

HOW WELL ARE WE SERVING OUR ADULT LEARNERS?

Investigating the Impact of Institutions
on Success & Retention



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CAEL's **Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI)** Initiative is aimed at increasing access and removing barriers to postsecondary education for adults so they can be successful in attaining postsecondary degrees and credentials. This initiative is one example of the many projects CAEL has underway to pursue its mission to remove policy and organizational barriers to learning opportunities and to identify and disseminate effective practices. The development of the ALFI Assessment Toolkit and this publication are made possible by a generous grant from Lumina Foundation for Education.

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Adult Learning Focused Institution Initiative

Adults are seeking college degrees in greater numbers. Their “nontraditional” characteristics—part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financial independence, and parental responsibilities—create needs and priorities that differ from traditional students. They need institutional flexibility in curricular and support services, academic and motivational advising supportive of their life and career goals, and recognition of experience and work-based learning already obtained.

CAEL addresses these issues through its Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) Initiative, the goal of which is to help colleges and universities improve learning opportunities for working adults and the employers who support their education.

Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners

At the center of the ALFI Initiative is CAEL’s Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners, created to assist colleges and universities in meeting the unique needs of their adult students. The Principles provide a framework that helps institutions of higher education adopt policies and practices to make educational opportunities more accessible and to remove obstacles from the path to degree completion.

The Principles are based on a benchmarking study of six highly adult-learning-focused colleges and universities and input from other higher education stakeholders.

EIGHT PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVENESS FOR SERVING ADULT LEARNERS

OUTREACH	The institution conducts outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers of time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.
LIFE & CAREER PLANNING	The institution addresses adult learners' life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.
FINANCING	The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.
ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES	The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.
TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS	The institution's faculty uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential- and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.
STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS	The institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.
TECHNOLOGY	The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience.
STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS	The institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.

CAEL's next step in the ALFI Initiative was the creation of a workbook entitled, *Best Practices in Adult Learning: A Self-Evaluation Workbook for Colleges and Universities*. The workbook is based on the Principles and describes practices and policies used by high-performing colleges and universities that serve adult learners. The workbook also offers an opportunity for campus leaders to informally assess their institutions. Yet while the stories and lessons are inspiring, by themselves they fall short of answering the questions that colleges and universities ask about the means of continuous improvement. Thus, with support of Lumina Foundation for Education over a two-year period, CAEL worked with its organizational and institutional partners to create surveys that bring useful data to answer the question asked by many colleges and universities: "How well are we serving our adult learners?"

Adult Learning Focused Institution Assessment Toolkit

CAEL designed the **Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) Assessment Toolkit** specifically for colleges and universities that want to retain undergraduate adult learners by providing programs that meet and exceed their expectations.

The ALFI Assessment Tools are a pair of survey instruments that are based on CAEL's Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners. The Tools work together to help uncover what is important to adult learners as well as pinpoint an institution's strengths and areas for improvement. They provide a powerful tool for colleges and universities to align their institutional policy with the needs of adult learners.

Institutions assemble a cross-institutional team of faculty and administrators to complete approximately fifty items in the **Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS)**, which offers a unique opportunity for dialogue and reflection on the institution's resources and practices devoted to adult learners. The ISAS scans eight key areas: institutional background; mission, leadership, and organizational structure; recruitment and orientation; tuition and financial aid; teaching and learning; faculty recruitment and development; student services; and key constituencies.

The second part of the Toolkit, the **Adult Learner Inventory (ALI)**, is completed by a sampling of adult students. Created by Noel-Levitz and CAEL, the ALI measures how satisfied adult learners are and what is important to them. These measurements show how to better meet the needs of adult learners as well as what issues should receive top priority. When the ISAS and ALI are used in tandem, they provide a revealing view of the congruency of perceptions amongst institutional leaders and adult learners.

The detailed report received from both surveys includes national benchmarking data to compare results with institutions serving adults nationwide. Implementation of the ALFI Assessment Toolkit also provides institutions the opportunity to become part of the Coalition of Adult Learning Focused Institutions. These institutions are recognized for their ongoing commitment to programs promoting success in adult learning. Benefits to ALFI Coalition partners include special conferences, use of the ALFI logo, and listing on CAEL's Web site as a Coalition Participant.

Testing the Model

Decision makers can only count on data taken from instruments whose validity is secure. For the ALFI Assessment Tools, CAEL worked with partners at Noel-Levitz (NL) and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), subject-matter experts as well as with representatives at the pilot institutions whose daily work is dedicated to adult learners. This multi-faceted process assured that the ALFI Assessment Tools represent the best practices revealed through CAEL's studies.

