The Plus 50 Initiative:
Standards of Excellence
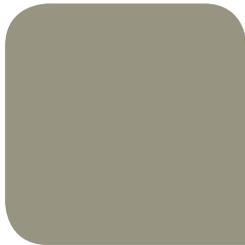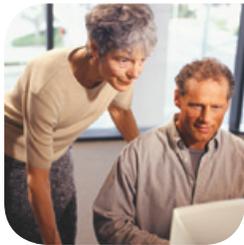
plus 50
Community Colleges:
AGELESS LEARNING

Community colleges are vital institutions that meet the evolving needs of students and their communities. As society faces a massive demographic shift with the aging of the baby boom generation, community colleges are called upon to meet the needs of this population. Colleges nationwide are currently expanding program offerings that support plus 50 learners in reaching their educational, career, and volunteering goals. The purpose of this publication is to support community colleges in developing these offerings. It describes the Plus 50 Standards of Excellence: the essential, core program elements that need to be in place for a Plus 50 program to succeed and become sustainable. It contains guidelines that community colleges can reference as they innovate and grow their own programming for plus 50 learners.

The Plus 50 Standards of Excellence

- Needs Assessments and Ongoing Evaluation
- Broad-Based Organizational and Institutional Support
- Community Partnerships
- Learner-Centered Programming
- Learner Support Services
- Accessible and Accommodating Materials and Environments
- Professional Development for Faculty
- Integrated and Targeted Marketing

What is the Plus 50 Initiative?

The American Association of Community Colleges' (AACC) Plus 50 Initiative (2008-2011), funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, was created to build the capacity of community colleges nationwide to develop programming that engages the plus 50 learner. The Initiative supported a pilot group of 13 two-year institutions to develop or expand college offerings in three areas: workforce training and career development; learning and enrichment; and volunteering. It was later expanded to include affiliate colleges that were paired in learning partnerships with experienced Plus 50 colleges.

Why Consider a Plus 50 Program at Your Community College?

With the baby boom generation (the 78 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964) now approaching typical retirement age, there is an increased focus on what this age cohort will do in its later years. This group represents a tremendous resource to the nation in terms of experience, skills, and leadership capacity. With Americans healthier and living longer, they are less interested in traditional retirement. At the same time, structural changes in the economy mean that many in this age cohort need to work longer than they had planned, or re-enter

the workforce. And many of those who do not need to work for income will seek work to stay active and engaged through encore careers, the pleasure of learning, or via giving back to their communities through volunteering. Clearly there is a large and growing demand for offerings targeted to the plus 50 population, and Plus 50 programming is a way for community colleges to continue meeting these critical community needs.

About the Standards of Excellence

Those involved in the Plus 50 Initiative are deeply committed to developing a knowledge base that community colleges across the country can use to design and further develop their own programming for plus 50 learners. The Standards of Excellence constitute an important part of that effort. To codify these standards, the Initiative leveraged the lessons that grantees had learned after two years of innovation, program implementation, and continuous improvement.[1] Through ongoing evaluation and a collaborative process undertaken at the third annual AACC Plus 50 Conference, grantee colleges distilled their best thinking on the Standards of Excellence for Plus 50 programming. The standards were refined by the Plus 50 third-party evaluators, LFA Group, and reviewed by the Plus 50 Advisory Committee.[2]

This document contains the collective wisdom of the Plus 50 grantee colleges on the essential elements of a successful Plus 50 program: what community colleges should strive for in developing and implementing their own programming. These Standards of Excellence are not prescriptive – there is ample room for innovation. Instead, they are guidelines for the basic building blocks that should be in place for a program to have the desired impact on its clients: providing plus 50 learners with the knowledge, skills, and resources that support purposeful lives through education, work, and service.

For each standard, this document provides (1) a definition, (2) an explanation for how this Standard of Excellence creates impact among plus 50 learners, and (3) a list of the "foundational elements:" actions or components required to most effectively develop this Standard of Excellence. Each Standard also features one promising practice derived from program innovations at the grantee colleges.

Standards of Excellence

The essential, core program elements that need to be in place for a program to have the desired impact on its learners.

[1] Find more information on grantee colleges at: http://plus50.aacc.nche.edu/colleges/coll_prof/Pages/default.aspx

[2] The Plus 50 Advisory Committee includes representatives from AARP, American Council on Education, Civic Ventures, Senior Corps, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Institute for a Competitive Workforce, as well as three former community college presidents.

