



Outreach and Engagement for Racially Minoritized Adults at the Community College

REACH Guidebook Series

About the REACH Guidebook Series

The REACH Guidebook Series builds upon insights from Lumina Foundation's Racial Equity in Adult Credentialing in Higher Education (REACH) initiative, a multi-year effort involving six states – California, Colorado, North Carolina, New York, Texas, and Virginia – to strengthen credential attainment for adult learners of color in community colleges.



This three-part series was developed to offer practical insights into how faculty, staff, and administrators at community colleges can leverage resources to design and implement innovative strategies to positively affect academic and workforce-related outcomes for racially minoritized adult students. Each guidebook focuses on a key area of practice relevant for advancing equitable outcomes among adult learners of color:

- **Framework for Advancing Equitable Credit for Prior Learning**
- **Culturally Sustaining Professional Development for Community College Faculty and Staff**
- **Outreach and Engagement for Racially Minoritized Adults at the Community College**

Grounded in current research, practitioner experience, and insights gathered from interviews and cohort meetings with REACH and REACH Deeper colleges, the series offers practical guidance, actionable tools, and real-world examples to help institutions strengthen their efforts to better serve adult learners of color.

This material is based upon work supported by the Lumina Foundation under grant number 2304-1116173. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material do not necessarily reflect the views of the Lumina Foundation.

Acknowledgements to the following individuals for their contributions to this guidebook series:

- Yiwen Ai
- Thea A. Brown
- Raina Dyer-Barr
- Junior Gonzalez
- Kailee Karr
- Jason A. Keist
- Greg Latshaw
- Brett A. Visger
- Wes White
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Suggested Citation

Community College Research, Praxis, and Leadership. (2025). *Outreach and Engagement for Racially Minoritized Adults at the Community College* (REACH Guidebook Series). University of Pittsburgh School of Education.

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Outreach and Engagement for Racially Minoritized Adults at the Community College



Introduction

Outreach and Engagement for Racially Minoritized Adults at the Community College is a resource for community college practitioners seeking to develop effective strategies for connecting with and supporting racially minoritized adult learners. Grounded in research and field-tested approaches, this guide emphasizes the importance of intentional outreach throughout a student's educational journey. That journey begins before enrollment, as practitioners thoughtfully identify and engage adults with little or no prior college experience but who are interested in pursuing higher education. Whether seeking a two-year associate degree, a short-term workforce credential, or preparing for transfer to a four-year university, these students benefit from informed, relationship-centered engagement. While outreach efforts should include all student populations, this guide explicitly highlights practices essential to engaging and supporting adult students of color.

Racially Minoritized Adults at the Community College: A Snapshot

Community colleges are uniquely positioned to serve adult learners, with the average age of a community college student being 27 years (American Association of Community Colleges, 2025). Still, significant completion gaps remain when comparing graduation rates between students over and under 24 years of age, with learners over the age of 24 graduating at an 18% lower rate than their younger college peers. Even more concerning are the disparate graduation rates revealed when comparing traditionally aged white students to Black and Hispanic students 24 years of age and older, who graduate at rates 37% and 34% lower, respectively (REACH, n.d.).

Black students are more likely to delay attending college and are “the only racial/ethnic group that has more older adult students than younger adult students

enrolled in undergraduate education (Jain & Crisp, 2018, p. 10). Moreover, Black and Hispanic adults are overrepresented in populations who have completed “some college, no credential” (SCNC) compared to their representation in populations of currently enrolled undergraduates. Specifically, “Hispanic students were 24.4 percent of the SCNC population as of July 2022 compared to 21.5 percent of all enrolled undergraduates in the 2022-23 academic year. Black students accounted for 14.0 percent of all undergraduates but were 19.1 percent of the SCNC population” (Berg, et al., 2024, p. 7).

Similar disparities exist among American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) adults over 25 years of age, with only 16% holding a degree (American Indian College Fund, 2025). Clearly, there is an imperative for intentional outreach and engagement if community colleges are to close equity gaps in enrollment and completion for adult students of color.

Considerations for ameliorating racial equity gaps between adult learner subpopulations remain critically important. However, much of the research and practice on adult learners at community colleges has taken a race-neutral approach, positioning age as the central factor influencing students’ educational outcomes. While a student’s age certainly affects how they experience college, racial identity also intersects with other social locations—such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status—to shape the student experience.

Currently, there is an increased opportunity to examine and respond to the intersecting needs of adult learners of color at both the state and institutional levels. In their report advocating for greater scholarly and institutional attention to racially minoritized adult learners, Jain and Crisp (2018) note, “It is therefore highly problematic that our review identified relatively few studies that considered the role of race in shaping the college decisions and experiences of adult students” (p. 12). Fortunately, since the release of their report, philanthropic organizations, scholars, and practitioners—within and beyond two- and four-year institutions—have made concerted efforts to identify racially minoritized adult students in postsecondary education and actively address their unique needs in areas such as outreach, engagement, and curriculum design.

What is Outreach and Engagement?

While community colleges approach and define student outreach and engagement in myriad ways, it is common to find that college-led initiatives are planned, measurable, and tailored to meet students where they are. These initiatives integrate emotional, academic, social, and civic growth. Broadly speaking, outreach activities encompass the outward-facing decisions a college makes to attract potential students. At the same time, engagement can be viewed as the multi-faceted ways that students interact with and are exposed to meaningful educational experiences on campus (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2015). Both outreach and engagement initiatives seek to promote the holistic development of students, encompassing support services, pedagogical practices, and programs that

foster and sustain relationships to support ongoing academic, social, and emotional growth for students and the surrounding community.

Student outreach refers to the broad set of college-led initiatives designed to engage current and prospective students through intentional communication that encourages them to take specific actions (EAB, 2023). These actions may include enrolling or re-enrolling in courses, meeting critical deadlines, attending orientation or campus events, or utilizing available academic and support resources. Effective outreach strategies are crucial for building awareness, facilitating access, and guiding students through key decision points in their educational journey.

