BARRY DARNELL, REBECCA KLEIN-COLLINS & KARI SHAFENBERG

Building Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES)

Research findings and a new framework for supporting institutional change

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Executive Summary

Last year, CAEL launched a series of research activities designed to develop a new framework to help guide institutional policies and practices in their work to support adult learners. The research activities included interviews with currently enrolled or recently graduated adult learners, an examination of 10 high-performing programs serving adults, a review of existing research on effective practices to meet adult learner needs, a survey and focus groups of never-enrolled adults, consideration of lessons from CAEL's most recent work with institutions wanting to better serve adults, and additional consultation of CAEL staff and other subject matter experts.

Combining this new research with the lessons from our own experience working with adult-serving institutions, and recognizing that the postsecondary environment is a different world compared to the one that existed 20 years ago, CAEL developed a new framework to help guide institutional policies and practices in their work to support adult learners. The **Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES) Framework** contains a series of planning and operational domains through which institutions can more effectively support today's adult learners. In this new framework, the focus is as much on the process for becoming an adult learner-focused institution as it is on the programs and services that are most visible to the adult learner as they make decisions about where to enroll.

HIGH-LEVEL FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

The research revealed several important themes and insights about the needs of today's adult learners for successful postsecondary experiences:

- **Affordability.** Adult learners, more so than their traditionally aged peers, are often balancing multiple financial obligations as they seek their postsecondary credential. This can include housing costs, child or dependent care, and other family expenses. The affordability of a program and the potential return on investment of their postsecondary education weigh heavily on the decision to pursue additional education. Adult learners are highly cost-conscious, and financial factors are often central to their enrollment decisions.
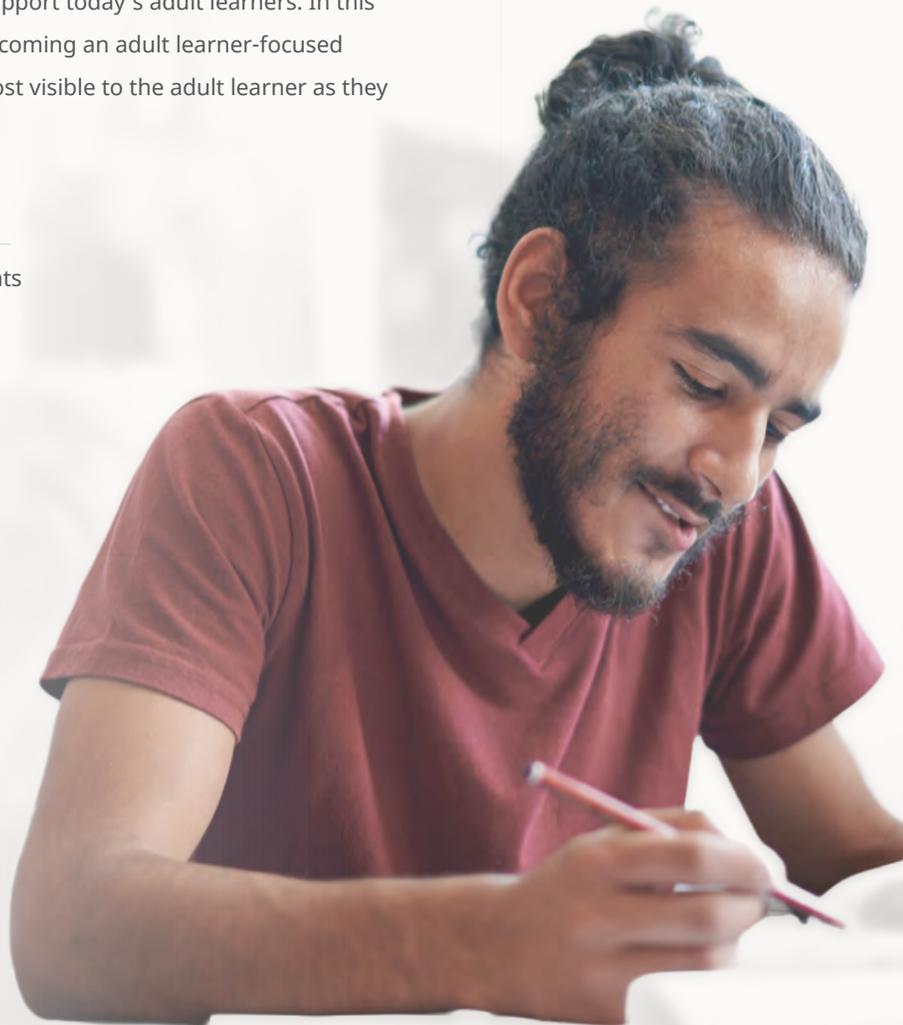
- **Career Connections and Relevance.** Professional growth and development is often cited as the primary motivating factor for enrollment in higher education. These students seek to improve their professional status, either by growing in their current role or moving into new positions upon completion of their credential. Adult learning theory states that adults draw from their internal motivation to stay committed to education, and that they benefit from applying their learning directly to their daily lives (Knowles, 1980). The never-enrolled adult surveys, as well as the CAEL-conducted interviews with current adult learners, reinforced the role that career development plays in the decision to return to school, with professional goals such as obtaining a new job as a top motivator. Additionally, the high-performing institution study demonstrated consistent attention to career relevance and services, both in the classroom and in structural supports.

- **Academic Empowerment.** Adult learners seek institutions that recognize their complete experience and provide opportunities to control their own progress and development. These students have specific goals and milestones to reach, and they know themselves well enough to recognize what they need to be successful. Ownership of learning modalities, schedules that fit an adult's busy life, opportunities to count prior learning, and engaging classroom experiences equip adult learners with the ability and confidence to succeed in postsecondary institutions.

- **Student Support.** A range of student support services is critical for student success — particularly when focused at the front end of an adult learner's journey. The transition to postsecondary learning is a time when adults need help navigating and balancing education with their other daily responsibilities. While student support takes many forms, at its core it should enhance the learning journey with collaboration across institutional offices, internal support teams, and the learners themselves to meet the students where they are and guide them through their education. This support is crucial at all stages of the student experience, but the initial transition into a postsecondary program is especially fraught for adult learners at the beginning of their program, as they require additional assistance and support to navigate their new institution and academic standing. Pillars of support, including academic and financial advising, career counseling, and personalized outreach work in concert to provide guidance and direction for these learners.

- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.** Adult learners embody multiple roles and identities in their lives, yet gaps in diversity efforts, recognition, and acceptance can result in students feeling like outsiders in a postsecondary environment, particularly for those who are part of historically underrepresented populations. Institutional systems and structures may perpetuate inequities in both access and student success.

NEW ADULT LEARNER LEADERS FOR INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS (ALLIES) FRAMEWORK

In the framework, depicted in *Figure 1*, the adult learner is at the focal point of the process as a whole. In **Level 1: Data-Driven Planning**, the institution engages in a set of activities that establish the first part of the foundation: making data-driven decisions that ensure equity and success. In **Level 2: Organizational Capacity and Policy**, the institution focuses on expanding and improving internal capacity to meet adult learner needs. In **Level 3: Student Experience**, the institution focuses on designing, developing, and improving the program- and service-design components that the adult learner sees and experiences.

FIGURE 1

Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES) Framework

LEVEL 1: DATA-DRIVEN PLANNING

Level 1 in the ALLIES Framework focuses on gathering data (*Student and Labor Market Data*), using that data to help shape a new strategy (*Adult- and Equity-Focused Strategic Plan*), and fostering a new culture within the organization that prepares for change and embraces new ways of learning and operating (*Culture of Change and Adaptivity*).

- **DOMAIN 1: Student and Labor Market Data**
  An institution that effectively serves adults collects data on adult learner outcomes throughout and beyond the academic journey, ensuring programs equitably and reliably bridge adult learners to enrollment, gainful employment, socioeconomic advancement, and further academic success. It is important to know the institution's main constituency: adults who have already enrolled there and adults who could potentially enroll there. Institutions need to know about those individuals — who they are, their work histories, their educational histories, what they want from postsecondary learning, and so on. In addition, it is critical that the institution serving them pay close attention — and adapt its program offerings — to the needs of the labor market. This means that the institution is aware of the skills that employers want and need, and takes the necessary steps to ensure that graduates are prepared to meet those skill expectations.

- **DOMAIN 2: Adult- and Equity-Focused Strategic Plan**
  An institution that effectively serves adults is aware that adult learners come with different backgrounds and experiences, and they also come with different barriers to learning and success. Institutions need to establish programs that support every adult learner persona, as well as systems to ensure that solutions and strategies are helping to narrow — and not exacerbate — achievement gaps for underrepresented groups. Questions around equity are particularly important given that adult learners tend to be a more diverse population. Issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion therefore matter quite a bit when it comes to building a strategy for becoming an adult-focused institution.

- **DOMAIN 3: A Culture of Change and Adaptivity**
  An institution that effectively serves adults will recognize that creating an adult learner-focused institution is a big change for multiple functions and departments. All involved need to both understand the reason for the changes and then also want to be a part of the changes. Change needs to then become embraced as part of the culture, so that the institution continues to adapt to meet the current and anticipated needs of the community it serves.

LEVEL 2: ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AND POLICY

Level 2 in the ALLIES Framework involves building institutional capacity to support adult learners. The institution operationalizes adult learner inclusion and success (*Inclusive Policies and Governance*), prepares faculty and staff to support and engage adults more effectively (*Faculty and Staff Professional Development*), and identifies ways to expand the institution's capacity to meet adult learner career and support needs (*Impactful Partnerships*).

- **DOMAIN 4: Inclusive Policies and Governance**
  An institution that effectively serves adults establishes policies that: emphasize an adherence to quality standards; remove structural barriers facing adult learners; embrace learning rather than seat time; and leverage the expertise of its leadership, faculty, and staff to ensure that its programs and services support the success goals of adult learners. Institutions should also explore whether and how their governance structures — the ways in which an organization operates and how decisions are made — are designed to consider adult learners. This starts with revisiting the mission statement and strategic goals that the institution has set pertaining to adult learners.

- **DOMAIN 5: Faculty and Staff Professional Development**
  An institution that effectively serves adults ensures that all faculty and staff are prepared to provide adult learners with flexible formats, support services, opportunities to connect their life experiences to what they are learning, and assignments that are predictable and potentially adjustable. When all faculty and staff are trained to serve adults well, that strengthens the overall capacity of the institution and its ability to sustain a long-term focus on adults. In addition, faculty and staff have important roles to play in helping adults feel like they belong in a postsecondary environment, and professional development is key to making that happen.

- **DOMAIN 6: Impactful Partnerships**
  An institution that effectively serves adults partners with employers, workforce boards, industry associations, employment-focused centers, trade unions, community-based organizations and leaders, alumni, and other postsecondary providers. These partnerships provide expanded opportunities for experiential learning, enhance the student support structure, develop and validate relevant stackable credentials, and ensure equity in access to its programs and services. Part of building the capacity to serve adult learners involves knowing what the institution can provide through its own resources versus what the institution should rely on others to do. Partnerships with external organizations can expand the institution's capacity to create strong connections between learning and the workplace, seamless transitions to further learning, and access to wraparound support services that adult learners may need to succeed.

LEVEL 3: STUDENT EXPERIENCE

An institution that effectively serves adults draws on data and available resources to design the best possible program for its current and prospective adult learners. Activities in Levels 1 and 2 create a strong foundation for the development of adult-focused programs and services, with special attention to: affordable programs; student support, particularly at the front end of the student's journey; academic empowerment; and career relevance and connections. These program elements should also be featured in adult student outreach and recruitment efforts, as these elements will make postsecondary education possible, attractive, and welcoming to prospective adult learners.

- **DOMAIN 7: Affordable Programs**
  There is considerable evidence that one of the biggest barriers for adult learners is the cost related to pursuing postsecondary education and credentials. An institution that effectively serves adults provides detailed information about the total costs, finds ways to reduce overall costs, and offers avenues for recognizing learning from all sources. Important strategies include: financial aid and debt advising; scholarship assistance, completion grants, and other financing strategies; program design/cost reduction options; open educational resources; transparency on program costs and flexibility in payment schedules; and removing financial barriers in the application process and to enrollment.

- **DOMAIN 8: Student Support, Particularly at the Front End of the Student's Journey**
  The importance of providing support to adult learners throughout their educational pursuits cannot be overstated. Adult learners often have "time poverty" as a result of juggling education with work and family obligations. They may have unexpected costs or family health care challenges that can derail their progress. They may be academically rusty from being out of the classroom for many years. They are often first-generation college students without a personal network to help them navigate how postsecondary institutions work. They may have a lot of self-doubt in their own ability to succeed. They may struggle to feel like they belong in higher education. An institution that effectively serves adult learners provides a wide range of student support, with a special focus on the early stages of the student's postsecondary experiences. An institution can help to ease transitions and create a sense of belonging by front-loading advising and outreach into the application, admission, enrollment, and onboarding processes and during the first term of study. Other strategies include helping with: understanding career and degree options (particularly before enrollment); navigating the postsecondary process; building self-efficacy; ensuring that all learning accounts; balancing education with work and life; guiding and coaching; and emergency grants/funds.

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- **DOMAIN 9: Academic Empowerment**
  An institution that effectively serves adult learners empowers them by making it possible for them to balance learning with their other life responsibilities, and by valuing their work-based and experiential learning. Of the many ways in which institutions can empower students in their academic experiences, four areas are particularly helpful when designed with adult learners in mind: coursework modalities; pacing and scheduling; teaching and learning; and recognition of all learning (transfer policies, credit for prior learning, and reverse transfer degree options).

- **DOMAIN 10: Career Relevance and Connections**
  An institution that effectively serves adult learners recognizes that for most adult learners, postsecondary education is one step toward a career goal and economic mobility. Programs therefore need to have clear connections to the workplace, and instruction needs to include a focus on the competencies that employers seek in job candidates. Institutions can enlist several different kinds of strategies to help students meet their career goals, such as: work-relevant programs; career advising and other services, including help with developing social networks; work-based learning or experiential learning opportunities; and connections to employers.

USING THE FRAMEWORK

The ALLIES framework is a starting point for institutions to take their adult-focused programs and services to the next stage. Institutional planning groups can use the levels and domains as a guide when considering how to build or strengthen their foundation. **The main report provides a list of questions to help institutions begin that process.**

Going forward, CAEL's work with institutions and other organizations will use this framework and approach, and we will design new tools and resources based on the new framework for our members and partners. We hope that sharing the framework with a broader audience will have an impact on how adult learners are served in all postsecondary institutions and programs.

CONCLUSION

Since the initial publication of CAEL's *Ten Principles for Principles for Effectively Serving Adults*, the postsecondary education landscape has transformed. Institutions are increasingly offering different modalities, types of credentials, flexible schedules, attention to needed workplace skills, and online programs and services — the last of which was, of course, buoyed by the sudden switch to remote learning during COVID-19. All of these developments help postsecondary institutions more effectively serve adults.

But we know that even the most adult-friendly programs and practices don't reach their full potential if they are not built on a solid foundation of change management and attention to capacity, with a trained and prepared staff focused on data-driven decision making. **The Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES) Framework** provides guidance to help institutions through these necessary levels of planning and development so that they can build the foundation needed for effective and equity-focused adult learner initiatives — and continue to grow and evolve over time.

For more details on the ALLIES Framework, continue reading the full report, below. It can also be accessed at *Building Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES): Research Findings and a New Framework for Supporting Institutional Change*, at www.cael.org/news-and-resources/adult-learner-framework.

Introduction

Earning a college credential can be challenging for many adult learners. When "Natalie" first enrolled in college right out of high school, her priority was her family. As the oldest child in a family that emigrated from the Dominican Republic, she had to choose a college that was inexpensive and close to home so that she could continue to work to financially support her family. With two part-time jobs and volunteer work helping refugees, Natalie struggled to find the time for more than one class per semester. **The result: she didn't finish.**

She continued to work and volunteer, she got married, and she started a family. A second chance at college came through **College Unbound**, an adult learner-focused institution that offered her the flexibility to take classes that worked with her schedule and provided her with technical support, regular advisor check-ins, accommodations as needed, connections to mentors, and options for childcare. Nearing her 30th birthday, she is now getting ready to graduate and advance in her professional career, working with organizations helping immigrant families navigate the educational system and making a larger impact through policy change.

"You know, in the real world, you have to pay for rent, and you have to go to work. There was no way for me. **I felt like college wasn't adult-friendly...** There weren't a lot of options for online classes or anything like that. It was taking me longer to finish."

