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# How Guided Pathways Reforms Can Improve Support for Adult Students

## Lessons From Three Tennessee Community Colleges

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The Community College Research Center (CCRC), Teachers College, Columbia University, has been a leader in the field of community college research and reform for over 20 years. Our work provides a foundation for innovations in policy and practice that help give every community college student the best chance of success.

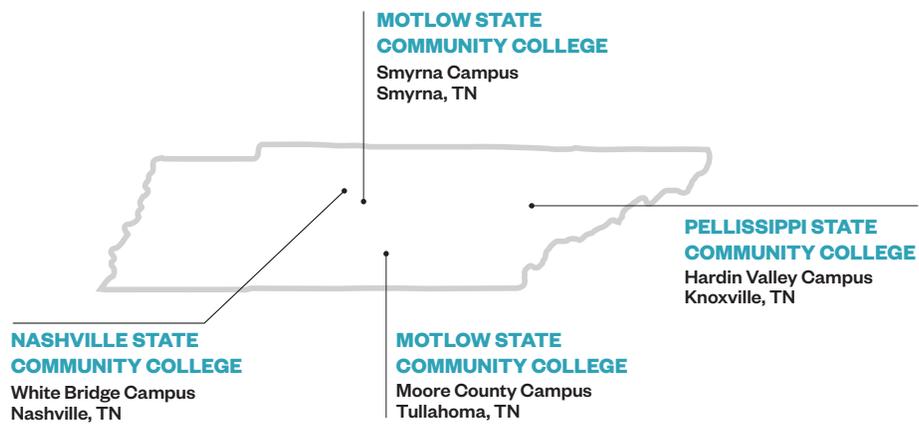
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# College Campuses Visited During Fieldwork



## Inside This Report

This report describes how three community colleges in Tennessee undertaking guided pathways reforms provide support for adult students. Adults make up a significant portion of the community college student population. A fifth of full-time students and two fifths of part-time students enrolled in community colleges are aged 25 or older. However, adult students at community colleges are less likely than traditional-age students to obtain a credential (Shapiro et al., 2018), as they often face a number of barriers to college success. These include a lack of academic preparation due to time spent out of school, institutional challenges (bureaucratic and administrative barriers imposed by college policies), situational challenges (such as transportation and childcare difficulties and food and housing insecurity), and psychological challenges (such as academic anxiety or lack of confidence). Despite the complexities of pursuing a college credential as an adult, student services and supports at community colleges often attend to the needs of traditional-age rather than adult students (Chen, 2017).

Guided pathways reforms are emerging as a promising strategy for improving student outcomes and closing equity gaps at community colleges by better helping students explore options for careers and college, choose a program of study, develop an educational plan, and monitor progress along that plan. But little is known about how the guided pathways approach can help to address challenges facing adult students. This report draws on interviews conducted with faculty, student support staff, and administrative staff and on focus groups conducted with adult students at three community colleges in Tennessee that have implemented guided pathways reforms—Motlow State Community College, Nashville State Community College, and Pellissippi State Community College. We address the following research questions:

1. What academic and nonacademic challenges do adult students face in community college?
2. In what ways do faculty, advisors, and other student services staff approach student support differently for adult students as compared to traditional-age students?
3. How can community colleges design advising and other student services to best support adult students at each stage of selecting, planning, and staying on an educational and career pathway?

Following the guided pathways framework, we present the strategies that these Tennessee community colleges have been using to support adult students by organizing them into three core areas: helping students choose and enter a program of study, keeping students on their path, and promoting student learning. Related to helping students choose and enter a program of study, the colleges have designed recruitment and onboarding practices geared toward adults, helped students navigate the enrollment process, utilized educational plans that connect students' coursework with their goals, and more. To keep adult students on their path, the colleges have lifted some of the institutional barriers to persistence, eased situational barriers by directing support for basic needs, and addressed social and psychological needs through mentoring and coaching. To enhance adult students' learning, the colleges

have developed teaching practices that build students' college knowledge, provide greater support for students in online courses, foster inclusive environments for mixed-age classes, and encourage adult-friendly class-level rules and norms.

In addition to the strategies these colleges have already implemented, college personnel at all three institutions had plans, suggestions, and ideas for further strengthening support for adult students. These strategies, which can be understood as the next frontier of support for adult students, include building connections between noncredit and credit programs, embedding career services in coursework, enhancing adult students' sense of belonging, assessing student and faculty readiness for online learning, and more.

Motlow State, Nashville State, and Pellissippi State are providing innovative models for addressing the needs of adult students by including targeted supports within guided pathways reforms. Differing needs within the adult student population as well as overlapping needs shared by many adult and traditional-age students call for a multi-pronged strategy to support adult students, consisting of:

- Universal policies and services critical in promoting success for all students, which are embedded in guided pathways reforms (e.g., mandatory college onboarding activities, career and program exploration, advising);
- Targeted supports recognizing the challenges and opportunities of adult learners (e.g., flexible scheduling, designated point of contact for adult students, family-friendly spaces and events);
- Personalized supports tailored to the needs of adults as individuals (e.g., mentoring and coaching, intake surveys to identify students' needs and interests).

## Introduction

Adults make up a substantial portion of the community college student population. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), 21% of full-time students and 39% of part-time students enrolled in public, two-year community colleges in fall 2017 were aged 25 or older. However, the share of adults enrolled in community colleges has been decreasing steadily over the past several years. Despite evidence of positive labor market returns for students who obtain associate degrees and/or certain longer-term certificates, there were already fewer adult students enrolled in community colleges immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic than there were two decades ago (Jenkins & Fink, 2020). The pandemic has only exacerbated this trend, leading to an unprecedented 37% decrease in the number of adults aged 25 or older enrolled in public, two-year colleges for the fall 2020 semester compared to the previous year (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020).