The primary goal of student outreach is to deliver timely, relevant, and actionable information that promotes student enrollment, fosters engagement, and supports retention through program completion. Research shows that proactive communication—particularly when personalized and strategically timed—increases application rates, reduces summer melt, and improves persistence among adult learners and historically underserved populations (Castleman & Page, 2014). Furthermore, institutions that integrate outreach with advising, financial aid guidance, information on credit for prior learning, and peer support are more successful in reengaging students who have stopped out and guiding them toward credential attainment (Inside Track, 2022; CAEL, 2020).

Recognizing that engagement spans a student's college experience and does not conclude at enrollment is essential.

Moreover, student engagement strategies should extend beyond campus boundaries into the communities served. Building trust with community-based organizations (CBOs)—which often provide students with services, information, and guidance—not only expands the college's recruitment reach but also reinforces its role as a community-centered resource rather than a peripheral institution. Establishing trust with adult learners of color begins with focusing on the quality and sustainability of relationships. Outreach and engagement are not one-time efforts; they require ongoing, reciprocal connections with both students and the communities in which they live.

Listening sessions with adult learners and other postsecondary stakeholders across Minnesota conducted by Wilder Research and the Minnesota Office of Higher Education (OHE) yielded valuable insights into how to effectively engage adult learners and how institutional policies and practices might be adjusted to better meet their needs (Hamrock et al., 2021). Notably, the concept of “relationship” emerged as a central feature that should guide interactions between college practitioners and adult learners: “Numerous stakeholders mentioned that relationship-based, person-centered supports at every step of an adult learner's postsecondary education could help address many of the barriers noted in this report” (p. 18).

Adopting a relationship-centered orientation not only facilitates an understanding of the overlapping nature of adult students' life-world environments (Donaldson & Graham, 1999), but also positions the discussion within a broader discourse on racial equity at the community colleges—one that centers

and affirms the knowledge and skills that racially minoritized adults contribute to campus life.

The following pages explore some nuances to consider when developing outreach and engagement initiatives for racially minoritized adult students. Before discussing promising and field-tested practices, it is important to clarify that the terms “outreach” and “engagement” are neither mutually exclusive nor sequential. Rather than existing as distinct phases (e.g., outreach then engagement), they operate in a dynamic interplay. The authors recognize and value colleges’ creative integration of outreach and engagement efforts to help students build and sustain momentum toward academic completion. The following information is organized into titled sections to enhance usability and clarity of ideas.

Using the Guidebook

Practitioners can use this guidebook as a source of inspiration, drawing from both the outreach and engagement efforts presented and the organizing frameworks discussed. Designed as a practical resource, the guide supports community college staff, faculty, and administrators in their efforts to better reach and serve adult learners of color. Whether planning a reengagement campaign, developing outreach materials, or partnering with community-based organizations, users will find specific strategies, sample tools, and actionable tips grounded in successful practices from around the country.

Community College Outreach and Engagement Practices for Racially Minoritized Adult Students



As stated at the outset, the term *student outreach* is used broadly to refer to college-led activities and initiatives focused on communicating with current and prospective students to prompt some form of action. Regardless of the specific action desired, outreach and recruitment efforts targeting racially minoritized adult learners must be grounded in *respect* and *reciprocity*. In this context, and as previously stated, the relationship is *key*.

Sustainable relationships require mutual exchange (open); they cannot be one-sided (closed). Reciprocity in outreach communications with students can be demonstrated by establishing and maintaining channels for responsive dialogue between students and college personnel. For example, rather than merely informing students about an upcoming job fair on campus (closed), outreach should also include timely and patient responses to students' questions about the event (open). Ultimately, reciprocity ensures that the needs of all stakeholders—students, the college, external partners, and the broader community—are acknowledged, considered, and valued.

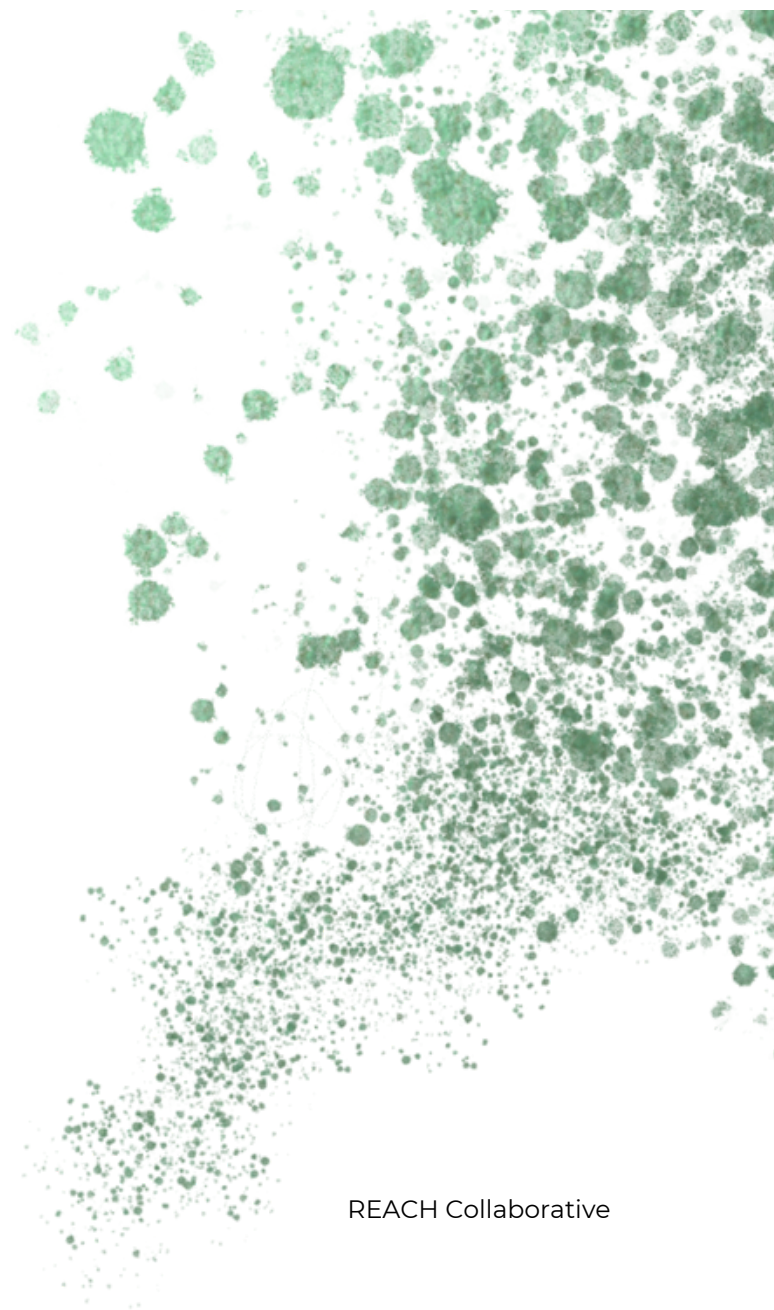
Identifying Emerging Adult Learner Populations

