

Supporting Non-traditional Learners in Career Technical Education

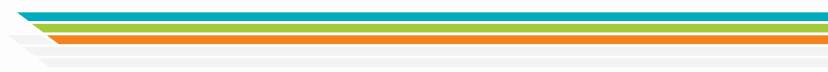
Career Technical Education (CTE) policies and programs have increasingly focused on supporting the needs of historically marginalized learners and closing access and performance gaps among learner groups. Perkins V, the latest iteration of federal CTE legislation known as the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, is part of this trend. The law defines nine learner groups as special populations and includes a number of provisions that address expanding access to and supporting success within CTE programs for special populations. This brief will describe strategies for supporting one of these special populations: non-traditional learners.

SPECIAL POPULATIONS IN PERKINS V

LEARNER GROUPS DEFINED AS SPECIAL POPULATIONS IN PERKINS V:

- Out-of-workforce individuals
- English learners
- Individuals experiencing homelessness
- Individuals with disabilities
- Single parents, including single pregnant women
- Youth who are in/have aged out of the foster care system
- Individuals preparing for careers that are non-traditional for their gender
- Youth with a parent who is a member of the armed forces and is on active duty
- Individuals from economically disadvantaged families, ex. low-income youth and adults

CTE educators are developing strategies to support learner groups who, while not special populations under the law, may need additional supports, including migrant and undocumented, LGBTQ+ and justice-involved learners.



DEFINING NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS

Non-traditional learners are defined in Perkins V as learners who are enrolled in CTE programs that are preparing for them for career fields that are non-traditional for their gender, meaning that individuals from one gender comprise less than 25 percent of those employed in that occupation or field.

To determine these non-traditional fields, states develop lists based on the gender makeup of occupations in that state or use national tools such as the [crosswalk](#) prepared by the U.S. Department of Education. These tools may identify, for instance, that men studying allied health or women in manufacturing programs qualify as non-traditional.

*CTE policies and programs support non-traditional learners because **students benefit from exposure to a variety of careers and guidance that does not pigeonhole them because of their gender.***

CTE policies and programs support non-traditional learners because students benefit from exposure to a variety of careers and guidance that does not pigeonhole them because of their gender. Stereotypes that assume jobs are suitable for only men or only women can discourage learners from pursuing fields of study that appeal to their interests and strengths and lead to high-wage, fulfilling careers. Learn more about how non-traditional learners are addressed in Perkins V with the first brief in this series, [Introduction: Maximizing Access and Success for Special Populations in Career Technical Education](#).

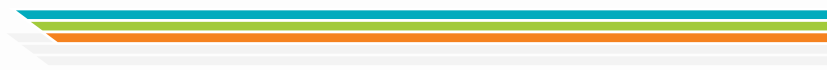
STRATEGIES FOR NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS

Recruiting and supporting non-traditional learners has been a focus of CTE policies and programs since the 1970s, which has resulted in a number of potential strategies to support this population. Potential state (🏛️) and local (📍) approaches include:

Middle grades, 9th-grade career exploration 🏛️ 📍

Research has shown that enabling students to explore a wide range of careers before they have formed a strong vocational identity can help students see the benefits of non-traditional career fields.¹ Schools and districts can offer career exploration courses and activities during the school day and through camps and clubs, and states can support them with professional development about offering these experiences and by enabling Perkins funding to be spent in the middle grades.

¹ Connected Learning Alliance. (2019). Influences on occupational identity in adolescence: A review of research and programs. https://clalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Influences_on_Occupational_Identity_Adolescence.pdf



Inclusive equipment 📍

On the local level, schools and districts can ensure that CTE programs have tools, uniforms and supplies that can be used by learners with different needs. Rosemont High School in Oregon significantly increased the number of young women in manufacturing programs by, among other strategies, ensuring that smocks and gloves were available in their sizes.²

Career guidance 🏛️ 📍

States and local CTE programs can provide professional development and access to labor market tools that empower counselors to deliver career guidance that supports non-traditional learners to pursue high-wage, in-demand fields.