At the same time that adult enrollment in community colleges has been declining, the importance of college credentials and skills has been increasing (Schneider & Sigelman, 2018). Furthermore, even though adult enrollment in community colleges has reached a historic low, dramatic increases in unemployment and radical labor market shifts resulting from the pandemic will likely increase pressure on adults to enroll in community college for credentials, upskilling, and retraining leading to better career opportunities (Jenkins & Fink, 2020).

**Due to the pandemic, dramatic increases in unemployment and radical labor market shifts are likely to increase pressure on adults to enroll in community college.**

Increasing the number of adults obtaining postsecondary credentials will require not only the addressing of barriers that adult students faced prior to the pandemic but also the provision of supports for adults struggling with additional challenges due to the pandemic (Jenkins & Fink, 2020). Among students aged 25 or older who started at a community college in 2012, only 35% completed a credential after six years at either their original institution or a different institution, compared to 42% of students age 20 or younger. And more than half (56%) of adult students who started at a community college in 2012 had stopped out entirely after six years, compared to 42% of traditional-age students (Shapiro et al., 2018).

A variety of factors may be contributing to the gap in completion rates for adult students. Having spent time out of school during which they may have lost certain college-related knowledge or skills, some adult students face challenges related to academic preparation (Hardin, 2008). Additionally, adult students may struggle with *institutional* challenges (bureaucratic and administrative barriers imposed by college policies), *situational* challenges (such as transportation and childcare difficulties and food and housing insecurity), and *psychological* challenges (such as academic anxiety or lack of confidence) (Hardin, 2008). Yet, despite the particular complexities of pursuing a college credential as an adult, student services and supports at community colleges are more often modeled on the needs of traditional-age students, with little attention paid to the needs of adult students (Chen, 2017). Indeed, Wang (2020, p. 93) found that one of the greatest barriers facing adult students in community colleges is the experience of navigating “an educational space that is fundamentally designed with more traditional-age students in mind.”

Of course, some supports that colleges offer may be helpful to both adult and traditional-age students. And popular reform models at community colleges often emphasize support practices aimed at improving student success for all students, with some targeting underserved students. Guided pathways is one such model. Guided pathways reforms have emerged as a promising strategy for improving completion and for closing equity gaps, but little is known about how the model can address challenges facing adult students. Guided pathways reforms are designed to better help students explore options for careers and college, choose a program of study, develop an educational plan, and monitor progress along their plan. The core principles of the guided pathways model involve: (1) structuring program pathways so they lead clearly and directly to transfer with junior standing in a major or to employment in careers that pay a family-sustaining wage, (2) prioritizing program and career exploration from the start of college to help students select and enter a program path, (3) monitoring students' progress and actively intervening to keep students on their path, and (4) promoting learning by ensuring that students have access to engaging courses involving opportunities for active and experiential learning, particularly in their program of study (Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2018). Guided pathways efforts involve a focus on improving advising and student supports to enact these principles, but research has yet to examine how advisors, student services staff, and faculty can most effectively tailor guided pathways strategies to meet the specific needs of adult students.

This report draws on qualitative data obtained from interviews conducted at three community colleges in Tennessee that have implemented guided pathways reforms. Using these data, this report addresses the following research questions:

1. What academic and nonacademic challenges do adult students face in community college?
2. In what ways do faculty, advisors, and other student services staff approach student support differently for adult students as compared to traditional-age students?
3. How can community colleges design advising and other student services to best support adult students at each stage of selecting, planning, and staying on an educational and career pathway?

After providing a brief overview of the study's context and methods, the report divides the discussion of findings into two sections: (1) strategies that the three colleges have been using to support adult students throughout their educational journeys, and (2) suggestions for strengthening support for adult students moving forward.

## Study Context, Sites, and Methods

For the past several years, the Community College Research Center (CCRC) has been engaged in research examining the implementation and effects of guided pathways in Tennessee, where all 13 of the public two-year colleges in the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) system have been engaged in enacting these reforms (referred to in the state as “Tennessee Completion Practices”) since 2015 (Jenkins, Brown, et al., 2018; Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2018). Concurrently, the launch of Tennessee Reconnect —the state’s



Learn more about Tennessee Reconnect here:

<https://www.tn.gov/nexttennessee/tennessee-reconnect/tennessee-reconnect-one-pager0.html>

tuition-free policy for adults (aged 24 or older) attending community and technical colleges—has placed Tennessee community colleges at the vanguard of national efforts to recruit and retain adult students. Together, these initiatives present a unique opportunity for examining the needs of adult students and considering how community colleges can best support them throughout each stage of their educational journey.

The three colleges that participated in this study—Motlow State Community College, Nashville State Community College, and Pellissippi State Community College—were selected because they serve a large proportion of adult students and offer targeted support services for adults. In addition, these colleges vary in terms of their geographic location in Tennessee, urbanicity (rural, suburban, urban), and program offerings.

**Table 1.**  
Student Demographics at the Three Community Colleges

	HEADCOUNT	BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN	HISPANIC	AGED 25 OR OLDER
Motlow State	8,577	11%	9%	22%
Nashville State	11,197	29%	6%	39%
Pellissippi State	15,089	7%	5%	27%
Average across all TBR community colleges	8,895	14%	5%	28%

*Note.* Twelve-month unduplicated headcount from 2018–19 (Motlow State and Pellissippi State) and 2017–18 (Nashville State).

We conducted a two-day site visit at each college in spring 2019 during which we interviewed a range of administrators, faculty members, and student services staff members and conducted focus groups with adult students using open-ended interview protocols. Because this report is primarily focused on understanding how adult students experience college and how colleges go about supporting adult students, we organized interview questions around the three core areas of the guided pathways framework that involve direct interaction between students and the college: (1) helping students choose and enter a program of study, (2) keeping students on their path, and (3) promoting student learning (Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2018).