Some colleges have begun using data analysis and data mining technologies to identify potential adult learners prior to enrollment. Through these approaches, institutions can refine and target their marketing efforts toward adult learners of color who are more likely to enroll. Organizations such as [CollegeApp](#), for instance, use data mining techniques to identify pools of prospective adult learners who have shown interest in postsecondary education and training. Colleges are then given lists of potential adult learners within their catchment areas to initiate outreach.

Many institutions prioritize identifying students who have stopped-out as a core population of their adult learner strategy. It is important to acknowledge that, due to persistent disparities in equitable outcomes, data from the National Student Clearinghouse report on *“Some College, No Credential”* indicates that adult learners of color are disproportionately represented within the stop-out population. Although students stop out for different reasons, they often face many real and perceived barriers to re-enrollment. In light of these challenges, there is merit in employing multiple methods to identify prospective adult learners of color for recruitment.

Once pools have been identified, targeted social media advertising has become a critical strategy for reaching this population. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube enable institutions to deliver customized content to specific demographic segments based on age, location, educational background, language preference, and online behavior. By leveraging these tools, colleges can promote flexible course offerings,

career-relevant programs, and student support services directly to prospective learners who are most likely to benefit from them. support services directly to prospective learners who are most likely to benefit from them. For example, a community college seeking to reengage Latinx adult learners might run bilingual ads highlighting evening classes and tuition support, ensuring the messaging resonates culturally and contextually. This type of data-informed targeting enhances engagement and application rates, enabling institutions to connect more authentically with underrepresented populations.



Outreach and Engagement Examples

MI Reconnect 21 Digital Marketing

The [Michigan Center for Adult College Success](#), in partnership with [CollegeApp](#) and [25th Hour Communications](#), was selected by the Office of Higher Education in the [Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential \(MiLEAP\)](#) through an RFP to operate a digital marketing campaign promoting the Michigan Reconnect Age Expansion Scholarship targeting adults 21-24 (Reconnect 21). In addition to developing a [Champion Toolkit](#), which included a range of marketing materials tailored to different populations and languages, potential learners were identified through data mining, and messaging was customized to address both demographic personas and geographic eligibility for Reconnect 21.

A total of 39,936 individuals targeted in the digital marketing campaign engaged with Reconnect by either starting an application or requesting more information, representing a 12.5% engagement rate. The campaign saw significantly higher engagement among Latinx and white populations, with some equity gaps observed among Black populations. Although no analysis has identified the root causes of these gaps, the results suggest that digital outreach is a promising approach for engaging adult learners of color. However, there remains a need for further refinement of messaging that is explicitly aimed at Black students. Additional analyses are warranted to better understand why the campaign was more successful with Latinx students than with Black students.

Central New Mexico Community College (CNM)

CNM utilized targeted social media advertising to reengage adult learners, with a particular focus on Latinx and Native American students between the ages of 25 and 44. The college ran bilingual Facebook and Instagram campaigns featuring short videos of adult students sharing their success stories. These videos emphasized flexible scheduling, online learning options, and access to career support.

The campaign also employed geofencing to target individuals in ZIP codes with historically low postsecondary participation, complemented by tailored messaging specifically designed to resonate with working adults balancing employment and family responsibilities.

Messaging and Modes of Delivery

Effective messaging requires foresight and planning. Specifically, it is crucial to gather, reflect upon, and act on information about adult learners of color within the community. The emphasis on local context cannot be overstated, as racially minoritized adults are not a monolith. While certain generalizations can be drawn from current research, it is essential to conduct fieldwork within one's own community to that messaging is informed by accurate, context-specific insights, allowing for the development of effective programs, practices, and processes.

For adult learners in general, messaging that highlights the return on investment of higher education, the ability to balance parenting and work responsibilities with academic pursuits, and the time required to earn a valuable credential tends to resonate with their priorities when considering enrollment in college.

Mathematica's evaluation of Lumina Foundation's multi-state Adult Promise Pilot programs (Goble et al., 2021) provides examples of adult-centric messaging used by participating colleges to connect with adults in their respective states. Sample phrases include, "It's never too late to finish what you started and begin a new chapter in your life" (Oklahoma) and "College is more than just a degree. Your college experience helps you define who you want to be, what you want to do in the future, and how you can build a better life for you and your family" (Hawaii) (p. 6).

Central to the aims of this guidebook is the goal of ensuring that marketing materials foster a sense of belonging amongst racially minoritized adults. Colleges should use

imagery that reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of the groups they are targeting in their messaging. One key theme from the Wilder Research listening sessions discussed earlier (Hamrock et al., 2021) was that, "Outreach, communication, and relationship building efforts should be pursued to address the postsecondary narrative mismatch for adult learners" (p. 7). Specifically, the dominant narrative about who qualifies as a "college student" (and, by extension, who does not) has historically skewed towards younger students fresh out of high school. Racially minoritized adults are especially attuned to this narrative mismatch, as it contrasts sharply with their lived experiences. As one participant articulated:

"I think that's really a struggle even when you see the pamphlets, the brochures, it's always pictures of young people. I think that makes it hard for people to see themselves in a university or in a college. If I don't see somebody that looks like me, I'm not going to go. Even when it's an older person, it's always like a white older person, and so it's like, 'Well, where's the Latino student that's older—African American student, Asian American student?' I think that also needs to be reflected so that people can see themselves going to a place that's for them. – Stakeholder (p. 14)

(Hamrock et al., 2021)

All college outreach materials should therefore be designed to portray racially minoritized adult learners of various ages, life roles, and settings—both on and off campus—signaling to the reader that they are seen and that they belong as future or continuing collegians. Similarly, multilingual marketing materials proactively reduce language barriers, helping institutions connect with Latino and Native American adult learners who are not English speakers (Nichols & Barger, 2021).

