Enroll (Skills and Digital Ready)	Connect to advanced apprenticeships, clinical placements, or fast-track programs aligned with high-skill openings.	Registered apprenticeships, capstone industry projects, clinicals/pre-practicum placements, leadership tracks in incumbent worker training such as preceptorships.

This alignment ensures that work-based learning experiences match learner readiness levels while providing clear progression pathways that support the stackable credential architecture described in Section 2.

Key Elements of Effective Work-Based Learning

Summary of key elements within each type of work-based learning

Type of Experience	Intent and Guiding Principles	Guiding Statutes and Regulations	Funding
Internships	Any work-based learning opportunity that allows a student to apply learned skills and theories to a hands-on, paid or unpaid employment environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No specific California statute or regulation Federal Fair Labor Standards Act 	None specific to internships although colleges may utilize independent study to earn apportionment for students completing internships.
Cooperative Work Experience	Hands-on work-based learning, either general or occupational, paid or unpaid, coordinated by colleges with students and employers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> California Education Code California Code of Regulations Title 5 Federal Fair Labor Standards Act 	Colleges earn FTES-based apportionment for CWE units completed by students.
Apprenticeship	Paid hands-on work-based learning, coordinated by employers or trades groups with students and colleges.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> California Labor Code California Code of Regulations Title 8 Federal Fair Labor Standards Act 	Colleges may be given regular supplemental instruction (RSI or Montoya) funds by program sponsors. Some potential for apportionment.

Type of Experience	Intent and Guiding Principles	Guiding Statutes and Regulations	Funding
Clinicals / Practicum	Unpaid hands-on work-based learning completed as part of a course. Often utilized in allied health courses but may be used in other disciplines as well.	Regulations consistent with any lab-based curriculum, including required instructor supervision	Colleges may earn FTES-based apportionment for discipline-specific course units completed by students.
Preceptorships	Hands-on work-based learning completed at the end of a program of study in coordination with employed professionals in the discipline. Common in registered nursing and other allied health programs but may apply to other disciplines as well.	California Code of Regulations §1426.1 Board of Vocational Nursing, Preceptorship	Varies depending on program.
Work Study	Federal Work Study is an educational financial aid program for students with demonstrated financial need while enrolled.	Federal Title IV Federal Student Aid, administered by the U.S. Department of Education	Federal Work Study hours may be included as part of student financial aid packages; Title IV Federal Student Aid Funds.

The Jobs pillar of the 3D Pathway Model ensures that adult learners' educational investments translate into meaningful career opportunities. When colleges start with industry needs, design programs collaboratively with employers, and integrate work-based learning throughout educational pathways, they create the conditions for adult learner success that extends far beyond credential completion to lasting career advancement and economic mobility.

Success requires treating industry partnerships not as nice-to-have additions, but as fundamental components of institutional strategy. When done well, these partnerships answer adult learners' most urgent question: *Will this education create the opportunities my family and I need to thrive?*



Building effective industry partnerships is not easy work. It requires developing authentic, mutually beneficial relationships that connect adult learners directly to meaningful employment opportunities and career advancement. **Assessment D: Industry Partnership**

Development & Work-Based Learning in Appendix A of this toolkit helps colleges examine their capacity to develop and sustain employer partnerships, including partnership infrastructure and governance, employer engagement and relationship building, work-based learning integration, and employment outcomes tracking systems. The assessment can be used alone or in combination with the following action plan.

JOBS-FOCUSED QUICK START GUIDE

Industry Partnerships & Employment Outcomes

Goal: Build authentic employer partnerships and work-based learning that connect adult learners directly to career advancement and economic mobility.

30 Days: Industry Engagement

Week 1-2: Partnership Assessment

- Complete Assessment D from Appendix A
- Map key regional employers in high-opportunity sectors
- Analyze current graduate employment rates and wage progression
- Identify dormant employer relationships to reactivate

Week 3-4: Launch Employer Outreach

- Schedule listening sessions with 8-10 major regional employers
- Survey recent graduates about job placement and career advancement
- Contact workforce boards and union representatives for partnership opportunities
- Identify 2-3 potential industry champions willing to co-lead initiatives

90 Days: Partnership Development

Month 2: Formal Partnership Structure

- Establish industry advisory committees with governance authority
- Create partnership agreements outlining roles, responsibilities, and success metrics
- Develop employer engagement protocols for systematic relationship maintenance
- Launch employer satisfaction tracking and feedback systems

Month 3: Work-Based Learning Launch

- Establish 3-5 paid internship or apprenticeship placements
- Integrate employer-sponsored projects into existing curriculum
- Create industry mentorship program connecting students with professionals
- Begin industry-recognized credentialing preparation for graduates

6 Months: Full Employment Pipeline

Comprehensive Work-Based Learning

- Expand to 25+ work-based learning placements across multiple employers
- Implement co-op programs alternating classroom and workplace experience
- Establish apprenticeship programs with structured on-the-job training
- Create capstone projects evaluated by industry partners

Career Services Integration

- Coordinate career counseling with academic planning for employment focus
- Launch employer networking events and sector-specific job fairs
- Provide job placement support including resume development and interview prep
- Establish graduate employment tracking with 6-month and 1-year follow-up

Success Indicators

- 30 Days: 10+ employer contacts initiated, industry champions identified
- 90 Days: Advisory committees operational, work-based learning partnerships established
- 6 Months: 85% employment placement rate, documented wage progression

Employment Outcome Targets:

- 85% job placement within 6 months of graduation
- 20% average wage increase over pre-program earnings
- 90% employer satisfaction with graduate preparation
- 75% graduate retention in employment after 1 year

Quick Troubleshooting:

- Employers hesitant to engage? Start with low-risk partnerships, focus on solving their workforce problems
- Limited work-based learning capacity? Begin with job shadowing and guest speakers, build gradually
- Difficulty tracking employment outcomes? Partner with state employment agencies, use alumni surveys

SECTION 4: METRICS AND REPORTING – TRACKING PROGRESS FROM ENROLLMENT TO EMPLOYMENT



Data is not just a tool for measurement, it is a mirror, a map, and a mechanism for change. For too long, adult learners, especially low-wage workers, immigrants, returning students, and caregivers, have been rendered invisible in traditional institutional data systems. When colleges rely solely on metrics designed for first-time, full-time degree seekers, they fail to capture the realities of the students who make up a growing portion of today's enrollment: adults balancing school with work, parenting, and community obligations.

This invisibility has real consequences. Without clear data, colleges struggle to design focused interventions, secure appropriate funding, or monitor outcomes for adult learners. A lack of visibility reinforces inequity. Changing this requires more than adding new data points, it requires reimagining the entire approach to how adult learner success is defined and measured.

An effective strategy begins with **shared ownership** of adult learner metrics. Rather than defining success solely from an institutional perspective, colleges benefit from co-creating outcomes with adult learners themselves. This collaborative approach ensures that data reflects what truly matters to students, whether that is completing a credential, securing a promotion, achieving financial stability, or simply gaining the skills and confidence to take the next step in their education.

A strong adult learner data strategy also:

- Disaggregates data to reveal trends by profile type, age, employment status, caregiving responsibilities, and other relevant factors.
- Incorporates metrics that capture the full learner journey, from outreach and onboarding to re-engagement after stopping out.
- Cultivates a campus-wide culture where data is used not to punish, but to reflect, improve, and celebrate progress.
- Builds shared data literacy so staff across roles and departments can interpret and act on insights.

Colleges participating in the UDW Adult Learner Demonstration Project have worked alongside WestEd, the UDW Resource Center (URC), and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (Chancellor's Office) to design and test these strategies in practice. Through this work, institutions have moved from using data primarily for compliance reporting to embedding it in weekly case management meetings, monthly cross-team huddles, and end-of-term reviews. This intentional integration has not only strengthened decision-making, but also deepened collaboration and created a shared commitment to improving adult learner outcomes.

When data is approached as a shared responsibility and a learning tool, rather than a static compliance exercise, it becomes a powerful driver for equity, innovation, and lasting change. While strong metrics matter for all students, adult learner success can look very different depending on their starting point. For example, colleges can select and interpret metrics in ways that reflect realistic milestones for each profile group. This ensures that progress is measured not just by end outcomes, but by meaningful steps along the pathway that align with learners' readiness and goals.

This section offers a roadmap for developing a data culture that intentionally centers adult learners. A mature data strategy requires more than counting outcomes, it calls for working across the institution to define the learner journey, co-develop what success looks like in partnership with adult learners, and ensure those definitions are embedded in the metrics being tracked. By identifying meaningful measures, building shared data literacy, and embedding inquiry into regular planning and decision-making cycles, colleges can turn data into a driver of institutional learning and continuous improvement. Four focus areas anchor this approach: **Defining and Monitoring Adult Learner Success Metrics, Building a Data Culture for Continuous Improvement, Using Logic Models and Evaluation Objectives to Drive Institutional Learning, and Measuring What Matters: Why Outcome Metrics Are Critical to Adult Learner Success.** Together, these practices ensure that institutions not only track progress from enrollment to employment, but also act on insights to strengthen outcomes for adult learners.

DEFINING AND MONITORING ADULT LEARNER SUCCESS METRICS

Effective support for adult learners begins with clearly defining what success looks like and how to measure it. In the California Community Colleges, success metrics are designed to capture the full journey of learners, from recruitment and onboarding through to completion and workforce advancement. These metrics—such as enrollment, completion, and living wage attainment—are often organized by student goals, such as adult education, ESL, career education, or transfer preparation, and are aligned with statewide initiatives like Vision 2030. While these measures provide a strong foundation, they do not always capture the full breadth of adult learner engagement, such as early recruitment touchpoints, persistence after stopping out, or participation in noncredit-to-credit transitions. Importantly, when benchmarks are disaggregated by learner profile type (e.g., Foundational Needs, Skills Builder, Ready to Enroll), colleges may uncover different progression patterns. Recognizing these distinctions ensures that supports are not one-size-fits-all, but instead are tailored to the diverse realities and trajectories of adult learners.

The UDW Adult Learner Demonstration Project built on the California Community Colleges' existing Student Success Metrics (SSM) framework by co-developing benchmarks with the Chancellor's Office, WestEd, and URC partners that reflect the real milestones and lived experiences of adult learners. This collaborative process emphasized:

- **Clarity** – Metrics had to be intuitive and actionable for college teams.
- **Feasibility** – Data had to be accessible through existing systems or modest enhancements.
- **Relevance** – Metrics needed to align with adult learners' goals: job stability, credentials, and wage gains.
- **Alignment** – Metrics were mapped to Vision 2030 priorities and labor market outcomes.

Project leadership reviewed UDW membership data, including the size of the eligible population and expressed interest in participation, alongside best practices for engaging adult learners drawn from similar initiatives: SEIU Education Fund, Reconnecting Adults

(California Adult Education Program and California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office pilots), and the Los Angeles College Promise for Adults. This analysis, paired with college-level data, informed the development of feasible and realistic metrics of success anchored in the California Community Colleges’ Vision 2030 framework, ensuring alignment with statewide measures for enrollment, credential attainment, and wage gains. All partners, the Chancellor’s Office, WestEd, and URC, met to discuss the measures and targets, confirm their relevance to ongoing priorities and adult learners’ goals, and build a shared understanding of their importance. These shared metrics now serve a dual role, tracking institutional progress while also guiding strategy, resource allocation, and continuous improvement efforts.

The following benchmarks were established to reflect both the scale of the UDW Adult Learner Demonstration Project and the specific outcomes that matter most to working-age adults balancing education with employment, caregiving, and other responsibilities. The goals provide a shared set of targets for all participating colleges while allowing flexibility for local adaptation based on college context and community needs. They are intended to measure not only access, but also progress toward meaningful academic and career milestones:

- **Achieve a 5% increase in enrollment** of UDW members and their families at partner California community colleges, signaling improved outreach, recruitment, and awareness of available programs.
- **Ensure 15% of enrolled UDW members and family members** complete a noncredit certificate, credit certificate, associate degree, or baccalaureate degree within two years of their initial enrollment, demonstrating timely progression toward credential attainment.
- **Increase the share of UDW members and families earning a livable wage**, targeting a 10% improvement, aligned with Strong Workforce Program metrics for the second or fourth quarter post-exit, reflecting the project’s emphasis on career advancement and economic mobility.