"NATALIE", CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

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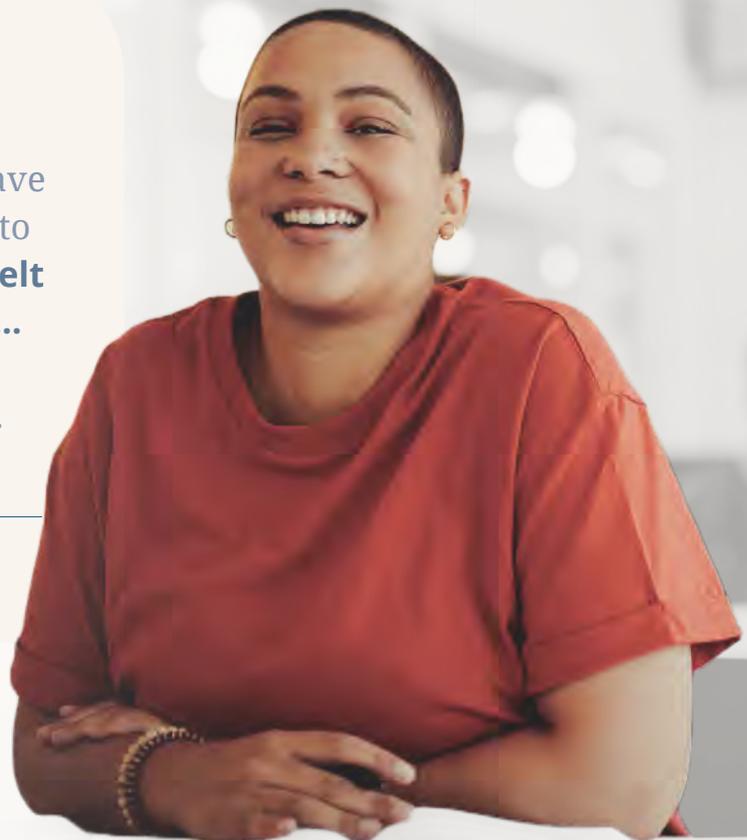
The kinds of policies, practices, and programs that meet the needs of adult learners like Natalie, such as those developed by College Unbound, are increasingly being adopted by many colleges, universities, and other education providers. **For nearly a half century, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has been helping postsecondary institutions make the necessary changes to better serve adult learners.** The foundation of this work has been our Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults, a framework that originally emerged from a 1999 benchmarking study and which has been updated several times over the years (see end of this section for a short history of CAEL's work with the *Ten Principles)*.

Last year, CAEL launched a series of research activities designed to develop a new framework to help guide institutional policies and practices in their work to support adult learners. The research activities included interviews with currently enrolled or recently graduated adult learners, an examination of 10 high-performing programs serving adults, a review of existing research on effective practices to meet adult learner needs, a survey and focus groups of never-enrolled adults, consideration of lessons from CAEL's most recent work with institutions wanting to better serve adults, and additional consultation of CAEL staff and other subject matter experts.

WHO IS AN ADULT LEARNER?

Adult learners are typically defined as students who are age 25 or older while pursuing undergraduate degree and credentials.

Adult-serving institutions may also consider that other learners have life circumstances that are similar to those of students aged 25 and older. Those students might also benefit from adult-focused programs. For example:

- Students who are balancing their studies with full-time employment, caregiving and/or parenting responsibilities

- Students who are financially independent of their parents

- Students who are service members or veterans

- Students who did not go directly to college from high school

- Students whose primary identity is shaped by profession, parenting, or service to country — in other words, they do not see themselves primarily as a student.

In response to changes in the postsecondary environment, CAEL combined this new research with the lessons from our experience working with adult-serving institutions to create the new ALLIES Framework. This framework contains a series of planning and operational domains through which institutions can more strategically plan for, educate, support, and graduate successful adult learners.

The new framework is not a standalone list of best practices. From our decades of work with institutions, we know that providing a set of principles and best practices is not enough. What institutions really need to become more effective is a process to follow that will help them with the larger organizational changes needed to serve adult learners.

This report therefore presents the new domains as part of such a change management process. At different stages or levels of engagement, institutions will focus on a set of specific domains, building upon the different levels as they go. In the initial levels, the focus is on building a strong foundation through domains that are part of data-driven planning and organizational capacity building, including attention to policy and governance structures that better support adult learners. On that foundation are then built the program- and service-focused domains that address the adult learner's direct student experience.

The report concludes with a vision for how institutions can use the new framework and change management process, along with guiding questions for institutional implementation.

THE ADULT LEARNER ALLIES FRAMEWORK

LEVEL 1 • DATA-DRIVEN PLANNING

LEVEL 2 • ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AND POLICY

LEVEL 3 • STUDENT EXPERIENCE

ADULT LEARNERS

A Culture of Change and Adaptivity

Adult and Equity-Focused Strategic Plan

Student and Labor Market Data

Inclusive Policies and Governance

Faculty and Staff Professional Development

Impactful Partnerships

Career Relevance and Connections

Academic Empowerment

Student Support, Particularly at the Front End of the Student's Journey

Affordable Programs

HISTORY OF CAEL'S TEN PRINCIPLES

CAEL's *Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults* trace their roots to the "Adult Learning Focused Institution" initiative in 1999. Through this initiative, CAEL worked with the American Productivity & Quality Center (APQC) to examine practices at six postsecondary educational institutions selected through a competitive process for their evident excellence in serving adult learners. The findings of this study were presented in *Best Practices in Adult Learning: A CAEL/APQC Benchmarking Study* (Flint, 1999).

Building on those findings, CAEL designed the original seven Principles: Outreach, Life & Career Planning, Financing, Assessment of Learning Outcomes, The Teaching-Learning Process, Student Support Systems, and Technology. Over time, and to reflect new insights on how institutions operate to effectively serve adults, CAEL added three new Principles: Strategic Partnerships (2005), Transitions (2008), and Adaptivity (2017). CAEL has used the Principles to assess how effectively institutions serve adult learners through the lens of practices that matter to adults, and the resources, partnerships, and capacity-building activities that empower institutions to serve adults at scale.

Research Approach and High-Level Findings

There were several different methods through which CAEL and its partners approached the research on the needs of adult learners in postsecondary education:

- A review of existing research literature on adult learner needs and postsecondary institutional best practices

- A study of never-enrolled adults (a small portion of the "never-enrolled" sample included adults who had enrolled but never started a course). This study included a national survey and in-depth interviews that explored the following questions:

  - The factors that may lead to adults' decisions to pursue education
  - How adults research and choose different courses of study
  - The reasons why interested adults do not follow through with the application or enrollment process

- In-depth interviews with 10 institutions offering high-performing programs for adult learners *(see page 18 for list of institutions)*

- In-depth interviews with 19 adult learners attending the high-performing programs in this study

- CAEL's own experiences working with adult-centered institutions and programs.

The data and insights from these sources reveal several important themes and insights about the needs of today's adult learners for successful postsecondary experiences:

- **Affordability.** As with most students pursuing a postsecondary credential, affordability is a key factor in adult learner enrollment and success. Due in part to their competing financial obligations, such as child or dependent care, housing expenses, and family needs, adult learners are highly cost-conscious, and financial factors are often central to their enrollment decisions.

- **Career Connections and Relevance.** Relevance of their educational programs to their future careers is of prime importance. Programs are valued when connections to careers and workplace needs are clear.

The full methodology is described in Appendix A.

A report on the survey and interviews with never-enrolled adults was published separately (Darnell, 2022).

- **Academic Empowerment.** Ownership of learning modalities, schedules that fit an adult's busy life, opportunities to count prior learning, and engaging classroom experiences equip adult learners with the ability and confidence to succeed in postsecondary institutions.

- **Student Support.** A range of student support services is critical for student success — particularly when focused at the front end of an adult learner's journey. The transition to postsecondary learning is a time when adults need help navigating and balancing education with their other daily responsibilities.

- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.** Adult learners embody multiple roles and identities in their lives, yet gaps in diversity efforts, recognition, and acceptance can result in students feeling like outsiders in a postsecondary environment, particularly for those who are part of historically underrepresented populations. Institutional systems and structures may perpetuate inequities in both access and student success.

The detailed findings as well as the specific insights from CAEL's many decades of work with adult-focused institutions informed the development of a new framework for guiding the work of institutions wanting to improve their effectiveness in supporting adult learners. This framework is described in greater detail in the following pages of this report.

Because so many of the research findings from this project are, in fact, examples of successful adult strategies, we have chosen to present all evidence and examples within the description of the different framework elements: **10 different planning and operational domains that are critical for institutions to become Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness — ALLIES**.

HIGH-PERFORMING ADULT-CENTERED PROGRAMS STUDIED FOR THIS REPORT

- **Bay Path University's The American Women's College**

  Online degree program for women, offering certificates, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees

- **Capella University**

  Online registered nurse (RN) to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program

- **Code Fellows**

  An intensive coding bootcamp

- **College Unbound**

  Bachelor of Arts, Organizational Leadership

- **Columbus State Community College**

  Huntington Exact Track accelerated business degree with stackable certificates, associate and bachelor's degree, and the Nationwide IT Workforce Certificate

- **City University of New York School of Professional Studies**

  Online adult business degree completion program

- **Mississippi State University**

  Bachelor of arts degree completion program

- **Monroe County Community Schools**

  Adult basic education including high school equivalency and industry certificates

- **State University of New York Empire State College**

  Adult-serving undergraduate program

- **Wichita State University**

  Teacher certificates for paraeducators

New Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES) Framework

Not every adult-focused institution needs to be an institution that focuses exclusively on adults. But when institutions make the decision to focus more intentionally on adult learners, that effort will be more successful when it isn't just adding a few adult-focused elements to the mix. The temptation, of course, is to start with the visible parts: the programs and services that adult learners need to engage with learning and achieve their goals. However, when institutions skip over important planning and strategy steps, those programs and services lack a firm foundation. Those programs and services may be dependent on a single internal champion who may not always stay at that institution. They may rely on faculty and staff who need professional development to fulfill their roles well. They may be siloed away from the "traditional" programs in a way that perpetuates their "otherness" within the institution — leaving adult learners feeling like an afterthought rather than an important and valued part of the student body.

In CAEL's experience — and in the examples of the high-performing institutions we have been studying — effective adult-focused programs and institutions are characterized by being data-driven in their decision-making, adaptive to changing learner needs, intentional in their attention to inclusion and equity, consistent in ensuring adult-supportive policies and governance, and resourceful in using partners to expand capacity. That is why in this new framework for Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES), the focus is as much on the process for becoming an adult learner-focused institution — and building a good foundation — as it is on the programs and services that are most visible to the adult learner as they make decisions about where to enroll.
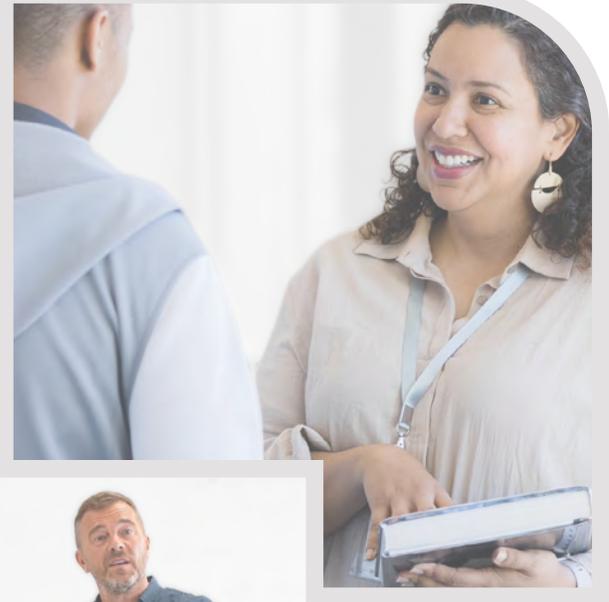
FIGURE 1

Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES) Framework

In this new framework, depicted in *Figure 1*, the adult learner is at the focal point of the process as a whole. In **Level 1: Data-Driven Planning**, the institution engages in a set of activities that establish the first part of the foundation: making data-driven decisions that ensure equity and success. In **Level 2: Organizational Capacity and Policy**, the institution focuses on expanding and improving internal capacity to meet adult learner needs. In **Level 3: Student Experience**, the institution focuses on designing, developing, and improving the program- and service-design components that the adult learner sees and experiences.

The institution needs to work through each of these levels as it begins building a new adult learner program. Once programs are established, the institution can continue to focus on and invest in both the foundational activities of levels 1 and 2, as well as the student experience factors of level 3. Each of the three levels consists of several domains, or areas for deliberate planning and implementation, that are key to effective institutional approaches to serving adult learners. Institutions with established adult learner programs can also benefit from the guiding concepts within this framework. By reinforcing or implementing engagement with these domains, any adult learner program can continually improve to meet the needs of its students.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOCUSING ON ADULT LEARNERS

Today, adult students account for 33% of total undergraduate enrollment in the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; data from 2019). They include people who have never enrolled in postsecondary learning as well as people who previously attempted college courses but did not finish a formal credential.

The economic benefits of having postsecondary credentials are significant: people with bachelor's degrees have a lifetime earnings premium of $1.2 million over those with just a high school diploma (Carnevale et al., 2021). And while it is by no means necessary for every worker to have a four-year bachelor's degree — particularly as more employers begin to recognize and value many shorter-term credentials focused on in-demand skills — having some postsecondary learning is increasingly important in our skills-based economy.

It is important to note that postsecondary education attainment is not equitably distributed. In 2019, Black and Hispanic postsecondary attainment for 25–64 year olds lagged behind that of White attainment by 15 and 23 percentage points, respectively. Zeroing in on younger cohorts shows even greater gaps, with 25–34 year old Black and Hispanic attainment lagging behind White attainment by 20 and 24 percentage points, respectively (Lumina Foundation, 2019). Of particular note for institutions wanting to bring back students who were previously enrolled: Black, Latino, and Native American learners are overrepresented in the population of individuals with "some college, no degree," relative to their shares of currently enrolled undergraduate students (Sedmak, 2022).

Finally, we are in a moment when institutions are facing current and looming declines in traditionally aged student enrollment (Bransberger et al., 2020). Many colleges and universities are therefore seeing some economic necessity in welcoming adults to their institutions.

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LEVEL 1

DATA-DRIVEN PLANNING

ADULT LEARNER LEADERS FOR
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Level 1 in the ALLIES Framework focuses on gathering data
(Student and Labor Market Data), using that data to help shape a new
strategy *(Adult- and Equity-Focused Strategic Plan)*, and fostering a new
culture within the organization that prepares for change and embraces
new ways of learning and operating *(Culture of Change and Adaptivity)*.

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DOMAIN 1

STUDENT AND LABOR MARKET DATA

*An institution that effectively serves adults collects data on adult learner outcomes
throughout and beyond the academic journey, ensuring programs equitably and reliably
bridge adult learners to enrollment, gainful employment, socioeconomic advancement,
and further academic success.*

The decision to become an adult-focused institution involves — perhaps above all else — knowing
the institution's main constituency: adults who have already enrolled there and adults who
could potentially enroll there. Before doing anything else, institutions need to know about those
individuals — who they are, their work histories, their educational histories, their main roles (e.g.,
parent, professional, student), what they want from postsecondary learning, and what they need
in terms of support. Institutions also need to understand how their own enrolled adult learners
have been doing: who succeeds at the institution and who doesn't; what choices they make about
courses, majors, credentials, schedules, enrollment intensity,
and modalities; what they say about their experiences
at the institution; what differences exist in the
experiences and outcomes of different
subgroups (race/ethnicity, gender, income,
parenting status, etc.); how they pay
for their education; and what support
services are most in demand.

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Institutions may not track all of this information when getting started, but it should be possible to locate and examine most of this data to get a better understanding of who the population is and what they need from postsecondary learning providers.

Beyond those details, it is important to remember that adult learners have their eye on the end game when choosing a program of study. Adult learners are often already employed while seeking their credentials, and yet one of the key reasons that they are pursuing education is for the purposes of improving their employment and career opportunities.

When asked about their primary motivation for pursuing postsecondary education, the never-enrolled adults we surveyed overwhelmingly identified professional and career goals — with 43% saying they considered enrolling "to get a better job" and another 27% saying "to make more money" *(Figure 2)*. Further, when asked about the most important attributes of a postsecondary

FIGURE 2

Main reason why never-enrolled adults considered enrollment
(Source: Darnell, 2022)

- To get a better job — 43%
- To make more money — 27%
- For personal enrichment — 18%
- To learn more about a subject — 8%
- To meet a requirement for my current employer — 3%
- Other — 1%

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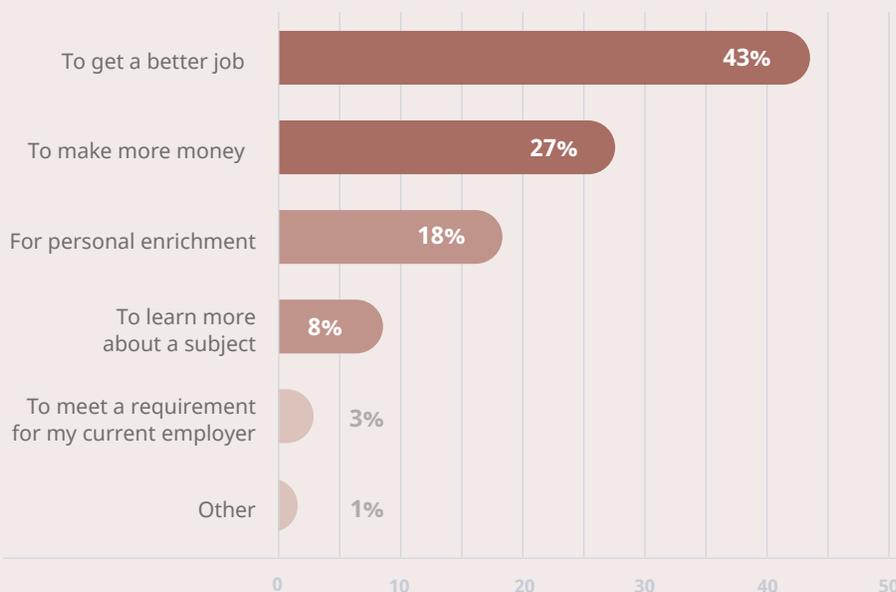
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FIGURE 3