Importantly, colleges must remain aware of the potential to unintentionally mislead prospective students by featuring in their outreach materials imagery or representations that do not reflect the actual campus environment or available services. For example, if a college runs an advertisement portraying a large group of Latinx students socializing in a student lounge, yet the college's Latinx student population is minimal, such messaging may be misleading to prospective Latinx students considering enrollment. Ultimately, colleges must be realistic and transparent about their offerings, student demographics, and campus climate.



Raritan Valley Community College (RVCC New Jersey)

The college promoted advertisements on its website for its “Adult Learning Experience” orientation sessions, offering a relevant example of how colleges can ensure that adults of color are represented in adult-centric imagery and outward-facing communications.

Pitt Community College (Pitt CC) (via NC Reconnect / Belk initiative)

Goble et al. (2021) describe a re-enrollment campaign also coordinated with InsideTrack, Pitt CC used targeted text messages, emails, and phone calls to reach adult learners, many of whom were racially minoritized, who had completed at least 50% of a credential. Their email template was direct, warm, and centered on the learner's goals. It featured statements such as “You can get a better skill and a better job,” “You’ve already done the hard work,” and “Completing your credential means higher pay and more stability for you and your loved ones. This personalized, goal-oriented approach yielded a 7% response rate on cold outreach, well above typical campaign figures (Goble et al., 2021).

Oregon Adult Learner Outreach Toolkit

Developed by the Higher Education Coordinating Commission of Oregon (HECC), this resource serves as an example of how community colleges can tailor their messaging to adult learners of color while also offering recommendations for removing systemic barriers faced by racially minoritized adults. This toolkit provides sample messaging applicable across adult learner populations, for example: “Financial assistance can make your education affordable. Scholarships and grants are available to help you afford tuition, books, and other costs.”

In addition, the toolkit includes messaging specifically tailored to specific adult learner audiences:

- **Students who have SCNC**

Have some college credits but no degree? It's never too late to finish. Find out how your credits might transfer to an Oregon community college or public university.

- **Credit for Prior Learning**

You can get college credit for what you already know. By earning credit for prior learning, your certificate or degree is closer than ever.

- **Undocumented Students**

There are financial aid options for undocumented and DACA students. In Oregon, you may be considered for state financial aid programs. Explore your options, including submitting the Oregon Student Aid Application (ORSAA).



Community-Based Organizations and Agencies

Community-based organizations play a critical role in building and sustaining healthy communities. As trusted providers of social, physical, emotional, and spiritual support, CBOs are often seen as reliable and trusted sources of information. Community colleges can leverage this trust by partnering with CBOs to share messaging about what their institutions offer prospective and returning students. Targeted outreach at faith-based organizations, community centers, and workforce agencies has been shown to increase engagement with adult learners. For men of color in particular, research indicates that they are most likely to enroll or return to school when outreach occurs in trusted community spaces (Belk Center, 2023) as well as local businesses and labor unions (Geary, 2023).

Mathematica's report on a joint effort by Lumina Foundation and the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities underscores the importance of college-community partnerships in supporting adult learners of color. The Partnerships for Adult Learner Success (PALS) initiative helped urban-serving universities scale institution-wide changes in three key areas: cultural, programmatic, and structural. This multi-pronged approach enabled participating institutions to form external partnerships, thereby improving the recruitment of racially minoritized adults (Starks, 2024). Although the PALS initiative focused on urban-serving universities, the authors emphasize that "all institutions could consider establishing partnerships with those organizations most connected to their local communities, such as community centers, churches, or other professional organizations, such as unions" (Starks, 2024, p. 8).

[Miami Dade College \(Florida\)](#)

Miami Dade College has established a unique collaboration with multiple local community-based organizations, including [OIC of South Florida](#) and [Catalyst Miami](#), to provide students with financial coaching and health resources in conjunction with academic advising, workforce development, and re-entry support. Additionally, mobile outreach teams play a pivotal role in reaching underserved neighborhoods.

[Austin Community College \(ACC\) \(Texas\)](#)

This college has developed a long-standing relationship with [Capital Idea](#) to provide financial incentives to working adults pursuing postsecondary credentials. As a coalition of CBOs and employers in central Texas, Capital Idea has spent the past 25 years raising funds to support adult students with tuition, course textbooks, childcare assistance, career guidance, and job placement.

Common Methods Used for Outreach to Adult Students of Color

When surveying the landscape for common tactics colleges use to effectively connect with racially minoritized adults, several recurring elements emerge across successful initiatives:

Personalized Reengagement

Direct contact via calls, texts, or emails to adult learners who previously paused their enrollment.

Representation in Imagery and Language of Origin

Featuring adult students of color in marketing materials (web, social media, print, and video) and ensuring that all content is available in multiple languages.

Focus-Group Driven Message Design

Crafting messaging informed by input from adult learners of color, with an emphasis on family, career advancement, and affordability.

Partnerships

Collaborating with navigators or national vendors such as InsideTrack to amplify student messaging and partnering with CBOs, faith-based organizations, workforce development agencies, and local cultural centers.

Effectively Engaging Adult Students of Color



While more than 36.8 million adults under 65 years of age in the U.S. have some college experience without earning a credential, Black, Latino, and Native American students are overrepresented within this population (Berg et al., 2024). This fact makes it all the more urgent for colleges to develop effective engagement strategies to support these learners.

According to Starks et al. (2024), adult students of color feel most supported when institutions intentionally create college cultures that honor their unique perspectives and implement programs and processes that are responsive to their needs. Effective engagement is multi-level, multi-faceted, and includes the following high-impact practices:

- Recognizing and appreciating student identities beyond their role as students
- Supporting their work-life balance
- Promoting their sense of belonging
- Providing opportunities for professional growth and development.

This guide serves as a starting point for exploring these areas; however, each institution should engage directly with adult students of color on their campuses to better understand and respond to their specific needs.

