

# Helping Adult Learners Succeed: Tools for Two-Year Colleges



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*Prepared by Ruth Frey, Consultant*

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For a complete list of CAEL publications or information about CAEL membership, please contact:

**Judith Wertheim**

Vice President for Higher Education Services  
CAEL National Headquarters  
55 East Monroe Street, Suite 1930  
Chicago, IL 60603  
Phone: 312-499-2600; Fax: 312-499-2601  
**[www.cael.org](http://www.cael.org)**

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# Helping Adult Learners Succeed: Tools for Two-Year Colleges

In our knowledge-based economy, education has become a critical link to economic security. A postsecondary degree or credential is now an essential qualification for jobs that offer good wages. In fact, the fastest-growing occupations identified by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics require some postsecondary education, while jobs that require only on-the-job training are expected to decline.<sup>1</sup> This leaves adults without a postsecondary education at a significant disadvantage in the marketplace.

Adults looking to gain a foothold in the changing economy are seeking a college degree in greater numbers. Yet, their “non-traditional” characteristics—part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financial independence, and/or parental responsibilities—create needs and priorities that differ from those of traditional students<sup>2</sup> and make it difficult for adults to enter into and succeed in the traditional postsecondary environment. Research on the topic identifies four major barriers to education for working adults: Lack of time, family responsibilities, scheduling and location of courses, and the cost of education.<sup>3</sup>

Community colleges often provide the access, affordability and convenience adults require and serve as the point of entry to a college degree or certification. As a result, more than half of community college students are older than the traditional-aged student.<sup>4</sup> Yet even these institutions sometimes lack the total learning environment that facilitates and enhances adult learners’ chances for success. Supporting and guiding this population of students can be challenging. But more colleges are now offering flexible delivery formats, specialized advising, and expanded services to help adult learners reach their goals.

This paper explores how a carefully designed survey instrument can provide valuable information to institutional leaders, program directors, faculty, and staff concerning adult learners, their perceptions of the institution they attend and the directions in which institutions might move to improve services to adult learners.

## Helping Colleges Help Adult Learners

Designing effective programs and services that break down barriers and help adult learners succeed requires a clear understanding of students’ needs and expectations. To assist with this task, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) developed the Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) Assessment Toolkit, which offers colleges a mechanism to formally assess programs for adult learners.

The Assessment Toolkit was developed by CAEL in 2003 and is based on CAEL's *Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners*. These *Principles*, provide a framework for colleges in developing programs and policies that help adults reach their educational goals:

**Outreach:** The institution conducts outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers of time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.

**Life & Career Planning:** The institution addresses adult learners' life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.

**Financing:** The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.

**Assessment of Learning Outcomes:** The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.

**Teaching-Learning Process:** The institution's faculty uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.

**Student Support Systems:** The institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.

**Technology:** The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience.

**Strategic Partnerships:** The institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.

Scales in the ALFI Assessment Toolkit represent the *Principles*. The scales are aggregates of individual items on the survey that have been clustered together conceptually and statistically. Scale reports offer a comprehensive picture of what is important to an adult learner population, how the institution believes it is meeting those needs, and comparisons between the two.

Because community colleges are affordable, open-access institutions that serve as a pathway to gaining certifications and/or degrees, they fill a unique place in the education of working adults. With support from Lumina Foundation for Education, CAEL revised its existing ALFI Assessment Toolkit for the specific needs of these institutions in 2004. The newly developed Toolkit was test-piloted with 25 two-year colleges during the 2005-2006 academic year (see Appendix A). The results of the pilot point to the importance of addressing adult learners' needs in the two-year institution and serve as a launching point for further exploration of ways for colleges – both two-year and four-year—to support this important sector of students.

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provide a framework  
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This document describes the ALFI Assessment Toolkit and the outcomes of the pilot project, including:

- Understanding student transitions
- Findings from interviews with college representatives who participated in the pilot
- Results from student focus groups
- Concluding observations



## The Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) Assessment Toolkit

The ALFI Assessment Toolkit is comprised of two assessments that provide concrete measures of adult learners' perceptions of their experience as compared to faculty and administration's perceptions of institutional programming. The first tool is an Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS). It is designed to assess a wide range of activities, policies and practices at institutions and was developed by CAEL with the assistance of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS). The second tool, the Adult Learner Inventory (ALI), probes adult learners' experiences to examine how important and how satisfying a college's programs and practices are to them. The ALI was co-developed with Noel-Levitz, a well-known designer of student assessment surveys. Together, the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey and the Adult Learner Inventory provide institutions with information to guide decision-making activities for

improving adult learner services and program quality, with the ultimate goal of boosting access and retention. Because outcome reports also offer comparative data with other institutions that have used the ALFI Assessment Toolkit, the data from the surveys can be used to promote the successful aspects of those programs and services that already meet the unique needs of adult learners.