Importance of different program attributes when considering postsecondary education
[Percent of never-enrolled adults saying attribute is "extremely" or "very" important]
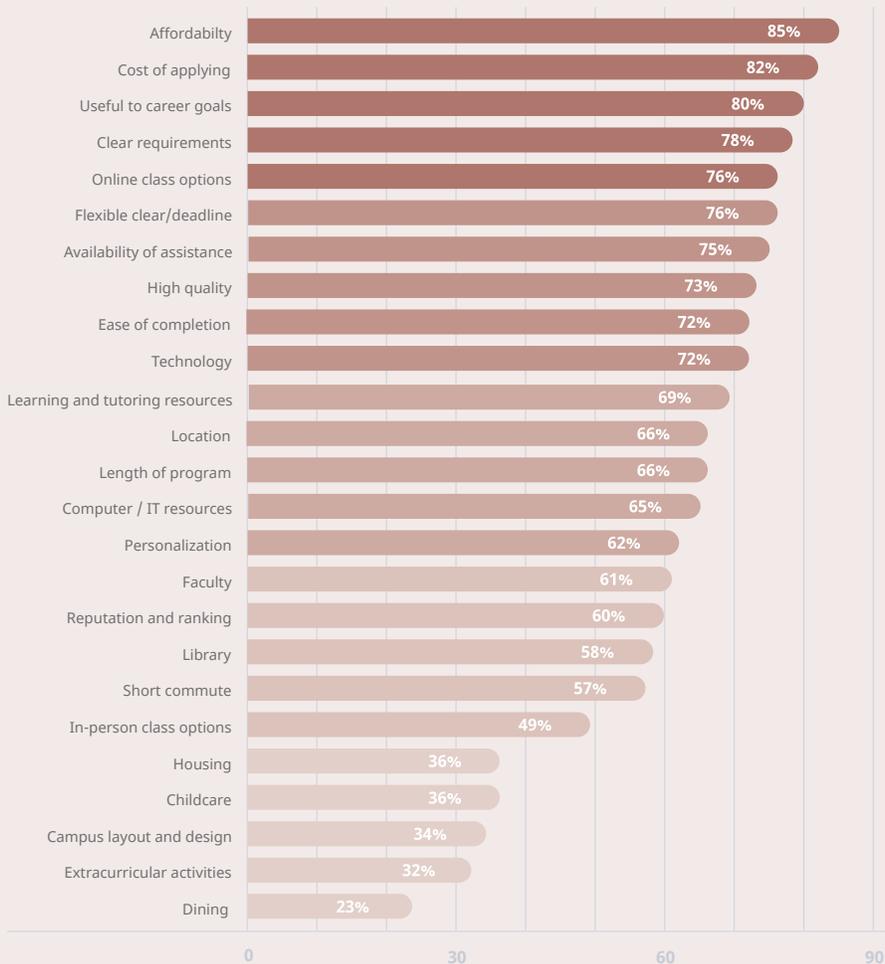*(Source: Darnell, 2022)*

Attribute	Percent
Affordabilty	85%
Cost of applying	82%
Useful to career goals	80%
Clear requirements	78%
Online class options	76%
Flexible clear/deadline	76%
Availability of assistance	75%
High quality	73%
Ease of completion	72%
Technology	72%
Learning and tutoring resources	69%
Location	66%
Length of program	66%
Computer / IT resources	65%
Personalization	62%
Faculty	61%
Reputation and ranking	60%
Library	58%
Short commute	57%
In-person class options	49%
Housing	36%
Childcare	36%
Campus layout and design	34%
Extracurricular activities	32%
Dining	23%

program, the third-most popular response from never-enrolled adults is "Useful to career goals,"
with 80% of respondents identifying this as a critical attribute *(Figure 3)*.

Since career outcomes are tied to adult learners' goals, institutions should take measures
to ensure that adult learners attain them, just as they look at completion, persistence, and —
for community colleges — successful transfer. Especially where programs predominantly
serve learners with explicit career goals (e.g., registered nurses, manufacturing certificate),
institutions should look beyond completion and collect information about their students'
post-completion success.

Related to the above, and because adult learners are pursuing more skills and credentials in order to improve their employment and career options, it is critical that the institution serving them pay close attention — and adapt its program offerings — to the needs of the labor market. This need not mean that the institution focuses solely on vocational considerations, or that each program is narrowly tracked for a specific occupation. It does, however, mean that the institution is aware of the skills that employers want and need, and takes the necessary steps to ensure that graduates are prepared to meet those skill expectations.

For general studies and liberal arts programs, for example, having career-relevant instruction means an emphasis on core transferable skills (also known as soft skills, human skills, 21st Century skills, and so on). Program and curriculum designers should highlight the learning outcomes of such degree programs in the terms of what graduates know and can do after completing them. They should ensure that students can describe their acquired knowledge and skills in ways that emphasize their learned competencies to prospective employers and future education opportunities.

For career, technical, and occupational programs, a focus on labor market data means understanding how different jobs and industries are changing over time, and what that means for curricula and instruction. In addition, it means knowing which occupations have the best long-term career outlooks, not just in terms of starting salary but also in terms of long-term employability and career advancement — and applying that knowledge to decisions about which programs to offer and which to sunset, or to at least advise students about the reality of their employment opportunities for different courses of study.

For institutions serving specific geographic regions, labor market data becomes even more specific: understanding which local industries are growing (and which are not), where the biggest demand is within industries, and how the institutions' programs could become better aligned with those needs. This not only ensures positive employment options for adult learners, but also can strengthen the local economy more generally.

"I just didn't like sitting around […] just being a 'housewife.' It's unfulfilling to feel like you're just not doing anything. It's nice to feel like you're important, and you're contributing to the world, and you have a purpose. **So that was, really, the sole reason why I wanted to seek out my education.**"

ADULT WHO APPLIED BUT DID NOT ENROLL

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DOMAIN 2

ADULT- AND EQUITY-FOCUSED STRATEGIC PLAN

*An institution that effectively serves adults is aware that adult learners come with different
backgrounds and experiences, and they also come with different barriers to learning and
success. Institutions need to establish programs that support every adult learner persona,
as well as systems to ensure that solutions and strategies are helping to narrow — and
not exacerbate — achievement gaps for underrepresented groups.*

The collection of data on both students and labor market needs provides a starting point for
the next foundation-building activity, which is a strategic plan for serving adult students at the
institution. The plan could:

- Define adult learner personas that the institution intends to serve

- Specify the ways in which those personas will best succeed
  in their postsecondary pursuits

- Articulate what success looks like for those students

- Identify strategies, programs, policies, and practices of an effective
  approach to serving those learners at the institution.

This plan would then consider the resources that would be needed in
terms of staffing (e.g., curriculum and course design, advising/coaching,
credit for prior learning (CPL) coordination, outreach, tutoring, etc.),
professional development, technology, and needed partners for support
and career connections.

An institution with a mission that is focused on equity and inclusion would
have a strategic plan that strongly focuses on strategies, solutions, and
supports to address adult learners' concerns. Solid data collection strategies
would provide the insights needed to understand whether the institution is
serving the population it should (does our adult student population reflect the
community we serve?) and whether the institution serves that population well (are
those target student populations successful?). The plan would then identify needed
areas for expansion, improvement, or program redesign to meet the needs of the specific
populations to be served and supported to achieve more equitable outcomes.

> "**Schools really need to
> focus on how to handle
> bias and check their
> stereotypes.** They need
> to make sure they are
> working inclusively,
> not only with diverse
> instructors, but also
> diverse students."

RECENTLY COMPLETED ADULT LEARNER

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Questions around equity are particularly important given that adult learners tend to be a more diverse population. Black, Latino, and Native American learners are overrepresented in the population of individuals with "some college, no degree," relative to their shares of currently enrolled undergraduate students (Sedmak, 2022), and U.S. Census data show that there is a higher percentage of Black and Native American students among adult undergraduates (9.4%), compared to traditional-aged undergraduates (12.8%) (2019). These are populations that have been, or otherwise feel, marginalized in postsecondary settings. Issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion therefore matter quite a bit when it comes to building a strategy for becoming an adult-focused institution.

It should not be news to anyone in postsecondary education that there are significant inequalities in terms of who has access to postsecondary institutions as well as who is successful in completing degrees and other credentials. As described in the box on page 21 of this report, Black and Hispanic postsecondary attainment is far lower than than of Whites. And while we have seen some progress in recent years, Latino adults remain the least likely racial or ethnic group to earn a college degree, and Black and Latino students are more likely than their White and Asian peers to leave college without a degree (Anthony, 2021).

Postsecondary think tanks, advocacy organizations, government officials, and funders had already been turning their attention to the need to close racial and ethnic educational equity gaps even before the "racial reckoning" following the death of George Floyd in 2020. Students and institutions are likewise very cognizant of issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion considerations should go beyond issues of race and ethnicity, since populations that often feel marginalized in postsecondary institutions include neurodiverse individuals, people with physical disabilities, student parents, and adult students more generally. The never-enrolled students we interviewed said that it matters who is depicted in marketing and advertising for postsecondary programs, so attention to reflecting diversity in outreach efforts is one important action that institutions can take. But efforts need to go well beyond images and marketing changes.

Inclusion means providing resources and peer communities for adults who are neurodiverse, LGBTQ+, veterans, or people of color. Equity means paying attention to access and completion

gaps; acknowledging and counting the knowledge and skills acquired from all work experiences, not just managerial work; providing professional development to instructors and advisors on implicit bias and the needs of key student subpopulations; and efforts to have faculty and staff reflect the student body, particularly in terms of race and ethnicity. The concerns around equity suggest that an intentional design that focuses on removing barriers for specific groups of adult learners could end up assisting all adult learners.

DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND EQUITY

Diversity is the presence of differences that may include race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, language, (dis)ability, or age (adapted from Defining DEI, dei.extension.org). This includes populations that have been — and remain — underrepresented among both adult learners in the classroom and practitioners in the field, and marginalized in broader society. Diversity acknowledges all the ways people differ.

Inclusion is the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those who have physical or mental disabilities and members of other minority groups. In college and university settings, adult learners and underrepresented populations are often overlooked when it comes to program design and/or internal strategic planning processes.

The manifestation of **equity** is often the purposeful allocation of resources (e.g., opportunity, networks, funds, time, support, etc.) in a way that eliminates disparities in desired outcomes. Equity is often used interchangeably with equality, but there's a core difference: Where equality is a system in which each individual is offered the same opportunities regardless of circumstance, equity distributes resources based on needs. We live in a disproportionate society, and equity tries to correct its imbalance by creating more opportunities for people who have historically had less access.

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> "One of my first instructors that I
> had was also a queer person, and
> **I saw myself represented in the
> tech community through this one
> instructor**. That was the instructor
> that drove home for me, like, 'Hey,
> we are here. Queer people do
> work in the tech industry.'"

RECENTLY-COMPLETED ADULT LEARNER
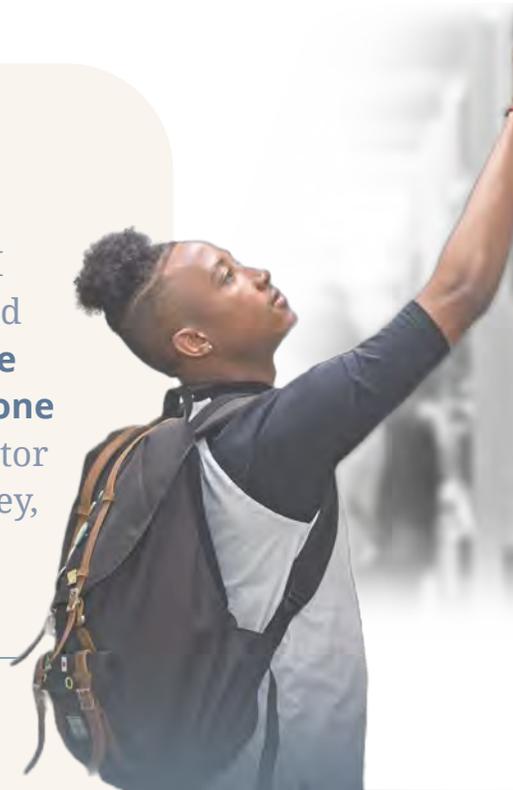
Issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion provide an important lens through which to understand the other key research themes that emerged for this report:

- **Affordability** is an issue that plays out differently for many adult student subgroups; for example, Black and Latino students are more likely to take out loans to attend college, compared to White students (Student Borrower Protection Center, 2020), and more than half of Black students who don't complete their degrees default on student loans (Anthony, 2019).

- Assistance with **career connections** — especially understanding labor market outcomes of different career pathways — can help to close the very real occupational segregation that perpetuates income and wealth inequalities. It is noteworthy that since 1980, half of the gender wage gap is attributed to women working in different industries than men, specifically "caring" professions such as nursing, childcare, and teaching. The gap expands for people of color; as at all levels of education, women of color are frequently segregated into jobs with lower wages than their white male peers, and Black men are overrepresented in low-wage jobs (Washington Center for Equitable Growth, 2017; Hamilton et al., 2011).

- One program that epitomizes **academic empowerment** is CPL, yet CAEL research has shown that Black and lower-income adult students are less likely to earn CPL credits (Klein-Collins, Bransberger, & Lane, 2021).

- **Student support**, by definition, considers the specific needs of individual students and key student subgroups. These need to be available in ways that minimize the influence of implicit bias — for example, eliminating personal biases that may exist with respect to which students are more "deserving" of assistance and accommodations.

Circling back to Domain 1, one of the most important tools that institutions have to address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion is **data** — data on the community the institution serves, the students it attracts, the ways in which different student groups engage with programs or services (i.e., advising, CPL, career services, etc.), and the differences in outcomes for different student subpopulations. Enlisting the institution's research capacity and making good use of data is part of building a firm foundation for serving adult learners — an important first step in the new framework for effectively serving adults.

"I think a lot of adult learners started something years ago. And now they want to go back and finish it. **And I think that success is walking across that stage.** I'm feeling that sense of accomplishment."

RECENTLY COMPLETED ADULT LEARNER

DOMAIN 3

A CULTURE OF CHANGE AND ADAPTIVITY

An institution that effectively serves adults will recognize that creating an adult learner-focused institution is a big change for multiple functions and departments. All involved need to both understand the reason for the changes and then also want to be a part of the changes. Change needs to then become embraced as part of the culture, so that the institution continues to adapt to meet the current and anticipated needs of the community it serves.

While leadership is critical from the start of the strategic planning process, a successful adult learner program involves getting the rest of the institution on board with the planned changes. Good change management practice goes beyond just communicating those changes. Rather, good change management means building awareness of the need for the change, building interest in serving new populations more effectively, and then explaining what changes will happen, when those changes will happen, and how they will affect each individual's role.

Through this process, the institution will be able to identify adult learner champions and the extent to which the institution has capacity to embrace change and a culture of adaptivity. The institution can also gain a sense of existing resources it can build on (in-house assets) and professional development needs. With this knowledge, institutions can then focus on how to take action on developing policies, programs, and services that meet adult learner needs.

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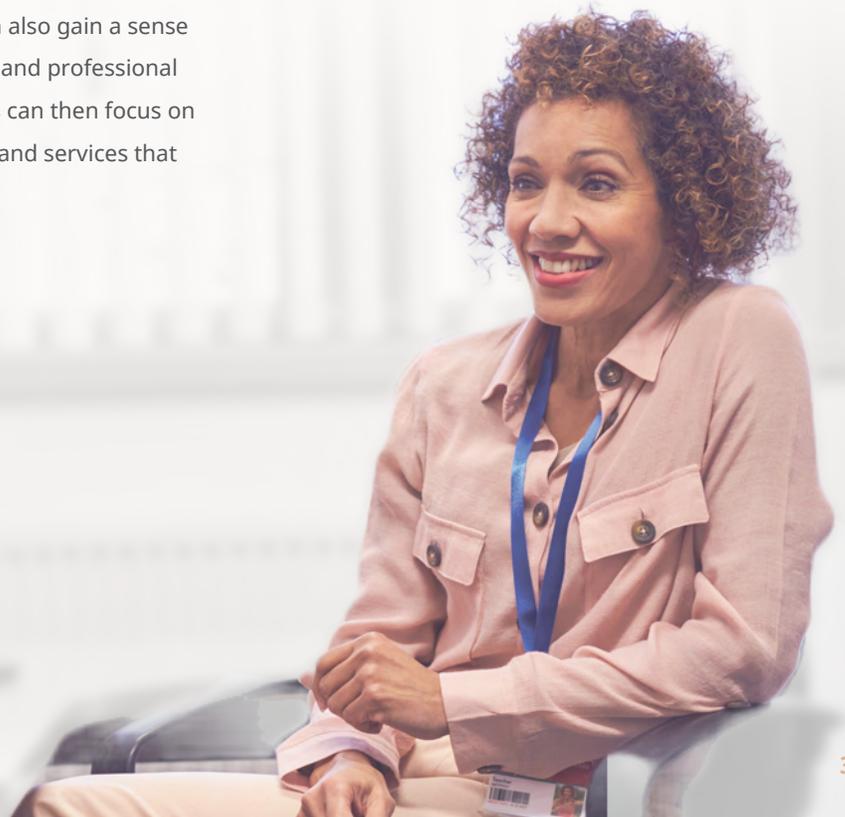
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In CAEL's experience, an institution's ability to adapt to and embrace a culture of change is characterized by:

Taking action in response to all data to improve upon adult learner success outcomes.

Collecting robust feedback from stakeholders and students to understand whether and how their institution is effectively serving and graduating adult learners.

Implementing change management tactics with detailed timelines and shared accountability for program design and rollout.

Reflecting on recent changes and program cycles to readjust as needed and ensure quality and effectiveness.

Including faculty and staff in relevant discussions around adult learners and their success, especially those who directly serve adult learners.

Creating a culture of continuous learning and feedback.

The three domains in this data-driven planning level create the base the institution can build on, with the next level focused on building organizational capacity to become true ALLIES.

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LEVEL 2

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AND POLICY

ADULT LEARNER LEADERS FOR
INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS (ALLIES) FRAMEWORK

Level 2 in the ALLIES Framework involves building institutional capacity
to support adult learners. The institution operationalizes adult learner
inclusion and success *(Inclusive Policies and Governance)*, prepares
faculty and staff to support and engage adults more effectively *(Faculty
and Staff Professional Development)*, and identifies ways to expand the
institution's capacity to meet adult learner career and support needs
(Impactful Partnerships).