Recognize and appreciate students' identities beyond their identity as a student

Adult students often occupy overlapping social roles, such as parent, employee, caregiver, each with its own set of responsibilities and contributions, in addition to their role as students. Those roles equip them with valuable skill sets and forms of knowledge that should be respected and, when appropriate, incorporated into their educational experiences on campus. Recognizing the “fullness” of adult students’ identities and extending mutual respect can also play a critical role in faculty-student relationships. This is especially important for adult Black male students, who have been shown to defer to faculty to avoid appearing disrespectful or to preserve the faculty member’s credibility in the classroom (Goings, 2017)

Support their work-life balance

Flexible course and term schedules give busy adults greater options to pursue their educational goals while managing life responsibilities. For example, some colleges have condensed traditional 16-week courses and terms into 8- or 6-week formats, maintaining academic rigor while allowing students more time for other areas of their lives. Learning pathways should also be reviewed and adapted to ensure accessibility for all learners. Institutions that offer Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) and Prior Learning Assessments (PLA) are better positioned to engage a broader talent pool of community members whose prior work experiences give them a head start in completing a college credential. While CPL has been shown to positively impact persistence and graduation rates among adults who access these programs (CAEL, 2021), colleges must address equity gaps in CPL usage across minoritized groups.

[Virginia Western Community College](#) (VWCC) exemplifies such equity-focused support. The college offers immigrant students an English as a Second Language (ESL) course specifically designed to help them compile a CPL portfolio of their prior work experiences. Because the course is not covered by financial aid, VWCC provides a \$500 scholarship to participating students. To further expand access to postsecondary credits, VWCC also works with students who have taken classes while incarcerated. For additional information on implementing equitable CPL pathways, see the *Framework for Advancing Equitable Credit for Prior Learning* guidebook within this series.

Course format and scheduling also play a significant role in enabling adult learners to balance life and academic responsibilities. Providing students with choices such as synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid course formats adds a valuable layer of flexibility. For example, as a mini-grant recipient of North Carolina’s state-wide [NC Reconnect](#) efforts to reengage adult learners, the College of Albemarle implemented an innovative class model known as “high-flex environments.” In these HyFlex courses, students had the freedom to choose how they would engage with the course material throughout the semester—via web conference, in person, or online asynchronously (Belk, 2024).

Promote their sense of belonging

It is common for returning—or first-time—adult collegians to feel they are behind their younger peers or do not belong on campus. Additionally, racially minoritized students across age groups often encounter both implicit and explicit racial harm within the classroom and

across campus environments. Micro- and macro-level forms of racialized maltreatment are too frequently perpetrated by faculty, advisors, student service professionals, and fellow students. Race-based discrimination can manifest through assumptions of criminality as well as perceptions of academic or cultural inferiority (Wood & Harris III, 2017).

Given the potentially hostile environments that racially minoritized students may face, community colleges must develop inclusive, racially equitable campus infrastructures centered around the respect and dignity of all students.

[The Caring Campus](#) initiative, developed by the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC), promotes systemic changes in how faculty and nonacademic staff interact with students. The initiative offers coaching to help institutions establish sustainable relationships with students and strengthen collaboration across departments. The underlying idea is that intentional behavioral changes among college professionals—such as using “warm referrals” or implementing first-week greetings—can positively impact student persistence and completion rates (Barnett and Bickerstaff, 2022). Preliminary findings suggest that implementation of the Caring Campus model shows promise in addressing racial equity gaps at community colleges (IEBC, 2021).

Provide them with professional growth and development opportunities

Research shows that students are more likely to persist when their education is directly linked to career advancement (Belk Center, 2023). For adult learners more broadly, a postsecondary education serves as a pathway to improving their own lives and the lives of their families. Accordingly, colleges bear responsibility for building and maintaining the institutional infrastructure necessary to facilitate professional growth and development opportunities that lead to high-wage employment after graduation.

Industry-college partnerships are critical linkage points that connect course content to work-based training experiences. Through internships, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training, adult students can continue to build practical skills while making timely progress toward completing their academic programs.

Notably, paid apprenticeships and tuition reimbursement programs have been shown to significantly reduce dropout rates by alleviating students’ financial burdens. One study found that 75% of students enrolled in employer-funded tuition programs completed their degrees, compared to only 35% of students without employer sponsorship (Geary, 2023).

Enrollment Navigators

Enrollment navigators are dedicated staff members or trained peer mentors who guide adult learners through the admissions and onboarding processes. They can be crucial in increasing engagement and promoting equity for adult learners of color. Navigators provide culturally relevant support, help eliminate administrative barriers—such as FAFSA, registering for courses, and accessing financial aid—and offer personalized outreach that acknowledges students' lived experiences and responsibilities. Evidence indicates that navigator-led programs are among the most effective strategies in state Adult Promise initiatives, with over 70% of participating institutions reporting a substantial impact on enrollment resulting from navigator or ambassador support.

Southside Virginia Community College (SVCC) hosts a dedicated [Navigator Team](#) that assists adult learners through admissions steps, course registration, and academic planning. Support is available via telephone, Zoom, or in-person appointments.

South Texas College (STC), a designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), offers support through its [Office of Student Reengagement](#). Adult re-enrollees are connected with a single point of contact—a navigator or coach—who guides them through the admissions, financial aid, academic advising, and course registration processes. They also connect them to community resources for needs such as childcare and textbooks.



Financial Support and Basic Needs

We know that students enroll in college with the hope of creating a better life for themselves and the people they care most about. However, the absence of, or threats to, securing basic needs such as food, childcare, clothing, mental health services, financial support, and transportation can significantly hinder a student's ability to fully engage in their program of study. It is nearly impossible to focus on academic deadlines when the demands of day-to-day survival consume one's attention. Accordingly, community colleges must support students in building a solid foundation of health and well-being to thrive in the classroom and beyond.

More than 50% of community college students experience housing insecurity, with students of color disproportionately affected (Geary, 2023). Food insecurity is also widespread among low-income students, many of whom are unaware of available resources such as campus food pantries and assistance with SNAP enrollment. Additionally, students who carry unpaid debt from previous semesters may choose not to enroll due to a lack of financial means to clear those balances.

Findings from [The Student Financial Wellness Survey](#) (2024) provide additional insight into undergraduates' challenges in accessing basic needs. Trellis Strategies, a non-profit research and consulting firm focused on workforce advancement and higher education, administered the survey to 104 colleges and universities, receiving nearly 50,000 responses from undergraduate students to capture a snapshot of overall student well-being.