In addition to these top-level benchmarks, colleges are encouraged to track process indicators and intermediary metrics that support continuous improvement, including:

- FAFSA/CADAA completion
- Noncredit or credit enrollment
- First-term retention
- Case management touchpoints
- Milestone course completion

Within these metrics, colleges can disaggregate not only by adult learner status, but also relevant demographic characteristics like race/ethnicity, gender, and low-income status to understand whether learners’ experiences are patterned by these attributes. Institutions that monitor these metrics consistently are better positioned to design focused supports, identify disproportionate impact early, and ensure progress toward equity-centered outcomes.

The UDW Adult Learner Demonstration Project shows that when metrics are co-developed with learners in mind, embedded in regular review cycles, and disaggregated to reveal equity gaps, they become a driver for both institutional learning and learner success. Colleges that commit to a mature data culture—where outcomes are tracked from enrollment to employment and insights are acted upon—position themselves to strengthen pathways, increase credential attainment, and improve wage outcomes for adult learners.

Why It Matters

The Chancellor’s Office , CAEP, and other state initiatives have emphasized the need to broaden and reframe success metrics to better capture adult learner progress. Institutions that disaggregate by age, employment status, parenting status, and other relevant factors are more likely to:

- Design interventions tailored to learner needs
- Identify equity gaps early
- Foster cross-functional ownership of student outcomes

As demonstrated by the UDW project, a common metrics framework also supports aligned technical assistance, case management, and resource allocation across institutions.

USING LOGIC MODELS AND EVALUATION OBJECTIVES TO DRIVE INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING

To build a data culture that supports equity-centered planning and improvement, colleges can benefit from using shared frameworks that connect day-to-day practices with long-term goals. Logic models and evaluation objectives are powerful tools in this regard; they help teams articulate what success looks like, describe or co-develop what strategies they will use to achieve it, and how they will measure progress over time.

Within the UDW Adult Learner Demonstration Project, WestEd co-developed a set of logic models and evaluation objectives with UDW, URC, and the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office to guide institutional learning and strengthen alignment across partners. These tools are not just for evaluators; they are designed to support colleges in structuring inquiry, reflection, and action planning at every level.

Rather than approaching evaluation as a one-time activity or compliance requirement, colleges are encouraged to integrate these tools into ongoing improvement cycles. Logic models can serve as a visual map that links inputs (like staffing or services) to short-term outputs (like enrollment and advising sessions) and long-term outcomes (such as persistence and wage gains). When paired with clearly defined evaluation objectives, these models provide a scaffold for monitoring progress over time.

The five evaluation objectives developed for the UDW project offer a useful starting point for institutions seeking to build capacity for data-informed learning:

1. Assessing Member Outcomes and the Member Experience

Understanding how adult learners engage with services, what barriers they face, and what progress they make helps institutions adapt supports in real time.

2. Understanding Strategies for Enrollment and Completion

Evaluating which outreach, onboarding, and program design strategies are most effective provides insight into where to scale or shift resources.

3. Examining Employer and Industry Engagement

Tracking how employer partnerships contribute to learner outcomes ensures alignment with labor market needs and member career goals.

4. Tracking Cross-College Collaboration

Understanding how teams, departments, and institutions work together highlights coordination strengths and areas for improvement.

5. Supporting Learning About WestEd's Technical Assistance

Documenting how TA supports institutional change allows colleges to reflect on what types of support are most helpful in driving progress.

Institutions may consider using these objectives to structure regular reflection sessions, quarterly, biannually, or annually, and to guide the development of dashboards or strategic plans. Doing so creates consistency in how data is interpreted and used across the organization. Moreover, colleges that tie these objectives to internal planning and budget processes are better positioned to align resources with impact.

BUILDING A DATA CULTURE FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Defining metrics is only the beginning. A strong data culture ensures that data is regularly reviewed, widely shared, and meaningfully acted upon. Colleges can increase their ability to share the impact on adult learners by building institutionalized habits of inquiry, where teams at every level—advisors, faculty, deans, and researchers—can ask questions, interpret patterns, and collaborate on solutions. Colleges aiming to improve outcomes for adult learners may consider building a data culture that prioritizes shared learning, inquiry, and responsiveness over compliance-driven reporting. A mature data culture is not simply about producing reports; it's about embedding curiosity, accountability, and collaboration into everyday institutional practice. Rather than viewing data as the domain of institutional researchers alone, colleges can engage staff across departments in interpreting and acting on what the data reveals. When data is democratized and regularly reviewed, it becomes a powerful tool for equity and improvement.

To move toward a more mature data culture, colleges can take the following steps:

- **Foster shared ownership of student outcomes**

All staff, advisors, faculty, administrators, and program coordinators, can benefit from seeing adult learner success as a collective responsibility. Jointly reviewing data helps teams align efforts and support each other in continuous improvement.

- **Use disaggregated data to illuminate patterns and inform interventions**

Parsing data by age, employment status, parenting status, and enrollment type can help uncover disparities and support the design of intentional strategies.

- **Promote transparency across roles and departments**
Sharing progress updates, service utilization trends, and outcome data through dashboards, team briefings, or collaborative discussions helps normalize inquiry and shared accountability.
- **Create structured time for reflective practice and learning**
Integrating data review into existing meeting structures, case management cycles, or professional development allows teams to reflect on findings and surface improvement ideas.
- **Link data use to planning and resource allocation**
Colleges may want to explore how findings from student data can shape staffing decisions, support services, scheduling, and partnership priorities. Doing so increases alignment and responsiveness to adult-learner needs.

Community colleges participating in the UDW Adult Learner Demonstration Project offer strong examples of how this shift can occur. Colleges that integrated disaggregated data into weekly case management check-ins, monthly cross-team coordination meetings, and end-of-term planning sessions reported clearer alignment across departments, more rapid response to student needs, and higher levels of learner retention. These cycles created space for shared ownership and allowed frontline staff to meaningfully contribute to data-informed decision-making. While implementation varied by campus, several colleges saw early signs of improvement in early outcomes such as:

- **Improved coordination across services**
Cross-functional data reviews helped identify communication gaps and led to stronger handoffs and case tracking systems.
- **Stronger staff engagement and alignment**
Practitioners reported greater clarity about their role in advancing student success and greater confidence in using data to guide their work.
- **Higher adult learner retention**
Data-informed case management supported timely outreach and re-engagement of learners at risk of stopping out, especially those managing multiple life responsibilities



Effective metrics and reporting systems require building comprehensive data infrastructure that enables evidence-based decision making and demonstrates adult learner success to stakeholders. **Assessment E: Adult Learner Data Systems & Continuous Improvement in Appendix A of this toolkit** helps colleges examine their capacity to collect, analyze, and act on adult learner success data, including data infrastructure and management, analytics and performance measurement, reporting and communication, and continuous improvement processes. The assessment can be used alone or in combination with the following action plan.

SECTION 5: SUSTAIN & SCALE



Many colleges already have programs and services that support adult learners, yet sustaining and scaling these efforts requires intentional strengthening, expansion, and integration into the institution's long-term systems. Successful redesigns cannot remain isolated projects—they must be embedded into permanent funding streams, institutional priorities, and cross-functional leadership structures. Attention should also be paid to assessing current and possible regional partnerships that should bring resources and expertise to meeting the needs of adult learners.

Equally important, colleges must establish regular review cycles that pair disaggregated outcome data with program cost analyses to understand both effectiveness and sustainability. By combining cost frameworks with levels of care and corresponding learner outcomes, colleges can assess where current investments yield the greatest return and where adjustments or expansions are needed.

This process not only supports responsible resource allocation but also helps identify opportunities to scale services without sacrificing quality. Colleges participating in the UDW Adult Learner Demonstration Project have found that documenting case management costs, modeling staffing needs for various enrollment targets, and exploring technology solutions that extend relational support can all inform a practical path toward scale.

This section outlines strategies for building the structural, financial, and cultural foundations that ensure adult learner programs become durable, high-impact components of the college's mission and performance metrics.

These strategies include:

- **Building Evidence for Sustainable Scaling** – Document current case management model costs and outcomes, research alternative scaled support models from other states, create scenarios for staffing needs tied to enrollment targets, and explore technology that preserves relationships while extending reach.
- **Building on the Demonstration Project Model** – Develop a Pathway to Scale framework showing completion and cost implications across four support models: (1) Intensive Support for students with significant barriers, (2) Moderate Support blending individual and group services, (3) Light-Touch Support emphasizing self-direction and automation, and (4) Hybrid/Tiered Models that match support levels to student needs and institutional resources.
- **Institutional Integration** – Ensure cross-departmental coordination, shared accountability, and leadership engagement to embed adult learner success throughout institutional systems.
- **Continuous Improvement** – Establish regular data review, industry advisory processes, and student feedback integration to maintain program responsiveness and quality.
- **Financial Sustainability** – Diversify funding through base funding integration, workforce grants, employer partnerships, and student affordability initiatives to ensure long-term program viability.

By using data-driven planning and intentional design, colleges can transition from short-term program success to institution-wide, sustainable impact for adult learners.

BUILDING EVIDENCE FOR SUSTAINABLE SCALING MODEL

Why it matters: A sustainable adult learner strategy requires more than passion and initial funding—it requires evidence that the program can maintain impact as it grows. Without documented costs, outcomes, and scalability models, programs risk losing funding, failing to expand effectively, or compromising quality as they serve more students. Evidence-based planning enables colleges to make informed decisions about resource allocation, demonstrate value to stakeholders, and build confidence among learners and partners that programs will persist over time. Colleges can build this **evidence base through four key actions:**

1. Document Current Case Management Model Costs and Outcomes

Calculate Total Program Costs

- Staff salaries and benefits
- Technology and materials
- Administrative overhead

Track Comprehensive Outcomes

- Enrollment growth and retention rates
- Completion rates and credential attainment
- Wage gains and employment outcomes

Analyze Cost-Effectiveness

- Present findings as cost per student served
- Calculate cost per student completing
- Disaggregate data by student profile to understand which populations benefit most

2. Research Alternative Scaled Support Models

Study Peer Institutions and Programs

- Identify successful adult learner programs (e.g., AccelerateED, SEIU Education Fund partnerships, Tennessee Reconnect)
- Examine their cost structures, staffing ratios, and outcomes
- Analyze scalability factors and implementation challenges

Document Transferable Practices

- Identify best practices that could be adapted locally
- Assess resource requirements for implementation
- Understand contextual factors that contribute to success

3. Create Scenarios for Staffing Needs Across Enrollment Targets

Develop Scalable Projections

- Model staffing changes at 100, 500, 1,000, and 5,000 students
- Align scenarios to student support tiers (intensive, moderate, light-touch)
- Account for both direct service staff and administrative support needs

Plan for Growth Phases

- Identify critical transition points where staffing models must evolve
- Anticipate training and professional development needs
- Consider geographic distribution and service delivery methods

4. Integrate Technology to Extend Support Capacity

Evaluate Automation and Efficiency Tools

- CRM systems for relationship management and tracking
- Chatbots and self-service portals for common inquiries
- Early-alert software for proactive intervention
- Mobile apps for student engagement and communication

Assess Impact and Cost-Effectiveness

- Calculate potential cost savings from automation
- Measure impact on student satisfaction and outcomes
- Ensure technology enhances rather than replaces human connection

BUILDING ON THE DEMONSTRATION PROJECT MODEL

Why it matters: The UDW Adult Learner Demonstration Project provides a tested foundation, but scaling to reach more learners requires strategic adaptation rather than simple replication. Institutions need frameworks that help them balance competing priorities: serving more students while maintaining quality, managing costs while preserving

effectiveness, and responding to diverse student needs within realistic resource constraints. A structured approach to scaling prevents programs from either remaining too small to create institutional impact or growing so rapidly that they lose the relational elements that make them successful.