Questions for administrators focused on understanding organizational structures and the types of services available for adult students, as well as on issues such as how adult students factor into strategic priorities for the institution. Questions for faculty members and student services staff focused on how individuals working directly with adult students help them select a program of study, stay on track, and engage in learning. Finally, questions for adult students were designed to explore their educational and career goals, experiences entering and progressing through a program, and key challenges and sources of support. Overall, the protocols were designed to provide insight into how the general principles of the guided pathways model can be applied to provide support for the particular needs of adult students. In total, we conducted 38 interviews with 63 administrators, faculty members, and student services staff members and six focus groups with 19 adult students.

# Findings

Following the structure of the interview protocols and in line with the guided pathways framework (Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2018), we divide the existing strategies that these three Tennessee community colleges are using to support adult students into three core areas: (1) helping students choose and enter a program of study, (2) keeping students on their path, and (3) promoting student learning through improved teaching methods. While many of these strategies are specific to adult students, some overlap with strategies that benefit all students or other student populations.

## Overview of Strategies the Colleges Are Undertaking

### Helping Adult Students Choose and Enter a Program of Study

- Designing recruitment practices that speak to adults
- Helping students navigate the enrollment process and ensuring they receive credit for prior postsecondary credits
- Ensuring students select a program that is aligned with their goals and interests
- Creating plans that connect students' coursework with their goals
- Setting students up for success by leveraging their experience to build confidence

### Keeping Adult Students on Their Path

- Lifting institutional barriers to persistence
  - Flexible scheduling and extended office hours
  - Targeted supports
- Easing situational barriers by supporting the whole student
  - Direct support for basic needs
  - Connections to local community services
- Addressing social and psychological needs through mentoring and coaching
  - Relationship building
  - Ongoing confidence building

### Promoting Adult Learning Through Inclusive Classroom Practices

- Providing support for adult students in online learning
- Promoting pedagogical strategies designed both to recognize the specific needs of adults and to foster inclusive environments for mixed-age courses
- Developing adult-friendly course-level policies

## Helping Adult Students Choose and Enter a Program of Study

Under the guided pathways model, student support starts before students set foot on campus and continues as students begin college. This is accomplished by implementing outreach and connection strategies to engage with potential students, guiding students through the decision to enroll, and helping students explore their interests and goals and learn about program options connected with different careers (Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2018; Jenkins et al., 2020). Onboarding is especially important for adult students, who often have been away from formal education settings for many years and thus lack connections to the kinds of institutionalized support for college exploration and planning that is sometimes built into the contemporary high school experience. Additionally, without well-established central locations from which to recruit adults, colleges are finding that it is critical to adopt creative new recruitment strategies specifically targeting adults. Interviewees at the three colleges in the study provided insight into multiple stages of the onboarding process—including recruitment and enrollment, program selection, and the development of educational plans—as well as about opportunities to build adult students’ confidence as college students.

### Designing recruitment practices that speak to adults

In response to Tennessee’s focus on adult students through Tennessee Reconnect and the Drive to 55 college attainment goals, the colleges we visited have started testing new strategies aimed at reaching more adult students. For example, Pellissippi State has made a deliberate effort to identify admissions recruiters who were themselves adult learners in college and who can thus speak to prospective adult students about their own experiences in having earned a postsecondary credential later in life. Motlow State offers recruitment events directly targeted to adults (see text box).



Learn more about Drive to 55 here:  
<https://driveto55.org/>

#### **Motlow State: Multigenerational Recruitment and Information Nights for Adults**

Motlow State has developed a **multigenerational approach** for high school recruitment events, targeting both high school students and their parents. As part of this strategy, recruiters discuss the importance of education at all stages of life. In addition, Motlow State holds **information nights** specifically for adults who are considering enrolling in the college. After learning that what adults most wanted was the chance to speak with someone one-on-one, the college changed the format of its adult information nights from a one-hour presentation to a 20-minute presentation followed by 40 minutes for individual conversations.

## Helping students navigate the enrollment process and ensuring they receive credit for prior postsecondary credits

Enrolling in community college can prove daunting for adults due to a variety of hurdles, including unfamiliarity with technology and difficulties navigating online application forms, a lack of knowledge about education and career options, the complexity of financing college, and onerous administrative requirements. In addition, adult students may not be aware of opportunities to receive credit for life experience (e.g., military training) or through prior learning assessments, or may not realize that some credits earned for college courses taken elsewhere can transfer. Obtaining prior transcripts can be difficult, especially if institutions are in other states or are no longer in operation, or if students have a financial hold at a previous institution due to an outstanding balance. In extreme cases, issues such as these may deter adults from enrolling altogether. To help address these challenges facing adult students, Nashville State developed the Reconnect Café, staffed by an advisor who works with a caseload of adult students. The position was initially funded by the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce for one year and is now supported by the college. Anyone from the community is welcome to stop by the Café, where they can receive information about the college, services on campus, and the Tennessee Reconnect grant as well as get help completing the application to Nashville State and the application for the Reconnect grant.

## Ensuring students select a program that is aligned with their goals and interests

During the enrollment process, adult students benefit from a facilitated process in which they are helped to explore their interests and short- and long-term goals to choose a program that is a good fit. Under the guided pathways model, students are provided with support in choosing a program from the start of college (Jenkins et al., 2020). Like other students, adult students who enroll or reenroll in college have varying degrees of certainty about their career goals and what they want to study while in college. One student services staff member we spoke with noted that while some adult students arrive at college uncertain about their goals or their options, other adult students are “pragmatic” and “more-focused.” A student services staff member observed that “when [adult students] were decided, they were much more decided” than younger students.