The Student Financial Wellness survey revealed the following:

- Almost half of the respondents reported difficulty focusing on academics due to financial challenges
- 44% reported experiencing food insecurity
- 43% reported housing insecurity
- 14% indicated that they had experienced homelessness in the past year since beginning college
- 13% reported missing classes due to unreliable transportation
- 33% reported experiencing symptoms of major depression

The Trellis report emphasizes the importance of not only bolstering student support services on campus but also ensuring that students are aware of available resources, both on campus and within the greater community, to help them stay on track with their studies.

Programs like Germanna Community College's [Single Stop](#) screening tool help bridge this information gap by assisting students in assessing their eligibility for essential basic needs such as food, transportation, housing, and employment services. Students can complete the screening online or receive in-person assistance from a Single Stop specialist.



Institutional debt forgiveness programs (iDebt), embedded within initiatives such as [Chicago Fresh Start](#) and [Detroit Reconnect](#) have proven that forgiving outstanding college debts enables thousands of students to return to school. In addition, policies that eliminate transcript holds, expand emergency financial aid, and streamline the FAFSA process have been shown to significantly increase completion rates.

Making emergency aid dollars available to students facing financial hardships has also proven effective in helping them navigate unexpected life circumstances. The Hope Center has developed a [guide for distributing emergency grant aid](#). For example, Austin Community College has operated its [Student Emergency Fund](#) since 2002, providing individual, need-based grants of up to \$1,500.00. Applicants must maintain a minimum GPA of 2.0 and complete an interview with a social work-trained advocate. These grants have resulted in a 91% retention of recipients.

In 2016, numerous states launched [Adult Promise](#) programs to reduce the financial barriers that adult learners often face when attempting to re-enroll in college. In response to the exclusion of learners over age 24 from many traditional state and local promise programs, the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association ([SHEEO](#)) and the [Lumina Foundation](#) collaborated with states to develop promise-type programs specifically designed for adult learners. While each state has the flexibility to tailor its program to meet specific state contextual and learner needs, these promise programs generally operate as “last dollar” supports, covering tuition and fees after other aid is applied. Additional components at the state-level program may include mentoring services, industry pathways, credit for prior learning, and financial literacy training.

Academic Supports & Faculty and Staff Professional Development

Academic support made available to students cannot be separated from those who administer and facilitate such services. McGrath (2009) posits that “it is imperative...that [adult educators] are aware of the theories that are associated with adult learning and it would make sense that all adult educators should be educated ABOUT adult learning principles in some shape or form [emphasis in source]” (p. 109).

Andragogy, the most widely recognized model of adult learning, was developed by Malcolm S. Knowles (1970), who defined it as: “the art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 43). Andragogy is grounded in a core set of assumptions about how adults engage with learning and how best to support them in educational settings:

- Experiential learning strategies are essential for enabling adults to master and apply new concepts.
- Adults become ready to learn when they encounter real-life challenges that demand new knowledge and skills.
- Collaborative learning that values shared experiences is critical. Educators should invite adults to lead short discussions based on their career histories.
- Because adults are self-directed learners, they benefit from having flexibility in assignments, project formats, and deadlines

Ultimately, the instructor’s role is to help shape the conditions under which the adult learner can apply problem-solving strategies and acquire the requisite skills to become proficient and capable.

Therefore, it is critical that the instructor:

- Acknowledge diverse backgrounds and perspectives
- Avoid overly paternalistic teaching styles (i.e., “Sage on the Stage” pedagogy)
- Create space for adult learners to question, critique, and challenge ideas

Because the classroom is central to adult learners’ success, it should be critically examined for inequities in instruction, curriculum content, and both student-faculty and student-student interactions. Additionally, campus-based support services available to all students should be evaluated for their relevance to the lived experiences of adult learners of color.



Strategies to consider in supporting the academic success of racially minoritized adult learners include:

Peer and Faculty Mentoring

Connect adult students of color with peer or faculty mentors who share similar backgrounds or experiences to enhance feelings of belonging and professional networks.

Access to Diverse Course Materials

Support instructors in creating syllabi that include racially minoritized scholars and authors, as well as assignments that incorporate opportunities for personal narratives.

Culturally Responsive Advising

Train advisers in cultural humility and anti-racist advising practices to help students navigate coursework and identify institutional barriers.

Academic Coaching Through a Lens of Cultural Competence

Coaches can assist students with time management, self-advocacy, and scholarly confidence while simultaneously validating the racial and cultural stressors they may face.

Affinity-Based Study Groups and Learning Communities

Cohorting adult students of color and providing built-in academic and emotional support can foster collaboration, relationship-building, cultural validation, and mutual accountability.

Adults arrive on campus with biographies and histories that shape their educational journeys. For students of color, these histories are often shaped by systemic exclusion and underrepresentation in broader society. Johnson-Bailey (2002) poignantly reminds us:

When we participate in programs or classes as students, instructors, or planners, we bring the historical weight of race with us...such ranks, authorizations, honors, suspicions, and stereotypes cannot be cast aside. They are accrued in society's invisible hierarchical banking system of trading and bartering according to designated racial rankings (p. 40).

Accordingly, adult educators need to reflect on the broader social positions they occupy and consider how their socialization within these positions may adversely affect student achievement. Community college professionals, in particular, should participate regularly in professional development to further develop their cultural competencies (see the accompanying REACH *Culturally Sustainable Professional Development for Faculty and Staff* guidebook for more examples).

At the time of this publication, academic support services specifically designed to meet the needs of students who are both adults and racially minoritized remain limited.

Student support within colleges and universities is often conceptualized through an either/or lens, categorizing students as either adults or students of color, without accounting for the intersections of gender or other minoritized social markers. Nevertheless, academic supports tailored to adults and racially minoritized students, respectively, still fulfill the promise of advancing equitable student success outcomes.

Examples of Academic Supports

[The Center for Male Engagement](#) (CME) at the Community College of Philadelphia offers a one-stop shop for academic and financial resources designed to enhance retention rates and empower Black male students. CME employs a culturally responsive mentorship model, ensuring that Black male students receive personalized coaching and guidance from professionals who understand their lived experiences and educational barriers. Additionally, CME offers career exploration sessions, resume writing workshops, and mock interview training to help students prepare for professional success.