Colleges can achieve effective scaling by intentionally designing a Pathway to Scale that defines levels of support, aligns staffing and technology, and balances reach with depth of service.

This framework helps colleges identify where to prioritize resources, how to maintain quality, and what trade-offs to anticipate as scale increases.

The Pathway to Scale Framework

The framework organizes support models into four tiers, each with different implications for staffing, technology, and student outcomes. Understanding these distinctions enables colleges to strategically combine approaches, ensuring resources are allocated where they will have the greatest impact.

1. Intensive Support

Model Description: High-touch approach providing regular one-on-one case management, personalized academic and career advising, and proactive outreach at key milestones.

Best For: Students with significant barriers, such as those returning after a long gap, balancing caregiving responsibilities, or navigating complex career transitions.

Key Features:

- Weekly or bi-weekly individual meetings
- Comprehensive needs assessment and service coordination
- Proactive crisis intervention and problem-solving
- Close collaboration with faculty and support services

2. Moderate Support

Model Description: Blended approach combining periodic one-on-one check-ins with group advising, workshops, and technology-enabled milestone tracking.

Best For: Students who need regular guidance but can manage some aspects of their college experience independently.

Key Features:

- Monthly individual check-ins with group programming
- Technology-supported milestone tracking

- Targeted workshops on key topics (financial aid, career planning, study skills)
- Peer support networks and study groups

3. Light-Touch Support

Model Description: Primarily self-directed approach where students have access to online resources, peer networks, and on-demand advising as needed.

Best For: Students with strong self-advocacy skills and fewer barriers to success.

Key Features:

- Automated outreach triggered by specific events
- Self-service resource libraries and online tools
- Drop-in advising and virtual office hours
- Peer mentorship programs

4. Hybrid/Tiered Model

Model Description: Customized approach where students are assessed at intake and assigned to a support tier based on their needs and risk factors.

Best For: Institutions serving diverse adult learner populations with varying support needs.

Key Features:

- Comprehensive intake assessment and risk stratification
- Dynamic movement between support tiers based on changing needs
- Efficient resource allocation aligned with student requirements
- Data-driven assignment and reassignment protocols

Support Model Comparison

Support Model	Estimated Staffing Ratio	Student Capacity	Completion Rate (Est.)	Cost per Student
Intensive Support	1 staff per 100 students	100–300	70–80%	High
Moderate Support	1 staff per 250 students	500–1,000	55–65%	Medium
Light-Touch Support	1 staff per 500+ students	2,000–5,000+	40–50%	Low
Hybrid/Tiered Model	Varies by tier	Scalable	Varies by tier	Varies

Resource Implications by Model

Intensive Support

- Requires sustained funding and deep case management expertise
- Delivers the highest completion rates but serves fewer students
- Best ROI for students with the highest barriers to success

Moderate Support

- Balances personalization with reach effectively
- Often requires technology integration for milestone tracking and outreach
- Good middle ground for institutions with moderate resources

Light-Touch Support

- Enables maximum reach at the lowest cost per student
- Relies heavily on automation, self-service tools, and targeted referrals
- May miss students who need more intensive intervention

Hybrid/Tiered Models

- Offer the most flexibility and efficient resource allocation
- Allow alignment of intensive services with greatest need
- Require sophisticated intake and assessment processes
- Can maximize both reach and impact within budget constraints

INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATION MODEL

Why it matters: Successful programs for adult learners don't operate in isolation—they require coordination across credit and noncredit divisions, workforce departments, student services, and institutional leadership. Integration ensures shared ownership of outcomes, improves learner navigation, and allows the entire college to function as a unified system supporting adult learner success.

Key Integration Strategies

Cross-Departmental Coordination

- Build regular structures for collaboration among instruction, counseling, workforce development, financial aid, and basic needs services
- Establish cross-functional teams with clear roles and communication protocols
- Create shared workflows that eliminate silos and reduce student friction

Shared Accountability for Outcomes

- Make adult learner success a campus-wide priority, not just the domain of one unit or grant project
- Integrate adult learner metrics into institutional scorecards and performance reviews
- Align departmental goals with adult learner persistence and completion targets

Data Integration and Transparency

- Create systems to share disaggregated data across departments
- Use data to inform both operational decisions and equity strategies
- Establish regular reporting cycles that track progress and identify improvement opportunities

Leadership Engagement

- Secure commitment from executive leadership, deans, and department chairs
- Embed adult learner pathways into institutional planning and accreditation processes
- Ensure adequate resources and authority for cross-departmental coordination

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT MODEL

Why it matters: Serving adult learners well requires ongoing responsiveness to shifting labor market demands, learner feedback, and performance data. Programs must remain flexible enough to adapt while maintaining quality and consistency. A continuous improvement approach builds trust with learners and partners, drives program excellence, and reinforces a culture of innovation.

Programs that embed student and employer feedback into their design cycles demonstrate stronger labor market outcomes and increased learner satisfaction.

Key Improvement Strategies

Quarterly Data Review

- Regularly analyze enrollment, completion, and employment data
- Disaggregate findings by age, race, income, and program
- Use data to identify trends, gaps, and opportunities for improvement
- Share findings across departments to inform decision-making

Annual Industry Advisory Reviews

- Engage employer and union partners to validate curriculum relevance
- Ensure alignment with current and emerging hiring needs
- Gather feedback on graduate preparedness and skill gaps
- Update programs based on industry input and labor market projections
- Review hiring and work-based learning outcomes

Student Voice Integration

- Embed adult learners in program design and improvement processes
- Conduct regular focus groups and feedback sessions
- Use surveys and interviews to understand student experience
- Ensure the model reflects learners' lived experiences and evolving needs

Regional Coordination

- Align redesign work with regional workforce boards and adult education consortia
- Coordinate with other colleges to maximize impact and avoid duplication
- Share best practices and lessons learned across institutions
- Participate in regional data collection and outcome tracking

The Bottom Line: Adult learners persist when they are seen, supported, and given reasons to believe that each course, credential, and connection brings them closer to their goals. Sustaining this engagement requires institutions to commit to removing financial, academic, and logistical friction at every step, recognizing that program design alone isn't enough.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY MODEL

Why it matters: Redesigning programs for adult learners requires upfront investment, but long-term success depends on colleges diversifying and aligning funding sources to maintain programs without relying solely on grants. A sustainable financial model allows colleges to scale what works, weather fiscal fluctuations, and send a strong message to learners and partners that these programs are here to stay.

Colleges that align adult-serving programs with core funding—rather than treating them as "side projects"—are better positioned to sustain scale and maintain equity.

Key Sustainability Strategies

Base Funding Integration

- Leverage state apportionment and enrollment-based funding to support core instructional and student support costs
- Integrate adult learner services into regular budget planning processes
- Avoid over-reliance on temporary or competitive funding sources

Workforce Grant Diversification

- Pursue multiple funding streams including WIOA Title I, Perkins V, Strong Workforce Program, and federal sector-based initiatives
- Develop grant-writing capacity and maintain active pipeline of opportunities
- Align grant activities with institutional priorities to ensure sustainability beyond funding periods

Employer Investment and Partnership

- Build co-investment through customized training contracts and apprenticeship sponsorships
- Develop tuition assistance partnerships with local employers
- Create fee-for-service training programs that generate revenue while serving workforce needs
- Establish employer advisory groups to guide program development and ensure market relevance

Student Affordability and Access

- Maintain low or no-cost tuition options for adult learners
- Expand access to last-dollar scholarships and emergency aid
- Partner with community organizations to provide wraparound financial support
- Advocate for policy changes that improve adult learner financial aid access

Revenue Diversification Benefits:

- Reduces dependence on any single funding source
- Provides flexibility to adapt programs based on changing needs
- Demonstrates institutional commitment to long-term sustainability
- Creates multiple pathways for program growth and expansion

CONCLUSION

The Adult Learner Toolkit represents more than a collection of best practices—it's a blueprint for institutional transformation that places working adults at the center of educational design. When colleges embrace the 3D Pathway Model connecting People, Programs, and Jobs, they create powerful engines of economic mobility that benefit students, employers, and entire communities.

The evidence is clear: Adult learners succeed when institutions eliminate barriers rather than asking students to navigate around them. They thrive when education connects directly to career advancement, when support is proactive rather than reactive, and when their prior knowledge and life experience are valued as assets rather than obstacles.

Implementation requires commitment, but the returns—measured in student success, community impact, and institutional vitality—far exceed the investment. Colleges that view adult learners not as a special population requiring add-on services, but as central to their mission, position themselves as leaders in educational equity and workforce development.

The future belongs to institutions that understand adult learners don't need charity—they need systems designed with their realities in mind. When colleges create seamless pathways from education to employment, provide responsive support that honors complex lives, and use data to drive continuous improvement, they fulfill higher education's promise of opportunity and mobility.

Your next step is to begin. Whether starting with a single assessment, launching a welcome center, or implementing the comprehensive approach, every action toward adult learner success moves your institution closer to becoming the educational partner your community needs and deserves.

Adult learners are not the students of the future—they are the students of today, waiting for institutions brave enough to redesign education around their potential rather than their barriers. This toolkit provides the roadmap. The journey starts now.

APPENDIX A: ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT ADULT LEARNER SUCCESS



This toolkit includes **six interconnected assessments** designed to evaluate and strengthen institutional capacity for serving adult learners. Each assessment can be used **independently** to address specific institutional priorities or as part of an **integrated system** within the comprehensive 3-Phase Pathway approach.

To ensure consistency, all six assessments use the same three-point scoring rubric. This allows institutions to benchmark their practices, identify areas for improvement, and track progress over time across all functional areas.

The assessments are intentionally reinforcing, with key elements appearing across multiple tools from different perspectives to support holistic implementation and engage diverse stakeholders. For example, ensuring career education curriculum aligns with regional workforce demand appears in both Assessment C (Program Design) and Assessment D (Industry Partnerships), but each focuses on different implementation aspects—Assessment C examines curriculum design and faculty engagement, while Assessment D evaluates employer relationship building and partnership infrastructure. This multi-perspective approach ensures comprehensive coverage while allowing institutions to focus on their specific improvement priorities.

For each assessment, the toolkit provides both standalone guidelines to support colleges using a single tool and integrated guidelines to guide colleges implementing the full system. Together, these resources offer colleges practical direction and support for embedding adult learner-focused strategies across programs, policies, and services.

Assessments at a Glance

Assessment/ Phase	Purpose	Key Focus Areas	Best Used When	Maximum points
A: Welcome & Access Systems	Evaluate institutional systems for welcoming, orienting, and initially supporting adult learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical/Virtual Access Staffing & Expertise Service Integration Community Connection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Low enrollment rates -Poor first-semester retention -Adult learner complaints about 	36
B: Case Management & Ongoing Support	Evaluate systems for providing ongoing academic, personal, and career support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Case Management Infrastructure Proactive Interventions Life Balance Support Success Tracking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Mid-program attrition -Student success challenges -Uncoordinated support services 	36
C: Program Design & Pathway Alignment	Evaluate how well programs are designed to meet diverse adult learner needs and career goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexible Program Structure Adult-Centered Curriculum Career/Transfer Pathways Learner Profile Differentiation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Poor completion rates -Low employment outcomes -Curriculum redesign needs 	36

Assessment/ Phase	Purpose	Key Focus Areas	Best Used When	Maximum points
D: Industry Partnership & Work-Based Learning	Evaluate institutional capacity to develop and sustain meaningful employer partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnership Infrastructure Employer Engagement Work-Based Learning Employment Outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Weak employment outcomes -Limited industry relevance -Workforce development focus 	36
E: Data Systems & Continuous Improvement	Evaluate capacity to collect, analyze, and act on adult learner success data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data Infrastructure Analytics & Measurement Reporting & Communication Continuous Improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Data-driven decision making -Accountability requirements -Performance improvement focus 	36
TOTAL SYSTEM				180

Quick Start Guide

Starting Implementation? Begin with **Assessment A** (Welcome & Access) to establish your foundation, then add Assessment F (Financial Support) for comprehensive front-door services.