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DOMAIN 4

INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND GOVERNANCE

*An institution that effectively serves adults enacts its mission statement by creating
policies that: emphasize an adherence to quality standards; remove structural barriers
facing adult learners; embrace learning rather than seat time; and leverage the expertise
of its leadership, faculty, and staff to ensure that its programs and services support the
success goals of adult learners.*

Adult-centered programs and services will not be effective if offered in an environment where
structures and policies work as a counterforce to adult learner success. Institutions need to
consider ways in which existing policies work at cross purposes to an adult-focused mission.
This could include:

Admissions standards
or requirements that
make it difficult for
someone who may
not have performed
well in their previous
educational experience
but has matured and, as
an adult, developed the
skills and capabilities to
succeed academically.

Automatic holds placed
on a student's record
due to owing a small
balance, affecting their
ability to request a
transcript or re-enroll.

Penalties for dropping or
missing classes that do
not account for students
who may have family-,
work-, or military
service-related conflict.

Transfer policies
that are arbitrarily
restrictive, making
it difficult for adult
learners to make all of
their learning count.

Policies that severely
restrict how much prior
learning credit can be
awarded and applied to
a student's degree plan.

One qualitative study found that "adult degree programs negotiate power and interest, centering
on (a) moving the institutional interest in adult learners from the margins closer to the center,

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(b) gaining influence by drawing on multiple forms of capital, (c) building a bridge of common interests among key players as a way of leveraging power, and (d) balancing institutional expectation for growth with resource limitations" (Watkins & Tisdell, 2006). In Level 1: Data-Driven Planning, we recommended that postsecondary leaders include adult learner success and equity outcomes in the institution's strategic plan. We described the importance of building a culture of change and adaptivity. Lacking these elements, adult learner-serving efforts may stall at this component of the process owing to a deficit of resources and a diminished sense of urgency and priority on the change initiative.

Adult learners also would like to have a voice in informing changes and initiatives that impact the programs in which they enroll. In CAEL's institutional assessment process, the Adult Learner 360, we often see adult learners report dissatisfaction with their institution's inaction on their feedback. While most adult learners juggle multiple commitments that limit their capacity to become involved with their institution through committees, focus groups and satisfaction surveys can reveal insight from a diverse group of adult learners regarding the efficacy, relevance, and availability of programs and services — and whether and how changes to policy and process can improve upon these facets
of their experiences.

A "C-Suite" leader should serve as the executive sponsor over institutional endeavors to serve adult learners. Even so, all levels of the institution have a role to play in enacting any policy-driven practice. Faculty, staff, and leadership must approach policy-based decisions as a unified front. Process maps and standard operating procedures can help identify participants in a policy-driven process. These documents can help identify barriers, disconnects, duplicative efforts, and resource deficits that constrain an institution's efforts to serve adult learners. A policy audit that considers adult learners' needs and the ways in which they engage with postsecondary learning can help the institution identify these barriers and disconnects. Most importantly, the results from such an audit could help make the case for redirecting resources, improving internal processes, or supporting any necessary policy or process changes.

In addition, institutions should explore whether and how their governance structures — the ways in which an organization operates and how decisions are made — are designed to consider adult learners. This starts with revisiting the mission statement and strategic goals that the institution has set pertaining to adult learners. In addition, it can be valuable to find ways for adult learners to be represented in student leadership opportunities, especially student advisory committees.

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DOMAIN 5

FACULTY AND STAFF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

*An institution that effectively serves adults ensures that all faculty and staff are
prepared to provide adult learners with flexible formats, support services, opportunities
to connect their life experiences to what they are learning, and assignments that are
predictable and potentially adjustable. When all faculty and staff are trained to serve
adults well, that strengthens the overall capacity of the institution and its ability to sustain
a long-term focus on adults.*

Faculty and staff often do not know what the best practices are to serve adult learners. As part of
the capacity-building process, institutions need to consider what kind of professional development
opportunities will be needed. It may be helpful to examine the specific backgrounds and needs
of current and prospective adult learners at the institution; surveying adult learners at various
stages (e.g., intake, following their first term, as they approach graduation, etc.) can help identify
where additional capacity and understanding may be needed. Surveying faculty and staff can
also help decision makers understand what their needs are in terms of information, capacity,
resources, and other support. All of these activities can also be helpful for overall program design,
particularly where additional adult-centered support and advising may be needed. While
not all-inclusive, some commonly requested professional development topics include:
better understanding the barriers facing adult learners and strategies to remove
them; curriculum and instructional strategy redesign to engage adult learners;
understanding individual and departmental roles in implementing credit for
prior learning (CPL) programming; and strategies to connect adult learners
to academic and nonacademic support.

Faculty and staff have important roles to play in helping adults feel like
they belong in a postsecondary environment, and professional development
is key to making that happen.

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DOMAIN 6

IMPACTFUL PARTNERSHIPS

*An institution that effectively serves adults partners with employers, workforce boards,
industry associations, employment-focused centers, trade unions, community-based
organizations and leaders, alumni, and other postsecondary entities. These partners
provide expanded opportunities for experiential learning, enhance the student support
structure, develop and validate relevant stackable credentials, and ensure equity in access
to its programs and services.*

Part of building the capacity to serve adult learners involves knowing what the institution can
provide through its own resources versus what the institution should rely on others to do.
Partnerships with external organizations can expand the institution's capacity to create strong
connections between learning and the workplace, seamless transitions to further learning, and
access to wraparound support services that adult learners may need to succeed.

For example, institutions may need to create partnerships with workforce-related stakeholders:
local or regional workforce boards, chambers of commerce, industry associations, and employers
themselves. Ideally, these partners should align with the institution's own values and mission — for
example, in providing opportunities to access high-quality career pathways and family supporting
occupations, and in promoting greater diversity and inclusion in an industry's talent pipeline.

In these partnerships, postsecondary providers/institutions serve as a resource for a community's
or industry's talent and upskilling needs. In turn, these relationships help the providers/institutions
understand the current, imminent, and future needs of the workforce. These organizations may
be able to share their own labor market analyses, as well as insider knowledge not yet reflected
in public datasets. For example, a healthcare industry association may disclose that a nearby
county will be opening a medical facility that will affect immediate and long-term demand in the

region for certified nursing assistants, medical billers/coders, registered nurses, and medical assistants. Or, a manufacturer may be moving operations to the region, and it will have an ongoing need for individuals cross-trained in manufacturing and IT. Similarly, those connections to regional economic development entities can signal when other industries will be phasing out certain kinds of occupations. On a more general level, connections with employers and industry-related organizations can provide insights about transferable skills, knowledge, and abilities that employers need from all graduates.

Workforce partnerships can — and should — go beyond just information sharing. Other valuable ways postsecondary institutions can engage with workforce development, employers, chambers, and industry associations include assisting with designing and developing programs; providing work-based learning opportunities (e.g., internships or apprenticeship programs); assisting with mock interviews; securing commitments to hire graduates or interview completers of the program; providing financial support; providing industry experts as adjunct faculty; pursuing systemic improvement (in both private- and public-sector policies and practices); and, enlisting them as champions of an institution's programs to other employers, job seekers, and funders.

Meanwhile, community organizations, faith-based organizations, government agencies, and other service providers are also indispensable partners for a postsecondary provider. Some of the benefits of developing robust relationships with these stakeholders include:

- A presence for the institution within the communities it seeks to serve.

- Pipelines from secondary education equivalency (e.g., GED) and English language acquisition to college-level work.

- Key insight into the needs and barriers of the community served.

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- Access to government- or private-sponsored programs that address critical childcare, food, and housing needs — as well as things like broadband assistance.

- The opportunity to provide college-level learning and preparation offsite.

- Opportunities to work with parents of college-going youth to help prepare multiple generations for postsecondary education.

- Access to case managers with relevant social and cultural context to serve a diverse group of adult learners.

- Opportunities to partner with organizations to pursue grant funds that can help create, sustain, and enhance wraparound support services.

- An indispensable resource for multilingual, culturally competent talent that can serve future learners as mentors and advisors.

Other possible partners can include funders (philanthropic and/or public), research organizations (or research institutions within larger universities), and advocacy/technical assistance organizations that provide resources and professional development opportunities.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHILDCARE

In the case of childcare, it can be valuable for institutions to provide childcare onsite — and may be critical for institutions operating in one of the many childcare "deserts." Yet, some adult learners we interviewed noted that such a service may not actually meet the needs of all student parents. One interviewed adult learner said, "If there were dependent care available for children [at my institution], I would have taken advantage of that in a heartbeat with the caveat that I do have a child with special needs — so that gets a little more complicated." This adult learner's specific needs speak to how strategic partners could offer services that the institution itself may not be able to provide, or provide well. Partnerships with community providers, or with funders who can subsidize in-home childcare, may be more ideal solutions, depending on whether those options are available.

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LEVEL 3

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

**ADULT LEARNER LEADERS FOR
INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS (ALLIES) FRAMEWORK**

An institution that effectively serves adults draws on data and available resources to design the best possible program for its current and prospective adult learners. Throughout Levels 1 and 2, the institution collects data, engages in adult- and equity-centered strategic planning, works toward developing a culture of change and adaptivity, addresses the need for adult-centered policies and governance, trains faculty and staff, and identifies (with an eye toward securing) impactful partnerships. These activities are what create the strong foundation for the development of adult-focused programs and services.

There are many different components of good postsecondary program design; not all of them are listed in this section. Here we focus on the more specific aspects that should be prioritized for adult learners: affordability, student support, academic empowerment, and career relevance and connections. These program elements should also be featured in adult student outreach and recruitment efforts, as these elements will make postsecondary education seem possible, attractive, and welcoming to prospective adult learners.

To recruit adult learners, focus on the key student experience factors.
What is it about the program that will appeal to adult learners and make them feel like they can be successful?

DOMAIN 7

AFFORDABLE PROGRAMS

An institution that effectively serves adults provides detailed information about the total costs, finds ways to reduce overall costs, and offers avenues for recognizing learning from all sources.

There is considerable evidence that one of the biggest barriers for adult learners is the cost related to pursuing postsecondary education and credentials. Studies of adult learners have found them to be quite cost-conscious, and financial factors are often central to their enrollment decisions (EAB, 2019; Clinefelter et al., 2019; Hagelskamp et al., 2013). Surveys of adult learners — and prospective adult learners — almost always show that the top two barriers to postsecondary enrollment are time and money, with money usually coming out on top. For example, in an EAB survey of interested/prospective adult learners, when asked about top factors preventing them from enrollment, cost was cited as the top reason for not returning to school (40%) — ahead of the time constraints of family responsibilities (23%) and professional/ work-related commitments (22%) (EAB, 2019).

"I know that one of the parts that's been holding me back is the financial aspect of it. **Not everyone's going to be able to afford tuition on top of a mortgage payment and bills and all of that.**"

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

More recently, Strada Education Network's survey of postsecondary consumers shows a decline in the percentage of unenrolled adults (with an associate degree or less) who say that additional education would be worth the cost; prospective adults also say that the top barrier to enrollment is cost (57%), followed closely by time considerations ("life balance") (50%) (Torpey-Saboe, N. & Clayton, D., 2022).

In CAEL's own survey of never-enrolled adults conducted for this study, the top two factors when considering postsecondary education are "affordability" (85%) followed by "cost of applying" (82%) *(see Figure 3, page 25)*. Follow-up questions in the survey expand on and reinforce these statistics:

- Of the never-enrolled adults who considered but never applied to any postsecondary education programs, the most commonly cited reason is "could not afford cost of program" (50%), followed by "could not afford price of application" (29%) *(Figure 4)*.
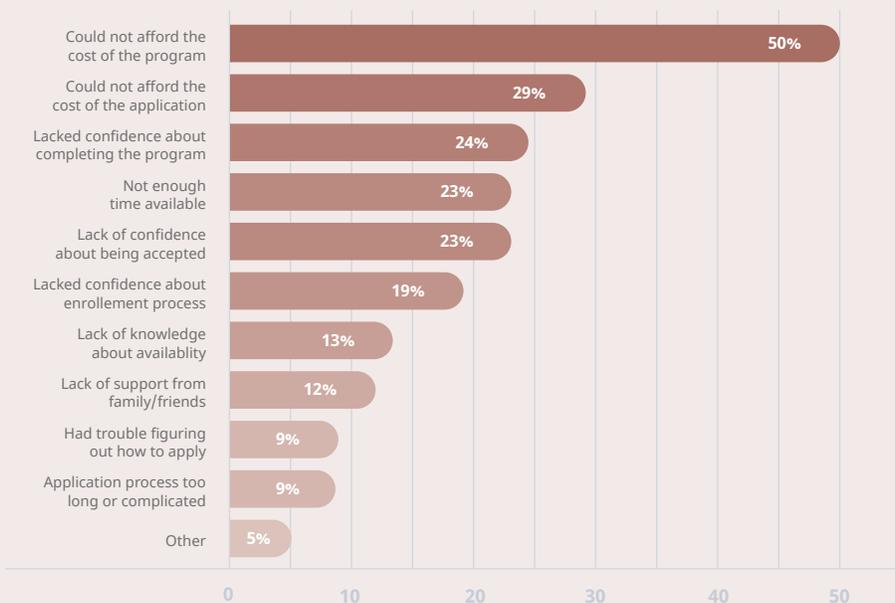
"A lot of people are struggling financially, especially adult learners. **Being able to find something that's affordable is a must.**"

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

FIGURE 4

Reasons for never-enrolled adults not applying to postsecondary program
*(Source: Darnell, 2022)*

Reason	Percentage
Could not afford the cost of the program	50%
Could not afford the cost of the application	29%
Lacked confidence about completing the program	24%
Not enough time available	23%
Lack of confidence about being accepted	23%
Lacked confidence about enrollment process	19%
Lack of knowledge about availablity	13%
Lack of support from family/friends	12%
Had trouble figuring out how to apply	9%
Application process too long or complicated	9%
Other	5%

FIGURE 5

Reasons for never-enrolled adults not enrolling after submitting an application for admission *(Source: Darnell, 2022)*
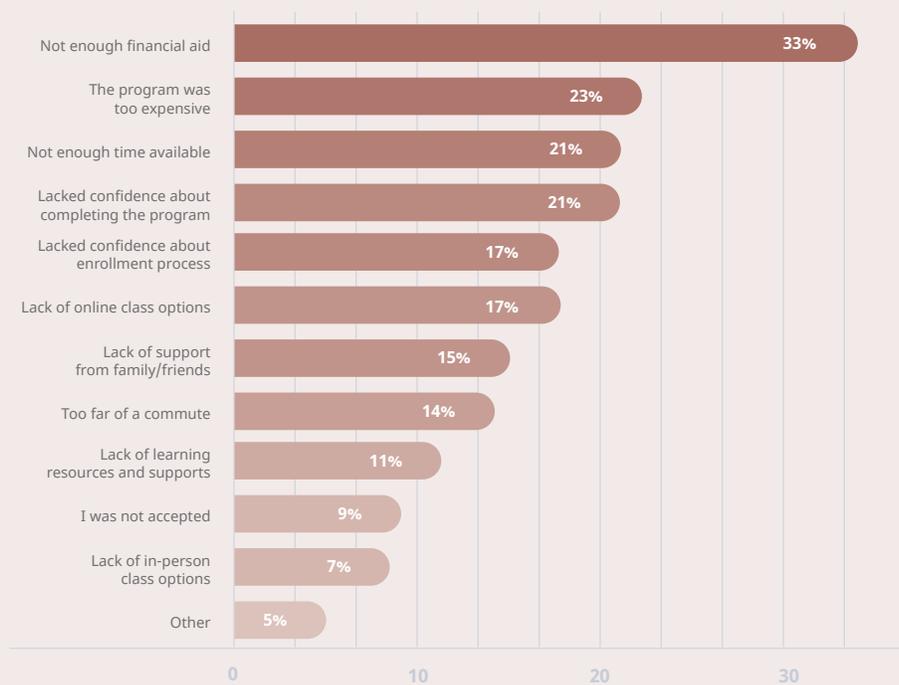
- Of the never-enrolled adults who did at one point submit an application, the most commonly cited reason for not enrolling is "not enough financial aid" (33%), followed by "the program was too expensive" (23%) *(Figure 5)*.

- Across both groups of never-enrolled students, those who considered and never applied and those who applied and did not enroll, 78% report that they would be more likely to apply or enroll if it were less expensive.

In CAEL's interviews, several current or recent adult learners shared that they wanted to know about the costs of attending college — and their options to pay for it — before looking at other aspects of a particular program. A theme that emerged was a reluctance to take on debt, particularly if credential completion or the financial return of investing in a credential is not guaranteed.

Sample strategies that high-performing programs use to address affordability may include:

- **Financial Aid and Debt Advising.** One survey of adult learners found that the institutional service most valued by adult learners is financial aid advising to guide them through their options (Stamats, 2017). Several of our high-performing programs provided financial services and financial aid advising from the very start, to make sure that students were well-informed about program costs and financing implications. These discussions should cover the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (and relatedly, federal financial aid options), scholarships, and tax implications for enrollment (e.g., tax credits they may be eligible for, taxable funding sources, a reduced income tax obligation if they reduce their work hours while in school). These conversations should also discuss the return on investment to the student's intended credential in terms of higher pay or career advancement potential, as those details are important to weigh against the cost of attendance and/or future loan payments. Advisors should also urge working adults to investigate whether their employer offers tuition assistance that could cover some or all of their program costs.