California Community College System (CCC) launched a state-wide campaign entitled [“I Can Go To College”](#) to raise awareness of financial aid, guaranteed transfer pathways, and career programs. The campaign utilizes targeted marketing, culturally relevant messaging, imagery, tribal consulting, and grassroots outreach to local tribal and urban Native communities.

The [Bridges to College Program](#), created by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, supports adult students transitioning into and completing postsecondary credentials, including those in non-credit programs such as GED preparation and ESL courses. The program primarily targets low-income and underrepresented adult students, offering wraparound advising to improve persistence, self-efficacy, and entry into credit-bearing programs of study

Leveraging Institutional Data



Having access to—and the ability to analyze—student-level datasets can empower community college faculty, staff, and administrators by illuminating combinations of the “5 W’s” (*who, what, when, where, how*) that can be leveraged to advance student success of racially minoritized adult students.

In discussions about the importance of leveraging institutional data, it is essential to recognize that community colleges vary in their capacities to collect, analyze, and disseminate data. The expectation is not for every institution to operate on equal footing. Instead, it is understood that each college possesses distinct contexts, capacities, and financial resources related to data management and analysis. Regardless of these differences, advancing the outcomes for racially minoritized adult students requires that institutions utilize existing elements within their data infrastructure to foster a data-informed campus culture.

In their report *“Developing a Data-Informed Campus Culture: Opportunities and Guidance for Institutional Data Use,”* Maldonado et al. (2021) outline five recommendations for institutions working to bridge the data-implementation gap that many colleges face.

They encourage colleges and universities to:

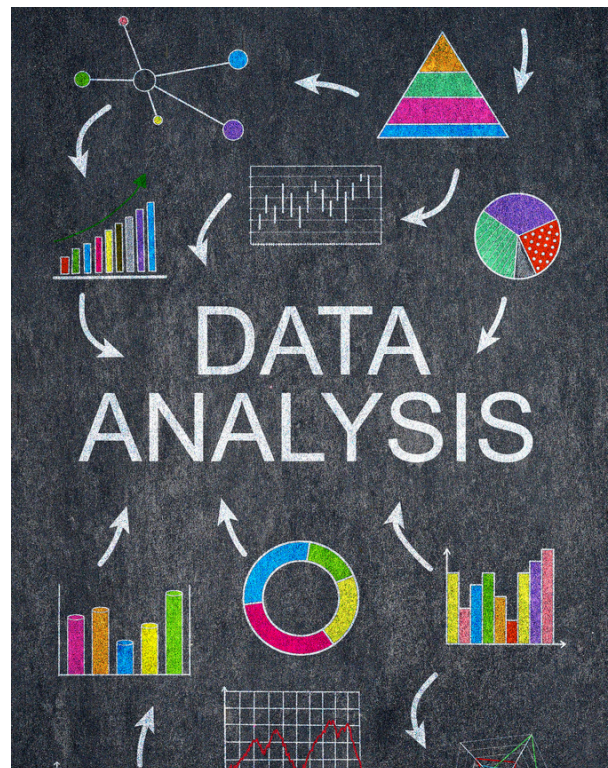
1. Identify data champions among leadership and across campus to establish a data culture and increase data literacy.
2. Strengthen data literacy among all campus stakeholders.
3. Establish unified metrics across offices and a data dictionary to standardize definitions, streamline analysis, and improve data literacy.
4. Develop partnerships to streamline data processes, including synthesis and governance.
5. Invest time and resources in improving access to and use of high-quality data on campus.

As a 2025 Aspen Institute [“Finalist of Distinction,” San Jacinto College](#) (Texas) has incorporated many of the previously mentioned recommendations for developing a data-informed campus culture. The college implements a data warehouse and real-time dashboards for faculty and advisors. Additionally, faculty and staff are offered regular professional development opportunities to help them integrate data in instruction and advising practices. The college also partnered with an external data analytics company to determine which programs of study were most likely to lead students into sustainable employment for graduates. This effort resulted in the closure of some programs and the creation and/or expansion of others that aligned more closely with the local labor market.

As noted earlier, racially minoritized adult students are often overlooked because they exist at the intersection of race and age descriptors. To address this oversight, colleges must disaggregate student-level data by both race *and* age to gain

meaningful insight into how these learners are performing across various metrics.

Understanding differential outcomes and identifying achievement gaps among adult learners of color enables institutions to investigate root causes and design targeted interventions that support students’ academic, social, and emotional needs. Harris and Wood (2022) emphasize the importance of investing in robust data systems that enable the disaggregation of data across student subgroups, particularly in efforts to advance the success of men of color attending community colleges. The authors note, “Efforts to improve postsecondary access and success for men of color cannot be as timely and targeted as they need to be in the absence of these data” (p. 12).



Interrogating Application and Enrollment Data

Colleges should disaggregate and review application data by age, race and ethnicity, income, and zip code to identify populations with low college participation rates. Once communities and groups with low application rates are identified, colleges can develop and implement targeted outreach efforts using culturally relevant strategies to help boost applications from those populations and underrepresented neighborhoods.

Colleges should also disaggregate and examine the data from application to enrollment to identify potential gaps in the process. Upon identifying these gaps, colleges should investigate potential causes of non-enrollment by conducting funnel analyses to determine the reasons behind the decline. A helpful starting point is to match applicant data to determine whether those who did not enroll had completed a FAFSA. Analyzing where adult students of color stopped out of the enrollment process can reveal areas for improvement, such as orientation, advising, or registration processes. Additionally, colleges may consider reaching out to non-enrollees to conduct focus groups to identify common themes behind their decision not to enroll.

Disaggregating data serves as a microscope, revealing where racial equity gaps exist at the institutional, programmatic, and course levels. For example, [Sinclair Community College](#) has held an annual campus-wide Data and Equity Summit since 2016. The college practices transparency with outcome data and uses it to inform campus planning and improvement efforts, particularly for men of color.