Need Data-Driven Insights? **Assessment E** (Data Systems) can be used standalone to evaluate your institutional research and improvement capacity.

Workforce Development Focus? Combine **Assessment C** (Program Design) and **Assessment D** (Industry Partnerships) for comprehensive workforce alignment evaluation.

Comprehensive Evaluation? Use all six assessments in sequence following the 3-Phase Pathway Model to assess for holistic institutional transformation.

Universal Scoring Rubric + Interpretation Guide

All assessments use this consistent 3-point scale:

Score	Implementation Level	Definition
3	Proficient	Fully implemented with evidence of effectiveness and positive outcomes
2	Developing	Partially implemented; basic elements in place but inconsistent or incomplete
1	Beginning	Limited or no implementation; planning stage or early development only

Score Range (each assessment)	Percentage	Implementation Level	Action Focus
29-36 points	80-100%	Proficient Performance	Focus on continuous improvement and scaling successful practices
22-28 points	60-79%	Developing Performance	Targeted improvements needed in specific areas
12-21 points	Below 60%	Beginning Performance	Systematic development required across multiple domains

ASSESSMENT A: ADULT LEARNER WELCOME & ACCESS SYSTEMS

Instructions: Complete this assessment to surface blind spots, track implementation progress, take stock in areas of strength and help to build shared ownership of adult learner onboarding. Use results to inform strategic planning, staffing, partnership development, and continuous improvement. Revisit the checklist regularly to monitor growth and celebrate progress.

Standalone Use: When focusing on enrollment, first-semester retention, or front-door improvements

Integrated Use: Phase 1 foundation assessment; prerequisite for Assessments B and C

Domain 1: Physical and Virtual Access (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
A. 1.1 Centralized Welcome System	3 Dedicated adult learner welcome center with specialized staff, extended (evening and weekend) hours, and virtual access options	2 Designated welcome space with some adult-specific features and flexible access	1 General admissions process only, no adult-specific welcome system	
A. 1.2 Streamlined Enrollment Process	3 One-stop enrollment with same-day completion capability and multiple entry points	2 Coordinated enrollment process with most services co-located or simplified enrollment with some departmental coordination	1 Traditional multi-step enrollment requiring multiple visits	
A. 1.3 Accessibility and Accommodation	3 Proactive accommodation assessment with comprehensive accessibility features	2 Standard ADA compliance with responsive accommodation processes or basic accessibility with accommodation available upon request	1 Minimal accessibility considerations or accommodation processes	

Domain 2: Staffing and Expertise (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
A. 2.1 Adult Learner Specialists	3 Dedicated staff with advanced training in adult development, barriers, and success strategies	2 Designated staff with specialized adult learner training or some staff with adult learner professional development	1 General student services staff without specialized adult training	
A. 2.2 Cross-Departmental Training	3 All student-facing staff complete annual adult learner competency training	2 Most student services staff trained on adult learner needs and resources or basic adult learner awareness training for key staff	1 Limited or no adult learner-specific staff training	
2.3 Cultural and Linguistic Competency	3 Multilingual staff reflecting community diversity with cultural competency certification	2 Some multilingual staff with cultural responsiveness training or translation services available with basic cultural awareness	1 Limited linguistic support or cultural competency development	

Domain 3: Service Integration (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
A. 3.1 Wraparound Service Connection	3 Direct on-site access to childcare, transportation, financial assistance, and basic needs support	2 Strong partnerships with immediate referral to wraparound services or basic resource connections available through referral	1 Limited awareness or connection to wraparound services	
A. 3.2 Academic and Career Planning Integration	3 Welcome staff provide comprehensive academic planning, career exploration, and transfer guidance	2 Welcome process includes basic academic planning and career information or academic planning available through referral to counseling	1 Separate academic planning process not connected to welcome center	
A. 3.3 Technology and Digital Literacy Support	3 On-site technology training, device lending, and comprehensive digital literacy support	2 Basic technology orientation and some digital literacy resources or technology help available through referral to learning center	1 Limited technology support or digital literacy assistance	

Domain 4: Community and Peer Connection (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
A. 4.1 Peer Support Networks	3 Structured peer navigators are systematically supporting adult leaders as they enter	2 Peer support opportunities facilitated through student life programs or informal peer connections encouraged through orientation activities	1 Limited peer connection opportunities for adult learners	
A. 4.2 Community Partnership Visibility	3 Active community partnerships showcased with clear pathways to employment and services	2 Community connections highlighted in welcome materials and processes or basic information about community resources provided	1 Limited community partnership information or connection	
A. 4.3 Alumni and Success Story Integration	3 Regular alumni engagement with new adult learners through mentoring and success showcases	2 Alumni success stories featured prominently in welcome materials or some success stories shared during orientation	1 Limited use of alumni or success stories in welcome process	
Adult Learner Welcome & Access Systems TOTAL SCORE				

Implementation Considerations

Designing an effective Welcome Center requires intentional planning, cross-departmental collaboration, and engagement with the learner community.

Key steps include:

Start with Assessment

- Conduct needs assessment including current service usage data for each of the learner profiles
- Identify dropout points during enrollment for each of the student profiles named in this toolkit
- Gather direct input from adult learners

Build Iteratively

- Begin by co-locating high-impact services
- Create a warm, branded physical or virtual front door
- Evolve over time to include shared intake forms, peer navigators, and community partnerships

Invest in Staffing

- Hire team members with lived experience in adult education or social services
- Provide training in trauma-informed care, cultural humility, and digital tools
- Ensure support is both competent and compassionate

Think Strategically The one-stop Welcome Center becomes more than a service desk—it's a community anchor and institutional expression of equity. For adult learners, it's often the first sign that the college has designed with them in mind.

ASSESSMENT B: ADULT LEARNER CASE MANAGEMENT & ONGOING SUPPORT

Instructions: Use this protocol to guide the design and implementation of coordinated case management for adult learners. The checklist supports institutional teams in building sustainable systems for holistic support and follow-up.

Standalone Use: When focusing on retention, completion rates, or mid-program support improvements

Integrated Use: Phase 1-2 bridge assessment; builds on Assessment A, informs Assessment C

Domain 1: Case Management Infrastructure (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
B. 1.1 Caseload Management Systems	3 Manageable caseloads (1:100 or lower) with systematic case assignment based on student needs and risk factors	2 Reasonable caseloads (1:150) with some systematic case assignment or basic case assignment procedures	1 High caseloads (1:200+) with no systematic case management approach	
B. 1.2 Integrated Communication Systems	3 Unified case notes system with cross-departmental access and automated alerts	2 Shared case management system with regular cross-departmental communication or basic case tracking with periodic interdepartmental updates	1 Separate academic planning process not connected to welcome center	
B. 3.3 Staff Training and Professional Development	3 Comprehensive case management certification with ongoing professional development in adult learner support	2 Specialized training in adult learner case management and crisis intervention or basic case management training with some adult learner focus	1 General counseling training without case management specialization	

Domain 2: Proactive Student Success Interventions (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
B. 2.1 Early Warning and Response Systems	3 Data-driven early alert system with systematic follow-up protocols and predictive analytics	2 Basic early warning indicators with some follow-up procedures or automated interventions with personalized outreach	1 Reactive support only, limited early intervention systems	
B. 2.2 Academic Support Coordination	3 Integrated tutoring, supplemental instruction, and study skills support with progress tracking	2 Coordinated academic support services with case manager referral or academic support available with basic coordination between services	1 Limited academic support or poor coordination between services	
B. 2.3 Personal and Crisis Support	3 Crisis intervention protocols with emergency assistance, community resource connections, and rapid response capability	2 Basic crisis support with referral to community resources or emergency fund access with some crisis intervention	1 Limited crisis intervention capacity or resource connections	

Domain 3: Life Balance and Barrier Mitigation (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
B. 3.1 Flexible Support Delivery	3 Multiple support modalities (in-person, virtual, phone, text) with evening/weekend availability	2 Flexible scheduling with some evening/weekend availability and virtual options or some flexible scheduling with limited evening or virtual support	1 Traditional business hours only with limited flexibility	
B. 3.2 Family and Employer Integration	3 Family support programming and basic employer communication support for flexible arrangements	2 Family orientation and some employer engagement or some family resources and limited employer integration	1 Individual student focus only, no family or employer integration	
B. 3.3 Financial Support and Planning	3 Financial aid optimization with emergency funding and basic financial planning support	2 Financial aid assistance with some emergency support available or comprehensive financial literacy with limited emergency funding	1 Basic financial aid processing only	

Domain 4: Success Tracking and Continuous Improvement (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
B. 4.1 Outcome Monitoring and Analysis	3 Regular tracking of retention, completion, and satisfaction with data analysis and predictive modeling	2 Basic outcome tracking with periodic review and reporting or comprehensive tracking with limited analysis	1 Limited outcome tracking or analysis of case management effectiveness	
B. 4.2 Student Feedback Integration	3 Regular student satisfaction surveys with service improvements based on feedback	2 Periodic feedback collection with some service adjustments or continuous feedback collection with limited improvement implementation	1 Limited student feedback collection or use in service improvement	
B. 4.3: Professional Learning Community	3 Regular team meetings with case review, professional development, and best practice sharing	2 Periodic case consultation and some professional development or regular meetings with limited professional development	1 Individual practice with minimal collaboration or professional development	
Adult Learner Case Management & Ongoing Support TOTAL SCORE				

Implementation Considerations

Launching or strengthening a case management model requires intentional coordination across multiple departments—student services, instruction, institutional research, and external partnerships. While many colleges already offer various forms of support, the key to adult learner success is integration and follow-through.

Key Steps:

Start with Existing Strengths

- Inventory current advising, outreach, and support systems offered and utilized by different adult learners
- Build on what's working before launching new initiatives

Define Roles Clearly

- Articulate responsibilities of case managers, peer navigators, or outreach coordinators
- Differentiate from traditional counselors or advisors

Use Common Tools

- Adopt shared tracking systems (CRM or early alert platforms)

- Allow multiple teams to see and update learner progress

Ensure Manageable Caseloads

- Cap caseloads to enable meaningful outreach and follow-up
- For large cohorts, use tiered support or proactive communication triggers

Invest in Staff Training

- Equip teams with trauma-informed practices, cultural humility, motivational interviewing
- Provide knowledge of noncredit-to-credit pathways and community resources

Elevate Cross-Functional Collaboration

- Schedule routine coordination meetings across departments
- Discuss trends, barriers, and learner stories

Center Learner Voice

- Use student surveys, focus groups, or exit interviews
- Gather feedback on case management experiences and identify improvements that can be made stratified for different adult learners (foundational learners, skill builders and career-ready)

Remember: Case management is a practice of connection. When done well, it turns fragmented systems into a coordinated net of support, helping adult learners stay enrolled, meet their goals, and feel seen.

ASSESSMENT C: ADULT LEARNER PROGRAM DESIGN & PATHWAY ALIGNMENT

Instructions: Use this planning tool to help assess their current capacity to serve different types of adult learners and identify specific areas for development. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, this framework recognizes that foundational learners, skills builders, and pathway-ready adults have distinct needs requiring tailored program design and support strategies.

