

NOVEMBER 2021

Adept at Adapting

Using Student and Administrative Feedback Data to Support Adult Learner Success

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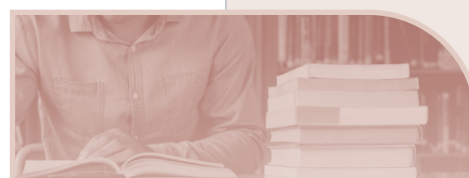
Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers, postsecondary educators, and employers, industry groups, foundations, and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, we foster a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. A nonprofit membership organization established in 1974, CAEL is a part of Strada Collaborative. To learn more, visit cael.org and stradacollaborative.org.

Introduction

Students aged 25 and older constituted approximately 40 percent of all undergraduates in 2018. But adult learners are not differentiated just by their age. They also often face multiple challenges to earning a degree or credential: caregiving and household obligations, a full-time job, unexpected life disruptions (such as medical bills), and so on. In these broader terms, “nontraditional” students comprise around three-quarters of enrolled undergraduates (Remenick, Lauren. “Services and Support for Nontraditional Students in Higher Education: A Historical Literature Review.” SAGE Journals. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 8 May 2019. Web. 09 Aug. 2021).

Many postsecondary institutions already recognize that adults comprise a significant portion of their student body — or they may be starting to recognize the potential for serving more adults as they face declining enrollments from their traditional student pipelines. These institutions realize that they should have programs and services in place that are tailored to address the challenges and opportunities that individually and collectively shape adult learner success. However, institutions are often unaware of whether and how their existing programs and services effectively support adult learners. Consequently, it is difficult for leadership to allocate resources strategically to best invest in adult learner success.

This report includes individual as well as aggregate summaries of how CAEL’s Adult Learner 360™ has helped postsecondary institutions, systems, and partnerships use data to optimize resources for current and prospective adult learners. The CUNY School of Professional Studies, Lorain County Community College, the Virginia Community College System, and KC Scholars all utilized Adult Learner 360’s integrated diagnostic solution. Adult Learner 360 uses parallel surveys to assess and benchmark institutional effectiveness in serving adult learners, identify challenges and opportunities, and chart pathways of improvement through a data-intensive gap analysis. One survey captures the perspective of institutional stakeholders who work with adult learners or lead those who do. The other captures the perspective of adult learners themselves.



WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF AN ADULT LEARNER?

The term can be defined by age, but it can also refer to any college student whose primary identity is not “student” — some people are referring to this as “Today’s Student.” They can be parents, workers, veterans, or service members — people who are juggling school with other responsibilities like work and family. Adult learners are students who are willing to spend their limited time and resources on education because they recognize that they will need more skills, knowledge, and credentials to access better-paying jobs or careers with long-term employability.

CAEL's Adult Learner 360

CAEL developed Adult Learner 360 to provide institutions with a data-grounded method to assess the quality and effectiveness of an institution's programs, services, and policies for adult learners. Adult Learner 360 traces its roots back to 2003 and the Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) Toolkit, which first employed a parallel-survey approach. Continual growth in capability and other enhancements led to the emergence of Adult Learner 360 as a comprehensive diagnostic solution that compares colleges and universities' effectiveness against the aggregated performance of other adult-serving postsecondary institutions. Informed by CAEL's decades of experience helping colleges and universities excel in serving adult learners, Adult Learner 360 uses two surveys to collect actionable data: one that captures the effectiveness of the institution's policies and practices, and one that measures the satisfaction of adult students. The former surveys institutional administrators and faculty; the latter currently enrolled adult learners.

Programs and services rated highly by both institutional and adult learner respondents are identified as institutional strengths; those rated lower in terms of satisfaction, effectiveness, or importance point to possible areas for improvement. Where misalignment between the students and institutional ratings occurs, there are potential opportunities for additional engagement with students or institutional representatives to understand the driver for this disconnect.