Disaggregated data can help institutions close racial equity gaps by providing critical insight into questions such as:

- Who is enrolling? Does the student body reflect the broader community served?
- Who is being retained and who persists by semester, by course, and to degree completion?
- What is the racial/ethnic composition across programs of study? Are certain groups concentrated in specific programs? What characteristics do those programs share?
- Who is gaining employment post-graduation? In which sectors? Do these sectors offer family-sustaining wages and benefits?

College-wide metrics on completion, GPA, re-enrollment, and transfer offer valuable insights into how students generally perform at institutions; however, these data points do not reveal the underlying reasons—the “why”—behind the outcomes. Community college professionals must intentionally seek input from racially minoritized adult students to understand which aspects of their college experiences act as educational barriers and which can be improved to support their postsecondary success.

Collecting and utilizing qualitative data is also important for cultivating a data-driven campus culture. Seeking student perspectives is a purposeful endeavor rooted in the desire to understand their lived experiences. This process may include individual interviews, focus groups, or surveys. Central to this effort is the expectation that colleges will use the data gathered to inform and shape their institutional practices and programs. Processing data is not enough; students expect institutions to act on their behalf. One effective way to ensure students are heard is by including them in formal discussions about college policies through student governance and shared governance boards.

In this spirit, colleges nationwide have developed innovative strategies to include students in institutional operations while also preparing them for future leadership roles (Finkel, 2024).

Example Initiatives Include:

- [Madison Area Technical College](#) (Wisconsin) - Senior administrators, including the college president, attend student senate meetings to gain direct insight into student concerns. Students also participate regularly in working groups with college decision-makers.
- [South Puget Sound Community College](#) (Washington) - The student senate administers quarterly surveys, and results are used to inform collaboration with executive leadership and the board of trustees on potential changes to policies and campus offerings.
- [Borough of Manhattan Community College \(BMCC\)](#) (New York) - Student government association members participate in key voting decisions within the college council and academic senate.

Access to high-quality data provides colleges with invaluable insights into all aspects of institutional operations that affect students as they enter, matriculate, and complete their postsecondary education. A college's ability to leverage institutional data is reflected in how nimble it can address—and how responsively it can act upon—identified barriers to student success. A broad range of data points should be collected, analyzed, and utilized proactively to anticipate potential equity gaps before racially minoritized adult students experience them. Admittedly, developing a data-informed campus culture presents more challenges for some colleges than others. However, actively working to build these capacities will not only enhance how colleges fulfill their missions but also improve the lives of the students they serve.



Putting it All Together

There remains a need for continued focus on policies, practices, and processes that are responsive to the perspectives, challenges, and strengths of racially minoritized adult students attending community colleges.

Across the nation, colleges are advancing promising practices that can benefit adult students of color, even though many of these initiatives are designed with a broader adult learner population in mind.

While race-neutral conceptualizations of adult students' college experiences do not fully capture the complexities of racially minoritized adults, they offer high-impact data-informed starting points that can be strengthened by intentionally incorporating considerations of students' racialized realities.

As mentioned earlier, several states have undertaken concerted efforts to create financial, workforce, and academic support structures for adult learners through [Adult Promise](#) programs. Similarly, adult [Reconnect](#) initiatives are designed to facilitate college re-entry points and provide continued support for adults, particularly those who have earned college credit

but have not earned a credential. Example states include [California](#), [North Carolina](#), [Michigan](#), and [Tennessee](#).

Through qualitative research with stakeholders involved in North Carolina's Reconnect program, including students, community college presidents, faculty, and staff, the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at North Carolina State University (Belk Center) developed a conceptual framework known as the "Five P's." This framework, grounded in adult student journey mapping at North Carolina community colleges, consists of five components: *public messaging*, *partnerships*, *processes*, *pathways*, and *proximity*.

Each component raises critical questions colleges should consider when designing strategies to reengage and support adult learners. The authors also include a "Racial Equity Consideration" to ensure the specific needs of racially minoritized adult learners are addressed (VanZoest et al., June 2024).

Public Messaging *Marketing and Communication*



Question

Where is public messaging currently viewed or heard by adult learners? Where *should* it be?

Action

Conduct a market analysis or focus group with students who have recently attended the institution.

Racial Equity Consideration

Ensure that racial diversity is represented not only among focus group participants but also among those facilitating the conversations.

Partnerships *Collaboration*



Question

How will the college foster internal teamwork and buy-in from faculty and staff to support adult learners?

Action

Emphasize the needs of adult learners by establishing adult learning centers or “one-stop” centers for advising and access to community resources

Racial Equity Consideration

Offer professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to explore and gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by racially minoritized adults on campus.

Processes

Shifting the Approach



Question

What changes in institutional processes and practices are necessary to reengage adult learners?

Action

Develop pre-college transition programs tailored for adult learners

Racial Equity Consideration

Disaggregate all student-level data by race and age to identify where equity gaps may exist.

Pathways

Academic and Career Advising



Question

What does academic advising look like for adult learners? How does it differ from advising traditional-age students?

Action

Create “career communities” and expand career advising services to reflect the motivations adults have for enrolling in college programs

Racial Equity Consideration

Monitor advising practices to ensure that adults of color are not disproportionately funneled into low-wage career pathways.

Proximity *to Access and Completion*



Question

What innovative strategies can reduce time-to-degree for adult learners?

Action

Hire adult success coaches to mentor and build authentic relationships.

Racial Equity Consideration

Initiatives such as Men of Color initiatives (MOCI) and peer/faculty mentorship programs have proven effective in fostering leadership development and academic engagement among men of color (Snodgrass, 2021).

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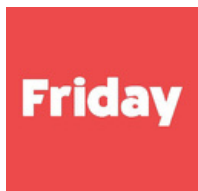
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Friday is a mission-driven strategy and design firm focused on three intersectional areas we believe are critical to shaping the future: learning that helps us realize our potential, work that gives us the opportunity to apply our talents, and communities that connect us to something bigger than ourselves. Our team of strategists, educators, and creatives have joined the REACH team to distill the work of the collaborative into simple, compelling messages and to share those widely with the field.



The REACH Collaborative is focused on creating pathways designed for Black, Hispanic and Latino, and Native American adults to earn quality credentials that lead to a degree. We work with states and community colleges to replace systems and beliefs that unfairly hold adult learners of color back from a better education and life with pathways, supports, and practices that celebrate and value their unique lived experiences.