- **Scholarship Assistance, Completion Grants, and Other Financing Strategies.** Finding sources of funding to help students facing the largest financial barriers is an important strategy. Among the high-performing programs we studied, those at State University of New York (SUNY) Empire State College (ESC), The American Women's College at Bay Path University, and Code Fellows all have some form of scholarship funds, while Mississippi State University's degree completion program offers completion grants. Meanwhile, Columbus State Community College's (CSCC) program offers third-party funding that is automatically awarded to students meeting minimum academic progress criteria (e.g., earning a C or above in their courses). Code Fellows offers a range of financial resources to meet the needs of students at every socioeconomic level, including income share agreements (ISAs). Colleges can also investigate whether their programs and students could qualify for other

"Luckily, they offered scholarships, which I was awarded, so the cost was not as bad as I initially had thought. **It seems like they have a lot of financing options, but along with the scholarship, I was able to just pay out of pocket.**"

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

funding sources such as Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or state training dollars. They may also consider identifying funds to cover other costs that might not be covered by other funding sources, such as licensure exams and job-related equipment.

- **Program Design/Cost Reduction Options.** Institutions can help drive down costs by rethinking how programs are designed, delivered, and priced. Some of the programs we studied were designed with cost-saving components such as Capella University's direct assessment model that allows students to progress more quickly and at a lower cost, Code Fellow's discounts for course bundles, and a flat tuition rate at both Wichita State University and The Women's College at Bay Path University. In addition, several had generous transfer policies and CPL offerings that helped students apply their prior learning and progress more quickly toward completion (see also Domain 8 on Support Services and Domain 9 on Academic Empowerment for more on the value of recognizing prior learning).

- **Open Educational Resources.** Textbooks and other reading materials can really add up for students. Bay Path University, CUNY SPS, CSCC, and Wichita State University use open educational resources to reduce the variable costs of attendance; CSCC also offers course materials through its library.

- **Transparency on Program Costs and Flexibility in Payment Schedules.** Learners want to know up front how much the program will cost — not just a course or semester but the entire program. In addition, they can benefit from having different options for paying their tuition, such as breaking down the payments into smaller amounts over a longer period of time. As one interviewed adult learner described, "I get paid every two weeks. Why can't I pay according to my pay schedule?"

- **Removing Financial Barriers in the Application Process and to Enrollment.** As noted above, just the cost of applying to a postsecondary program can be a barrier for many; for that reason, Bay Path University's program has removed tuition deposits and matriculation fees. In addition, adults who are returning to formal education may find that they have balances from their previous postsecondary experiences; there may be financial holds for small charges (e.g., parking ticket, library fee) that are obstacles to enrollment. Institutions may want to explore providing some form of debt forgiveness as they reach out to students who might be interested in finishing what they started.

"During a semester, I only [pay] for the 6-week class that I'm about to take or just started. **It's a lot easier to come up with $1,200 than $4,000 at one time."**

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

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DOMAIN 8

**STUDENT SUPPORT, PARTICULARLY AT THE FRONT END
OF THE STUDENT'S JOURNEY**

*An institution that effectively serves adult learners provides a wide range of student
support, with a special focus on the early stages of the student's postsecondary
experiences. An institution can help to ease transitions and create a sense of belonging
by front-loading advising and outreach into the application, admission, enrollment, and
onboarding processes and during the first term of study.*

The importance of providing support to adult learners throughout their educational pursuits
cannot be overstated. Adult learners often have "time poverty" as a result of juggling education
with work and family obligations. They may have unexpected costs or family health care challenges
that can derail their progress. They may be academically rusty from being out of the classroom for
many years. They are often first-generation college students without a personal network to help
them navigate how postsecondary institutions work. They may have a lot of self-doubt
in their own ability to succeed. They may struggle to feel like they belong in higher education.

Several research studies support the need for a range of support services — proactive
advising, emergency financial aid, connections to public aid, connections to community resources,
tutoring, mentoring, coaching, and so on — to help address those issues so that adult learners will
succeed (See, in particular: Bergman et al., 2014; Odle, 2020; Van Noy & Heidkamp, 2013; Leavitt
et al., 2021). Research also suggests paying particular attention to easing the initial transitions to
postsecondary learning and helping adults feel like they belong.

The research conducted for this study — through surveys and interviews with prospective adult
learners as well as in-depth studies of institutions with high-performing programs — suggests
that attention to student support needs should also have a particular focus on the front end of
the student's educational experiences. That is where adult learners can face some of their biggest
challenges in terms of understanding their options, navigating the learning process effectively,
building self-efficacy, ensuring that their prior learning is valued and recognized, balancing
education with other responsibilities, and feeling like they belong.

- **Understanding career and degree options, particularly before getting started.** Adults may understand that they need additional skills or credentials to access good jobs and careers. However, it is unlikely they know the range of occupations and career pathways available to them — much less what kind of educational programs can get them there. In our survey, 43% of never-enrolled adults said their top reason for considering education was to get a better job, and 27% said it was to make more money *(Figure 2, page 24)*, yet only 24% said that they knew exactly which degree or program they wanted to pursue (Darnell, 2022). Most of these adults turned to Google and college websites to help them find possible institutions and programs, yet the information they typically sought was with respect to price (71%), online class options (64%), and financial aid (63%); only about half (48%) looked at specific majors or programs, and just over one-third (35%) looked at reputation and rankings *(Figure 6)* (Darnell, 2022).

FIGURE 6

Information that never-enrolled adults look for when researching postsecondary institutions
(Source: Darnell, 2022)
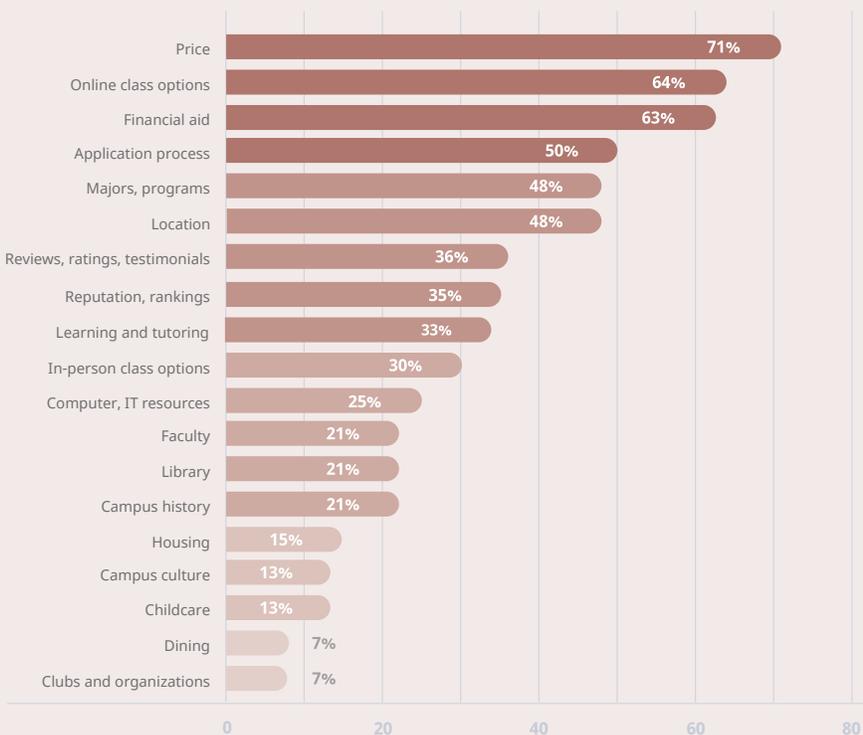
Price	71%
Online class options	64%
Financial aid	63%
Application process	50%
Majors, programs	48%
Location	48%
Reviews, ratings, testimonials	36%
Reputation, rankings	35%
Learning and tutoring	33%
In-person class options	30%
Computer, IT resources	25%
Faculty	21%
Library	21%
Campus history	21%
Housing	15%
Campus culture	13%
Childcare	13%
Dining	7%
Clubs and organizations	7%

"All the resources that I needed were available to me, **aside from more time,** which no one can give me."

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

In interviews, never-enrolled adult learners explained that they do not really know what is available, and they rarely move past this cursory approach to decision making. At a time when certain career pathways promise long-term employment, career advancement, and economic mobility, there is a real need for institutions to step in and help adult learners consider the full range of occupational choices available, and which majors or training programs lead to which career pathways.

- **Navigating the postsecondary institution process, particularly in the initial stages.** Adult learners, particularly those who are first-generation college students or first-time enrollees, often find postsecondary-institution processes to be confusing. This is particularly true during the application and enrollment process. Interviewed students said that they would benefit from a simpler or streamlined application and enrollment process, along with visual aids that make it easier to understand.

- **Building self-efficacy and a sense of belonging.** In our interviews with adult learners, most had low confidence in their ability to enroll and complete a degree. The reasons vary — it may have been a while since they were in a classroom, and they might just be feeling academically rusty. Or, they may have previously had negative educational experiences. In Strada Education Network's survey of "aspiring" adult learners, only one in three reported having had a positive experience with education the last time they were enrolled in either high school or college (Strada Education Network, 2020). In CAEL's survey of never-enrolled adults, 84% said they would be more likely to enroll if they were more confident about their ability to complete (Darnell, 2022).

- **Ensuring that all learning counts, with exploration of options at the start of a student's studies.** Adult learners are not coming to postsecondary institutions as a blank slate. Many have enrolled in college in the past; the National Student Clearinghouse reports that today there are 39 million Americans who have "some college, no degree" (Causey et al., 2022). Previous research has shown that one of adult learners' top concerns is the ability to have their previous credits accepted in transfer (Stamats, 2017), and another study found that the more credits adults are able to transfer, the greater the likelihood of their persisting to a degree (Pearson, 2019).

"**I would have liked to have more step-by-step instructions on how to apply, what to expect, and what would be my options,** [...] just to help clear out some of the worries of the unknown."

NEVER-ENROLLED ADULT LEARNER

> "My advisor took the time to do one-on-ones. **She was like, 'I need to get to know who you are.'** That really helped me in prepping my mind and my spirit into wanting to get into the space of learning."

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

CAEL's Adult Learner 360 survey of currently enrolled adults found that adults report tremendous frustration when prior-earned credits are not honored. Yet rigid transfer policies by the receiving/enrolling institution often present barriers: The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO, 2019) reports that during the transfer process, college students commonly lose more than 40% of their previously earned credits.

In addition to previous college-going experiences, adults have considerable non-formal or informal (or noncredit) learning from a variety of other sources (e.g., work, life, military, volunteering, self-study, noncredit study, etc.), some of which are comparable to the learning that takes place in college classrooms and could count toward their degrees or other credentials — but only if their college or university offers them CPL options. CAEL's research has long shown that adults with credit through CPL are more likely to persist and complete degrees (Klein-Collins, Taylor, Bishop, Bransberger, Lane, & Leibrandt, 2020; Klein-Collins, 2010), with other research efforts showing similar results (Capella University, 2021; McCay & Douglas, 2020; Bergman et al., 2014). CPL can also be a tool to help near-completers cross the finish line, or for others to accelerate completion (Van Noy & Heidkamp, 2013) when coupled with strong institutional support and sound program practices (Travers, 2015). Yet, CAEL also knows from nearly 50 years of working with institutions on CPL that there is tremendous inconsistency in the way that CPL is offered within institutions; in our Adult Learner 360 process, we often find that adult learners are dissatisfied with what is offered and the support available. In addition, as noted in the section for Domain 2, Black and lower-income adult students are less likely to earn CPL credits. Thus, programs should find ways to ensure that there is equitable access to and use of CPL options (Klein-Collins, Bransberger, & Lane, 2021).

The literature and the high-performing programs studied for this report offer many examples of how institutions could address student support needs and create a greater sense of belonging — both at the front end and throughout:

- **Front-end focus on a range of needed services.** Institutions need to spend time very early in the admissions and enrollment process understanding the full range of issues that rise to the level of "barrier" for each adult learner. One of our high-performing programs, CUNY SPS, requires students to provide detailed information about their lives through intake forms at the time of enrollment. Finding ways to provide "wraparound support" — addressing childcare, transportation, health issues, disabilities, and food and housing insecurity, in addition to things like academic tutoring — can be challenging, but institutions often leverage community resources or public assistance programs to help support a range of student needs.

  One program representative observed that many adult learners wait a long time to return to learning, including waiting until "all the elements in their life are in position for them to be successful." Yet even in these cases, the program's advisors found it worthwhile to use the intake process to capture what is working well for the adult learner now and what has been a barrier in the past. In this way, institutional advisors will have a better sense of what to watch for.

CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING (CPL)

Credit for Prior Learning, or CPL, is a term for various methods that colleges, universities, and other education or training providers use to evaluate learning that has occurred outside of the traditional academic environment. It is used to grant college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training. Other common terms for this process include prior learning assessment, recognition of prior learning, and recognition of learning.

For free resources on CPL, see www.cael.org/lp/cpl-pla.

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- **Onboarding through simpler application processes, adult-focused orientations, or "first courses."** Postsecondary institutions need to find ways to help adult learners navigate the environment and create a greater sense of belonging — during both the application and enrollment process, and also during their first term. Simplifying the application process and providing a single point of contact that helps adults through the process are some of the practices that can be helpful pre-enrollment (Stamats, 2017). Once through the application and enrollment processes, many of the high-performing programs we examined offered special orientations and, in some cases, "first courses" that provide adults with sources of information, course materials, the curriculum, and even an exploration of CPL options. For adults who are new to online learning, institutions should consider providing a test or trial version of an online course for students to gain a better sense of what to expect. Capella University has found that this kind of test course has been helpful for improving early persistence rates.

- **Early examination of prior learning.** Another important part of the front-end process (during onboarding and perhaps even during the application/enrollment process) is to explore the student's prior learning to make sure that the institution recognizes as much learning as possible, either through credit transfer from previously attended institutions or from CPL. In some cases, the prior learning may be enough to qualify for awarding students associate degrees as an incremental step toward a bachelor's degree (e.g., reverse transfer awards).

"**They were very intentional about making sure that no one was left behind.** They didn't want anyone to feel like they couldn't do this."

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

WHEN POLICIES, PROCESSES, AND MISSION TO SERVE ADULTS ARE NOT ALIGNED

While attending school, working full-time, and raising a child, "Natalie" had difficulty accessing financial aid advisors and her institution's bursar's office because they offered neither virtual support nor hours outside of the traditional 8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m. workday. She also struggled with the institution's harsh penalties for missed paperwork and deadlines, and she could not find course sections that fit into her work schedule. These policies and processes did not serve her needs as an adult learner. When a program is not "adult student-ready," students may end up like Natalie: feeling blamed and punished for being a first-generation college student and working parent-learner.

- **Help balance education with work and life.** As noted earlier in this report, the course formats can be enormously helpful to adult learners who are juggling education with work and life responsibilities. The never-enrolled adults even noted that self-paced and online courses — and sometimes even just consistently offered courses — can make it possible to manage those competing responsibilities. Beyond that, one high-performing institution, Wichita State University, assigned a success coach, an academic advisor, and a program success coach to each learner. SUNY ESC focused on helping adult learners create personalized plans. College Unbound recognized the power of family and community support to student success. They integrated support from family members, exploring a multigenerational approach to educational offerings. They also shared meals with students and their families at the start of the program to reinforce the student identity as both an adult learner and active member of their family or community.

- **Guiding, coaching, and nudging.** As with all learners, providing guidance and coaching throughout an adult learner's journey can be central to student success (Leavitt et al., 2021). These services can be enhanced by putting student engagement data to use; data analytics can assist advisers and coaches in providing timely "nudges" and proactive interventions when learners are in danger of falling behind in their studies (Odle, 2020; York et al., 2017). Guidance at all stages of the educational journey can also be useful when coming from peer mentors.

"One of my fellow students had a baby during our sessions. He needed to catch up on some work, and he was able to do it. **He felt supported.**"

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

- **Emergency grants/funds.** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was growing evidence of the effectiveness of providing emergency aid options for students whose continued enrollment could be jeopardized by an unexpected expense, with data showing that students who accessed such aid had high rates of retention and completion (Ascendium, 2020; Great Lakes Higher Education Guaranty Corporation, 2016). Among our high-performing programs, both Mississippi State University and Wichita State University provided some form of emergency funding to help students weather unexpected financial issues. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) provides some guidance to colleges in its Emergency Aid Rubric, which centers on six capacity pillars critical for successful emergency aid administration: management, policy implications, technology, measuring success, securing resources, and increasing awareness. Each capacity pillar has associated criteria, which the rubric presents in the form of guiding questions, as well as descriptors for each of the possible ratings (NASPA, 2016).

"They pair you and a group of other learners with a coach. You have monthly meetings and you talk about everything that's going on, **it doesn't even have to be related to the program itself or what classes you're taking but just, 'How are you doing? Do you need any help?'**"

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

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DOMAIN 9

ACADEMIC EMPOWERMENT

*An institution that effectively serves adult learners empowers them by making it possible
for them to balance learning with their other life responsibilities, and by valuing their
work-based and experiential learning.*

Many adults juggle multiple responsibilities while seeking their postsecondary education. This
may include working full time or caring for family members, leaving little room in their lives for
their own academic pursuits. For these students, balancing these different responsibilities requires
ownership of their time and control of their planning. Adult learners therefore seek to have agency
over their educational journey while maintaining space for their other roles — such as worker,
parent, caregiver, service member, and community leader. Acknowledging that those roles
exist and are important is another way that institutions can help create a sense of belonging
for adult learners.

Of the many ways in which institutions can empower students in their academic experiences, four
areas are particularly helpful when designed with adult learners in mind: coursework modalities;
pacing and scheduling; teaching and learning; and recognition of all learning.