Standalone Use: When focusing on program completion rates, employment outcomes, or curriculum redesign

Integrated Use: Phase 2 core assessment; builds on Assessments A & B, connects to Assessment D

Domain 1: Flexible Program Structure (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
C. 1.1 Multiple Entry and Exit Points	3 Multiple start dates per year with competency-based progression and clear stackable credential pathways	2 Some flexible entry points with traditional semester structure or year-round enrollment with limited flexibility	1 Traditional semester-based enrollment only	
C. 1.2 Schedule and Delivery Flexibility	3 Multiple modalities (online, hybrid, evening, weekend) with accelerated and part-time options	2 Evening and online options available for most programs or some evening or online courses available	1 Traditional day schedule with limited flexibility	
C. 1.3 Prior Learning Recognition	3 Comprehensive Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) system with multiple assessment methods	2 CPL available for most programs with clear assessment processes or basic CPL available for some programs	1 Limited or no prior learning recognition	

Domain 2: Adult-Centered Curriculum Design (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
C.2.1 Real-World Application Integration	3 Applied learning opportunities integrated throughout curriculum with authentic workplace applications	2 Some applied learning components in select courses or project-based learning with limited industry connection	1 Traditional academic approach with limited real-world application	
C. 2.2 Competency-Based Learning Elements	3 Strong transfer partnerships with clear pathway guidance and articulation agreements	2 Basic transfer agreements with some pathway information or clear pathways with limited partner institutions	1 Limited transfer options or unclear pathways	
C. 2.3 Technology Integration and Digital Literacy	3 Technology tools regularly used with comprehensive digital literacy skill development	2 Basic technology integration with some digital literacy instruction or technology seamlessly integrated with limited skill development	1 Limited technology use or digital literacy development	

Domain 3: Career and Transfer Pathway Clarity (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
C. 3.1 Industry Alignment and Currency	3 Regular industry input with annual curriculum review and current industry standards integration	2 Some industry connection with periodic curriculum updates or programs designed with industry input but limited updates	1 Limited industry input or curriculum currency	
C. 3.2 Transfer Pathway Integration	3 Family support programming and basic employer communication support for flexible arrangements	2 Family orientation and some employer engagement or some family resources and limited employer integration	1 Individual student focus only, no family or employer integration	
C. 3.3 Stackable Credential Architecture	3 Multiple credential levels with defined stacking opportunities and clear career advancement pathways	2 Some certificate to degree pathways available or stackable design with unclear advancement pathways	1 Limited credential stacking or unclear advancement pathways	

Domain 4: Learner Profile Differentiation (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
C. 4.1 Foundational Learner Support	3 Contextualized basic skills with career pathway connections and integrated support services	2 Basic skills support available with some career integration or integrated basic skills with limited pathway connection	1 Traditional remediation separate from career programs	
C. 4.2 Skills Builder Program Design	3 Short-term programs aligned with local labor market needs and industry-recognized credentials	2 Some short-term training programs available or industry-aligned programs with limited credential recognition	1 Limited short-term or skills-focused programming	
C. 4.3 Pathway-Ready Program Enhancement	3 Advanced coursework with leadership development or specialized tracks available	2 Standard program offerings with some advanced options or advanced programs with limited enhancement opportunities	1 Basic program level only with limited advancement opportunities	
Adult Learner Program Design & Pathway Alignment TOTAL SCORE				

Implementation Considerations

Designing effective adult learner programs requires systematic analysis, cross-functional collaboration, and deep understanding of diverse learner needs and career pathways.

Key steps include:

Start with Assessment

- Conduct comprehensive program audit using Assessment C in Appendix A to identify gaps in flexible structure, curriculum design, and pathway clarity
- Analyze completion and employment outcomes by learner profile (foundational, skills builder, pathway-ready)
- Gather input from current students, graduates, and employers about program relevance and effectiveness
- Review labor market data and industry skill demands to inform program currency

Build Systematically

- Begin with high-impact flexibility improvements like multiple entry points and evening/weekend options
- Integrate Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) processes to accelerate progress
- Develop stackable credential pathways that allow learners to build toward larger goals
- Create clear program maps showing progression routes and career outcomes

Invest in Faculty and Curriculum

- Provide professional development in adult learning principles, competency-based instruction, and industry integration
- Support faculty in developing applied learning projects with authentic workplace connections
- Establish regular curriculum review cycles with industry advisory input
- Implement technology tools that enhance rather than complicate the learning experience

Think Holistically

Effective adult learner programs become more than course sequences—they're career acceleration systems that recognize learners' existing knowledge, accommodate their complex lives, and connect directly to economic opportunity. For adult learners, well-designed programs signal that education can be both rigorous and realistic, opening doors rather than creating barriers.

ASSESSMENT D: INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT & WORK-BASED LEARNING

Instructions: Use this assessment tool to evaluate your institution's capacity to develop and sustain meaningful partnerships with employers and industry. Rather than treating workforce connections as an add-on, this framework recognizes that effective industry partnerships require systematic infrastructure, authentic employer engagement, integrated work-based learning, and measurable employment outcomes that directly benefit adult learners seeking career advancement and economic mobility.

Standalone Use: When focusing on employment outcomes, program relevance, or workforce development

Integrated Use: Phase 2 workforce alignment; builds on Assessment C, informs Assessment E

Domain 1: Partnership Infrastructure and Governance (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
D. 1.1 Dedicated Partnership Management	3 Designated staff with significant time allocation for industry partnerships and relationship management systems	2 Part-time staff assignment with basic industry engagement responsibilities or full-time staff with limited systems	1 Industry engagement handled as additional duties without dedicated capacity	
D. 1.2 Strategic Planning Integration	3 Industry partnerships included in strategic planning with resource allocation and measurable goals	2 Industry engagement referenced in strategic plan with limited resources or partnerships central to planning with insufficient resources	1 No strategic integration of industry partnerships	
D. 1.3 Advisory Structure and Governance	3 Regular advisory committee meetings with structured input on programs and some decision-making authority	2 Basic advisory structure with periodic industry input or active committees with limited governance authority	1 Limited or inactive industry advisory involvement	

Domain 2: Employer Engagement and Relationship Building (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
D. 2.1 Systematic Employer Outreach	3 Regular employer outreach with systematic relationship tracking and engagement strategy	2 Part-time staff assignment with basic industry engagement responsibilities or full-time staff with limited systems	1 Limited employer outreach or relationship management	
D. 2.2 Industry Needs Assessment and Response	3 Annual industry needs assessment with program adjustment processes and labor market analysis	2 Periodic industry input with some program modifications or continuous analysis with limited program response	1 Limited industry needs assessment or program responsiveness	
D. 2.3 Employer Satisfaction and Feedback Systems	3 Regular employer surveys with feedback integration into programming and satisfaction tracking	2 Basic employer feedback collection with some follow-up or regular surveys with limited integration	1 Limited employer feedback or satisfaction monitoring	

Domain 3: Work-Based Learning Integration (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
D. 3.1 Apprenticeship and Internship Programs	3 Some apprenticeships with internship options in most programs and structured work-based learning	2 Basic internship programs with emerging apprenticeship opportunities or extensive internships with limited apprenticeships	1 Limited work-based learning opportunities	
D. 3.2 Industry-Integrated Curriculum	3 Regular industry input in curriculum with guest instruction and authentic workplace integration	2 Basic industry involvement in curriculum development or curriculum input with limited instruction integration	1 Limited industry integration in curriculum design	
D. 3.3 Authentic Assessment and Credentialing	3 Some industry-recognized credentials with employer input on assessments and validation	2 Basic industry credential preparation with traditional assessments or industry validation with limited credential recognition	1 Limited industry-recognized credentialing	

Domain 4: Employment Outcomes and Career Services (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
D. 4.1 Job Placement and Career Services	3 Career counseling and job search support with employer connections and placement assistance	2 Basic career services with limited employer connections or comprehensive services with limited placement support	1 Minimal career services or job placement support	
D. 4.2 Graduate Employment Tracking	3 Regular employment tracking with basic wage and satisfaction data collection	2 Basic employment tracking with limited outcome data or comprehensive tracking with irregular data collection	1 Minimal or no systematic graduate outcome tracking	
D. 4.3 Continuous Partnership Evaluation	3 Regular partnership review with improvement planning and effectiveness assessment	2 Basic partnership assessment with limited improvement action or systematic evaluation with limited improvement processes	1 No systematic partnership evaluation or improvement processes	
Industry Partnership Development & Work-Based Learning TOTAL SCORE				

Implementation Considerations

Building meaningful industry partnerships requires strategic relationship development, authentic employer engagement, and systematic integration of work-based learning throughout programs.

Key steps include:

Start with Assessment

- Complete Assessment D in Appendix A to evaluate current partnership infrastructure and employer engagement capacity
- Conduct labor market analysis to identify high-demand occupations and key regional employers
- Survey recent graduates about employment outcomes and career advancement experiences
- Assess existing industry advisory structures and employer satisfaction with graduate preparation

Build Systematically

- Begin with one or two strategic employer partnerships in high-enrollment program areas
- Establish formal advisory committees with clear governance structures and decision-making authority
- Develop work-based learning opportunities starting with job shadowing and guest speakers, progressing to internships and apprenticeships
- Create employer engagement protocols for systematic outreach and relationship maintenance

Invest in Infrastructure

- Hire dedicated workforce development staff with industry experience and relationship-building skills
- Provide professional development for faculty in industry engagement and work-based learning pedagogy
- Develop employer-facing materials and processes that demonstrate institutional professionalism and student quality
- Implement tracking systems for partnership effectiveness and employment outcomes

Think Strategically

Effective industry partnerships become more than job placement—they're workforce development ecosystems that benefit students, employers, and the broader community. For adult learners, strong industry connections signal that education leads directly to economic mobility and career advancement, making the investment in learning both practical and transformative.

ASSESSMENT E: ADULT LEARNER DATA SYSTEMS & CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Instructions: Use this assessment tool to evaluate your institution's capacity to collect, analyze, and act on adult learner success data for continuous improvement. Rather than treating data as compliance reporting, this framework recognizes that effective data systems require integrated infrastructure, meaningful analytics, stakeholder-focused communication, and systematic improvement processes that drive evidence-based decisions to enhance adult learner outcomes.

Standalone Use: When focusing on data-driven decision making, accountability, or performance improvement

Integrated Use: Phase 3 continuous improvement foundation; synthesizes data from all other assessments

Domain 1: Data Infrastructure and Management (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
E. 1.1 Adult Learner Data Identification and Tracking	3 Clear adult learner identification with institutional longitudinal tracking and comprehensive	2 Basic adult learner identification with limited longitudinal capability or comprehensive identification with limited tracking	1 Inconsistent adult learner identification or tracking	
E. 1.2 Integrated Data Systems	3 Integrated student information system with most services connected and good data sharing capabilities	2 Basic system integration with some data sharing capabilities or integrated systems with limited service connections	1 Separate systems with limited integration or data sharing	
E. 1.3 External Data Integration	3 Some external data integration with employment or wage tracking and outcome monitoring	2 Basic external data connections with limited outcome tracking or integration capabilities with inconsistent data collection	1 No external data integration or outcome tracking beyond graduation	

Domain 2: Analytics and Performance Measurement (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
E. 2.1 Adult-Specific Success Metrics	3 Multiple adult learner success indicators with regular monitoring and outcome measurement	2 Basic adult learner metrics with periodic review or comprehensive measures with irregular monitoring	1 General student metrics applied to adult learners	
E. 2.2 Equity Gap Analysis and Monitoring	3 Regular equity gap analysis with improvement planning and disaggregated data review	2 Basic equity monitoring with some disaggregated data or gap analysis with limited improvement planning	1 Limited equity analysis or disaggregated data review	
E. 2.3 Predictive Analytics and Early Intervention	3 Basic predictive analytics with systematic intervention protocols and risk indicator tracking	2 Risk indicator tracking with some intervention processes or predictive capability with limited intervention systems	1 Limited predictive capability or intervention systems	

Domain 3: Domain 3: Reporting and Communication (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
E. 3.1 Stakeholder Reporting Systems	3 Regular reporting schedule with stakeholder-specific data presentations and accessible reporting	2 Basic reporting with some stakeholder customization or regular reporting with limited customization	1 Limited reporting or stakeholder-specific data sharing	
E. 3.2 Public Transparency and Accountability	3 Regular public reporting with clear adult learner outcome data and community accessibility	2 Basic public reporting with some adult learner data included or regular reporting with limited adult learner focus	1 Limited public reporting or adult learner data transparency	
E. 3.3 Data Storytelling and Communication	3 Data presented with context and storytelling elements that engage stakeholders effectively	2 Basic data presentation with limited narrative context or compelling narratives with inconsistent data presentation	1 Raw data reporting with minimal interpretation or storytelling	

Domain 4: Continuous Improvement and Action (9 points)

Indicator	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning	Score
E. 4.1 Data-Driven Decision Making Processes	3 Regular data review with decision-making integration and systematic review cycles	2 Periodic data review with limited decision-making connection or systematic review with inconsistent decision-making integration	1 Data collection without systematic decision-making integration	
E. 4.2 Graduate Employment Tracking	3 Regular improvement cycles with some rapid testing capability and systematic improvement processes	2 Basic improvement planning with limited rapid cycle implementation or improvement methodology with inconsistent implementation	1 Traditional planning processes without rapid cycle improvement	
E. 4.3 Continuous Partnership Evaluation	3 Regular evidence review with practice adoption and monitoring of implementation effectiveness	2 Basic evidence consideration in practice decisions or systematic research review with limited practice adoption	1 Limited evidence-based practice adoption or fidelity monitoring	
Adult Learner Data Systems & Continuous Improvement TOTAL SCORE				

Implementation Considerations

Developing robust data systems requires strategic technology investments, cross-functional collaboration, and commitment to evidence-based decision making.