Even for adult students with clearer goals, college staff remarked on the importance of having conversations with students about which programs and types of credentials are the best fit. As one staff member explained, many adult students assume that they need a certain type of credential to align with their goals, when that might not necessarily be the case. Further, college staff explained the importance of ensuring a good fit between adult students’ goals, interests, skills, and values and of presenting students with career pathways and programs that they may not have considered. For example, an administrator observed that many women of color show a high aptitude for technology careers, but they often do not see themselves in those roles. Many adult students can also benefit from a facilitated program exploration process that takes into account their goals, the jobs that are available in their geographical region, and their previous credits and balances these factors with their timeline for completing a credential.

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### **Pellissippi State: Purposeful Advising to Inform Program Selection**

The advising and onboarding process at Pellissippi State Community College, called **Purposeful Advising with Students (PAWS)**, is designed to help all students, including adults, through a process of exploration to determine a best-fit program. Before the start of their first semester, all students are required to meet with an advisor in order to register for first-term courses. Prior to this meeting, students must complete a career interest survey, the results of which become the basis for discussion during the session. This is a valuable discussion for adult students, as they may not be aware of all the career opportunities related to their interests. Additionally, this meeting provides an opportunity for advisors to explore how adult students' prior education and employment experiences relate to their desired career path. It also allows advisors to set realistic expectations about what particular programs entail and to discuss strategies for helping students prioritize their time.

### **Creating plans that connect students' coursework with their goals**

In her study of community college students enrolled in STEM programs and courses, Wang (2020) found that many adult students feel pressure to complete college as quickly as possible to realize the economic benefits of obtaining a credential. Similarly, college staff interviewees in our study noted that a common priority among adult students is ensuring that their coursework is aligned with their degree and career goals. As one college administrator observed, "If it's not clear how this gets them where they need to go, then it's more likely to be perceived as a waste of time." Another administrator emphasized the importance of explaining to adult students why they are taking certain courses and how those courses relate to their career aspirations.

A critical strategy for helping adult students complete their programs as efficiently as possible—without taking courses that do not apply to their degree or certificate and thus result in excess credits—is ensuring that students have the opportunity early on in their college experience to create an educational plan mapping out their courses from start to finish. For adult learners, it is also crucial to ensure that educational plans account for prior postsecondary credits as well as credits earned through prior learning assessments. At Motlow State, college staff observed that adult students attending community college through the Tennessee Reconnect program appreciate the clarity and direction offered by having a plan to complete their credential. As part of the onboarding process at Motlow State, each student is helped to use DegreeWorks, a web-based educational planning and advising tool, to create an educational plan leading to graduation that is individualized to each student's situation. Advisors at Nashville State highlighted the importance of building full educational plans for every student so that they can see "the practical path to their degree." As one advisor explained, when students see how long a degree will take to complete by creating an educational plan, they may consider taking summer courses or an additional course to finish faster.

For adult students and others, the content of the courses that are part of their educational plan is equally important as the plan itself. Enabling students to take

courses that explore a program’s foundational content in their first year is one strategy for ensuring that students are in a program that is aligned with their goals and interests. As one administrator explained, “There’s no such thing as just getting your gen eds out of the way. You need to pick a program.” It is also the case that developmental education sequences consisting of multiple courses have been a longstanding barrier to helping students enter college-level, program-relevant coursework early in their college experience. Fortunately, all Tennessee community colleges have taken important steps toward helping students enroll in college-level courses more quickly through the statewide implementation of corequisite remediation (Ran & Lin, 2019). However, some college staff members we spoke with were still concerned about the effects of requiring adult students to take placement tests and corequisite learning support courses. One senior leader noted that adult students “took a bold step” in enrolling in college, and placement into learning support (or developmental education) can leave them feeling defeated.

### Setting students up for success by leveraging their experiences to build confidence

Another critical part of onboarding for adult learners is helping them to build confidence as students. Interviewees noted that many adult students wrestle with previous negative educational experiences, wonder if they can be successful in higher education, and worry about being one of the oldest people in their courses. Similarly, Wang (2020) found that when adult students feel as though their life experiences are unappreciated, their academic engagement in the classroom becomes inhibited. One advisor in our study said that although adult students often enter college “focused and prepared, the hardest part is making them believe that they can do it.”

One way to recognize and elevate the knowledge, skills, and experience of adult learners is to find opportunities for them to provide advice and guidance to other students. For example, one administrator—a former adult student herself—described how, when she returned to college, she benefitted from both sharing advice with and learning from younger students. And first-year experience course instructors we spoke with, in particular, observed that providing students with these opportunities is an important learning and confidence-building opportunity for adult students.

One instructor remarked that open dialogue in class is important and that diversity of age within a class is an asset, as younger students sometimes raise questions that the adult students can answer. Or, when adult students share how they are balancing work, family, and school, it helps younger students realize how they could better utilize their time. One advisor shared a similar strategy, in which advisors affirm adult students’ lived experiences by coaching them to “own their experiences and perspective” when in classrooms with younger students. A faculty member said that, even though it sometimes requires creativity on the part of instructors to encourage students to share, once adult students are helped to feel like a “valued member of the class and a resource for other students . . . they are unstoppable.”

“

**[Although adult students often enter college] focused and prepared, the hardest part is making them believe that they can do it.**

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## Keeping Adult Students on Their Path

Keeping students on their path fundamentally requires a system in which advisors know what path each student is on and are able to recognize when a student is at risk of falling off that path. This involves developing policies and procedures to ensure that every student has an individual educational plan and that advisors are able to monitor progress along the plan so that they can intervene when necessary. At a logistical level, it also involves colleges scheduling courses based on the anticipated demand represented by students' educational plans so that students are not falling off track simply because courses they need are not offered when they need them or because there are not enough seats in critical courses (Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2018).