COURSEWORK MODALITIES

Adult learners benefit when institutions offer course modalities that best suit their needs
and "fit" their busy lives. Adults will have different preferences
among the various formats, including online, in-person, or
hybrid. Many adult learners value the flexibility of online
learning, which allows them to attend courses on their own
schedules. Many of the never-enrolled adults interviewed for
this report also noted that online learning options reduced
the anxiety of being the oldest person in the room, due to
those distinctions being less obvious in a remote environment
(Darnell, 2022). For other students, the ideal is having the
ability to complete coursework remotely while having access
to the campus for in-person contact with faculty and support
services (Clinefelter et al., 2019).

"**The online program was
something that worked
really well with my
schedule.** I have two kids
and another one on the
way, and just being able
to get my work done, get
my degree completed
while still working full
time was the best thing
that I could do."

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

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PACING AND SCHEDULING

Flexibility in pacing allows adult students the ability to focus on their educational journey as time permits, while acknowledging that for many of these students, external factors such as childcare, professional obligations, and other family commitments may impede their ability to maintain a regular schedule. CAEL's interviews with adult learners indicated that the strain of managing so many different obligations can lead to burnout and exhaustion. In response, some students may seek out accelerated programs to allow for a quicker completion, but even those students expressed the need for breaks and scheduling adjustments. Offering shorter modules and multiple start times per year can also provide adult learners with flexibility to take a pause as needed; students interviewed for this report expressed the needs for such breaks, particularly for those who are juggling multiple responsibilities, providing that there are no penalties on student status, financial aid eligibility, and overall cost to complete.

ADULT-CENTERED TEACHING AND LEARNING

What happens in the classroom is also important. A helpful way to understand this is through Malcolm Knowles' concept of andragogy (the method and practice of teaching adult learners), which eventually incorporated the following six "assumptions":

The need to know:
Adults need to know why they need to learn something before they learn it, even if that is an intellectual argument and not just a practical one.

**The learners'
self-concept:**
Adults have a strong self-concept and feel responsible for themselves, and thereby resent when others impose their will on them.

**The role of learners'
experiences:**
Adults bring a variety of experiences to the classroom, and therefore are more heterogeneous and require more individualized teaching and learning strategies.

Readiness to learn:
Adults come ready to learn if it takes them to the next development stage in their lives, which means the learning must be appropriate to where they are.

Orientation to learning:
Adults are life-centered or problem-centered in their learning, and don't respond well to subject-centered learning without context.

Motivation:
Adults are responsive to some external motivators like jobs and promotions, but primarily respond to internal pressures like job satisfaction and quality of life (Knowles et al., 2005).

There are several considerations for the teaching and learning process with adult learners, many of which are closely tied to the concept of empowering these learners academically (building neatly upon Knowles' assumption about the importance of "self-concept"). Many of these have long been "Teaching and Learning" best practices in CAEL's original *Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults*. Examples from the high-performing programs as well as from the literature include the following:

- **Periodic curricular reviews** to ensure consistency, usability, and quality; ongoing input from advisory boards and industry partners keeps course content relevant and applicable.

- **Opportunities to bring previous learning and experiences (particularly work experiences) into the learning process** to make connections between theory and practice, and to deepen learning for everyone in the class (Knowles, 1984).

- **Clear, direct, and consistent syllabi** that include rubrics, expectations for workload, and schedules of assignments and projects. Timing of deadlines can sometimes matter a lot; some of the adult learners interviewed for this report told CAEL that when assignments and submissions are due in early evening, they feel at a disadvantage to their peers who have more free time during the day to do coursework.

- **Comprehensive assessment and feedback to students**, including specific areas for improvement and areas of success (referenced by interviewed adult learners).

- **Options for student-designed majors** that allow adult learners to customize degrees to build on their existing college-level learning. Mississippi State University, for example, offers a bachelor of applied science (BAS) program that allows students with an earned associate in applied science to obtain a further credential. This program, though general in nature, affords students the opportunity to select their own areas of study that align with their personal and career interests.

- **Clear and transparent academic plans/maps** that set clear expectations and requirements for the program. This helps to give adult learners a fuller picture of what they will need to do to be successful, and how their prior learning can be leveraged to get them closer to the finish line.

"I love being able to do that kind of work at my own pace. **If more [providers] offered this kind of option, I think a lot more people would jump at the chance to do it.**"

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

> "We have three six-week classes in a semester, and **I can see all six weeks when I start the class, which helps me prepare and plan better from a time perspective**."

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

In CAEL's work with adult-focused institutions, surveys of faculty often indicate that they lack — and desire — the professional development necessary to support adult learner success in their teaching and advising roles. This is an important gap in institutional capacity. The research shows that, when controlling for all other student factors, institutional support (including faculty engagement) is among the most significant influences on student success (Bergman et al., 2014). Adult learners require different support from their faculty than their traditional-aged peers, and institutions must recognize and meet those expectations and needs. For example, some of the research indicates that because adult learners may have more in common with their faculty members than their student peers, they benefit from building relationships based on mutual respect and understanding of their lived experiences; however, when faculty do not recognize the complexity of their adult students' lives, or when their instruction is not collaborative in nature, they may inadvertently push their adult learners out of their program (Wyatt, 2011). Several of the high-performing institutions studied for this report noted that they pay considerable attention to supporting open and accessible connections between their adult learners and faculty.

RECOGNITION OF ALL LEARNING

Part of academic empowerment allows for a student to draw on all of their skills, knowledge, and experiences as part of the learning process. That means having opportunities to connect their experiential learning (e.g., work-based learning) to the course topics and objectives, as indicated above in the Teaching and Learning section. In addition, it means having any relevant prior learning count toward the student's degree or credential goal. Institutions can support this through transfer policies that are not arbitrarily restrictive, CPL opportunities, and reverse transfer programs.

- **Transfer policies.** Among top concerns for adult learners is transferability of credit (Stamats, 2017), which is understandable given that transfer students can lose up to 40% of credits earned from previously attended institutions (AACRAO, 2019). Studies have shown that acceptance of transfer credit by the receiving institution directly connects with likelihood of persistence and degree completion (Pearson, 2019). SUNY ESC shared that, in their experience, there are many students with large gaps between times of enrollment, and for these students, age limits on transferability of course credit can have a negative impact.

- **Credit for Prior Learning.** As noted earlier in this report, adult learners often bring relevant and college-level learning with them from their work, military, and life experiences. Colleges can use CPL methods (such as exams, portfolio assessment, and review of non-college training) to award college credit. In addition to CPL's impact on persistence and completion (see discussion in section on Domain 8 above), CPL is known to be validating for the adult learner, helping them with their self-efficacy as learners (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014).

- **Reverse transfer.** Another way to empower students is to credential some of the learning they already have — give them formal recognition of the learning they have accomplished on their way to a higher-level degree. For many years, select postsecondary institutions and systems have helped students with reverse transfer degrees, where students who have earned at least 60 postsecondary credit hours toward a bachelor's degree may be awarded an associate degree by a community college. This requires partnerships between institutions, along with data sharing agreements (Pocai & Davis, 2021), but students are able to receive an earned credential while working toward their ultimate academic goal. This helps to keep them motivated, demonstrate their own personal success, and receive support from both their current and past institutions. In some cases, the associate degree could potentially help the student access new occupational opportunities while they continue their studies. (Note that reverse transfer shares some features with incremental/ stackable credentialing in terms of providing a shorter-term credential that is intended to provide labor market opportunities while the student continues to work toward a longer-term degree or credential.)

"It was **very helpful that the teachers and professors have been welcoming** [...] and the fact that they'll walk through how to access everything — and just be available to answer questions."

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

DOMAIN 10

CAREER RELEVANCE AND CONNECTIONS

An institution that effectively serves adult learners recognizes that for most adult learners, postsecondary education is one step toward a career goal and economic mobility. Programs therefore need to have clear connections to the workplace, and instruction needs to include a focus on the competencies that employers seek in job candidates.

Adult learners are often already employed while seeking their credentials, and yet one of the key reasons that they are pursuing education is for the purposes of improving their employment and career opportunities. As previously shown in *Figure 2 (page 24)* and *Figure 3 (page 25)*, when asked about their primary motivation for pursuing postsecondary education, the never-enrolled adults surveyed for this report overwhelmingly identified professional, career, and financially focused goals as reasons for seeking postsecondary credentials.

Adult-focused institutions are right to lean into these motivations; adult learning theory emphasizes that adults draw from their internal motivation to stay committed to education, and that they benefit from applying their learning directly to their daily lives (Knowles, 1984).

Institutions can enlist several different kinds of strategies to help students meet their career goals, such as: work-relevant programs; career advising and other services, including help with developing social networks; work-based learning or experiential learning opportunities; and connections to employers.

"**When I was younger I didn't really understand the significance of a degree.** But now, working in the industry for so many years, you kind of understand what having the degree can do to help further your career."

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER
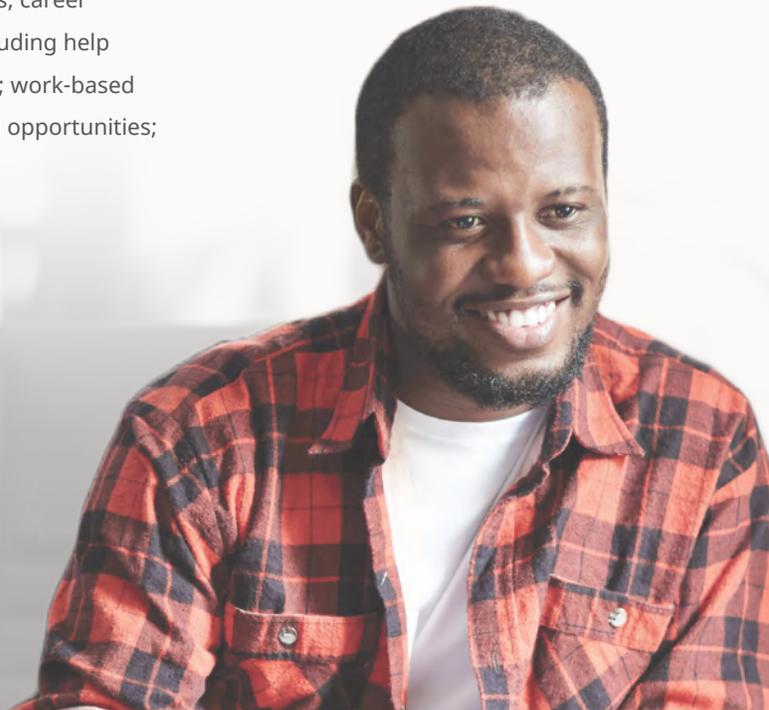
- **Work-relevant programs and credentials.** Work-relevant program offerings are those that intentionally meet the needs of employers, whether through a focus on transferable skills (also known as human skills, soft skills, 21st Century skills, and so on) or by preparing students for a specific industry or occupation. Programs can also be designed in ways to help students access new job opportunities sooner — through industry credentials embedded in longer-term programs or through shorter-term credentials for credit that students can build on later (or "stack") for the purposes of career advancement. The idea is to award market-valued credentials to students incrementally, helping to open new labor market opportunities as they continue toward higher-level degrees. This is a growing trend: the National Student Clearinghouse notes that growth in undergraduate credential earning in 2020–21 is largely attributable to students who were building on previously earned credentials (Karamarkovich et al., 2022)[1]. Offering ways to accelerate degree completion can help students access their new careers sooner (those strategies are also discussed under the section on Academic Empowerment below).

- **Career advising and other services.** The many credentialing options available today offer promise to the subset of students who have clear goals and know exactly how to get there. But for many students, the huge number of options can be overwhelming; Credential Engine (2001) has estimated the number of available postsecondary credentials to exceed 900,000. While browsing for the right field of study that aligns with their career goals, adult learners also must decide which type of credential is the appropriate fit, whether that be short-term technical certificates, microcredentials, technical associate degrees, transfer-oriented associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, individual courses to master specific skills, and so on.

Confusion around credentials, and which ones will help the learner reach their goals, speaks to the need for institutions to provide comprehensive career services and advising to their students, not just early and often but also accessible and in flexible, online formats. Career guidance and support should go beyond resume and interview preparation to include interest assessments, aptitude tests, and information about possible career pathways in promising industries (e.g., those with good employment prospects in the long term). Information about labor market projections and salaries for specific occupations can help adult learners select the most appropriate level of credential for their goals. CUNY SPS and Code Fellows offer different models for career advising and support. CUNY SPS's career services center, for example, specializes

"**I see that the jobs are better when you have a college education. When you have degrees and things, you get paid better.** They look at you more than they look at someone who just has a high school diploma."

NEVER-ENROLLED ADULT

[1] For more information on a growing movement to support incremental or stackable credentials, see Credentials As You Go at credentialasyougo.org.

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in offering assistance to employed adults, such as resume updates, networking, and professional development. Code Fellows's model, meanwhile, focuses on job coaching and post-placement assistance.

In addition to the above career services, there is growing recognition of the importance of social networks for helping people achieve economic mobility (Busette et al., 2021), and CAEL's own work tapping the insights of adult learners through our Adult Learner 360 assessments has shown that adult learners place a high priority on growing a professional network. Since working adults are generally less able to attend traditional networking events, they may benefit from different approaches to growing their career-building social networks.

- **Work-based and experiential learning.** Part of helping students make good career connections is ensuring they have the opportunity for hands-on experiences with real-world, real-work projects. Traditionally, private-sector internships have helped postsecondary students gain workplace experiences to help in their transition from academia to the workplace. However, working adult learners generally cannot participate in those kinds of experiences. Bay Path University recognizes these challenges by providing funding opportunities for unpaid internships. This allows students to take in the benefits of these experiences without the loss of income that frequently comes with internships. Colleges are also finding ways to offer project-based remote internships. Different forms of apprenticeship can also be used to blend work and learning for students; Wichita State University, for example, offers a Teacher Apprentice Program to meet the needs of both urban and rural school districts seeking to hire newly licensed teachers.

"The completion of this program **fits into my professional goals by getting me hands-on experience** in exactly what I'm going to be doing."

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

- **Connections to employers.** Collaboration with external stakeholders (including industry groups, workforce development boards, and local employers) not only provides pathway opportunities to enroll more students and support their growth, feedback from these external groups may also provide insight for new microcredential or certificate programs, internships, and course content. CSCC offers two employer-specific tracks: the Huntington Exact Track (an accelerated business degree) and the IT Workforce Certificate Program, each of which partners with a local employer.

Scheduling, course content, and flexibility of program delivery are designed with input from the employer partners, who in turn support their staff members in their degree or certification completion. Additionally, having direct connections with local industry and employers creates professional pathways for students as they transition from their postsecondary institution into their career. When institutions can demonstrate professional and industry-relevant content, adult learners with specific career goals can see development opportunities in the programs.

"You can learn [the technical skills] on your own. **But to actually get a network out of this and learn how to speak their language and sound qualified was extremely valuable.**"

CURRENT ADULT LEARNER

Using the Framework

There are many institutions that are recognizing the existence of adults on their campuses and in their classrooms — or are wanting to become more adult-focused in order to attract new student populations. **Becoming Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness — ALLIES — takes more than just offering online or evening courses.** And it takes more than just expanding programs and services. True ALLIES are institutions that invest in new strategic thinking grounded in data, understand how legacy policies can serve as significant barriers, creatively address capacity constraints, and know that institutional transformation requires a culture that embraces change.

The ALLIES Framework is a starting point for institutions to take their adult-focused programs and services to the next stage. Institutional planning groups can use the levels and domains to consider how to build or strengthen their foundation.

LEVEL 1

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE DECISIONS AND PLANNING GROUNDED IN DATA?

Does the institution examine available data on current and prospective students?

Does the institution have in-depth knowledge of employer skill needs and labor market occupational trends?

Does strategic planning consider that data when identifying strategic goals for the institution's next three years?

Does the institution consider how its strategies are working toward equitable access and outcomes, rather than perpetuating existing inequities?

Does the institution have a culture that is receptive to change? And that is able to enact needed changes?

LEVEL 2

TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE INSTITUTION EXAMINE ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AND REFINE INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES TO REMOVE SYSTEMIC BARRIERS AND IMPROVE UPON ADULT LEARNER SUCCESS?

Are there existing policies that restrict or limit enrollment/ admission for adult learners that could be revised or eliminated?

Are there policies that unnecessarily preclude adult learners from accessing programs or services that would benefit them?

How do existing transfer policies benefit adults with multiple prior postsecondary enrollments? How do existing transfer policies create barriers for those students?

Do faculty feel adequately prepared to instruct adult learners? Do faculty and/or staff feel adequately prepared to advise adult learners?

What support services require additional capacity in order to be able to provide them to adult learners?

To what extent are employers and industries engaged with the institution and with students? Are there opportunities for industries and employers to assist with developing students' and graduates' social networking needs?