## Understanding Student Transitions

Adult learners enter community college for a variety of reasons. Some come for work-related training. Others enroll in non-credit courses because of personal interest. Many enroll in credit-bearing courses with the intent of seeking an associate's degree or transferring to a four-year institution.<sup>5</sup>

A challenge facing community colleges is how to help and encourage adult learners to build on their education and seek credentials or degrees. Students taking work-related training courses need a path to a degree or credential program. Students in credit programs need a map to guide them to courses that will not only meet their program and career requirements but will also transfer to a four-year institution.

With this in mind, CAEL recently augmented the original set of Principles by creating one on "Transitions." The Transition Principle states that an "institution supports guided pathways leading into and from its programs and services in order to assure that students' learning will



apply usefully to achieving their educational and career goals.” Relevant items on the ISAS and ALI explore issues such as information and advising for students on transferring from non-credit to credit programs, articulation agreements with four-year institutions, and the availability of educational planning.

The significance of “Transitions” is exemplified in a 2006 report by CAEL and Noel-Levitz that analyzes the items on the Adult Learner Inventory.<sup>6</sup> This report shows that of the 47 items on the ALI, three of the seven items that make up the new “Transitions” scale are located in the top half of importance scores. These items focus on a college’s ability to explain what is needed to complete an academic program, classes that are closely related to life and work goals, and guidance on classes that transfer to other programs both within and outside of the college. The rankings indicate how important information about Transitions is to the student respondents.

Indeed, two of these items are rated among the top four items in terms of importance (out of 47). The item related to the college’s ability to explain what is needed to complete a program is the second most important item on the survey. The item on studies relating to life and work goals is the fourth most important.



## Community Colleges and the ALFI Assessment Toolkit

The real benefit of the ALFI Assessment Toolkit is that it allows campus leaders to compare perceptions of adult students through the Adult Learner Inventory with perceptions or administrators, faculty and staff through the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey. It is these comparisons that help colleges develop strategic priorities and strategic plans.

Approximately one year after the colleges in the pilot used the ALFI Assessment Toolkit and received their results, CAEL contacted them to learn what institutional changes had been implemented. Nearly 70% of the pilot colleges reported institutional changes following the use of the ALFI Assessment Toolkit. Activities included:

- New and expanded course delivery options such as Saturday course offerings, Sunday course offerings, a “Friday night” degree program, an accelerated degree program, and hybrid courses (face-to-face and on-line)
- Redesign of a website for adult learners, which is also used as an internal resource for faculty and staff
- Redesigned orientation sessions, making them more effective and efficient
- Development of a non-credit program targeting adults to assist them in transitioning to college. This program is designed to help adults become familiar with the college, help potential students to connect with people at the college and prepare them for placement exams

- Creation of a student mentor or advisor program to help new students negotiate college processes and procedures
- Hiring an “advising and retention” coordinator at a college’s Learning Development Center
- Mandatory advising training for faculty (full-time and part-time) and the development of online tools to help keep them up- to-date on advising issues

Nearly 70 percent of the pilot colleges reported institutional changes following the use of the ALFI Assessment Toolkit.

- Formation of an “Adult Learner” committee to work on issues related to this important demographic
- Use of the data to secure a Title III grant award to aid students in being successful during their first 30 credit hours of college

These activities address some of the most significant barriers faced by adults and point to issues addressed by the *Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners*. Accessible classes are key and creating learning opportunities at times when adults are available (weekends, evenings and on-line) is a critical first step. This was identified for many colleges in the pilot through the scale addressing the “Outreach” Principle. Yet, convenient programming is not enough. Adult students need guidance to help them identify their goals and the best way to reach them. The

“Life and Career Planning” and “Student Support Systems” Principles include educational planning and other support services that give adult learners the tools they need to negotiate the postsecondary environment.

Colleges also reported investigating other areas for new initiatives that may be implemented in the future. One college’s plan includes articulation agreements with local four-year colleges in order to position itself as the “preferred provider” for employees of corporations in the area. This initiative incorporates elements of the “Strategic Partnership” Principle as well as the new “Transitions” Principle, by working with employers and four-year colleges to provide an educational pathway for working adults.

In addition to these efforts, eight of the pilot colleges used the data from the ALFI Assessment Toolkit to inform strategic planning and program review, or as part of the accreditation review. Four other colleges stated that they plan to use the data as a baseline for future assessments. One college plans to put the results into its annual report.

## Focus Groups

The outcomes from the pilot surveys were further explored through focus groups with adult learners at three colleges that participated in the project. The comments from students reveal how the issues of *advising*, *accessibility* and *educational experience* impact students’ daily lives. Student comments also indicate the importance of the institution’s attention to the “Transitions” Principle, which affects their ability to efficiently move through their program and set aspirations for further education.