While the core principles involved in keeping adult students and traditional-age students on their paths are similar, there are many circumstances in which it is critical to tailor services for adult students. The following section outlines strategies adopted by the three colleges participating in the study that address specific institutional, situational, and psychological challenges that often derail adult students from their paths.

### Lifting institutional barriers to persistence

To address *institutional* barriers, Motlow State, Nashville State, and Pellissippi State implemented a variety of creative scheduling practices to better help adult students balance college and other responsibilities such as work or family. Additionally, they created designated staff roles focused on adults and assigned specific offices or departments the responsibility of overseeing initiatives focused on helping adults navigate college.

**Flexible scheduling and extended office hours.** When it comes to scheduling for adult students, colleges have found that options are key in terms of timing (when courses are offered), modality (how courses are offered—in person, online, or hybrid), and pacing (how long it takes to complete a course). In general, the same principles hold true for student services such as tutoring and advising. Wang (2020) found that adult students are more likely to have never met with an advisor than traditional-age students, primarily due to scheduling conflicts.

All three colleges in our study found that scheduling courses to meet the needs of adult students requires careful attention to *timing*. While the availability of evening and weekend courses is critical for some adults, not all adults want or need courses at those times. All three colleges increased their evening and weekend course offerings in advance of the launch of Tennessee Reconnect, but both Motlow State and Pellissippi State were surprised when fewer adults than expected selected these course times. As one student services staff member at Motlow State pointed out, the college enrolls a significant number of students who work night shifts and prefer morning classes. In addition to course timing, the colleges also thought critically about course *modality* as a way to increase scheduling options for adults. They decided to offer more online courses and hybrid courses, which take place partially online and partially in person. Motlow State also modified the *pacing* of courses for adults, providing intensive, condensed courses that allow students to complete a full three-credit course in a few weeks. At Motlow

State, the Adult College Express (ACE) program offers accelerated courses that meet for four hours one evening a week for five weeks, and the Weekend Warrior program provides general education courses that are needed for transfer in a three-week format with classes meeting on Friday evenings and Saturdays.

On the student services side, all three colleges made an effort to extend office hours earlier in the morning and/or later in the evening at least one or two days a week, as well as to offer some weekend hours. Pellissippi State also started conducting some advising appointments over Skype to provide more flexibility for students.

**Targeted support for adults.** Recognizing the common institutional barriers adult students are likely to face, all three colleges designated a point person (or persons) dedicated to working with adults. In preparation for the launch of the Tennessee Reconnect grant, Motlow State created a new role for a director of adult initiatives. The director conducts outreach to recruit adult students, guides them through the admissions and financial aid processes, and serves as a liaison to help adult students navigate any other challenges they may encounter, such as administrative registration issues or concerns about a faculty member.

Faculty members at Pellissippi State volunteer to serve as student success coordinators for specific student populations, one of which is adult learners. In addition to working directly with students to connect them to academic and nonacademic support services, success coordinators also serve as a resource for other faculty members. Faculty members can refer students to success coordinators or simply seek advice about strategies for working with a particular population. The college has also tasked its Access and Diversity Office with overseeing a variety of services targeted specifically to adults, including a special orientation for adult students and their families, regular events for socializing and networking, academic and career counseling, assistance with scholarship applications, and a mentoring program for adults who are first-time college students.

### **Nashville State: Dedicated Case Management and Space on Campus for Adults**

At Nashville State, the Reconnect **completion coach** described his job as supporting “Reconnecters” from enrollment through completion. He reaches out to all students receiving the grant at least once a quarter and stays in touch through regular emails. In addition to providing case management support, the completion coach operates the **Reconnect Café**, where adult students can not only drop in for assistance with tasks such as enrollment and registration but also grab a bite to eat and hang out.

### **Easing situational barriers by supporting the whole student**

To address *situational* barriers facing adult students, the three colleges developed strategies to support students’ basic needs directly, through services such as food pantries, and indirectly, through resources such as guides to off-campus services.

Such supports for basic needs are critical given that community college students report higher rates of food and housing insecurity than students at four-year institutions (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). According to a national survey conducted by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, rates of food insecurity among respondents at two-year colleges ranged from 35% to 49%, compared to 24% to 40% at four-year institutions. And rates of housing insecurity among respondents at two-year colleges ranged from 41% to 59%, compared to 25% to 47% at four-year institutions. While these data take into account community college students of all ages, some groups of students, such as parents and veterans, who are more likely to be adults, are at a higher risk of experiencing food and housing insecurity than the general student population (Baker-Smith et al., 2020).

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**Direct support for basic needs.** All three colleges operate food pantries for their students. Pellissippi State also started a community garden several years ago that primarily grows produce for the college pantry. Similarly, Nashville State is hoping that the college's greenhouse can eventually be used to supply their pantry.

Last year, Pellissippi State established an emergency fund to which students can apply for assistance with unexpected expenses and unmet financial needs that might otherwise prevent them from staying enrolled in college. The fund can be used for academic expenses, such as tuition and textbooks, as well as for a variety of other expenses, such as transportation and childcare. Motlow State provides similar emergency funds for students through the college foundation, including a scholarship specifically for students in the Adult College Express (ACE) program. Beyond providing funds, Pellissippi State also supports students struggling with housing insecurity by allowing them to shower and wash clothes in the recreation center.

**Connections to local community services.** At all three colleges, college staff were clear that while these direct services are critical, they are not enough to meet students' needs. When students are experiencing chronic poverty, a student services staff member at Nashville State explained, "you don't have to solve the problem, but you need to connect them to the people who can help with the problem." Toward that end, both Motlow State and Pellissippi State have developed resource guides to connect students with local services in the community. Motlow State has specifically focused on helping students identify health care providers that do not require insurance. In addition, both colleges ask students to complete intake surveys that can be used as the basis for referrals to local services.