LEVEL 3

ANSWERING THE ABOVE QUESTIONS CAN LEAD TO IMPORTANT INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES — AND A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR THEN CREATING OR EXPANDING NEW PROGRAMS AND SERVICES DESIGNED TO PROVIDE:

Affordable programs

Student support, particularly at the front end of the student's journey

Academic empowerment

Career relevance and connections

Going forward, CAEL's work with institutions will use this framework and approach, and we will design new tools and resources based on the new framework for our members and partners. We hope that sharing the framework with a broader audience will have an impact on how adult learners are served in all postsecondary institutions and programs.
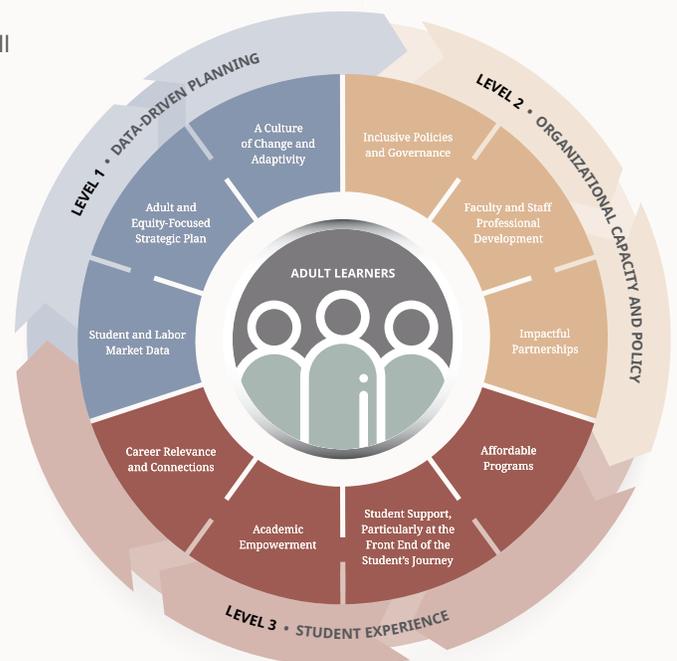
Conclusion

Since the initial publication of CAEL's Principles for Effectively Serving Adults, the postsecondary education landscape has transformed. Institutions are increasingly offering different modalities, types of credentials, flexible schedules, attention to needed workplace skills, and online programs and services — the last of which was, of course, buoyed by the sudden switch to remote learning during COVID-19. All of these developments help postsecondary institutions more effectively serve adults.

Encouraging, too, is the heightened awareness within and across postsecondary institutions of the existence of adult learners among their student populations and the need for making colleges and universities more welcoming environments for a diverse group of working learners. But we also know that even the most adult-friendly programs and practices don't reach their full potential if they are not built on a solid foundation of change management, attention to capacity, with a trained and prepared staff focused on data-driven decision making. The Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES) Framework provides guidance to help institutions through these necessary levels of planning and development so that they can build the foundation needed for effective and equity-focused adult learner initiatives. In addition, the fostering of a culture of change and adaptivity will help postsecondary providers realize more just and equitable outcomes for all students. After all, many traditional-aged learners, like "Natalie," share characteristics that often define adult learners: working full-time with multiple jobs, family responsibilities, and community involvement. Removing barriers — rather than providing workarounds and exceptions — helps all learners succeed.

Of course, the future for postsecondary learning is less than certain. Postsecondary institutions have considerable work to do on issues of affordability and demonstrating the value (and return on investment) of their programs to both graduates and employers. And the landscape could well see seismic shifts on what kind of credentials are offered, the length of those credentials, and delivery modalities. For institutions to help lead the way and thrive, they must become fluent in reading the trends of the future and navigating a world of accelerated change.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We recognize and thank the 10 postsecondary programs that participated in this study. While dozens of practitioners and leaders contributed to our research, we especially acknowledge those who took the lead on the process and provided a wealth of information and evidence that informed this report, analyzing their student outcomes data in novel ways to uncover best practices that impact adult learner enrollment, persistence, belongingness, completion, and post-completion success. We express the utmost gratitude to: Maura Devlin (Bay Path University The American Women's College), Jillian Klein (Capella University), Mitch Robertson (Code Fellows), Adam Bush (College Unbound), Michell Ward (Columbus State Community College), Jennifer Sparrow (CUNY School of Professional Studies), Susan Seal (Mississippi State University), Robert Moore (Monroe County Community Schools - Adult Education division), Nan Travers (SUNY Empire State College), Anna Porcaro (Wichita State University), and each of their teams for their contributions to this study.

We are further grateful to the 2,013 adults who provided feedback on their experience navigating postsecondary education in our survey of never-enrolled adults, as well as to the 29 never-enrolled adults who provided their insights through interviews.

Finally, this report would not have been possible without the voices of the 19 adult learners who interviewed with CAEL and shared about their experience in postsecondary education. The research team wishes each of you, especially "Natalie," the very best in your future learning, work, family, and life endeavors.

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METHODOLOGY

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and Sean Gallagher of the Northeastern University Center for the Future of Higher Education and Talent Strategy conducted a literature review of academic journals, dissertations, presentations, and publications for evidence of best practices for serving adult learners. It revealed that the research was dominated by discussion about why adult learners enroll in postsecondary education. Somewhat lacking was evidence for which specific policies, practices, and programs lead to good adult learner outcomes. Adult learners were also treated as a monolith; there is a need for more research on how to serve a diverse group of adult learners.

EVIDENCE FROM CAEL'S DECADES OF EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH ADULT-FOCUSED INSTITUTIONS

As part of the information-gathering component, CAEL also used data gathered from the prior five years' iterations of the Adult Learner 360 survey tools: an Institutional Effectiveness Questionnaire completed by faculty, staff, and administrators, and an Adult Learner Satisfaction Questionnaire completed by adult learners. We also drew on our experience working with institutions on designing and implementing new approaches to serving adult learners.

STUDY OF HIGH-PERFORMING ADULT-CENTERED INSTITUTIONS

We focused our program on the study of high-performing, adult-centered programs within postsecondary institutions.

Program Selection and Recruitment: The recruitment phase identified adult-serving postsecondary education programs, with a goal of selecting 10 programs of diverse structures with evidence of strong adult learner success outcomes. These success outcomes included enrollment, persistence, completion, and post-completion metrics, with a focus on program longevity, evidence-based practices, and outcome equity. We promoted the study through press releases and CAEL social media, and we encouraged CAEL members and staff to share the study with programs and institutions that explicitly serve adults.

The three primary criteria for program selection included: predominant enrollment of adult learners age 25 and older; collection of enrollment, persistence, and completion outcomes (and attempts to collect post-completion job placement/earnings data); and equity-driven, working to dismantle socioeconomic and racial injustice. Additional information used in examining applications included: student demographics, outcomes for diverse populations, assessment practices (including Credit for Prior Learning and reverse transfer), institutional culture, and special initiatives designed to serve diverse adult learners.

Examination of Programs: Ten of 34 high-performing, adult-centered programs were selected for in-depth examination:

- Bay Path University's The American Women's College: Online degree program for women offering certificates, associate and bachelor's degrees

- Capella University: Online RN to BSN program

- Code Fellows: An intensive coding bootcamp

- College Unbound: Bachelor of arts, organizational leadership

- Columbus State Community College: Huntington Exact Track accelerated business degree with stackable certificates, associate and bachelor's degree, and the Nationwide IT Workforce Certificate

- City of New York School of Professional Studies: Online adult business degree completion program

- Mississippi State University: Bachelor of arts degree completion program

- Monroe County Community Schools: Adult basic education including high school equivalency and industry certificates

- State of New York Empire State College: Adult-serving undergraduate program

- Wichita State University: Teacher certificates for paraeducators.

Each of the 10 selected programs completed an in-depth questionnaire that built upon the responses provided in the application, covering the following topics: defining adult learners (including specific subsets) as a target audience; direct and indirect measures of adult learner success outcomes; the history of the program; program structure and format; outreach and onboarding for adult learners; student support systems; program relevance to adult learner success goals; affordability measures; adult learner satisfaction metrics and evidence. CAEL's research team collected additional information through follow-up interviews.

Interviews of Adult Learners from the Selected Programs: In order to validate the research component of this study, we sought to include adult learners' firsthand perspectives. Each program was allowed to provide up to four adult learners for a 45-minute interview with CAEL. In all, 19 adult learners completed interviews to describe their postsecondary experiences. Each interviewee received a $50 incentive from CAEL.

NEVER-ENROLLED ADULTS: INTERVIEWS AND SURVEY

Interviews. CAEL contracted with Hanover Research on a study of adults who have never enrolled in postsecondary education. Hanover interviewed 29 individuals, of whom 14 had never begun the process of enrolling at a postsecondary institution, and of whom 15 had begun the process and applied, but never began their program of study. The interview covered: the individual's motivation for considering postsecondary education at this point in their life; what they were looking for in a program; why did they abandon the process and not apply; what barriers they encountered; what an institution could do differently should the individual reenter the application process.

Survey. Based upon feedback from the interviewed adults in the prior phase, CAEL and Hanover Research designed a survey instrument to explore the questions answered by the adults in those interviews. Our primary research questions were: the factors that drive adults who have never enrolled in postsecondary education to consider pursuing education; the factors driving prospective adult learners to enroll in a specific program or institution; and the factors that ultimately led prospective adult learners to not enroll. Hanover Research distributed the survey online in November 2021, and received 2,013 eligible responses.

SYNTHESIZING THE DATA AND FEEDBACK ROUNDS

We began our analysis with the themes identified in the literature review: affordable programs, career relevance and connections, academic empowerment, first-term and other student support, and equity. Following this, we reviewed concepts from the studies of adults who never enrolled in a postsecondary program, interviews with adult learners, insights from CAEL's Adult Learner 360 toolkit experiences, and the questionnaires and focus groups completed with the high-performing programs. The bulk of the evidence pointed us toward best practices that address common barriers to adult learner success. In addition, we pursued questions on how institutions manage a planned change toward supporting more adult learners and how they build capacity to ensure an impact on adult learner success. The questionnaires and interviews by the high-performing programs (along with CAEL's own two decades of experience administering our *Ten Principles* and the Adult Learner 360 survey tools) revealed substantial insight into what we call Level 1 and Level 2 of our inclusive change management model. More important than the "what" and "when," these important data clarify the "how and why" behind how these programs effectively serve adults as compared to peer institutions.

We conducted several rounds of feedback to validate our change management model with those who serve adult learners, including: multiple sessions to vet the Level 3 components of the model at the November 2021 CAEL Conference; peer review by subject matter experts and CAEL leaders; and additional virtual feedback sessions with the selected programs' staff and leadership.

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LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE STUDY

During the selection phase of this research study, we recognized that selecting programs for further study is a subjective process. A team of five individuals were part of the selection team: three from CAEL and two from outside organizations. None of the individuals on the team was permitted to score the application of an institution with whom the individual had a prior working relationship. While the institutions that we selected were the "highest performing" according to the criteria we set, they were ranked as such within the universe of institutions that opted into the process by submitting a complete application. Selection for this research study does not designate an institution the "highest performing" for adult learners at some national or international level, but rather indicates that the program itself has significant evidence of practice that effectively helps adults succeed within and beyond their postsecondary journey. These 10 programs offer significant insight into how adults can be well served through effective change management and are strong candidates for future study on adult learner theory and best practices.

We conducted interviews with 19 adult learners representing a range of programs selected into this study. Although 19 is a small number of individual student voices, their comments aligned with the commonly understood barriers faced by adult learners as revealed through the literature review, institutional focus groups and questionnaires, and CAEL's Adult Learner 360 surveys.

We conducted interviews with adults who have never enrolled in postsecondary education, with just over half (15 of 29) of the respondents having applied but not attended a postsecondary program. While we strove for a diverse mix of interviewees, the level of representativeness for this small amount is limited. In all, we interviewed more women (23) than men (6), and regional diversity was constrained, with more respondents (21) located in the eastern half of the U.S. (as segmented by the Mississippi River) than the western half (8). Although the interviews were geographically skewed eastward, the participants came from a relatively even mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas.

Our survey of adults who have never enrolled in postsecondary education provided insight into the experiences of 2,013 individuals representing appropriate diversity of geography, family structure, gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Further research initiatives could mine this data for significant differences that reveal barriers — and proposed practices to eliminate those barriers — as experienced by subgroups within the universe of surveyed adults.

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APPENDIX B

SUMMARIES OF THE HIGH-PERFORMING PROGRAMS EXAMINED FOR THIS REPORT

OVERVIEW

In early 2021, CAEL announced the intention to partner with high-performing institutions with adult-centered programs and structures on a study of effective practices. Through press releases and CAEL social media, CAEL members and staff shared information about the study with programs and institutions that explicitly serve adults. Institutions were invited to apply for an opportunity to share their insights and practices for this study, if selected as a high-performing program for adult learners. CAEL aimed to select institutions that predominantly serve adult learners, either in a specific program or as their overall enrollment; the exemplar institutions or programs would also assess learning outcomes, collect post-completion metrics, and be equity-driven, meaning they are actively working to dismantle socioeconomic and racial injustice. Several programs and institutions submitted complete applications, and ten high-performing, adult-centered programs were selected for in-depth examination. (See Appendix A for additional details about the selection process.)

Each submitting institution completed an application for review by a selection committee at CAEL. They shared student demographics by age, race/ethnicity, gender, veteran status, and Pell-eligibility; completion rates by age group, gender, and race/ethnicity; post-completion outcomes (e.g., job placement, earnings, advancement) including, where possible, by age group, gender, and race/ethnicity; and assessment practices. Applicants were asked to describe their institutional initiatives for serving diverse adult learners. The selection committee then reviewed each application and scored responses against a rubric to identify those best suited to the overall study.

Of the 10 programs selected, three were not-for-profit universities, three nontraditional vocational or training programs, two not-for-profit public schools, one community college, and one for-profit university. The programs were in nine states, ranging from Washington state to Massachusetts, and served urban, suburban, and rural communities, as well as online learners. The diversity of program scope, location, and history of each program allowed CAEL to collect a broad perspective of adult learner supports, program directives, and challenges.

Each program/institution completed a questionnaire with seven categories of inquiry. Subject areas addressed in the questionnaire included general definitions and approaches, program structure and format, outreach and onboarding, support systems, relevance, affordability, and understanding student satisfaction. The programs shared how they actively support their adult learner population, often providing specific examples of improvements or process implementation and the results these changes had on their students.

The following institutional summaries address the history and mission of each high performing program, as well as highlights relevant details about the organization and its population. These summaries identify one or two specific concepts addressed by the individual programs within the questionnaire and focus on how those initiatives, policies, or structures address the needs of their adult student population. While there is more data than can be presented here, the specific concepts shared in the summaries are also referenced in the framework research findings as examples of best practices or innovative approaches to meeting the unique needs and expectations of adult learners.

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BAY PATH UNIVERSITY

Established in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, in 1897 the small women's college of Bay Path University created an adult-focused program called The American Women's College (TAWC) in 1999. Though Bay Path was an established women's college at the time, the increasing number of adult students and their unique needs, coupled with federal grant funding, provided an opportunity to create a comprehensive structure built around needs of adult students, including increased support services, changes in the financial structure, increased flexibility in course registration, and proactive engagement.

Overall undergraduate enrollment at Bay Path University for the 2020-2021 year was 1,792 students, and 100% identified as female. The average age of these students is 36. Approximately 54% (589) students identify as white, and nearly 45% of the overall undergraduate population identify as first-generation students. Bay Path offers a variety of academic degree programs, including business and accounting, education, exploratory and liberal studies, communications and writing, cybersecurity, forensics, health care, justice & legal studies, psychology, and science. In 2011, TAWC expanded its adult-focused programming with the inclusion of the Social Online Universal Learning (SOUL) program, which supports online learning for adults aged 24 and older.

When designing programs tailored to adult learners, Bay Path acknowledged several critical support systems, including funding, career advising, and coaching, and incorporated those supports into their underlying structure. Recognizing that financial support is critical to overall persistence, Bay Path made multiple changes to its financial structures, including eliminating deposits, adding paid internships, proactive scholarship and grant advising, Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) and flexible transfer credit policies, and use of open educational resources (OER) for classroom materials. The coaching model includes guiding students to the schedules and courses that are best for them, recognizing the need for flexibility for adult learners, including occasional stop outs as needed. Bay Path offers a flexible schedule, including accelerated six-week courses, and students can begin their studies in any six-week term. Bay Path proactively drops students who do not engage with the class during the first two weeks; this mitigates transcripted withdrawals or failures due to inactivity.

Gretchen Heaton, dean, career and leadership development, shared that "Bay Path is creating an ecosystem that engages adult returning learners with career development support, training, and resources at every step of their undergraduate experience. Our holistic, team-based model of wraparound support, with flexible hours and modalities, is particularly critical to adult returning women's success, giving us the resources to respond with alacrity to student needs." The work at TAWC supports its adult learners and addresses both their academic and personal needs and challenges, creating opportunities for growth and success, such as a 65% six-year graduation rate, 72% persistence rate, and overall student satisfaction rate of 93%. In fact, 84.1% of TAWC students are likely to recommend the program, reflecting the effectiveness of the processes and supports in place.

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CAPELLA UNIVERSITY

Built with adult learners in mind, Capella University was established in 1993 as an online program designed to create a flexible and affordable option. Based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Capella's online students come from across the United States to participate in one of their 45 online undergraduate programs. As of 2021, the average Capella student identifies as female (82%), and attends part-time (72%). She is 38 years old and is likely to be a student of color, as 52% of their overall population identifies as an ethnicity other than white. Depending on the program, Capella students may transfer up to 135 quarter credits from their required 180. The implementation of Capella's FlexPath approach to online learning allows students to attend on their own schedule, as they meet course outcomes without structured timelines. When students have successfully completed a course, they move to the next course in their program, which permits both faster program completion and also provides off ramps for students who need time between courses.

The most popular program at Capella is the RN to BSN program, in which a registered nurse can build on their current license to earn a bachelor's degree by receiving 30 transfer credits in recognition of their licensure. The program was developed specifically for students at least 24 years old, building on national accreditation standards for nursing. Capella's wraparound student support services begin at the start of their programs. Each new student goes through a robust orientation and First Course program during which they meet their support team and are introduced to their program expectations, resources, and strategies for success. Students keep their designated support team throughout their program, ensuring assistance with navigating the FlexPath, receiving guidance for scholarship and grant opportunities, and receiving personalized support to keep them on track.