Key steps include:

Start with Assessment

- Use Assessment E in Appendix A to evaluate current data infrastructure, analytics capabilities, and improvement processes
- Inventory existing data sources and identify gaps in adult learner identification and tracking
- Assess staff capacity for data analysis and evidence-based practice adoption
- Review current reporting systems and stakeholder data needs

Build Systematically

- Begin with adult learner identification and basic outcome tracking in student information systems
- Develop standardized definitions and metrics for adult learner success across departments
- Create dashboard systems that make data accessible to staff and administrators for decision-making
- Establish regular data review cycles with cross-functional teams

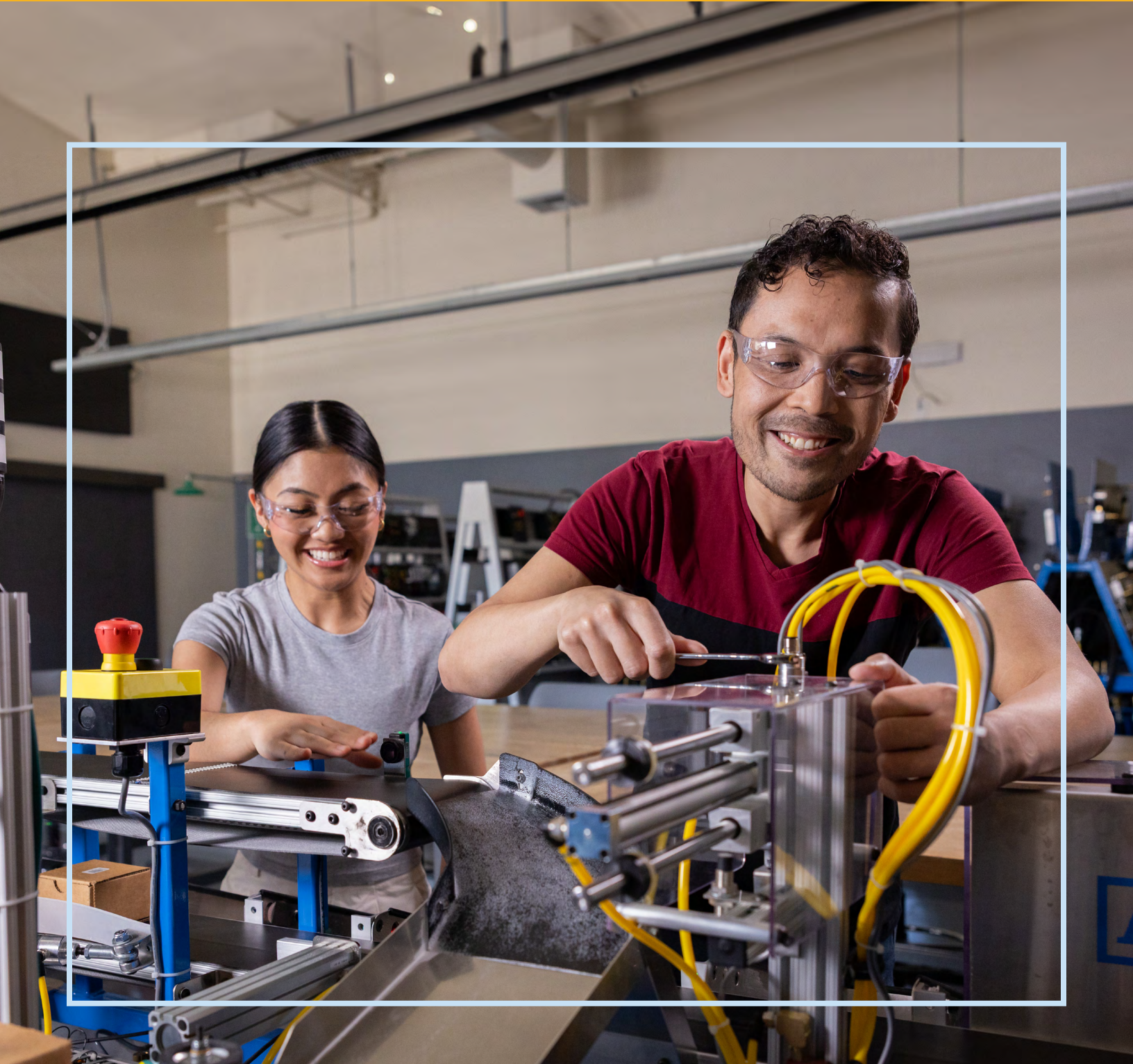
Invest in Capacity

- Provide professional development in data analysis, interpretation, and continuous improvement methodologies
- Hire or develop institutional research capacity focused on adult learner outcomes
- Implement user-friendly data visualization tools that support storytelling and stakeholder engagement
- Establish data governance policies that ensure accuracy, privacy, and ethical use

Think Strategically

Effective data systems become more than reporting tools—they're institutional learning mechanisms that drive continuous improvement and demonstrate impact. For adult learners, robust data systems ensure that their experiences inform better services and that their successes are captured and celebrated, creating cycles of improvement that benefit future students.

APPENDIX B: ADULT LEARNER TOOLKIT: COMPREHENSIVE QUICK START GUIDE



Integrated Implementation Approach

Transforming institutional capacity to serve adult learners requires coordinated action across multiple systems. This comprehensive guide integrates strategies from welcome and access, case management, program design, industry partnerships, data systems, and financial support to create a unified implementation roadmap.

Key Principle: Adult learners succeed when institutions eliminate friction at every touchpoint—from first contact through program completion and career advancement. Progress doesn't have to wait for perfection, but it does require intentional coordination across departments and sustained commitment to learner-centered design.

90-Day Foundation Building

Focus: Assessment, Quick Wins, and System Alignment

Phase 1A: Comprehensive Assessment and Data Gathering

Complete Integrated Assessment (Weeks 1-4)

- **Conduct comprehensive adult learner assessment using all six toolkit assessments:**
 - Assessment A: Welcome & Access Systems
 - Assessment B: Case Management & Ongoing Support
 - Assessment C: Program Design & Pathway Alignment
 - Assessment D: Industry Partnership Development
 - Assessment E: Data Systems & Continuous Improvement
 - Assessment F: Financial Support & Accessibility
- **Analyze institutional readiness across all domains:**
 - Current adult learner demographics, enrollment patterns, and completion outcomes disaggregated by age, income, race/ethnicity, and employment status
 - Map existing credential programs for stackability gaps, entry barriers, and career alignment using regional labor market data
 - Assess current support service utilization and identify where adult learners drop out or struggle most
 - Evaluate financial support systems and emergency assistance capacity

Engage Adult Learner Voices (Weeks 2-6)

- Facilitate focus groups with current adult learners, recent completers, and those who stopped out to surface design priorities and barrier identification
- Conduct comprehensive surveys during registration or orientation covering scheduling preferences, childcare needs, financial concerns, career goals, and support service awareness
- Partner with community organizations serving adult populations to reach learners not currently enrolled
- Include employers and industry partners in feedback collection to understand workforce preparation effectiveness

Phase 1B: Cross-Functional Team Building and Infrastructure

Assemble Integrated Adult Learner Success Team (Weeks 3-5)

- Convene representatives from academic affairs, student services, financial aid, workforce development, continuing education, institutional research, and business office
- Include at least two faculty champions from high-enrollment adult learner programs
- Add employer representative and adult learner advocate to core team
- Designate executive sponsor and project lead with authority to coordinate across departments and implement changes

Establish Governance and Communication Systems (Weeks 4-6)

- Create regular meeting schedule with clear agendas and decision-making protocols
- Develop shared project management system for tracking progress across all implementation areas
- Establish communication channels for rapid problem-solving and resource sharing
- Align team goals with institutional strategic plan and accountability measures

Phase 1C: Immediate Impact Wins

Launch Front-Door Improvements (Weeks 6-8)

- Implement multiple start dates for at least one high-demand program (quarterly or rolling entry)
- Create simplified, adult-friendly program maps that clearly show career outcomes, wage progression, and completion timelines

- Establish evening or weekend office hours for advising and financial aid specifically for working adults
- Co-locate or create "warm handoff" protocols between admissions, financial aid, and academic advising

Begin Financial Accessibility Enhancements (Weeks 7-9)

- Train financial aid staff on Workforce Pell requirements and timeline (July 2026 implementation)
- Identify current programs that may qualify for Workforce Pell and begin application processes
- Create emergency aid protocols and funding sources for transportation, childcare, and basic needs
- Embed FAFSA completion support and WIOA eligibility screening into all adult program orientations

Initiate Industry Partnership Development (Weeks 8-12)

- Reactivate existing employer advisory groups or create new ones for 2-3 high-opportunity sectors
- Schedule listening sessions with local workforce boards, union representatives, and major regional employers
- Identify potential work-based learning partners willing to pilot internships, apprenticeships, or project-based learning
- Map key industry leaders, workforce partners, and community organizations for ongoing engagement

6-Month System Integration

Focus: Program Redesign, Service Coordination, and Partnership Development

Phase 2A: Coordinated Program and Service Redesign

Launch Integrated Pathway Design (Months 3-4)

- Redesign 2-3 priority programs using Assessment C criteria, incorporating:
- Multiple entry/exit points with competency-based progression
- Stackable credential sequences with immediate labor market value
- Credit for prior learning (CPL) processes including portfolio assessment
- Integration of basic skills support with career content for foundational learners

Implement Coordinated Case Management (Months 3-5)

- Co-locate or coordinate academic advising, career counseling, and financial aid services using Assessment B framework
- Implement case management approach for adult learners with complex needs, including:
 - Manageable caseloads with risk-stratified assignment
 - Integrated communication systems with cross-departmental access
 - Proactive early warning and intervention protocols
 - Crisis response capabilities with emergency fund access

Establish Comprehensive Financial Support Systems (Months 4-6)

- Expand financial aid specialization for adult learners with flexible scheduling
- Develop comprehensive emergency assistance program with same-day processing capability
- Create partnerships with community organizations for basic needs support (food, housing, childcare)
- Launch adult learner-specific scholarship programs with streamlined applications

Phase 2B: Industry Partnership Integration and Work-Based Learning

Develop Systematic Employer Engagement (Months 4-5)

- Establish formal industry advisory committees with governance authority for program oversight
- Conduct comprehensive labor market analysis to identify high-opportunity sectors and skill demands
- Create employer engagement protocols for systematic outreach and relationship maintenance
- Develop employer-facing materials demonstrating institutional professionalism and student quality

Launch Work-Based Learning Initiatives (Months 5-6)