### **Addressing social and psychological needs through mentoring and coaching**

To address *psychological* barriers, such as academic anxiety and lack of confidence, individual faculty members, advisors, and other student services staff at these three colleges are supporting adult students by formally and informally serving as mentors

and coaches. Regardless of student age, strong relationship building is the foundation of effective mentoring and coaching, and for adult students, part of the relationship-building process is being recognized and appreciated as adult learners. Mentoring and coaching adult students also requires an understanding of the particular set of anxieties and insecurities with which some adults struggle, related to their self-perceived ability to succeed in college.

**Relationship building.** One student services staff member stressed that building relationships with students is one of the most important things he does, because he wants students to feel comfortable coming to see him when things are not going well, not just when they are. One student said that the most important part of advising for him is having an advisor who understands who he is as a person. For other adult students, an important part of relationship building with advisors is having advisors specifically recognize their perspectives as adult learners. Reflecting this point of view, one student mentioned that even though she had people she could talk to on campus, she wished she could go to someone who specialized in adult learning for guidance.

**For some adult students, an important part of relationship building with advisors is having advisors specifically recognize their perspectives as adult learners.**

Importantly, it is not just staff members in formal advising and counseling roles who have adopted a mentoring and coaching role with adult students. The academic support services staff at Pellissippi State and Nashville State intentionally focus on building rapport and trust with students so that students are not afraid to ask questions or admit when they are struggling. In the course of building relationships with academic support staff, students often share a great deal about what is happening in their lives. Rather than view these nonacademic issues as outside of their job responsibilities, academic support staff at Pellissippi State make a deliberate attempt to “be the ears” for their adult students, so that they can understand the challenges students are facing and make referrals to services such as counseling when appropriate.

**Ongoing confidence building.** Another key aspect of supporting adult students is building their confidence by helping them overcome anxieties and insecurities that may stem from returning to school after having spent an extended period of time out of school. This ideally begins in the onboarding phase (see prior section on setting students up for success) but continues as students move forward through college. One student mentioned being so certain she was going to fail that she was on the verge of quitting, until a student services staff member with whom she became close talked her “off the ledge” and encouraged her to keep trying. At the end of the semester she received all As.

Staff members across all three colleges identified this kind of coaching as a crucial part of their jobs. One student services staff member identified self-doubt as “the number one issue” for adult students and noted that his initial conversations with adults are often about addressing the fear that “I can’t do it, I’m a failure.” Similarly, another student services staff member described himself as a “cheerleader,” given how much time he spends simply encouraging adult students that they can succeed in college.

## Promoting Adult Learning Through Inclusive Classroom Practices

Promoting learning in the classroom is a critical piece of supporting adult students. As an administrator stressed, the classroom is one of the most important places for engaging students. Consistent with that idea, interviewees noted the need for more professional development for faculty related to the specific needs of adult students, particularly in the areas of supporting adult students in online learning, improving pedagogical strategies, increasing adult students' college knowledge, and developing adult-friendly course policies.

### Providing support for adult students in online learning

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges often viewed online courses as necessary to helping adult students fit college into their busy lives. Given the increase in online learning during the pandemic, it is more important than ever to be aware of the challenges posed by online courses in order to provide the supports necessary to help adult students succeed. Several adult students across the three colleges described having negative experiences with online courses. They reported having challenges in using the technology, communicating with professors and classmates, and completing assignments and tests. Many of the student services personnel with whom we spoke also reported that online courses are not always an effective strategy for promoting learning among adults. Interviewees at all three colleges found that older adults with limited computer skills struggle with the technological aspects of online courses. Some advisors indicated that they intentionally do not recommend online courses for adults in their first semester, despite their general feeling that colleges are “pushing” for everything to be online. Instead, they prefer to wait until adult students have had some time to get used to being in college before steering them toward online courses. To support adult students enrolling through Tennessee Reconnect, Motlow State began offering an introductory workshop on basic computer skills and found that one of the main areas in which adult students often need support is learning to use course management systems.

### Promoting pedagogical strategies designed both to recognize the specific needs of adults and to foster inclusive environments for mixed-age courses

Few faculty members are likely to have received the kind of professional development that would equip them to respond to the diversity of experiences, expectations, and life situations that adult students bring with them to the classroom. Faculty members may need support in developing strategies to address gaps in adults' college knowledge due to time spent out of school as well as to address adult students' interest in and motivations for engaging with course material, which can differ from traditional-age students.

As part of meeting the particular needs of adult students, it is also critical to provide professional development designed to help faculty members teach in classrooms

made up of students of different ages. Stressing this point, one administrator said that it is especially difficult to design a first-year experience course that is relevant to and fulfilling for both traditional-age and adult students. One reason that teaching multiple age groups simultaneously is challenging is that students may have different levels of familiarity with basic college knowledge. For example, one of the adult students we spoke with described her biggest challenge in college as being confronted with professors who are “used to teaching 19-year-olds.” She often found herself having “no clue” what the professors were talking about when asked to complete tasks like writing an annotated bibliography. She had a much easier time when professors explained things “step by step,” but all too often they seemed to make assumptions about what students did and did not know. Speaking from a faculty perspective, a long-time faculty member acknowledged that assuming that all students in a mixed-age classroom have the same foundational knowledge and skills is often a mistake. She has found that a phased approach is best, starting on a level everyone understands and then slowly “ramping up,” particularly around the use of technology. Developing an effective strategy was not easy, however, as doing so requires time, effort, and a mindset shift.

In order to help faculty members create classroom environments better designed to meet the needs of adult students, Nashville State developed a teaching center that explicitly focuses on enhancing skills in teaching courses that are diverse in terms of students’ economic backgrounds, race/ethnicity, and age. This effort builds off of previous professional development and training work, such as an in-service day for faculty devoted to the needs of adult students.