Capella identifies flexibility and career relevance as two of the most critical elements for student success. They meet these needs with their unique flexible planning and scheduling, as well as integration of industry-relevant curriculum. Recognizing that the adults in their RN to BSN program are seeking specific career advancement, the program is built to allow students to study around their personal schedules, while applying their courses to their work. Students also have access to a comprehensive career services center, learning how to leverage their experiences and training into shared language and career growth opportunities. In the 2020-2021 Alumni Outcomes Survey, 88% of nursing alumni "agree that their degree has positioned them to achieve their professional ambitions," and 96% of degree completers report job placement within a year of graduation.

The support services for students provide "a robust student support model comprised of faculty and coaches who work together to ensure that learners receive a personalized, flexible learning experience." Adult students entering the program receive personalized support as they navigate their courses in their own timeline, applying their education to their specific professional goals.

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CODE FELLOWS

Created in 2013 to assist adults seeking entry-level positions in the IT field, Seattle-based Code Fellows offers training in two programs: software development and operations and cybersecurity. Half of the Code Fellows students come to the program with an earned bachelor's degree, but with limited to no technical expertise. The training at Code Fellows is intended to support adults, primarily between the ages of 25 and 35, who are seeking improved job satisfaction and growth opportunities. In 2021, the student population was made up of 65% male students, 26% female, and 9% unspecified gender, with 59% of students identifying as white.

The development of Code Fellows was built on the four primary concepts of andragogy, or adult learning theory: (1) adult learners benefit from the why of learning, (2) adult students learn better experientially, (3) adults take a problem-solving approach to learning, and (4) adults learn best when the topic is immediately applicable. By centering these concepts in the structure of their training, courses are built with flexibility and applicability in mind, incorporating "soft skills" and professional development into their technical training. Development of the courses and specific program requirements leans heavily on hiring partners to identify needs and hiring gaps, ensuring that students are receiving relevant, necessary training. Students then have the option to take courses in a module format, allowing them to focus on the content that requires the most time and attention, and moving quickly through content at which they excel.

Prospective students are partnered with an admissions advisor who stays with them over the course of their entire academic career. This service includes guidance on the program, timing, and career assistance, as well as information and guidance on financing. Code Fellows offers both full-time and part-time enrollment options to meet the needs of working learners. According to Code Fellows, nearly 49% of its students make less than $25,000 annually at the start of the programs. To meet the financial needs of these students, Code Fellows offers scholarships, grants, and income share agreements with students.

Students are supported to succeed in their coursework and academic development, but also in their professional growth. Institutional job data from 2013-2021 demonstrates that 93% of graduates find employment in their field of study. Most common job titles include software engineer; software development engineer; web, software, or front end developer; iOS developer, and so on. In addition to their training, students are given career guidance and instruction. This includes opportunities for graduates to connect with hiring companies through internal workspaces and employment events, as well as the Qualifying Interview, in which students receive practice opportunities to excel in a professional interview setting. This support from the organization, faculty, advisors, and self-driven study positions adult learners to grow at their own pace, learning in stages the critical elements of their future career aspirations.

COLLEGE UNBOUND

Started in 2009 as a program designed to support low-income, first-generation students, College Unbound offers a single bachelor of arts degree in organizational leadership and change. In 2012, the institution narrowed its focus to support adult learners who had some college credit, but no credential. Through partnerships with other institutions and foundations, College Unbound has been a private, degree-granting institution since 2015, with regional accreditation granted in 2020. As of fall 2021, its student population is an ethnically diverse group, with 16% of students identifying as white, and are primarily female (76%) with average age of 36. The central structure of College Unbound recognizes the student as a fully formed human being, with external challenges and motivations, who may have experienced struggles or barriers to completion in the past. College Unbound reports that 80 percent of its adult students graduate, Black and Hispanic completions exceed completions for White and Asian students, and 100% of graduates find jobs, with the vast majority employed in their chosen industries.

Students are grouped together into "cohorts" with the same students and faculty across the length of their program. In this cohort model, students are able to leave and re-enter the program as needed based on their life circumstances, with the cohort acting as a touchpoint for building collaboration and support. Within the cohorts, students identify a project that relates to their coursework and their personal professional goals, applying their learning directly to their professional development. This approach recognizes both the students' external professional experiences while building relationships within the cohort itself. College Unbound expands the notion of student support by promising a personal learning network and a professional mentor for every student, supporting their progress over time.

As many students in the program are working parents, College Unbound is also cognizant of the challenges of both childcare and financing. Prior to enrollment, every incoming College Unbound student receives one-on-one meetings that include discussion of financial planning and debt minimization. Both the financial aid and admissions teams are collocated in the same office, providing a joint approach to starting the program, and answering all questions before students commit to enrolling. Additionally, there are childcare stipends available to qualifying students. College Unbound is committed to maintaining affordable tuition and supporting students with as many resources as possible to make degree completion attainable.

A central concept at College Unbound is that past challenges should not dictate future successes for students. The effort to build relationships between students and the institution, and to center care for the whole person, is incorporated into every element of the student experience at College Unbound.

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COLUMBUS STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Established in 1963 as the Columbus Area Technician's School, Columbus State Community College (CSCC) has existed in its current iteration since 1987. In recent years, CSCC has identified specific areas of study for its adult student population, building two programs structured to meet the unique needs and expectations of adult students. The Huntington Exact Track and IT Workforce Certificate Program were both established for working adults who have specific career goals and aspirations that drew them back to higher education. With specialized scheduling, financing, and course offerings, these programs are designed to meet their adult students' needs and demonstrate effective approaches toward building adult student programs.

The Huntington Exact Track Accelerated business program is a five-year, multi-credential plan for adult learners already employed at Huntington Bank. Within this highly structured program, students move through a cohort model with consistent schedules and course availability. Across the program, students can earn certificates, followed by an associate degree, before ultimately transferring to a bachelor's degree. Schedules are built around work requirements at Huntington, to ensure that the working students who are in this program are able to balance both their academic and professional needs simultaneously. In addition to the structure of the program itself, this program also has financial support built into its framework. Students on the Huntington Exact Track may qualify for "pre-imbursement," in which Huntington Bank provides payment for upfront costs for students. This eliminates financial barriers to joining the program. The sponsorship continues as long as students maintain minimum academic progress. Though early in the life cycle of this program, CSCC is already seeing a positive impact on students' professional success. As an upskilling program, all students are actively employed, and with the first year of Cohort 1, 7% of participating students have received promotions.

The IT Workforce Certificate is another adult-focused program built at CSCC to provide attainable credentials around the availability of working students, specifically those employed with Nationwide. The courses offered in this program are available via the Hyflex model, which provides options for synchronous, online learning, or access to class recordings within 24 hours. Courses are created with industry input, and students who enter with professional or personal experience have the option to prove competency through testing. This allows students to quickly move beyond required courses they already understand to focus on their development and training. Students are granted tutorials and learning guides to assist with their coursework and introduction to new programs and systems. Mentors from staff, students, and professional colleagues support students in this program as they progress.

Students on both paths are encouraged to connect with their colleagues through their shared experiences. As both tracks are built for working adults at specific companies, students are able to relate and connect with each other through shared experiences. Building relationships and support from the ground up in the programs creates a culture of engagement and care as students progress through their courses. Additional support structures in place supplement these efforts, creating two alternate, but parallel programs that provide structure, flexibility, and camaraderie throughout the students' academic journey.

CUNY SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

One of the newest units of the City Universities of New York (CUNY), the CUNY School of Professional Studies (SPS) opened in 2003 expressly to focus on supporting adult learners completing bachelor's degrees — students with at least 24 earned credits and no credential. Over the last twenty years, CUNY SPS added multiple certificates and graduate programs to its offerings. More than 70% of students in the 2021-2022 class undergraduate programs attend part-time and primarily online, and nearly 74% of the student population identifies as female. Meeting the needs of this group of students guided principles of student support, transfer credit and prior learning policies, and an online presence.

Because of the focus on degree completion, the CUNY SPS model highlights the role of transfer credit and credit for prior learning (CPL). Transfer students often lose substantial portions of the earned credits when they move to a new institution. Recognizing this, CUNY SPS implemented a welcoming transfer policy and reduced its residency requirement, which allows for more transfer credits to count toward a degree. When new students meet with their academic advisor, students are encouraged to share information about their professional lives and goals, and to learn about the CPL processes that can allow additional earned credits from non-traditional experiences, such as professional training, certifications, and lived experiences. In Spring 2020, 17.8% of all CUNY SPS undergraduate students received some CPL, while 33.2% of the graduating class received CPL.

The focus on career goals is also reflected in the approach of the CUNY SPS Career Services team. Since SPS students are highly interested in their own professional growth and applying their new learning to their work environment, SPS career advisors focus on those issues during advising sessions; in addition, they make themselves available to working learners virtually and around their workday hours. Additionally, SPS's industry partnerships help keep content in fast-changing programs relevant and current; these partnerships are also leveraged for networking and alumni connections. Students who have stopped out of their courses still have access to the Experiential Learning office, providing opportunity for them to leverage their current experiences as CPL when they return, and to focus on career growth if they are unable to move forward in their academic journey at a given time. As of summer 2021, the job placement rate for students who complete their program reached 87%, with the highest median salary of any CUNY senior college.

CUNY SPS offers many additional student supports, such as in-depth new student orientation, focused and consistent advising, 24/7 tutoring support, and open educational resources for classes. These address the ongoing challenges faced by adult learners, who often bring a wealth of experience into their programs as they actively work toward a specific goal, either personal or professional. By recognizing those goals and the students' overall efforts, CUNY SPS centers the student experience at the heart of their degree completion programs.

MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY

Mississippi State University (MSU) has been providing degree programs since 1878, and they have recently expanded their offerings to include a bachelor of applied sciences (BAS) degree. This program exists specifically to support adult learners who have earned an associate of applied science from an accredited community college or from the military. This program is available in person and as a fully asynchronous online program. Built with adult learners in mind, the program allows up to 60 transfer credits, 45 of which may be technical credits and 6 may be credits from prior learning. The services provided to these students, particularly those attending online, recognize the unique challenges facing adult learners.

The BAS program empowers adult learners to take control of their own program, studying content that most aligns with their personal interests and professional goals. Each student in the BAS program must select an emphasis area, allowing students to identify the primary content of their coursework. With support from the career center, students can receive guidance toward their intended professional pathway, whether that is growth on their current path, or a new career path and professional opportunity. The career center also offers resume writing and review services, as well as mock interviews to prepare students for career growth. The institution reported 97% of its 2020-2021 were employed or progressing into an advanced degree within six months of graduation. Graduates from MSU also report higher than average salaries compared with every other school in the state.

Advising at MSU takes a holistic approach to student success. Whether virtual or in person, advisors have regular one-on-one sessions with their students, at which point they address coursework, but also provide support for time management and study skills. MSU also created the Center for Distance Education, designed specifically to assist online learners and the faculty who serve them. The Center for Distance Education is a one-stop location for online learners combining multiple student services into one office. Students contacting the center have easy access to student success and IT support geared toward online students. Additionally, the center includes a faculty success center, providing training and professional development for faculty who serve adult learners. The Center also works with the staff and advisors to receive student feedback, incorporating input into the faculty development programs and the services offered.

Multiple offices and support structures are available to students both on and off campus, increasing accessibility to the needed resources. By building a new degree program focused on adult learners that creates a pathway to an undergraduate credential and supplementing the support structures on campus, MSU is increasing adult learner resources and opportunity.

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MONROE COUNTY COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

The Monroe County Community School District of Indiana serves 11,000 students across the county in 23 different schools. Among the various specializations and areas of interest provided across the schools is the adult education program for adult learners and their unique needs. In this context, "adult learner" applies to any student 16 and older who is not actively in school elsewhere. The adult learner program addresses three primary educational needs: high school diploma certification, English as a second language, and adult and workforce education. Each year Monroe County Community School's (MCCS) adult program sees approximately 500 students. As of fall 2021, these students primarily self-identify as male (62%) and are likely to be students of color (29.2% Hispanic/Latino, 9.7% Asian, 7.7% Black/African American, 6.0% more than one race) between the ages of 25 and 44. MCCS serves these students as they prepare to further their educational or professional goals.

This program tracks student skill gains and progression in a variety of ways. These include pre- and post-testing, attaining industry-recognized certifications, high school diploma completion or equivalent, employment status in the second quarter after exit, employment status in the fourth quarter after exit, and placement into postsecondary education or training. As of Summer 2021, students in the adult learning program had a 64% overall completion rate.

The adult education program is structured based on the principles of andragogy and empowering students to have ownership of their program. As such, all students have an "Adult Learning Plan," which they build in collaboration with their teachers, so instruction and supportive services are directed toward achieving the student's self-identified goals. Even the materials and content of courses are created with adult learners in mind, incorporating lived experiences of students whenever possible. Courses are offered in a flexible schedule for on-ground learning, as well as online for ease of access for working learners.

Students in the adult education program receive multiple layers of support from MCCS. Many courses are offered at no cost for students in the Adult Basic Education program; these students are typically studying to qualify for a diploma, military service, or an entry level job. Additionally, in partnership with the Indiana University School of Social Work, adult students are connected to community resources to help provide access to food, shelter, transportation, and other support. The program regularly tracks student attendance, allowing faculty and staff to identify students who are falling behind and provide proactive outreach.

The MCCS adult education program provides pre- and post-testing to demonstrate mastery of content, as well as enables students to earn industry certifications, their high school diploma, and supports students in their career searches. From the beginning to the end of their programs, MCCS acknowledges the potential barriers faced by their students, and provides support during and beyond their studies.

SUNY EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE

In 1971 the State University of New York (SUNY) established Empire State College with the intention of meeting students at any stage of their education, and with a particular focus on adult learners. From its inception, students have been empowered to design their own degree programs, and over the years the support and learning structures have evolved to meet the needs of adults throughout their academic journeys. The average student from SUNY Empire State College is in their mid-thirties, primarily female (64%), and studying part time; students represent every state in America, though most are from New York. Every student attending is supported in creating and designing a program that fits their unique interests and needs, with dedicated staff and faculty providing support at every level of their program.

From the start of their program, SUNY Empire College students receive a wide range of supports from staff and faculty. As students transition into the college, they work with the Student Success Team, which is made up of multiple representatives from student support areas. Professionals from Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, Decision Support, and other teams provide an online orientation that introduces students to their college and their degree planning options. They receive communication from the Begin Team, which ensures all documentation has been correctly completed and submitted, including their financial aid. The Office of Opportunity Program, which fosters a community of support and increased engagement, has shown results of a 15% increase in retention and course completion for students in the program, and up to a 40% increase in retention and course completion for students of color. By providing these services at the beginning of their program, SUNY Empire students are encouraged to focus on their courses, rather than the anxiety of transitioning into school.

Adult students also receive early recognition of their academic history through the flexible transfer credit policy, which allows up to 96 transfer credits with no age limit. SUNY Empire also acknowledges students' personal and professional history, as the college accepts and encourages use of CPL. As of Summer 2021, 50% of all undergraduate students use some form CPL in their programs. Upon beginning courses, students register for the Educational Planning course, in which they learn to develop their degree plan building on their transfer, CPL, and SUNY Empire courses. With ownership of their programs, SUNY Empire believes that adult learners are more likely to remain engaged and motivated as they study within their interests and goals.

While creating their academic program, students work closely in collaboration with their faculty mentors. These mentors provide support in developing the plan, but also provide guidance on CPL, career opportunities, and success plans. Mentors receive extensive training on adult learners, and incorporate the full student experience into their advising, including background, life and career goals, and personal interests. Students may be advised to take advantage of the multiple stackable credentials offered at SUNY Empire, building on their course progress and staying invested in their academic career.

By creating transition services, empowering ownership of study, and providing continuous support, SUNY Empire provides adult students with structure and stability necessary to be successful over time. Investing in the faculty and staff who provide those supports emphasizes the intention of the college to make serving their learners a top priority.

WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

In 2018, in response to a teacher shortage in rural areas in the region, Wichita State University introduced the Teacher Apprentice Program (TAP), designed for working paraprofessionals at elementary schools to obtain a bachelor of arts in early childhood education/elementary education. Students in this program achieve licensure by building on their professional experience and ongoing work-based learning. The 600 students who have participated in the program are at least 25 years old or otherwise self-identify as an adult learner; in addition, they work a minimum of 8 hours a week. This program is built to meet the needs of this specific adult learner group, with curricular and support policies centering this population's needs.

From the beginning of their journey, TAP students connect with a single point of contact who provides assistance from inquiry and admissions, and then through degree planning, enrollment, degree progress, and ultimately graduation. This consistent contact provides the adult students with a trusted relationship for questions and concerns throughout their studies. Additionally, all adult learners at Wichita State University receive support from the Office of Adult Learning. This office provides adult-focused assistance on both academic and non-academic support, including making connections with other helpful offices across campus. This approach is designed to help the students with a variety of concerns, thus alleviating any anxiety about being an outlier at an institution made up primarily of traditional-aged students. Now, four years into the creation of this program, TAP students have a 76.9% term-to-term retention rate.

The content of the TAP curriculum is designed with working adults in mind, recognizing that the intention of the program is to help assist with early licensure and employment while still enrolled. As a result, the first year of study focuses on the core content, applying it directly to the work the students are doing, and allowing application of work-based learning and practice in their courses. General education courses are offered in the second year of study. Courses are offered in 8-week terms, allowing for flexibility of scheduling; advisors assist with determining the best courses to take together. All TAP students begin with an adult student orientation and an Introduction to TAP course, which outlines the program expectations as well as provides guidance for online learning, preparing students for the remainder of their program.

Each student receives individualized support within a broad structure of student services. From degree planning to mentoring and coaching, TAP students receive consistent and focused guidance throughout their programs, tailored to each students' specific needs. Every student is assigned an academic advisor, a TAP Success Coach, a Wichita State University Success Coach, and a mentor and mentoring group that meets monthly. This requires immense investment of time and resources from the university, but Wichita State's experience is that such resources are the best way to effectively support students.

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