Conduct Needs Assessments and Ongoing Evaluation

DEFINITION: A Plus 50 needs assessment is a study that aggregates information on the needs of the local plus 50 population. Program staff use the data to understand how to design the program in a way that best serves plus 50 students. Ongoing evaluation is a process that staff can use to collect feedback from students and other stakeholders and then use the data for continuous program improvement.

Creating Impact

Needs assessment and evaluation are fundamental to the capacity of a college to ensure that its programming is creating a positive experience for plus 50 learners and helping them to reach their goals. Using the results of needs assessments, Plus 50 community colleges will understand how to tailor their offerings to plus 50 students – designing courses, services, and environments that effectively address the particular needs, interests, and learning objectives of this student population. In addition to focusing on students' needs, needs assessments also assess the local labor market and employment landscape. Understanding the needs of local business and industry helps to ensure that workforce training and career development offerings match employment opportunities. Needs assessments also support the ability of community colleges

Promising Practice: Needs Assessment Surveys for Plus 50 Learners

Mail surveys to current and former students asking about preferences for class times, areas of interest, and perceived obstacles to attending classes. Use the data to inform planning for programs and services.

to make the case for these programs to funders and college stakeholders. Colleges can then continue to support effective programming through the use of ongoing evaluation. Evaluation enables staff to identify program strengths and areas for improvement, and provides the data needed for adjustments in program design and implementation. It provides information in an ongoing way on how to increase impact and maximize positive outcomes for plus 50 learners.

Foundational Elements

- **Decide at the outset to use data to inform decision-making.** Ensure that Plus 50 program stakeholders buy into the value of assessing the needs of the local plus 50 population.

- **Build your assessment and evaluation capacity.** Learn about simple tools you can use – such as surveys and focus groups – to collect customer feedback. Incorporate evaluation and assessment as a routine part of Plus 50 program delivery and monitoring.

- **Disseminate assessment and evaluation results.** Reinforce the value of needs assessments and evaluation by sharing results with stakeholders to demonstrate the success of your program and to suggest ways your community college can continue to meet the needs of plus 50 students.

Secure Broad-Based Organizational and Institutional Support

DEFINITION: A Plus 50 program has broad-based organizational and institutional support when it engages administrators, staff, and faculty throughout the college as internal partners. It is important that these stakeholders have sufficient authority to influence day-to-day operations, and thus can make decisions to allocate resources to the Plus 50 program such as space, staff time, and the use of information technology. The broad base of support denotes the presence of stakeholders in diverse departments, including the Office of the President, Workforce Development, Continuing Education, Academic Affairs, Student Services, Public Information, Marketing, and Institutional Research.

Creating Impact

Broad-based organizational and institutional support results in maximum impact on plus 50 students by going beyond a siloed program to generate a more holistic transformation within the college. To be truly excellent, a

Plus 50 program must put in motion a cultural shift: a new way of thinking that incorporates the interests of plus 50 students into the development of college offerings. Planning – such as departmental planning or college strategic planning – supports this integration. The implementation of plans means mobilizing resources in new ways, assigning staff to new roles, and putting new standard operating procedures in place. As this happens, departments and individuals become invested in the goals of Plus 50 programming. Gaining the support of stakeholders throughout the college means that staff in other departments can leverage existing resources to support many of the other Plus 50 Standards of Excellence: Learner-Centered Programming, Learner Support Services, Accessible and Accommodating Materials and Settings, and Professional Development for Faculty.

Foundational Elements

- **Enlist the College President as an advocate.** The President needs to be a cheerleader for the program. His or her advocacy will demonstrate to others in senior management positions the importance of this program, and incentivize others to support the Plus 50 program's goals.

- **Make the case to key individuals and departments throughout the college.** A Plus 50 program needs to be able to "make the case" to stakeholders throughout the college beyond the Office of the President. Stakeholders need to have a deep understanding of the importance of this student population and how it relates to the college's diversity and inclusiveness, as well as the critical economic and societal role that community colleges can play by meeting the needs of plus 50 students.

- **Establish an Advisory Committee.** A Plus 50 Advisory Committee includes stakeholders from diverse departments within the college. Committee members will become invested in program success and they will champion program goals within their own spheres of influence.

Develop Community Partnerships

DEFINITION: Community partnerships are collaborative relationships that the Plus 50 program establishes with other local organizations that have related or similar goals. Local organizations can be of many types: nonprofits, area businesses, and local offices of government agencies. Examples of local organizations are workforce development agencies, museums, libraries, parks and recreation departments, chambers of commerce, and community-based organizations serving a similar population. In these collaborative relationships, the college and its partners can work together to meet the needs of the local plus 50 population.