## Advising

The students who identified items related to advising as important stated that well-informed advisors are critical to helping them negotiate their education and stay on track. It is vital for advisors to be proactive in reaching out to students (“Outreach” Principle), to be knowledgeable about programs and requirements (“Life and Career Planning” Principle), and to provide guidance on transfer issues (“Transitions” Principle).

Students noted that good advisors assisted them in choosing courses that fit their schedules and count toward their academic program. Adult students have little patience for courses that do not help them progress toward their degree. Noted one student, “As a father of three, there is no way I want to hear that I didn’t have to take a class. I could have saved the money. It is important that every class counts toward my degree.” Another student reported, “I had a hodge-podge of credits. [The advisor] helped me put them into a program.”

Advising was also cited as an important issue for students who were dissatisfied with their experience. For these students, advising impeded their academic progress because it did not provide the necessary information that assisted them in moving efficiently through their program of study and setting the foundation for transferring to a four-year institution.

The students expressed the need for advisors to lay out several options and provide advice on the best avenue to reach their goals. One student noted, “I went three times to an advisor because I didn’t want to make a mistake and lose time and money. But when I talked to an advisor, they just tell me I am on the right track after talking with me for two minutes. I know there is more than one way to go and I want to know the best way to go. I made a mistake [in the past] because I didn’t take classes in the right sequence.” Other students described unsatisfying encounters with advisors who were not knowledgeable about transferability of courses.

Some of colleges where the focus groups were conducted have at least one staff member dedicated to advising adult learners. Students described these individuals as key to their success; not only because they were knowledgeable, but also because they offered encouragement and support. One student reported, “[the staff member] helped me feel comfortable and helped me feel proud of my decision to come back...she encouraged me to take the step to continue my education.” These advisors help students aspire to further study. Several students noted that because of their advisor’s encouragement, they are now planning for their master’s degrees.

The Adult Learner Inventory outcomes show that, as a group, the colleges participating in the pilot did not meet the expectations of students in the areas of advising and guidance. These areas include knowledgeable advisors and developing an educational plan (the “Life and Career Planning” Principle), understanding what is required to complete a program of study, and guidance on transfer issues within the college and to four-year institutions (the “Transitions” Principle).

**Comments from students reveal how the issues of advising, accessibility and education impact students’ daily lives. Well-informed advisors are critical to helping them negotiate their educational experience and stay on track.**



## Accessibility

Since adult learners are often balancing work and family responsibilities with course work, it is essential that course options and administrative services are accessible and convenient.



The adults participating in the focus groups reported that a variety of claims on their time require them to have multiple options for course delivery. A student with a child with special needs finds that online courses allow her to take classes, even though it is difficult for her to come to campus. A working mother with three children cannot travel the distance to the main campus, but a satellite campus close to her home allows her to take classes. Accelerated courses suit other students who would rather engage in a compressed format to accommodate other responsibilities.

All of the colleges where focus groups were conducted showed active employment of the “Technology” Principle by allowing students to conduct virtually all of their administrative tasks (enrollment, payment of bills, purchasing books, etc.) via the Internet or by phone. This assists busy students who do not have time to come to campus. One student noted, “I do almost everything over the Internet: pay tuition, buy books, etc. Being able to do registration and other services online is great. You don’t have to come to campus when you are busy.” In fact, these systems are so integrated into student experience that students have come to expect it.

Problems with course scheduling can have a significant negative impact on adult learners as indicated by the “Outreach” and “Life and Career Planning” Principles which point to overcoming barriers of time, place and tradition and ensuring that the college has the capacity to help students reach their goals. Students facing this challenge reported having to take classes unrelated to their major in order to graduate because the more appropriate courses were not offered at a time or within a format accessible to them. Some students reported that this obstacle prevented them from graduating on time. Students also complained of the lack of course options and offerings during the summer months. Said one student, “[this college] needs to realize that we don’t take summers off. We are January to December students. We see degrees as advancement in the workplace. We want twelve months of education when we can get all the credits we can. We don’t want to be told we can only take three or six credits because that is all that is offered.”

Yet overall, colleges participating in the pilot succeeded in meeting the expectations of adult learners in the area of accessibility. The ALI outcomes report, shows that most colleges met student expectations in the “Outreach,” “Student Support Services,” and “Technology” Principles. These Principles are represented by such activities as convenient enrollment, obtaining information, and course delivery options.

## Educational Experience

In the classroom itself, adult learners want an experience that helps them move efficiently and effectively toward their goals. Adults bring a wealth of knowledge and life experience to their formal education. As the Principle on “Assessing Learning Outcomes” states, it is important for adult learners to build on this knowledge and not spend time revisiting knowledge they have already mastered. Also, adult learners must carve out time to study in the midst of competing priorities so it is important that students understand what is expected of them and that they receive timely feedback from instructors.