- Establish at least 2-3 paid internship, apprenticeship, or clinical placement partnerships
- Integrate employer-sponsored projects into curriculum for real-world application

- Create industry mentorship programs connecting students with working professionals
- Pilot competency-based assessment methods validated by industry partners

Phase 2C: Data Infrastructure and Tracking Implementation

Implement Comprehensive Tracking Systems (Months 4-6)

- Establish adult learner identification protocols in student information systems
- Create integrated data sharing capabilities across all student services
- Develop outcome tracking including employment placement, wage progression, and satisfaction
- Implement early warning analytics with automated intervention triggers

Launch Stakeholder Communication Systems (Months 5-6)

- Create dashboard systems accessible to staff, administrators, and key stakeholders
- Develop regular reporting schedules with learner success stories and outcome data
- Establish quarterly data review cycles with cross-functional teams
- Begin external reporting to demonstrate institutional adult learner commitment

1-Year Sustainability and Scaling

Focus: Evidence-Based Improvement, Institutional Integration, and Long-Term Sustainability

Phase 3A: Outcome Achievement and Continuous Improvement

Demonstrate Measurable Impact (Months 9-12)

- Achieve 15% increase in adult learner enrollment in redesigned pathways
- Improve completion rates by 10% for adult learners in programs with integrated supports
- Track and report employment placement rates, wage gains, and learner satisfaction using disaggregated data
- Document cost savings from improved retention and reduced support service duplication

Establish Evidence-Based Improvement Cycles (Months 10-12)

- Implement quarterly data review processes using Assessment E framework
- Conduct annual industry advisory reviews to validate curriculum relevance and update programs

- Integrate student voice systematically through focus groups, surveys, and advisory participation
- Use outcome data to refine program design, support services, and partnership strategies

Phase 3B: Institutional Integration and Policy Alignment

Embed Adult Learner Focus Institution-Wide (Months 9-11)

- Update institutional policies (catalog, prerequisites, scheduling) to support adult learner needs
- Integrate adult learner considerations into all new program development processes
- Expand successful models to additional sectors, campuses, or delivery modalities
- Align faculty evaluation and professional development with adult learner success outcomes

Develop Sustainable Funding Models (Months 10-12)

- Blend traditional funding with WIOA resources, employer partnerships, and federal aid (including Workforce Pell)
- Secure ongoing institutional funding for wraparound services and emergency aid
- Create cost-sharing agreements with industry partners for work-based learning and equipment
- Establish revenue diversification through customized training and fee-for-service programs

Phase 3C: Regional Leadership and Advanced Integration

Build Comprehensive Pathway Infrastructure (Months 11-12)

- Establish seamless transitions between non-credit and credit programs
- Create transfer agreements with four-year institutions specifically supporting adult learner advancement
- Develop alumni networks and continuing education opportunities for ongoing upskilling
- Implement advanced data integration with state longitudinal systems and employment records

Establish Regional Leadership Role (Year 2+)

- Share successful models with other institutions and community partners through formal presentation and documentation

- Lead regional workforce development initiatives and collaborative adult learner programming
- Influence state and federal policy through demonstrated adult learner success outcomes and advocacy
- Mentor other institutions implementing similar comprehensive approaches

Success Indicators and Troubleshooting

90-Day Success Indicators

- All six assessments completed with baseline scores established
- Cross-functional team meeting regularly with clear project momentum
- At least 3 immediate improvements implemented (multiple start dates, emergency aid, evening hours)
- Industry partnership conversations initiated with 5+ employers
- Adult learner feedback collected from 50+ current and former students

6-Month Success Indicators

- 2-3 programs redesigned with integrated support services
- Case management system operational with dedicated staffing
- Work-based learning partnerships established with measurable student participation
- Financial support systems expanded beyond traditional aid
- Data tracking systems capturing adult learner progression and outcomes

1-Year Success Indicators

- Enrollment and completion improvements documented and celebrated
- Employer satisfaction with graduates demonstrable through formal feedback
- Sustainable funding model operational with diversified revenue streams
- Institution recognized regionally as adult learner-focused with replicable practices
- Continuous improvement processes embedded in institutional culture

Common Implementation Challenges and Solutions

Challenge: Competing priorities and resource constraints *Solution:* Focus on integration opportunities that leverage existing resources rather than requiring new funding. Emphasize cost savings from improved retention and reduced duplication.

Challenge: Resistance to change across departments *Solution:* Start with willing champions, demonstrate early wins, and use data storytelling to build broader support. Ensure executive leadership communicates clear expectations.

Challenge: Industry partners hesitant to engage *Solution:* Begin with small, low-risk partnerships that provide immediate value to employers. Focus on solving specific workforce challenges rather than generic engagement.

Challenge: Adult learners skeptical of institutional commitment *Solution:* Prioritize transparency in communication, rapid response to barriers, and visible celebration of student successes. Ensure adult learner voices are central to ongoing improvement.

Challenge: Data systems inadequate for comprehensive tracking *Solution:* Start with manual tracking systems for key metrics while advocating for system improvements. Use external data sources and employer feedback to supplement institutional data.

Resource Requirements and ROI Framework

Staffing Investments

- Year 1: 1.0 FTE project coordinator, 0.5 FTE data analyst, professional development for existing staff
- Year 2+: Adult learner specialist positions, dedicated case managers, industry partnership coordinator

Technology and Infrastructure

- Immediate: Project management software, data visualization tools, communication platforms
- 6-Month: Student information system enhancements, early warning analytics, employer engagement database
- 1-Year: Comprehensive data warehouse, predictive modeling capabilities, integrated reporting systems

Return on Investment Indicators

- Enrollment Growth: 15-25% increase in adult learner enrollment within 18 months
- Retention Improvement: 10-20% improvement in semester-to-semester persistence
- Completion Rate Enhancement: 15-30% improvement in program completion rates
- Employment Outcomes: 85%+ employment placement rates with documented wage progression
- Cost Savings: Reduced support service duplication, improved resource utilization, increased revenue per student

This comprehensive approach ensures that institutional transformation is systematic, sustainable, and centered on adult learner success across all touchpoints and systems.

APPENDIX C: CRITICAL RESOURCES AND TOOLS TOOLKIT INDEX



APPENDIX C1. ADULT LEARNER REENGAGEMENT

- Bell, A. (2019, November). *Adult promise: Design template*. State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO). https://sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/SHEEO_AdultPromise_DesignTemp_2019.pdf
 - *What is it:* A state-level design template to guide adult promise initiatives.
 - *How to use it:* Use this to build or refine state strategies that support adult reengagement and completion.
- California Competes. (2018). *Back to college part one: California’s imperative to re-engage adults*. California Competes. https://californiacompetes.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CACompetes_Back-to-College-Part-One.pdf
 - *What is it:* A policy report highlighting the urgency of re-engaging California’s adults.
 - *How to use it:* Reference for framing the statewide imperative to invest in adult learners.
- California Competes (2018). *Back to College Two: Back to College: A Policy Prescription to Support Adults Returning to College*. Retrieved from https://californiacompetes.org/assets/general-files/CACompetes_Back-to-College-Part-Two.pdf
 - *What is it:* A set of policy prescriptions to remove barriers for returning adults.
 - *How to use it:* Draw on concrete recommendations to inform advocacy or legislative strategy.
- California Competes. (2020). *From practice to policy: How institutions accelerate adult completion and fuel prosperity*. California Competes. https://californiacompetes.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/CACompetes_Adults-Brief_Final.pdf
 - *What is it:* A brief showcasing institutional practices that accelerate adult completion.
 - *How to use it:* Adapt featured approaches to strengthen institutional policy and practice.
- Davis, L., Pocai, J., Taylor, J. L., Kauppila, S. A., & Rubin, P. (2022). *Lighting the path: To remove systemic barriers in higher education and award earned postsecondary credentials through IHEP’s Degrees When Due Initiative*. Institute for Higher Education Policy. https://www.ihep.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/IHEP_DWD_fullreport_Web.pdf
 - *What is it:* Findings from the Degrees When Due initiative on removing systemic barriers.

- *How to use it:* Use this report to inform equity-driven reengagement and credentialing strategies.
- Education Advisory Board. (2020). *Understanding and recruiting adult degree completers*. Education Advisory Board. <https://pages.eab.com/Adult-Degree-Completion-Whitepaper.html>
 - *What is it:* A whitepaper on identifying and re-enrolling adults with some college, no degree.
 - *How to use it:* Apply recruitment insights to refine outreach campaigns and enrollment pipelines.
- Education Strategy Group. (2021). *The adult-ready playbook: A comprehensive policy and practice guide to improve outcomes for post-traditional learners*. Education Strategy Group. https://edstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ESG_Adult_Ready_Playbook_Overview_FINAL.pdf
 - *What is it:* A comprehensive guide to adult-ready policies and practices.
 - *How to use it:* Use as a planning tool to assess institutional readiness and prioritize action steps.
- Gale, T., Erisman, W., & Cunningham, A. (2022). *Understanding the experiences of adults who successfully returned to college*. Lumina Foundation and Higher Ed Insight. https://higheredinsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/LuminaReport_FINAL.pdf
 - *What is it:* Research on adults who re-enrolled and completed college.
 - *How to use it:* Apply lessons learned to design supports that match adult learners' real needs.
- Sheffer, H., Palmer, I., & Mattei, A. (2020). *How adults return to school to complete their degrees*. New America, Center on Education, Labor, and Skills. newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/comeback-story/
 - *What is it:* Report on pathways and challenges for adults completing degrees.
 - *How to use it:* Leverage case studies to shape student-centered reengagement strategies.

APPENDIX C2. CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

- Shakman, K., Wogan, D., Rodriguez, S., Boyce, J., & Shaver, D. (2020). *Continuous Improvement in Education: A Toolkit for Schools and Districts* (REL 2021 014). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences,

National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/ies/2025/01/continuous-improvement-education-toolkit-schools-and-districts>

- *What is it:* A step-by-step toolkit for applying continuous improvement cycles in education.
- *How to use it:* Introduce as a practical guide to train teams in improvement science.
- Walston, J., & Conley, M. (2022). *Practical Measurement for Continuous Improvement in the Classroom: A Toolkit for Educators*. (REL 2023–139). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/rel-southwest/2025/01/tool>
 - *What is it:* A toolkit for measuring progress in classroom-level improvement cycles.
 - *How to use it:* Use with instructors to design measures that track and inform instructional change.

APPENDIX C3. LOGIC MODELS

- Kekahio, W., Cicchinelli, L., Lawton, B., & Brandon, P. R. (2014). *Logic models: A tool for effective program planning, collaboration, and monitoring* (REL 2014–025). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/pacific/pdf/REL_2014025.pdf
 - *What is it:* A guide to using logic models for planning and collaboration.
 - *How to use it:* Apply when designing multi-stakeholder initiatives to align efforts and goals.
- Lawton, B., Brandon, P. R., Cicchinelli, L., & Kekahio, W. (2014). *Logic models: A tool for designing and monitoring program evaluations* (REL 2014–007). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/pacific/resources/elm/pdf/Logicmodels.pdf>
 - *What is it:* A resource focused on using logic models for evaluation design.
 - *How to use it:* Use as a framework for setting evaluation questions and outcome measures.

- Shakman, K., & Rodriguez, S. M. (2015). *Logic models for program design, implementation, and evaluation: Workshop toolkit (REL 2015–057)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. Retrieved February 7, 2022, from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/rel_2015057.pdf.
 - *What is it:* A hands-on workshop toolkit for creating and refining logic models.
 - *How to use it:* Incorporate into staff trainings to build shared evaluation and planning skills.