### Developing adult-friendly course-level policies

Inflexible course-level policies pertaining to attendance and grading designed with traditional students in mind negatively impact adult students. It is almost inevitable that adults’ obligations outside of the classroom will at some point conflict with their responsibilities inside the classroom. Speaking to this point, one student commented, “Adults don’t skip class—they have other issues.” Thus, she was grateful that a professor—when she explained that she had to take her grandchild to doctors’ appointments—relaxed a strict attendance policy of dropping students’ grades by a letter after three missed classes. Although one administrator noted that faculty members are sensitive to such situations and willing to make adjustments based on family needs, it is likely that others are unsure how to handle these circumstances or unaware of how classroom policies can negatively impact adult students. Another administrator, for example, stated the need for broader recognition of the effects of zero-tolerance policies for issues like attendance and incompletes on adult students.

**“Adults don’t skip class—they have other issues.”**

# The Next Frontier for Supporting Adult Students

In addition to the strategies these colleges have already implemented, college personnel at all three institutions had plans, suggestions, and ideas for further strengthening support for adult students. Based on interviewees' direct recommendations as well as insight into adult students' experiences gained from the interviews and student focus groups, the remainder of this report outlines what might be considered the next frontier for enhancing support for adult students along all stages of the education pathway: helping them choose and enter a program of study, keeping them on their path, and enhancing their learning.

## Helping Adult Students Choose and Enter a Program of Study

### Building connections between noncredit and credit programs

Staff members at all three colleges agreed that it would be in adult students' best interest to build more on-ramps to college by creating stronger connections between noncredit workforce programs and credit programs. However, few formal structures exist to support this transition, and noncredit students typically do not receive advising services to help them explore credit programs. Interviewees cited several challenges that make it difficult to link noncredit and credit programs, including the short-term nature of many noncredit programs and the degree to which noncredit programs are often customized to suit employer needs. Despite these challenges, however, all three colleges have laid some initial groundwork that could be used to develop more robust noncredit-to-credit pathways. Pellissippi State is supporting companies interested in helping their employees earn college credit by aligning noncredit coursework with learning outcomes needed to apply for credit through prior learning assessments. Motlow State is exploring options for creating noncredit programs that could count for credit toward a certificate and then a degree. The noncredit department at Nashville State refers students who would like to learn more about college credentials to an advisor who focuses on working with adult students.

### Addressing institutional barriers to enrollment

Another area in which colleges may wish to enhance their support for adult students is assistance with institutional barriers to enrollment, such as difficulty in obtaining prior transcripts and dealing with existing financial holds. As a first step, colleges could place greater emphasis on specific admissions tasks such as obtaining prior transcripts in early recruitment efforts. Colleges may also wish to consider evaluating whether it would be beneficial to offer a debt forgiveness program for adult students that would eliminate financial holds (Ajinkya et al., 2019).

## Making orientation and first-year experience courses mandatory for adults

Many adult students have prior college experience, and at many colleges this means they are often exempted from certain important experiences, including orientation, first-year experience courses, and new student advising. However, these experiences are just as important for adult students as for traditional-age students, particularly for adults who have been out of school for a number of years, experience anxiety about returning to college, or want information about how to apply previous credits to a degree that will help them reach their goals. A number of college interviewees also highlighted the importance of tailoring the content of these onboarding activities to the questions and needs of adult students. With such adjustments, these experiences could become an opportunity to welcome adult students back to college; start building their confidence; and outline expectations, policies and procedures, and information on campus resources.

## Embedding career services in coursework

Several interviewees who work with first-year adult students noted that such students are often more interested and invested in activities around career exploration and planning than traditional-age students. To provide adults with ample exposure to career exploration and development—especially if they are exempted from first-year experience courses and early advising—colleges may consider embedding program and career exploration activities, such as informational interviews with someone in the field, into program-relevant courses.

## Keeping Adult Students on Their Path

### Enhancing adult students' sense of belonging

Just as for traditional-age students, a sense of belonging is critical for keeping adult students on their path. According to an administrator, “A sense of belonging drives everything. Without that, they won’t seek resources. They won’t stay.” While this principle may hold equally true for students of all ages, the factors contributing to a sense of belonging in college differ for adults. Given the centrality of family in many adult learners’ lives, the colleges are beginning to think more seriously about family engagement. Several interviewees highlighted that finding more ways to involve families in the college experience is crucial for engaging adult learners. An administrator noted, “The whole family is affected when someone goes back to college,” while another commented that the college is starting to see creating a welcoming, family-friendly environment as an adult student retention strategy. In fall 2019 Motlow State held a Family Fun Day that included live music, games, and crafts for kids, as well as demonstrations and exhibits from the academic departments.

### Creating more predictable and responsive course schedules

In addition to providing flexible scheduling to help adult students balance college and life, offering *predictable* scheduling will help adults plan ahead for work and childcare

and take more courses in a shorter amount of time, increasing their likelihood of completing college. Toward that end, Motlow State creates their course schedule for a full year at a time, rather than just a semester. However, other colleges in Tennessee, in particular Cleveland State and Volunteer State, have gone even further in building more predictable schedules. In addition to using a year-long course schedule like Motlow State, Cleveland State also uses block scheduling in many of its largest programs, allowing students to schedule all of their classes on two days per week and/or entirely during weekday mornings, weekday evenings, or weekend blocks, depending on their needs (Jenkins, Brown, et al., 2018). Similarly, Volunteer State has developed a two-year course schedule and uses block scheduling so that students can choose to take all of their courses either on Monday and Wednesday or on Tuesday and Thursday. In order to get a more accurate sense of how many sections of which courses will be needed when, the college asks all new students to create a full-program education plan and bases the schedule off of students' planned courses (Jenkins, Brown, et al., 2018).