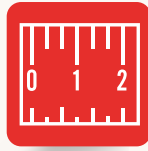
The survey questions are derived from CAEL's landmark Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners. Survey responses provide insight and guidance for institutions to develop programs and policies that help adults reach their educational goals. The Principles are born from CAEL's extensive experience as a leading advocate for adult learners, and CAEL periodically adjusts them in accordance with its growing body of research. Today, CAEL is considering further refinement of the Principles through grant-funded work underway on the development of a comprehensive Framework for adult learner success in the 21st century. CAEL uses the Principles to contextualize the Adult Learner 360 survey results. The Principles form the foundation for a post-survey report that highlights institutions' strengths, areas for improvement, and changes that can lead to better support for adult students. The report also features a comparison tool that allows participants to benchmark effectiveness and satisfaction against other two- and four-year institutions. Administrators use report data to set strategic goals and improve on policy and practice in order to impact adult learners' enrollment, persistence, and success. A CAEL expert discusses recommended changes with the institution, incorporating the institution's external drivers and current strategic initiatives.

CAEL'S TEN PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVELY SERVING ADULTS



Adaptivity

Adjusts to shifting external market forces and is able to adapt to the changing expectations of internal stakeholders, students and employers — understanding the needs of those they serve by developing creative academic solutions.



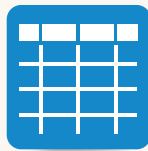
Assessment of Learning Outcomes

Defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners — both from the curriculum and from life and work experience — in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.



Financing

Promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.



Life & Career Planning

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



Outreach

Conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers in time, place and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities



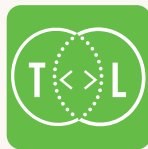
Strategic Partnerships

Engages in strategic relationships, partnerships and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners



Student Support Systems

Assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners



Teaching-Learning Process

Faculty uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful



Technology

Uses technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience



Transitions

Supports guided pathways that lead into and from the institution's programs and services in order to ensure that students' learning will apply usefully to achieving their educational and career goals to useful knowledge and skills

How Does Survey Data Lead to Changes That Benefit the Adult Learner?

Over the last 18 years, more than 140 postsecondary institutions have engaged with the Adult Learner 360 survey tools and benefitted from CAEL recommendations that were informed by the survey results. In the following pages, we share the stories of four such institutions and systems: CUNY School of Professional Studies, KC Scholars, Lorain County Community College, and the Virginia Community College System. These case studies offer several examples of the diverse ways institutions and adult learners can benefit from completing the Adult Learner 360 process.

Enhancing the Exceptional: CUNY SPS, Adult Learner 360, and Responsive Student Resources

CUNY School of Professional Studies (CUNY SPS) is an institution within the City University of New York (CUNY). One of the system's 26 campuses, CUNY SPS was founded in 2003 for the express purpose of offering agile learning solutions that could meet the city's ever-evolving workforce needs. CUNY SPS prioritizes programs that enable working adult learners to access viable career pathways. Today, it is one of the fastest-growing institutions in the CUNY system.

Although CUNY SPS staff welcome feedback from the working adult learners they serve, they lacked quantitative data that assessed how satisfied students were with their services. But like many smaller institutions, staffing and budget constraints rendered extensive institutional research out-of-scope. To alleviate this gap in institutional knowledge, in 2017 CUNY SPS was one of nine colleges within the CUNY system that adopted Adult Learner 360. After completing the

CHALLENGE

Deriving an objective performance assessment amid rapid growth and limited resources in order to remain agile and effective in serving adult learners.

SOLUTION

Adult Learner 360's parallel data on institution and adult learner perceptions allowed a small, emerging team to access the benefits of robust institutional research. CUNY SPS used the findings to reinforce strengths and meet challenges. Students' high regard for the SPS orientation and onboarding process inspired the creation of Test Flight — a realistic simulation of the online learning experience that immerses students into an online learning experience. This and other enhancements have led to top-20 national rankings for best online bachelor's programs and online bachelor's programs for veterans.