Creating Impact

Community partnerships create impact in two primary ways: by raising awareness of the program and thus boosting program participation, and by bringing additional resources to the table that may not be available internally. Community partners can leverage their networks (through such resources as mailing lists) to publicize the program or refer new

customers and thus create impact by extending the program's reach. Community partners can also bring additional resources through providing in-kind services, space, or funding commitments. By providing these resources, community partnerships also contribute to program sustainability. A particularly effective way for partners to support a college's Plus 50 program is through membership in an advisory committee, that way the partner commits time and expertise to support the program in building its impact.

Foundational Elements

- **Choose your partners well.** Ensure that you are bringing in organizations that will truly help you to meet the need of your plus 50 constituency. This means that the partners need to have institutional power to leverage resources on your behalf and expertise that will support continuous program improvement.

- **Make the relationship mutually beneficial.** Instead of bringing organizations in only for the purpose of your college program, see the relationship as one in which the college and its partners come together to meet the needs in a complementary way. Providing benefits to your partners will increase their investment in your success and will maximize the resources your partner provides in the long term.

- **Communicate regularly with stakeholders.** Meet regularly with partners and send updates so that they maintain a good understanding of how your work together is progressing. They need to know what is expected of them, what they can expect of you, and what the value of the program is – both to their organization and to the local plus 50 population.

Offer Learner–Centered Programming

DEFINITION: Plus 50 students are very different "consumers" of education than are younger adult learners. Programming is learner–centered when it is tailored to the needs, interests, and objectives of the plus 50 population. Implementing learner centered programming means being responsive to learners' feedback.

Creating Impact

When programming is highly relevant to learners' needs, interests, and learning objectives, students are fully engaged. No matter what the offering, it should be designed with the plus 50 user in mind. In being user-friendly, convenient, and welcoming, learner-centered programming makes plus 50 learners feel at home and allows them to make the most of their experience at college. In recognizing the particular challenges and assets of their age cohort, learner-centered programming shows students that the college understands their interests and appreciates their life situations. And for students seeking workforce training and career development services in particular, programming should address the specific challenges and opportunities that plus 50 workers face as they return to the labor force or advance their careers.

Foundational Elements

- **Tailor instructional delivery to meet the needs of plus 50 students.** Examples of tailored instructional delivery include accelerated courses for training and re-training to support plus 50 students who need to upgrade their skills to enter or re-enter the job market quickly, flexible scheduling to accommodate work and family demands (e.g. schedule options that include evenings or weekends), and providing online/distance learning courses to increase accessibility and allow students to progress at their own pace.

- **Take into account the learning styles of the plus 50 student.** Provide professional development to instructors to ensure that pedagogy meets the learning needs of this age cohort. For example, encourage instructors to make classes more interactive (since plus 50 students are less likely than younger students to have an affinity for listening passively to lectures), or to develop lesson plans that take into account the lifetime of experience that plus 50 learners bring to the discussion.

Provide Learner Support Services

Promising Practice: Career Changers Course

Offer a short course for plus 50 students that provides career exploration and assessment tools, and provides students access to occupational trend projections and data on employer demand in the local labor market.

DEFINITION: Learner support services constitute a bundle of services offered to the plus 50 learner to provide support and guidance throughout a college career. These services may be offered at an actual Learner Support Services center that is staffed by one or more Plus 50 advisors or coaches, or the services may be offered through a dedicated advisor or coach based in the Advising and Counseling Department. An advisor serves learners as a single point of contact and provides academic and career advising tailored specifically to the academic and career needs, interests, and objectives of students in this age cohort. Learner Support Services also offers a wide range of "system navigator" supports: additional services that enable a plus 50 learner to more easily navigate the community college system. These may include, new student orientations for plus 50 students; registration support; or guidance to sources of financial aid. When a service is not directly available through the plus 50 learner support services, advisors provide referrals to these outside services.