CTE ambassadors 📍

Current CTE learners and alumni who studied non-traditional fields can visit middle schools or 9th-grade classrooms through school or district CTE ambassador programs, letting students see examples of success in a non-traditional field.

Diverse teacher workforce and partners 📍

In addition to showing examples of current and former CTE learners in non-traditional fields, local CTE programs can also seek diversity among the teacher workforce and employer partners to further provide instances of non-traditional success.

Welcoming culture 🏛️ 📍

Part of recruiting and retaining non-traditional learners is providing a welcoming and inclusive environment in the classroom. States and local CTE programs can provide professional development and resources to educators on creating this classroom culture.

Inclusive promotional materials 🏛️ 📍

States and local recipients can develop brochures, posters, websites and social media that promote CTE programs and depict an inclusive range of learners, enabling learners to see themselves in a non-traditional program and career field.

² National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity. (2018). Oregon PIPE 2015-present: Advancing equity in CTE & STEM. https://napeq.org/wp-content/uploads/Oregon-PIPE-Promising-Practices_NAPE_Final-Updated_10-16-18_bw.pdf

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The strategies described above are not mutually exclusive and not all will be appropriate based on the needs of your non-traditional learner population. Before enacting new strategies, assess the current state of non-traditional learners in your CTE programs and dig into root causes of barriers and challenges:

- What do current non-traditional learners tell you about their needs, challenges and successes? What do prospective CTE students tell you about their concerns about pursuing nontraditional fields?
- How do the demographics of your CTE employer and community partners compare to the demographics of your learners? Do learners see examples of professionals in fields non-traditional for their gender?
- What does your data show about the CTE participation and concentration of non-traditional learners?
- How inclusive are your approaches to promoting CTE programs? Do you show non-traditional learners how they could fit in your CTE program?
- What does your data show about the performance of non-traditional learners?
- How do your career exploration, guidance and planning processes encourage learners to pursue non-traditional fields?
- What does your data show about the labor market returns to non-traditional fields, and how are you sharing this data with learners and families?
- How are you identifying non-traditional fields? Is this approach working or do you need to consider a different strategy?
- How do the demographics of your CTE teacher workforce compare to the demographics of your learners, and non-traditional learners, in particular?

For additional resources, visit the [Perkins V Section](#) and the [Maximizing Access and Success for Special Populations in Career Technical Education series page](#) in the [Learning that Works Resource Center](#)

CASE STUDY

To increase the number of non-traditional occupation (NTO) concentrators on the postsecondary level, the Wisconsin Technical College System Student Success Center analyzed non-traditional concentration data; identified success stories; and developed a [Scale of Adoption Assessment](#), which enables users to assess non-traditional supports at the college level, at the program level and in the classroom.

The data analysis highlighted a wide variation in NTO concentration across Career Clusters®, with the Hospitality & Tourism and Business, Management & Administration Clusters having the greatest gender parity. Interviews with staff highlighted potentially effective interventions including hiring designated staff to serve as liaisons to non-traditional learners, reaching out to middle and high school learners, using program alumni to provide peer-to-peer supports such as networking and mentoring, and providing programming at facilities for incarcerated women. These strategies contributed to average increases in NTO growth ranging from 10 percent to 18 percent between 2013 and 2019.



RESOURCES TO SUPPORT NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS

- **Non-traditional Learner Participation in Postsecondary Career Technical Education Programs** (Advance CTE, 2023)
- **Strategies to Increase the Concentration of Students in Nontraditional Occupations** (Wisconsin Technical College System, 2021)
- **2020 Nontraditional Occupations Crosswalk** (U. S. Department of Education Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education)
- **Oregon PIPE: Advancing Equity in CTE & STEM Promising Practices** (National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity, 2018)
- **Nontraditional Career Preparation: Root Causes & Strategies** (National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity)