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parallel surveys, CAEL prepared a report highlighting strengths and opportunities for improvement, with concurrent recommendations on actions to enhance support of adult learners. Subsequently, a CAEL expert discussed the report and its recommendations, incorporating external drivers and extant strategic initiatives to help create a customized institutional plan for strategic change.

As often occurs with institutions that care deeply about the adult learning experience, the parallel surveys showed that CUNY SPS staff were harder on themselves than students were. Still, the results revealed opportunities to make changes that were

certain to improve the adult learning experience, particularly in areas of career preparation, financial aid processes, and employer partnerships. Acting on these insights, CUNY SPS increased financial aid staffing, separated scholarships from financial aid functions, and reorganized its website to clarify financial aid information. The resulting increase in capacity and efficiency has opened the door to more scholarship and debt forgiveness programs. Adult Learner 360 also inspired a renewed focus on education through the lens of adult learners across multiple CUNY institutions and an ongoing exchange of best practices that has improved services for traditional and nontraditional students alike.

“We were ready to go beyond people reporting their own experiences. We didn’t have the staff to do the kind of institutional research some of the bigger institutions could do. We were looking to be more data-driven than anecdote-driven.”

JENNIFER SPARROW, PH.D., ASSOCIATE DEAN OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

Helping Employers Help Themselves: Lorain County Community College Scores for Adult Learners With Workforce Funding Assists

Adult learning is ingrained in the culture at Lorain County Community College (LCCC), located about 16 miles west of Cleveland. Serving adult learners is a pillar of [Vision 2025](#), the college's strategic roadmap. As the CAEL community sees time and again, supporting adult learners means [supporting the workforce and the broader community](#). So it's no surprise that LCCC has long been prioritizing credentials that prepare working-aged adults for good careers. Key to that has been embedding experiential learning into programs and engaging workforce and employer partners to create agile upskilling opportunities for workers.

Helping workers keep pace with a changing economy is something the college had prioritized well before it adopted Vision 2025, in 2019. But formulating that forward-looking strategy offered an occasion to build on the college's strong adult learning foundation. A CAEL member, LCCC completed the Adult Learner 360 diagnostic process to help assess challenges and opportunities as it prepared to pursue a U.S. Department of Education Title III grant directed at adult learners. The Adult Learner 360 survey process allowed the college to hear directly from adult learners about how effective LCCC was in meeting their needs.

While the overall results were unsurprisingly positive, their feedback identified areas where the college could make additional enhancements. Adult learners wanted more career and labor market information, including forecast salaries. They also prioritized information about financial aid and scholarship opportunities. They stressed the value of receiving this information proactively. Flexible program delivery, as always, was also important to accommodating adult learners' already-complicated schedules.

TRAIN OHIO'S GOALS INCLUDE:

- Filling the talent pipeline for small and medium businesses.
- Decreasing education-related student debt.
- Increasing enrollment in and completion of programs tied to in-demand careers.
- Increasing interest in advanced manufacturing as a career.



Armed with the survey information, LCCC crafted an application that centered flexible and accelerated program formats with integrated work-based learning to attract adult learners and meet growth-industry talent demands. In 2018, LCCC was awarded a five-year grant of \$2.1 million to expand access of academic programs to adult students and help them complete. LCCC has included 10 programs within the grant's scope. Enhancements include a 15-month associate degree model, all-online formats, and competency-based education options.

Within the college's "earn and learn" [Train Ohio](#) program, students enter paid internships with a sponsoring company three days per week. The interns, who are enrolled as full-time LCCC students, take classes twice weekly. At work, they perform tasks that also meet the learning outcomes assigned to the program. At the college, faculty and staff serve as liaisons between the employer and students. Throughout, they ensure that site work and coursework remain closely knit, whether students are pursuing a certificate or a degree.