Creating Impact

The one-stop-shop aspect of learner support services ensures that services are convenient and well coordinated. Students don't need to work with different people in different departments that have different requirements and information. Instead, requirements and information have – to the extent possible – already been streamlined and integrated. In addition, the Plus 50 advisor performs the critical role of providing individual attention to plus 50 learners, helping them to successfully integrate into the college, navigate the various systems, connect with the resources they need, find the courses and programs that will best help them achieve their objectives, and identify the courses taught by faculty who have expertise working with plus 50 learners. For those students who are attending college to further their careers, the Plus 50 advisor can help learners take advantage of career exploration and assessment tools, provide information about the local labor market, and identify courses and sequence that will prepare plus 50 learners for their career.
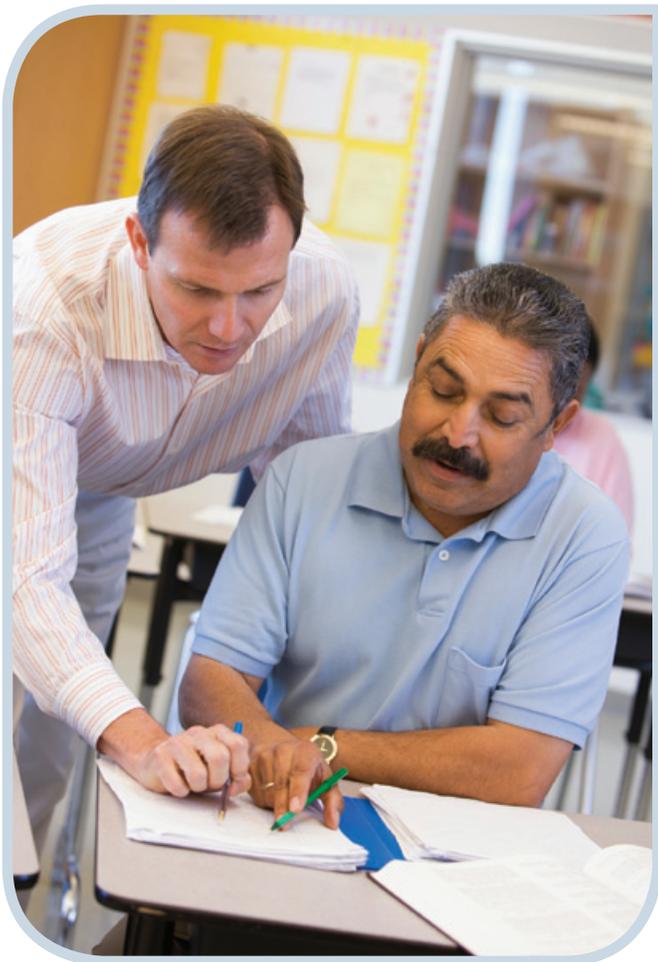
Foundational Elements

- **Develop a Resource Directory.** Learner Support Services should compile and make available to students a listing of all the resources directly available, as well as those for which referrals can be provided.

- **Utilize and train advisors or coaches who have extensive experience working with the plus 50 population.** Advising designed for the traditional college student does not meet the needs of plus 50 learners, whose life situations are very different from those of students in their 20s and 30s. Critical to the success of the advising relationship is an advisor with sufficient training and experience to appreciate the particular needs, constraints, and assets of plus 50 learners.

- **Provide plus 50 learners access to needs assessment and goal development resources.** Plus 50 learners should be able to access tools that help them to (1) develop targeted goals for career and/or personal enrichment and (2) structure learning opportunities at college in a way that supports those goals.

Provide Accessible and Accommodating Materials and Environments

DEFINITION: Accessible and accommodating materials and environments are those that are designed to take into account any physical or financial supports that a plus 50 learner might require.

Promising Practice: Designated Parking Spaces

Provide for your plus 50 learners parking spaces that are close to classrooms and have adequate night lighting.


Creating Impact

When colleges are properly equipped, they create a welcoming environment and set plus 50 students up for success. Enhancing accessibility does not require investments in buildings and structures; instead, colleges can leverage existing resources with an eye for plus 50 learners' needs. Accessibility reaches beyond structural barriers to include thoughtful approaches to course materials (e.g., handouts with larger font) and supporting students in accessing sources of financial assistance to increase affordability for plus 50 participants of all economic backgrounds. Students who can easily access and afford courses can dedicate their attention and time to the most important aspects of plus 50 participation: learning new skills, learning for personal enrichment, and building community. Plus 50 students thrive in comfortable, accommodating, and affordable community colleges.

Foundational Elements

- **Ensure physical comfort and accessibility by leveraging the technology at your college.** For example, using smart rooms with technological supports, such as dual monitors and microphones and speakers, enhances audio and visual content.

- **Be mindful of transportation access and options.** Choose event and course locations close to public transportation or provide transportation services to facilitate plus 50 students' access to courses and services.

- **Make community college more affordable.** If possible, offer direct financial aid. Design referrals to sources of financial aid and financial assistance workshops that are tailored to plus 50 students.