Further evidence of the validity and impact of the ALFI Assessment Tools comes from an independent report from evaluator Mary Williams and Associates. According to this report, the ALFI Assessment Tools made an impact on the institutions that used them. Among the pilot institutions, 84 percent have acted in some way to build stronger capacity to serve their adult learners.

A View of Adult Student Re-enrollments

Another step in our evaluation model—adult student responses to the ALFI Assessment Tools—also shows the efforts stimulated by the Tools lead to positive outcomes. For this work, CAEL asked for the assistance of the institutions that participated in the pilot study so that data on student retention and success could be correlated with scores on the ALFI Assessment Tools. The purpose of the study was to determine if institutions with strong scores from the ALFI Assessment Tools retained adult students.

For this study, CAEL provided exact time parameters when requesting the data, so that all institutions would report on an identical period. CAEL asked for adult student enrollment data from a recent period (July 1, 2002 to September 30, 2003) to ensure availability of data. This also coincided with the time that institutions were administering the ALFI Assessment Tools. CAEL also asked how many of the adult students who enrolled within that period then re-enrolled within a one-year period. Nearly all of the pilot institutions provided their data (twenty-one out of twenty-five institutions). Using this data, CAEL correlated the retention experience with the corresponding scores from the ALFI Assessment Tools.

Limitations of this approach should be noted. First, no links were made to the actual students who participated in developing the the Adult Learner Inventory. As a result, one cannot partition students' reasons that would explain institutional retention results. For example, students who start course work may not re-enroll for many reasons wholly unrelated to how well the school performs as an Adult Learning Focused Institution. Family emergencies, shift changes at work, personal dislike of individual instructors, and a host of similar reasons can occur.

Also, this study could not determine whether or not re-enrollment results are due to improvements that institutions implemented following use of the ALFI Assessment Tools. Accordingly, the appropriate way to view the study's retention results is as an effort to provide initial evidence of the concurrent validity (but not predictive validity) of best practices researched by CAEL.

What Early Results Show

The Adult Learner Inventory (ALI) measures how important it is that an institution meets an adult student's expectation and how satisfied the adult student is with the institution's ability to meet the expectation. The difference between the importance of a given institutional practice or service and students' satisfaction is the ALI "gap" score. A high "gap" score indicates challenges that an institution may want to address, while a low "gap" score indicates institutional strengths.

In CAEL's study, the correlation between re-enrollment percentages reported by the pilot institutions and the ALI "gap" scores is stunning. In short, what the data show generally is that colleges and universities with high "gap" scores have lower rates of re-enrollment, and conversely, institutions with low "gap" scores have higher re-enrollment rates. In order to demonstrate this correlation, Tables 2 and 3 list the ALI "gap" scores (converted onto a scale of 1–100) paired with the re-enrollment percentages (right-most column), from the top five and bottom five schools (based on re-enrollment rate).

Table 2. Adult Learner Inventory “Gap” Scores and Percentage of Re-enrolled Students for the Top 5 Pilot Institutions (by Re-enrolled Percentage), with Mean Values (shown in bold in the bottom row).

Outreach	Life & Career	Financing	Assessing Outcomes	Teaching/ Learning	Student Supports	Technology	%
7.00	6.30	11.20	7.20	4.90	8.70	6.30	.99
10.80	12.40	8.70	10.50	7.70	13.00	12.00	.93
4.60	7.30	5.50	7.30	4.70	5.70	5.30	.92
9.00	12.50	9.40	10.80	8.60	12.00	9.20	.88
8.70	10.40	11.20	10.40	6.70	10.70	10.30	.87
Mean=8.02	9.78	9.20	9.24	6.52	10.02	8.62	.92

Table 3. Adult Learner Inventory “Gap” Scores and Percentage of Re-enrolled Students for the Bottom 5 Pilot Institutions (by Re-enrolled Percentage), with Mean Values (shown in bold in the bottom row).