Thanks to the inclusion of stackable credentials, that's not an either-or choice. Certificates, which are tied to workforce advancement in their own right, stack toward an associate degree and, in the case of the associate of applied science in mechatronics technology-micro electromechanical systems (MEMS), a bachelor of applied science. In addition to MEMS, Train Ohio specializations include automation, cybersecurity, software development, and computer-aided machining. More, including digital fabrication, are planned. All told, LCCC has forged partnerships with more than 130 employers under Train Ohio. It has placed more than 140 students in jobs, boasting a 100% job-placement rate within MEMS, by far the largest Train Ohio program.

How Adult Learner 360 Data Helped More Adult Learners Access a ‘Pathway to the American Dream’

In September 2017, CAEL joined an initiative of the [New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Board](#) (NRMR WDB) to apply a U.S. Department of Labor grant toward improving credit for prior learning (CPL) practices with nine of Virginia’s community colleges in the southwestern part of the commonwealth. This project included partnerships with not only those colleges directly, but also with the [Virginia Community College System](#) (VCCS).

The NRMR WDB recognized CPL’s potential for advancing the grant’s mission to build a talent pipeline of skilled workers in support of regional growth in value-added industries. The grant-backed project, “Pathways to the American Dream,” (PAD) is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor. It prioritizes credential completion among un- and under-employed adults to enable career success in high-demand occupations.

CPL allows adult learners to parlay the skills and competencies they’ve developed outside of the classroom into formal college credit, so it is a natural fit for institutions looking for ways to fast-track adult learners to credential completion. As confirmed by CAEL’s study [The PLA Boost](#), CPL improves completion, saves students time and money, and further benefits institutions as students complete more traditional (purchased) credits in finishing degrees.

The VCCS and NRMR WDB focused CPL efforts on nine Pathways community colleges that, for the most part, are in the state’s rural southwest, where displaced workers are an all-too-familiar phenomenon. The nine Pathways institutions are Danville Community College, Lord Fairfax Community College, Mountain Empire Community College, New River Community College, Patrick Henry Community College, Southwest Virginia Community College, Virginia

“Adult Learner 360 opened the dialogue for faculty and student services staff to better understand the unique needs of adult learners.”

VCCS ADULT LEARNER 360 PARTICIPANT

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Highlands Community College, Virginia Western Community College, and Wytheville Community College.

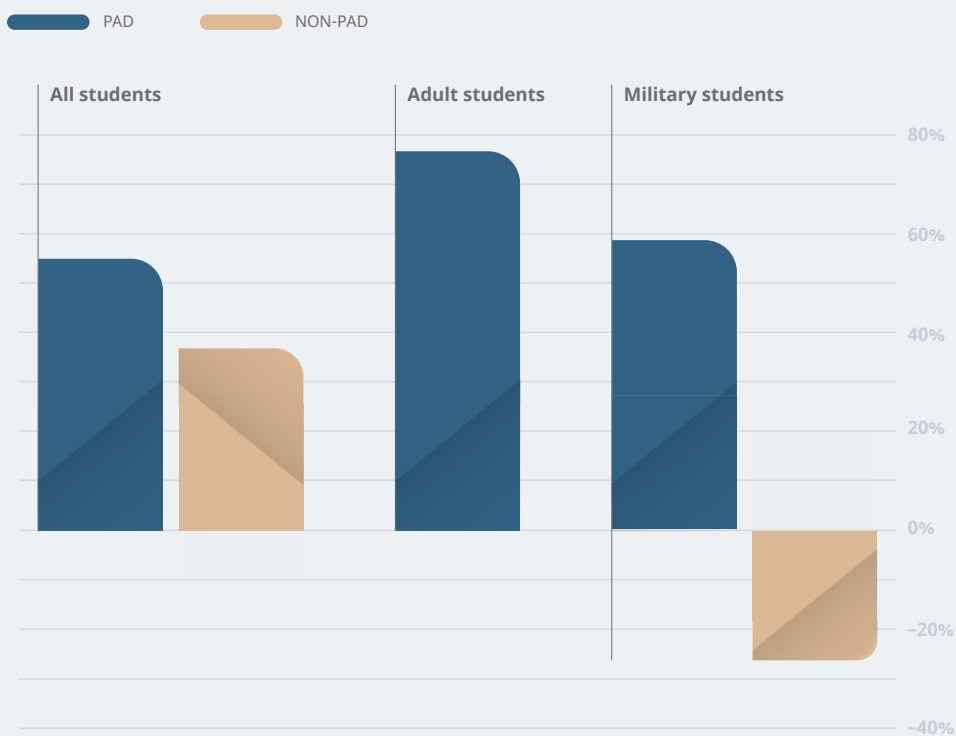
Adult Learner 360 was the foundation of CAEL's intake activities, which it completed for each institution. CAEL provided customized professional development at the institutions based on these assessments. This empowered them to develop and implement improvements to CPL and other adult learner-friendly practices over the following two years. In September of 2020, CAEL repeated the Adult Learner 360 process to measure progress.