Offer Professional Development for Faculty

DEFINITION: Professional development for faculty working with plus 50 learners provides instructors with a thorough understanding of how to most effectively design courses and activities to meet the unique learning needs of this student population.
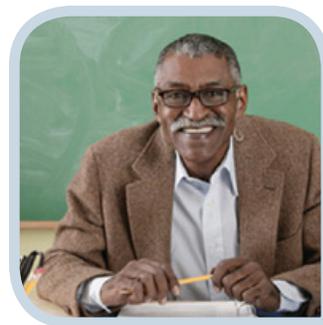
Creating Impact

Most of the interaction that a student has with a community college is through taking courses. Generating positive outcomes for plus 50 learners, then, is highly dependent on the extent to which students have a rewarding classroom experience. And a rewarding classroom experience depends, in turn, on the ability of the faculty to tailor instruction to the learning styles of those over 50. Research into androgogy (the study of adult learning) demonstrates that working with those older than the traditional college-age student requires a different approach to instruction. If faculty have received professional development that builds their skills in working with plus 50 learners, they will be better equipped to appreciate the needs, learning styles, and educational objectives of this age cohort. As a result, plus 50 learners will have better comprehension of the material, incorporate new knowledge more easily, build confidence, and enjoy the learning process more.

Promising Practice: Student Voices as Part of Faculty Professional Development

Host a panel of plus 50 students who discuss with faculty what works – and doesn't work – for them in the classroom.

Foundational Elements

- **Make a workshop or presentation on teaching plus 50 learners a standard part of your college's faculty professional development.** To ensure that faculty see that working with plus 50 learners is an important skill, incorporate it into the ongoing professional development offered to instructors.

- **Identify a high-quality curriculum for professionally developing faculty.** Find a curriculum that focuses on adult learners, on the value of experience and wisdom that plus 50 learners bring to the classroom, and on the importance of overcoming ageist stereotypes.

- **Provide ongoing feedback to faculty.** For faculty working with plus 50 learners, add items to their course evaluation questionnaires that specifically address their ability to provide a satisfying learning experience.

Publicize through Integrated and Targeted Marketing

DEFINITION: Integrated and targeted marketing is an approach to promoting a Plus 50 program that is not siloed and instead is embedded in a wide variety of community college marketing strategies and collaterals. In addition to integrated marketing, targeted advertising engages specific plus 50 communities through tailored approaches (e.g. including inserts with AARP membership mailings or a Plus 50 Web page on the college Web site) and may focus on particular offerings, such as re-careering courses, in specific settings.

Creating Impact

Colleges must reach out to prospective and current plus 50 learners in order to bring people to their Plus 50 programs. Getting people in the door and accessing offerings are the most basic elements of creating impact. Participation is the prerequisite for experiencing positive outcomes! Only through effective marketing will plus 50 learners receive the information they need in order to access and benefit from offerings. At the same time, successful marketing grows enrollment, thus boosting revenue and helping to make the program sustainable. This in turn means positive impact for learners in the long term: Program opportunities will remain in place for future generations of plus 50 learners.

Promising Practice: Sharing Plus 50 Student Stories

On the college Web site, post videos of plus 50 students telling their stories of how and why they came to the college, and what they are getting out of their experience there. Prospective students will appreciate hearing about the journey of someone they can identify with.

Foundational Elements

- **Integrate marketing across all college materials.** Ensure marketing materials are Plus 50-friendly. Materials should include images of older adults and highlight course offerings and services specifically tailored for this population.

- **Market Plus 50 offerings in a way that does not label the student as a "senior."** Marketing materials must walk a fine line between (1) letting the customer know that the offerings are tailored to their needs and (2) not making people feel like "senior citizens."

- **Work with the college marketing department or hire a professional advertising firm.** Use the capacity of your marketing department or the services of an advertising consultant to maximize the reach and depth of your advertising; polished marketing materials will enhance message accuracy and vibrancy, making your program stand out.

Resources

AACC is committed to aggregating online resources that community colleges can use to stay abreast of developments in the field, and to design and continually improve their Plus 50 offerings. For extensive additional information on how to implement the Plus 50 Standards of Excellence at your college, please visit AACC's Plus 50 Web site and use the Jump Start Plus 50 self-assessment tool (at http://plus50.aacc.nche.edu). This web-based tool is designed to assist community colleges in planning and implementing a Plus 50 program or strengthening an existing program. Jump Start Plus 50 asks guiding questions and – based upon the responses – offers suggested action steps and provides direct links to related online tools and resources.
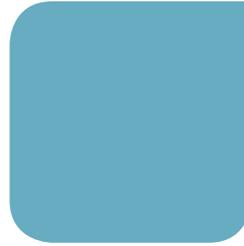
The American Association of Community Colleges is a national association representing close to 1,200 community, junior, and technical colleges nationwide. Community colleges are the largest and fastest-growing sector of higher education, serving close to 12 million students each year. AACC is headquartered in Washington, D.C. See *www.aacc.nche.edu.*

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