Outreach	Life & Career	Financing	Assessing Outcomes	Teaching/ Learning	Student Supports	Technology	%
20.00	19.50	17.30	18.80	16.50	23.00	21.80	.61
19.20	22.00	14.00	20.30	15.00	20.30	13.50	.59
9.50	11.50	11.20	11.40	8.30	12.70	8.20	.50
5.70	9.10	9.70	8.20	5.40	8.70	5.30	.48
17.10	15.40	19.90	16.70	12.40	21.80	17.90	.48
Mean=14.30	15.50	14.42	15.08	11.52	17.30	13.34	.53

These initial results are encouraging; they are powerful initial evidence of the concurrent validity of the ALFI Assessment Tools with respect to student retention in the form of subsequent re-enrollment for more academic work at the same institution. In that respect, they bolster this step in the evaluation model—the impact of ALFI Assessment Tools on adult learners through positive student-level outcomes. Yet a closer examination of adult student retention is in order.

A Continuum of Adult Retention/Success

In our evaluation of the pilot institutions' scores from ALFI Assessment Tools, CAEL's experience is that institutions that have high institutional scores on the Adult Learner Inventory (ALI) and the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS) will concurrently have strong adult student retention and success rates because those institutions are proactively trying to remove barriers facing adult learners.

The first challenge here is how to define **retention** of adult students in an appropriate and meaningful way. The key federal benchmark for college student retention is calculated on first-time–full-time student cohorts. Unfortunately, this standard is almost completely inapplicable for the vast majority of adult college students. Another part of the challenge is that traditional approaches measure retention in terms of traditional academic periods—in quarters or semesters. However, as we identify in the Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners, the best adult learning programs acknowledge the special needs of adult learners by offering unique structures—such as accelerated learning formats, rolling start dates, competency-based curricula, and contract learning—to help adults balance their academic goals with their other responsibilities. For example, some institutions permit students to enroll in modularized courses as frequently as every two weeks. These special enrollment arrangements and schedules are designed to improve adult student access and retention, yet traditional retention measures based on quarters and semesters fail to capture the suitability and satisfaction experienced by adults engaged in quickly recurring, intensive, nontraditional program formats. For that reason, in our initial studies involving the pilot institutions, we correlated scores from the ALFI Assessment Tools with rates of re-enrollment rather than term-to-term persistence.

Consideration of these issues lead to the conclusion that adult student retention should not be gauged upon continuous term-to-term enrollment, as is done for traditional students. Rather, an approach is needed that recognizes nontraditional formats and schedules. Adult student retention is *fundamentally different* than retention of traditional-age, residential students. Traditional students' principal identity is that of student, even if they work (known as “students who work”), so even a temporary interruption of their studies *disrupts* that identity. By contrast, adult students' principal identities are typically grounded in family and/or career, so the student role is complementary (otherwise known as “employees who study”); therefore, an interruption of studies may signify an *adaptive* not a disruptive response to life circumstances.

Adult students generally show poor retention as measured traditionally because they often enroll in one course at an institution and do not immediately re-enroll at the next opportunity. There may be “adaptive” reasons for this: students may not re-enroll because they needed the course only to prepare for or to complete a requirement for a degree program at another institution or because they enrolled in order to gain specific knowledge or expertise for their career. From a traditional retention perspective, these students’ enrollment behavior might simply be seen as a “drop out” or “stop out”—and might be counted as such in traditional measures, even though, from their perspective, they were successful in reaching their academic goals.

Measuring Adult Student Success

Student **success** is a concept for which there has been far less consensus than retention. Many believe that degree completion represents the full measure of success. Seen from that perspective, retention is then an intermediate or temporary indicator of progress within an intact program of study—in other words, waypoints on the road to success. However, it is also believed that an adult student is successful when he or she reaches an individual goal, even if that is just the completion of a course or certificate, well short of a full degree. For example, an adult student may need just one course to transfer to another institution that offers programs that better fits his or her needs. Or to get a job promotion an adult student may need a few courses or a certificate, but not a degree. By having transfer credit accepted or by achieving new employment or higher earnings, the learner may also experience success even without formal program completion.

Past and common measures of student success have often been based on measures that are more meaningful for traditional students than for adult learners. Good examples of such measures are grade point averages and time-to-degree. Because of the “stop out” phenomenon mentioned earlier, these measures can be void of meaning for adult students. An example of how such measures are inadequate for adults emerged at a large public university that participated in the piloting of the ALFI Assessment Tools. CAEL learned that most of the school’s adult students brought their required sixty credit hours of previous study from other institutions, but nearly a third of those students had originally attended this same university as “traditional” students, thus bringing forward credits that they had earned years earlier. Yet those students who had attended the university as traditional students confronted challenges when the grades that they earned during a previous phase in their lives were eventually merged into their current GPA calculation. Many ended up on academic probation because their grades during that previous experience at the university were not

as good as those that they currently earned as adults. Traditional approaches—such as assessing academic performance from the distant past as part of current academic progress—may seem on the surface to be objective, but they are not true indicators of the student’s potential success as an adult learner. In this example, the most recent work is the true indicator of how the student should be regarded and not the cumulative record.