The nine PAD institutions reported they had adopted more methods of awarding CPL, marketed it more aggressively, and, most importantly, awarded more CPL to students.

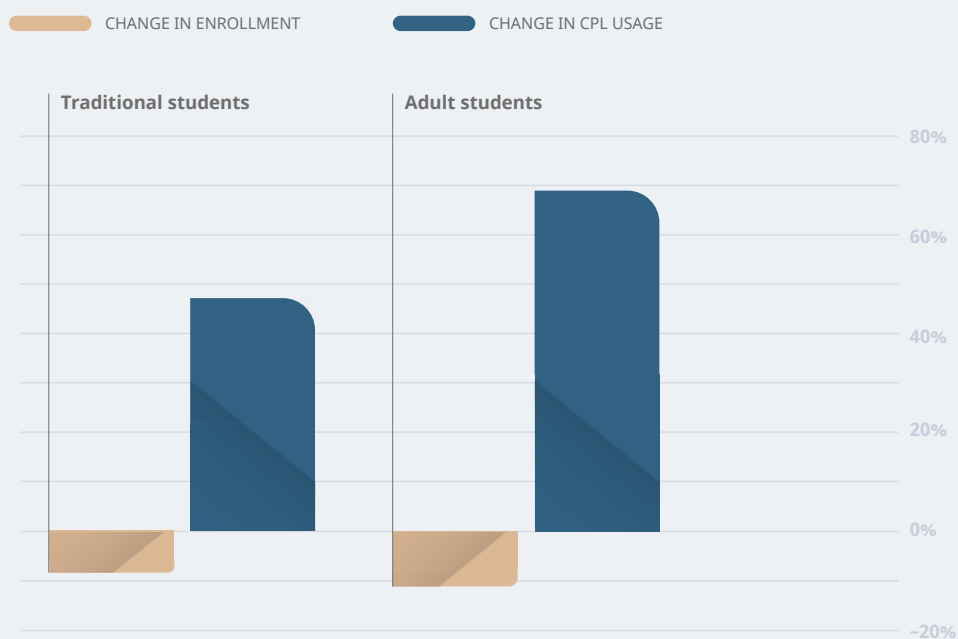
From 2017 to 2019, the PAD institutions saw an increase in CPL issued for adult learners of 69 percent. Among military students, there was a 58 percent increase in CPL.

Contrasting these outcomes with the other 14 VCCS institutions, which were not a part of the PAD program, provides context. During the same period, CPL for adult learners increased .01 percent and declined 23 percent among military students.

PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN CPL PRODUCTION, 2017-2019



PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN ENROLLMENT AND CPL USAGE — PAD COLLEGES



The increases in CPL production occurred against a backdrop of sharply reduced adult learner enrollment. From 2017-2019, PAD colleges saw an 11 percent reduction in adult learners, while non-PAD institutions saw a reduction of 13 percent. This may be evidence that the PAD institutions' latest efforts to improve in CPL and other areas important for adult learning are already impacting persistence and enrollment.

It is certainly evidence that the PAD colleges successfully targeted the intended population of adult students. Although adult learner enrollment declines outpaced reductions in

traditional students (11 percent vs. 7 percent), CPL growth was most robust among adult learners.

As is the case with any system, CPL perceptions and outcomes varied across the participating colleges. One constant was that those colleges that made CPL an institutional priority saw the greatest impact from the program. Realizing that CPL is an investment with an ROI that scales with your level of commitment, one college vice president shared that the process has converted him from a prior learning skeptic to a CPL "true believer."

How Parallel Surveys Helped KC Scholars Stay on the Path to Adult Learner Success

KC Scholars is a 501(c)(3) organization working to increase postsecondary education attainment in the greater Kansas City metropolitan region. Its adult learner program covers residents in the Kansas City region with some college but no degree, and adults with associate degrees who want to earn a bachelor's degree.

The CAEL partnership began during the 2016–2017 academic year, as the KC Scholars program was launching. CAEL completed the Adult Learner 360 diagnostic process at five KC Scholar program institutions.

These assessments measured how adult learner-friendly the campuses were, identifying existing areas of excellence, opportunities to improve adult learner support services across the region, and additional ways to champion subpopulations of adult students.

The survey results helped institutions better serve adult learners and prepared them for adult students who had been disconnected from higher education. Participating institutions received a report that quantified key challenges and charted how their strengths could be best leveraged in each area.

Many institutions' leaders found that their internal areas of concern did not always align with areas of need identified directly by adult students. Student feedback spurred efforts to make the improvements that mattered most to them, such as expediting the processes of FAFSA verification and credit transferring. These practices helped adult students persist in their studies, with the collected data serving as a benchmark to measure the impact of change over time on adult students' success.



CHALLENGE

KC Scholars wanted to complement the program's robust qualitative adult learner feedback with actionable data.

SOLUTION

CAEL's parallel institution and adult learner surveys, the foundation of its industry-transforming Adult Learner 360 solution.

Since May 2017, KC Scholars has awarded more than 420 Adult Learner Scholarships. Just two academic years later, more than 30 recipients have completed their degree. Participation in the KC Scholars program impacts persistence as well; scholarship recipients progress from their first to second year of college at a rate (nearly 90 percent) 35 percentage points higher than the national average.

“With post-traditional students quickly becoming the new normal in enrollment across the nation, I would recommend the Adult Learner 360 approach for any campus committed to the success of adult learners.”

BETH TANKERSLEY-BANKHEAD, PH.D., PRESIDENT AND CEO OF KC SCHOLARS

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This approach underpins the Adult Learner 360 diagnostic tool and advisory solution, which continues to complement the excellent work that KC Scholars does for adult learners today. Thanks to the paradigm-challenging dynamics of parallel surveys, administrators can continually test their own perceptions against those of their students. In fact, in the 2019–2020 academic year, five additional campuses took the assessment, and three of the original five retook it.

Conclusion

Institutional leadership cannot make informed decisions to improve services for adult learners without collecting actionable feedback from their faculty, staff, and adults regarding the efficacy of existing services. Only institutions that understand the complex needs of their adult learners can scale practices and programs to demonstrably impact adult learner enrollment, persistence, completion, and post-completion success. The prior case studies demonstrate that strengths, challenges, and adult learners' needs vary by institution. Further, faculty and staff may see opportunities for policy reform or professional development to serve adult learners more effectively. While some challenges can be addressed with quick-fix adjustments to practice, others require long-term investment into adult learner success. Each step toward enhancing program quality and services for adult learners supports a culture of continuous adaptivity in response to the changing demographics of postsecondary learners.