Clear learning goals are an indicator of successful implementation of the “Teaching-Learning” Principle and students in the focus groups described good instructors as those who are able to use it as a guide. One student remarked, “They really spell out what you are expected to do and learn. [And]...when you get to the end of the class, that is what you will know.”

Some of colleges where the focus groups were conducted use online courseware that allows students to track their progress in a class. Students were very enthusiastic about the service’s capacity to provide them feedback and allow them to check learning goals and course projects anytime and from anywhere. One student described the benefits this way: “[it] tells me exactly how I am doing. I don’t have to question how I am doing. I am at work and I want to check on an assignment I can do it. You can look at old tests and find out where you made a mistake and what you need to study for.” Students’ main disappointments with the courseware were that many instructors did not use it and were not required to do so.

As a further indicator of the “Teaching-Learning” Principle in action, students also discussed the value of coursework that relates to “real world” issues and challenges them to reach beyond their current skills and knowledge. At one college a student recounted an experience with her course in creative problem solving:

*“In the class we had to come up with a problem and go through steps to solve it. I actually solved a problem that I didn’t think I could solve with my eleven-year-old. I couldn’t believe it. I used the skills I learned in the class. I sat with my child’s teachers and I did my research and I knew what I was doing and it felt really good.”*

The issues facing the pilot colleges as observed through the focus groups echo findings in other reports on adult learners. For example, a recent report issued by the Employment and Training Administration notes the need for flexible schedules, including night and weekend classes; accelerated programs; and on-line programs. The report also advocates adult-focused academic and personal supports, and flags the pervasive problem of credit transfer between two- and four-year institutions and between non-credit and credit programs.<sup>7</sup>



## Concluding Observations

The ALFI Assessment Toolkit for two-year colleges provides an avenue for a targeted assessment of the adult learners' experiences and a college's response to the needs of this important demographic.

**The Tools informed new initiatives and generated cross-campus discussions about the adult learner.**

The pilot project indicates that the data from the Tools informed new initiatives and generated cross-campus discussions about the adult learner. The results are meaningful for tracking institutional progress through accreditation reviews, strategic plans, and for the creation of baseline data. Overall, the colleges participating in the pilot found the ALFI Toolkit a valuable contribution to their assessment plans and a catalyst for change.

The pilot results also indicate how important accessibility, transferability of credits, the educational experience, and advising and guidance are to adult learners, and echo current findings from research. The experiences of the students in the focus groups illuminate how these issues can have a real impact on their success. These investigations support the ALFI Assessment Toolkit's capacity to identify critical issues and provide key data about adult learner experiences.

Expanding lifelong learning opportunities is the driving force behind CAEL's mission. CAEL sees education as the key ingredient to a healthy society where citizens are prepared for employment in our knowledge-based economy. One way to bring about this vision is to help colleges help adult students. The ALFI Assessment Toolkit serves as a comprehensive and practical set of assessments, which inform and guide colleges' efforts to help adult learners move efficiently through their programs while fostering effective plans for future education.

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<sup>1</sup>Daniel Hecker, "Occupational Employment Projections to 2014," Monthly Labor Review Online 128, no. 11 (2005), <http://stats.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/11/art5full.pdf> (accessed September 6, 2007).

<sup>2</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, "Non-Traditional Graduates," in Digest of Educational Statistics (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

<sup>3</sup>Tim Silva, Margaret Calahan, and Natalie Lacireno-Paquet, "Adult Education Participation Decisions and Barriers," in Review of Conceptual Frameworks and Empirical Studies (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

<sup>4</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Educational Statistics (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

<sup>5</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Surveys Program of 2005. Adult Education Participation in 2004-05 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

<sup>6</sup>CAEL and Noel-Levitz issued an Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report in 2006 as part of the pilot project supported by Lumina Foundation for Education. This report focuses on the results from the Adult Learner Inventory. A report issued in 2007 includes colleges that used the ALFI Assessment Tools before the development of the Transitions scale and so does not uniformly address this facet of the assessment.

<sup>7</sup>Employment and Training Administration, Occasional Paper 2007-03, "Adult Learners in Higher Education: Barriers to Success and Strategies to Improve Results" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, March 2007).

## Our Vision

Learning is central to the vitality of individuals, organizations, communities and nations.

## Our Mission

CAEL pioneers learning strategies for individuals and organizations.

We advance lifelong learning in partnership with educational institutions, employers, labor organizations, government and communities.

CAEL works to remove policy and organizational barriers to learning opportunities, identifies and disseminates effective practices and delivers value-added services.