A critical element within measures of retention as well as many measures of success is that of time frame. Fewer adults proceed into and through their studies with the same course-load level or semester-to-semester continuity compared to traditional students (eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old’s). Because of competing obligations, adults generally take fewer classes, with more interruptions, over longer periods of time compared to younger students. There is no “right” or universal standard for intervals of time to use when measuring retention or of success when viewed as progression towards graduation. Too often, to acknowledge a “retention problem” for adult learners is to make unrealistic, if not unfair comparisons, to younger students for whom our expectations are different.

Retention and Success— New Yardsticks

CAEL convened a team of subject-matter experts to discuss alternative definitions of retention and success for adult students. CAEL then used these definitions to obtain data from as many of the original pilot institutions as possible and to see how well these measures correlated with their scores from the ALFI Assessment Tools. CAEL expects that these alternative measures of retention and success may be suitable for exploration in other contexts that involve adult learners, but they are not presumed to be the best or only approaches for use by other researchers.

The new conceptual framework that CAEL adopted for purposes of our research reported here begins with these high-level definitions:

- **Retention** identifies the frequency with which adult students, having enrolled in credit-bearing work, re-enroll for more credit-bearing work within one year.
- **Success** is identified by the frequencies with which adult students do the following, according to predetermined thresholds and time intervals:
 - complete one or more credit-bearing courses,
 - accumulate specified levels of credits applicable toward certificates or degrees,
 - earn academic credentials or transfer credits to other institutions,
 - avoid academic probation or dismissal.

Thus, the success measure presumes retention but focuses upon academic progress that includes a dimension of satisfactory academic performance.

Because CAEL wanted comparable data across all pilot institutions that would correlate with the institutional and student survey results obtained during 2002–2003, CAEL provided the pilot schools with the following specific time frame and enrollment activity periods:

“**Timeframe** – Activity (defined below) on adults students who enrolled in certificate or undergraduate degree programs during school year 1998–1999 (from July 1, 1998 but no later than June 30, 1999) which occurred anytime through the end of school year 2003–2004 (by June 30, 2004). This number should include all first-time adult student enrollees, including adults who have academic credit from other institutions but are enrolling at your institution for the first time. This number is the ‘base’ number for calculating measures of activity anytime over the specified five-year period; the activities measured are given below. Please note: Do not include graduate students.”

In conjunction with this specified time frame, pilots were then requested to provide data as it relates to the following **academic progression** or “milestones:”

“Of the adult students that matriculated at your institution anytime during the 1998–1999 academic year (as defined above by timeframe):

- a) How many of these students **completed at least one Title IV eligible course or course equivalent**, by the end of the 2003–2004 school year? A course equivalent may be credits earned through CLEP, challenge exams, or other prior learning assessments. Count each student only once. If eligible to be counted in this category, the same students may also be counted again below.
- b) How many of these students **completed at least twelve academic credit hours or earned a credential such as a certificate** by the end of the 2003–2004 academic year? Count each student only once. If eligible to be counted in this category, the same students may also be counted again below.
- c) How many of these students **completed thirty academic credit hours or completed a degree** by the end of the 2003–2004 academic year? Count each student only once. If eligible to be counted in this category, the same students may also be counted again below.
- d) How many of these students **continued their academic work at another postsecondary institution?** This transfer may have occurred in one of two ways: 1) a lateral move to another academic program or 2) a move to an institution that is a different type than your own (Ex: two-year to four-year). Evidence of transfer may be an academic transcript request or other systematic tracking means available to your institution. Count each student only once.”

A second set of indicators relates to **satisfactory academic performance**:

“Of the adult students that matriculated at your institution any time during the 1998–1999 academic year (the same group as above):

- a) How many of these students were **placed on academic probation** (as defined by your institution) at any time through school year 2003–2004?
- b) How many of these students were **subject to academic dismissal** at any time through school year 2003–2004?

- Note: Since students who have been dismissed usually were first placed on academic probation, students counted in ‘option b’ will duplicate many cases of students counted in ‘option a.’
- Note: These data should be available as part of your institution’s policies to comply with Title IV eligibility requirements.”