### **Assigning case managers**

Even though all three colleges profiled here have designated point people in place to support adult learners, the availability of support does not guarantee that students will benefit from it. To ensure that adult students have access to support in all of the areas in which they commonly face challenges—navigating institutional barriers to college, finding assistance for basic needs, and dealing with anxiety and self-doubt—colleges may wish to consider adopting a case management model of assigned advising or coaching that includes required meetings or touch points. Although staffing this kind of intensive advising requires substantial resources, more community colleges are beginning to move in this direction, including Roane State and Cleveland State in Tennessee (Jenkins, Brown, et al., 2018).

## **Promoting Adult Learning Through Inclusive Classroom Practices**

### **Assessing student readiness for online learning**

Given the necessity of remote learning for many adult students during the pandemic, it is critical to assess students' readiness for online courses to ensure that they have the technical, academic, and nonacademic skills needed to succeed in an online environment and to provide additional resources and support for those who need it.

### **Supporting faculty in online teaching**

It is also important to provide faculty members teaching online courses with opportunities for training in online pedagogy.

## Summary and Implications: Developing Multifaceted Strategies for Supporting Adult Students

When asked to describe the kinds of strategies that are effective for working with adult students, one student services staff member at Motlow State replied, “A rising tide lifts all boats” and suggested that adult and traditional-age students benefit from many of the same services. While this may be true in some cases, interviewees across all three colleges identified remarkably similar themes when discussing the needs of adult students as a distinct population, themes that point to how critical it is to move beyond universal reforms to focus on meeting the particular needs of adult students. A student services staff member highlighted the complexity of targeting the needs of particular student populations, explaining that she views different student populations as overlapping ovals in a Venn diagram. For example, she agreed that technology tends to be especially challenging for older adults, but also pointed out that many traditional-age students living in low-income rural areas have a similar lack of exposure to technology and experience similar challenges.

Complicating matters even further is the fact that, despite some commonalities, “there are different types of adult learners,” as one administrator stated. For example, a student services staff member noted that for every adult student who would prefer to attend a specialized orientation for adults, there is another adult student who does not want to be singled out or treated differently and who would prefer to attend a general orientation with students of all ages.

The differing needs among adult students and the overlap of needs between adult students and traditional-age students necessitate a multi-pronged strategy to support adult students, consisting of:

- Universal policies and services critical in promoting success for all students, which are embedded in guided pathways reform (e.g., mandatory college onboarding activities, career and program exploration, advising);
- Targeted supports recognizing the challenges and opportunities of being an adult learner (e.g., flexible scheduling, designated point of contact for adult students, family-friendly spaces and events);
- Personalized supports tailored to the needs of adults as individuals (e.g., mentoring and coaching, intake surveys to identify students’ needs and interests).

Importantly, these three types of support are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes offering targeted or personalized support for adult students will involve building flexibility and options into universal policies to enable adults to meet requirements and access services. For example, a mandatory orientation cannot be held on a single day at a single time—adult students will need multiple times and ways to participate. Likewise, while all students can benefit from career exploration, adults will likely have had more varied employment experiences and will come to college with different

degrees of certainty about what they want to do. Thus, there should be multiple options for satisfying career exploration requirements. In other words, as a student services staff member said, it is crucial “to meet the need without driving students away” by creating unnecessary “hoops to jump through.”

The reality is, that for students (and colleges) to succeed, colleges must adapt to what one administrator we spoke with described as the “new reality.” Adult students are no longer a niche, nontraditional segment but a core part of today’s college-going population. Similarly, another administrator stressed that adopting an explicit focus on the needs of adult students is an essential part of becoming a “student-ready” institution. Clearly, this is no easy task. Fortunately, however, colleges around the country, including Motlow State, Nashville State, and Pellissippi State, are leading the way in providing innovative models of addressing the needs of adult students through embedding targeted supports within guided pathway reforms.

## Postscript

The world is a very different place today than it was in spring 2019 when we conducted the interviews for this study. The COVID-19 pandemic has upended higher education not only for students but also for administrators, faculty, and staff. Yet at a time when so much of the future remains uncertain, one thing we do know is that the need for programs and services designed to help adult students succeed academically and professionally is greater than ever. Here we offer a few considerations for the ongoing environment.

- **Helping adult students choose and enter a program of study that is aligned with their goals.** In a rapidly evolving labor market with record levels of unemployment, it will be critical to help displaced adult workers seeking further education align their interests, knowledge, and skills with certificate and degree programs leading to jobs that offer family-sustaining wages.
- **Keeping adult students on their path by providing flexible scheduling and office hours.** As long as social distancing guidelines necessitate working and learning remotely, adult students will need more flexibility than ever in order to balance college with work, childcare, and other family responsibilities. This includes not only flexibility in terms of course scheduling and online course options but also the continued, if not increased, use of virtual platforms (like messaging apps and early alerts) to connect with adults to provide both academic and nonacademic supports.
- **Keeping adult students on their path by providing support for basic needs.** Adult students who had prior financial vulnerabilities are likely to be hardest hit by the additional struggles brought on by the pandemic, making connections to support services for food, housing, and other basic needs all the more critical.

In the midst of so much change, the core principles of guided pathways can provide a roadmap for enhancing support for all students. At the same time, the unprecedented

challenges facing higher education make it even more crucial to consider how those general principles can best be tailored to meet the needs of specific student populations, such as adults. Drawing upon the work of colleges like the three featured in this report—which have already been deeply and thoughtfully engaged in supporting adult students—is extremely beneficial. Their experiences offer important lessons not only for increasing success for adults but also for understanding how the guided pathways model can apply to and be tailored toward different groups of students.

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