APPENDIX C4. BUILDING A DATA CULTURE

- Gill, B., Coffee Borden, B., & Hallgren, K. (2014). *A conceptual framework for data-driven decision making*. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/publications/a-conceptual-framework-for-data-driven-decision-making>
 - *What is it:* A foundational framework for understanding data-driven practices.
 - *How to use it:* Use as a primer when building or strengthening an institutional data culture.
- Hamilton, L., Halverson, R., Jackson, S., Mandinach, E., Supovitz, J., & Wayman, J. (2009). *Using student achievement data to support instructional decision making (NCEE 2009-4067)*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved April 30, 2019, from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/dddm_pg_092909.pdf
 - *What is it:* A practice guide for applying student achievement data in decision making.
 - *How to use it:* Reference for faculty development and instructional planning.
- Stewart, J., Joyce, J., Haines, M., Yanoski, D., Gagnon, D., Luke, K., Rhoads, C., & Germeroth, C. (2021). *Program evaluation toolkit: Quick start guide (REL 2022–112)*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Central. Retrieved February 7, 2022, from <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/central/resources/pemtoolkit/resources.asp>.
 - *What is it:* A toolkit to quickly launch program evaluations.
 - *How to use it:* Use to guide staff through evaluation design and data collection basics.

- Regional Educational Laboratory West. (2023). *Aligning Data and Measures to Outputs and Outcomes of the Logic Model*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/west/pdf/AligningData_and_Measures_to_Outputs_and_Outcomes_LogicModel.pdf
 - *What is it:* A guide to aligning metrics with logic model outcomes.
 - *How to use it:* Apply to strengthen the connection between program goals, measures, and results.

APPENDIX C5. ADULT LEARNER NEEDS ASSESSMENT TOOLS

- California Adult Education Program. (n.d.). *CAEP fact sheets*. <https://caladulthood.org/CaepFactSheets>
 - *What it is:* Comprehensive data sheets providing demographics, outcomes, and needs of adult learners across California service areas
 - *How to use it:* Use during Phase 1 assessment to understand local adult learner populations and benchmark against state trends
- California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. (n.d.). *Adult learner needs assessment survey (Chancellor’s Office)*.
 - *What it is:* Standardized survey instrument designed to capture adult learner barriers, goals, and support needs
 - *How to use it:* Deploy during intake processes or as part of comprehensive institutional assessment of adult learner needs
 - *Available through:* California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Adult Education Program
- Canadian Literacy and Learning Network. (2012). *Learner needs assessment survey*. https://calp.ca/_uploads/resource-doc-372.pdf
 - *What it is:* Comprehensive guide for conducting community-level adult learning needs assessments
 - *How to use it:* Use to design and implement local needs assessments that inform program development and resource allocation

APPENDIX C6. LABOR MARKET ANALYSIS TOOLS

- California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. (n.d.). *DataVista: Strong workforce program regional data*.
 - *What it is:* California-specific labor market data and program outcome metrics for community college career education
 - *How to use it:* Align program offerings with regional economic development priorities and track employment outcomes
 - *Available through:* California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office

APPENDIX C7. STACKABLE CREDENTIALS DEVELOPMENT

- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. (n.d.). *Work-based learning toolkit*. <https://cte.ed.gov/wbltoolkit/>
 - *What it is:* Comprehensive implementation guide covering employer engagement, curriculum design, student supports, and sustainability strategies
 - *How to use it:* Follow the step-by-step approach during Phase 2 program redesign to build authentic stackable pathways
- National Skills Coalition. (2020). *Stackable credential policy toolkit*. <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Stackable-Credential-Policy-Toolkit-1.pdf>
 - *What it is:* Policy framework and implementation strategies for state and institutional leaders developing stackable credential systems
 - *How to use it:* Reference during institutional policy development and when advocating for supportive state policies
- Education Strategy Group. (2020). *Stackability guide: Building credential connections within institutions*. <https://edstrategy.org/resource/stackability-guide-building-credential-connections-within-institutions/>
 - *What it is:* Practical guide for mapping existing credentials and building institutional infrastructure for stackability
 - *How to use it:* Use during Phase 2 to audit current programs and design systematic approaches to credential stacking

APPENDIX C8. GUIDED PATHWAYS IMPLEMENTATION

- California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. (2018). *California guided pathways playbook*. <https://www.cccco.edu/College-Professionals/Guided-Pathways/ca-guided-pathways-playbook>

- *What it is:* Evidence-based strategies, resources, and examples for implementing equity-focused guided pathways
- *How to use it:* Reference throughout implementation to ensure adult learner needs are centered in pathway design
- EAB. (2020). *Achieving pathways goals with student-centered design: Community college toolkit*. <https://eab.com/research/community-college/toolkit/achieving-pathways-goals-with-student-centered-design-toolkit/>
 - *What it is:* Tools for designing student-centric program maps, course schedules, and advisor training materials
 - *How to use it:* Use during Phase 2 program redesign to create clear, navigable pathways that work for adult learners

APPENDIX C9. CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING (CPL)

- Academic Senate for California Community Colleges. (2021). Credit for prior learning toolkit. <https://www.asccc.org/sites/default/files/CPL%20Toolkit.pdf>
 - *What it is:* Comprehensive guide for California community colleges implementing CPL policies, including equity considerations
 - *How to use it:* Use during policy development and faculty training to ensure CPL processes are accessible and equitable
- Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (n.d.). Credit for prior learning. <https://www.cael.org/our-work/credit-for-prior-learning>
 - *What it is:* Free comprehensive resource including research, implementation guides, and institutional examples
 - *How to use it:* Reference during Phase 1 assessment and Phase 2 design to build evidence-based CPL programs
- Klein-Collins, R., & Olson, R. (2021). Connecting adults to college with credit for prior learning. Lumina Foundation. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/connecting-adults-to-college-with-credit-for-prior-learning.pdf>
 - *What it is:* Framework to support adult learners' CPL pathways.
- Palomar College. (n.d.). Credit for prior learning at Palomar College. <https://www.palomar.edu/cpl/home-page/>
- *What it is:* Institutional model with training modules, templates, and implementation resources

- *How to use it:* Study successful institutional implementation and adapt resources for local context

APPENDIX C10. WORK-BASED LEARNING DEVELOPMENT

- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. (n.d.). *Work-based learning toolkit*. <https://cte.ed.gov/wbltoolkit/>
 - *What it is:* Comprehensive resource defining WBL types, quality principles, and implementation strategies
 - *How to use it:* Reference during Phase 3 delivery innovation to integrate meaningful work-based learning experiences
- New America. (2020). *Making work-based learning work better for community college students*. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/briefs/making-work-based-learning-work-better-for-community-college-students/>
 - *What it is:* Research brief on effective WBL strategies specifically for community college populations
 - *How to use it:* Understand best practices for designing WBL experiences that serve adult learners effectively

APPENDIX C11. FINANCIAL AID AND SUPPORT SERVICES

- Higher Learning Advocates. (2023). *Toolkit: Solving Today's Students' Food, Housing, And Basic Needs Insecurities*.
 - *What it is:* Comprehensive toolkit for addressing food, housing, and basic needs insecurities among college students
 - *How to use it:* Implement during Phase 2 and 3 to build comprehensive support infrastructure for adult learners
- National Skills Coalition & Jobs for the Future. (n.d.). <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/> and <https://www.jff.org/>.
 - *What it is:* Guide for building effective partnerships between community colleges and workforce development agencies
 - *How to use it:* Develop sustainable funding models and wraparound support systems for adult learners

APPENDIX A12. STUDENT SUCCESS MEASUREMENT

- Cal-PASS Plus. (n.d.). *Cal-PASS Plus data system*. <https://www.calpassplus.org/Home>
 - *What it is:* California's longitudinal data system tracking student progress from K-12 through higher education and employment

- *How to use it:* Track adult learner outcomes and identify equity gaps in program completion and employment
- Center for Community College Student Engagement. (n.d.). CCCSE. <https://cccse.org/>
 - *What it is:* National benchmarking surveys measuring student engagement and satisfaction
 - *How to use it:* Conduct regular assessment of adult learner experiences and compare to national benchmarks
- MDRC. (2023). *Adult Learner Success Strategies: Evidence-Based Practices*.
 - *What it is:* Research-based guide to evidence-based practices for improving adult learner outcomes
 - *How to use it:* Reference during continuous improvement processes to identify and implement proven strategies

APPENDIX C13. PROGRAM QUALITY FRAMEWORKS

- Center for Law and Social Policy. (2022). *Advancing quality, career pathways framework*. <https://www.clasp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/AQCP-Framework.pdf>
 - *What it is:* Quality indicators and evaluation criteria for assessing stackable credential programs
 - *How to use it:* Conduct periodic quality assessments and program improvement planning

APPENDIX C14. PROGRAM MAPPING AND VISUALIZATION

- California Community Colleges. (n.d.). *Program mapper*. <https://programmapper.org/>
 - *What it is:* Tool for creating visual program maps that show clear pathways to completion
 - *How to use it:* Develop transparent program maps that help adult learners navigate their educational journey

APPENDIX C15. FACULTY AND STAFF TRAINING

- I-TECH. (2006). *Adult learning needs assessment toolkit*. <https://www.go2itech.org/HTML/TT06/toolkit/assessment/adults.html>
 - *What it is:* Training materials on adult learning principles, teaching methods, and assessment strategies

- *How to use it:* Provide professional development for faculty working with adult populations
- Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (n.d.). *CAEL professional development programs*. Available through Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.
 - *What it is:* Workshops and online courses on CPL implementation, adult learner support, and institutional change
 - *How to use it:* Build staff capacity for effective adult learner programming

APPENDIX C16. RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE BASE

- Community College Research Center. (n.d.). *CCRC*. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/>
 - *What it is:* Extensive research library on community college practices, with focus on student success and equity
 - *How to use it:* Stay current on evidence-based practices and research findings relevant to adult learners
- Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research. (2020). *Adult learner guidebook*. <https://belk-center.ced.ncsu.edu/adult-learner-guidebook/>
 - *What it is:* Practical guide with institutional examples and leadership strategies for serving adult learners
 - *How to use it:* Develop institutional strategies and communicate effectively with stakeholders about adult learner priorities

APPENDIX C17. PEOPLE-FOCUSED TOOLS

- Success Center for California Community Colleges. (2021). *Designing for adult learner needs toolkit*.
 - *What is it:* A toolkit of best practices and campus-based strategies for improving onboarding, communication, and student services for adult learners.
 - *How to use it:* Use this as a planning guide to adapt student services, orientation, and communication strategies to better meet adult learner needs.
- Institute for Evidence-Based Change. (n.d.). *Caring campus approach*. <https://iebcnow.org/caring-campus/>
 - *What is it:* A framework and training program focused on fostering stronger student connection and belonging, particularly through non-instructional staff.
 - *How to use it:* Engage staff in Caring Campus training to build a welcoming environment and improve adult student persistence.

- California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. (2022). *California community colleges student equity plans (2022–25)*.
 - *What is it:* State-required equity plans developed by California community colleges, with strategies for supporting disproportionately impacted students, including adults.
 - *How to use it:* Review your college’s equity plan for adult learner-specific strategies and identify alignment opportunities with this assessment.
- Center for Community College Student Engagement. (n.d.). *Community college survey of student engagement (CCSSE) – Adult learner insights*.
 - *What is it:* A national benchmarking survey that measures student engagement, with disaggregated insights for older and part-time learners.
 - *How to use it:* Analyze CCSSE results to compare your adult learner engagement levels with national benchmarks and inform improvement strategies.
- California Adult Education Program. (n.d.). *CAEP fact sheets and dashboards*.
 - *What is it:* A set of dashboards and fact sheets showing demographic data, enrollment patterns, and outcomes for adult education participants.
 - *How to use it:* Use these data visualizations to understand your local adult learner population and strengthen K–12/adult school/college pathways.
- Achieving the Dream. (n.d.). *Holistic student supports redesign guide*. <https://achievingthedream.org/holistic-student-supports-redesign-toolkit/>
 - *What is it:* A comprehensive guide to redesigning advising, case management, and wraparound services from a student-centered perspective.
 - *How to use it:* Apply this framework to redesign your institution’s support model and ensure adult learners receive proactive, coordinated assistance.

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