While imperfect in some respects, the virtue of these definitions as advanced by the subject-matter expert team that CAEL assembled is that nearly every institution of higher education is capable of or actually reported student work in credit hours, and nearly all will also have provisions for measuring satisfactory academic progress, upon which continuing student eligibility for federal student aid programs depends.

Results and Analysis

This section will report in particular on academic progression (credit hour production) and satisfactory academic performance (probation/dismissal) among the pilot institutions. Eighteen pilot institutions provided credit hour data and seventeen institutions provided probation/dismissal data to CAEL. Since this study was developed after the pilot project, there was no previous arrangement or obligation for institutions to participate. Since a relatively small number of participating institutions provided data, caution must be exercised in placing too much reliance or value upon findings from this small sampling.

The credit hour and probation/dismissal indicators showed the expected intercorrelations, which lends confidence into their use as outcome scales. Course completions correlated with completion of twelve credit hours as $r=.698$ ($p=.001$) and with completion of thirty credit hours as $r=.557$ ($p=.016$), while the completion of twelve credit hours with thirty credit hours was $r=.943$ ($p<.001$).

Similarly for the measures of satisfactory academic performance, probation correlated with dismissal as $r=.709$ ($p<.001$). There were no significant correlations between measures of credit hour production and probation/dismissal.

Only a few of the student outcome measures showed statistically significant relationships to the scores from the ALFI Assessment Tools in this small sampling of CAEL's pilot institutions. Three of the scores reported on data from the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS) showed negative relationships to the academic probation measure, such that higher scores of these variables accompany lower incidence rates of students on probation. Those scales are the Assessment of Learning Outcomes ($r= -.762$, $p<.001$), the Teaching/Learning Process ($r= -.771$, $p<.001$), and Student Support Systems ($r= -.537$, $p=.026$). While CAEL would have been pleased to observe other significant negative relationships between scores from the ALFI Assessment Tools and probation/dismissal, it must also be recognized that these three subscales are the only ones directly relevant to the academic process. There is no theoretical or practical reason to believe that institutional activities related to the other subscales (such as Outreach, Finance, or Strategic Partnerships) should be expected to have any material relationship to student academic performance.

With respect to academic probation, a statistically significant correlation emerged between the ISAS scale for the Teaching/Learning Process and dismissal—again negative—such that higher Teaching/Learning Process scores are inversely related to occasions of academic dismissal ($r= -.505$, $p=.039$). As before, no other significant correlations to other scores from the ALFI Assessment Tools were observed.

Regarding the Adult Learner Inventory (ALI), the Teaching/Learning Process scale also showed some relationship to student credit hour production. The Importance score (but not the Satisfaction score) for Teaching/Learning Process is positively correlated with the scales measuring student credit hour production at the twelve-hour level ($r=.527$, $p=.025$) and at the thirty-hour level ($r=.504$, $p=.033$). Here again, this positive relationship is “intuitively correct” insofar as effective instructional methods for adults should be expected to coincide with a higher incidence of earned credit hours among the adults. No other statistically significant relationships emerged with other ALI scores and the academic progression scales used for this study.

It should also be noted that only a few institutions that participated in this study could provide data on the number of students who continued their academic work at another institution. It is striking that at a time when it is so common for students to transfer that institutions do not follow this trend. CAEL believes this indicates an additional need in the higher education community to consider data collection and studies.

Discussion and Implications

A full-scale rigorous test of the new, alternative definitions of retention and success measures that are appropriate for adults as correlated with the institutional effectiveness measures that the scores from the ALFI Assessment Tools capture will require tracking a large cohort of institutional users of the ALFI Assessment Tools over a number of years with their corresponding student outcomes. Such a test will also require suitable control measures to monitor external or environmental influences that might otherwise explain institutional and student behavior. Needless to say, a full-scale test of the predictive validity of the ALFI Assessment Tools will be an intensive undertaking. Nonetheless, the work of the past few years in developing the Tools provides immediate and strong evidence underpinning the justification of the model.

The newly proposed definitions used for this research merit further testing and refinement. They likely represent the best available compromise between commonly available, reliable measures across a wide variety of institutions and the highly particular and immediate outcomes that characterize the intentions of adults students (i.e., Does this learning serve my individual goals? Can I use this learning tomorrow if not sooner?). For its part, CAEL will continue to be interested in continuing to participate in the development and refinement of better measures of the effectiveness of higher education not only at the student level but at the institutional level as well.

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