![Jobs for the Future]

Building Systems That Work for Adult Learners

Lessons from the Field

AT A GLANCE

Many states are adopting free community college programs to support their growing population of adult learners. The Improving Economic Mobility for Adult Learners Initiative (IEMAL) provides an illustration of how colleges along with state organizations are working to create new policies and structures that are responsive to a changing economy and student demographics.

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Acknowledgments

About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) transforms U.S. education and workforce systems to drive economic success for people, businesses, and communities. jff.org

About Achieving the Dream

Achieving the Dream (ATD) is a partner and champion of more than 300 community colleges across the country. Drawing on our expert coaches, groundbreaking programs, and national peer network, we provide institutions with integrated, tailored support for every aspect of their work—from foundational capacities such as leadership, data, and equity to intentional strategies for supporting students holistically, building K–12 partnerships, and more. We call this Whole College Transformation. Our vision is for every college to be a catalyst for equitable and economically vibrant communities. We know that with the right partner and the right approach, colleges can drive access, completion rates, and employment outcomes—so that all students can access life-changing learning that propels them into community-changing careers. Follow us on X (Twitter), Facebook, and LinkedIn.

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Executive Summary

Across the country, policymakers, postsecondary leaders, and students themselves are engaged in questions about the purpose and value of college. Learners are trying to reconcile concerns about the cost and relevance of postsecondary education with the increasing importance of postsecondary training and credentials for attaining good jobs. Many of these learners—and especially adults, who make up 43% of community college enrollments—are seeking to enhance their knowledge and skills. To support adult learner enrollment in higher education, many states have developed Adult Promise or Adult Reconnect programs that provide financial support for adult learners. These programs are an important first step for improving adult learner outcomes but need to be paired with changes to policy and practice.

Community colleges that adapt their policies and practices to today's economy and today's student demographics will be better positioned to meet the needs of all learners, including adults and traditional-age students. The Improving Economic Mobility for Adult Learners Initiative (IEMAL) provides an illustration of how colleges, along with state organizations, are working to create new policies and structures that are responsive to a changing economy and student demographics. These colleges and state organizations each chose evidence-based policies and practices that would provide adults with targeted advising and career services, reward prior learning and work experiences, accelerate credential attainment, and ensure that students are earning credentials with labor market value. In particular, they were intentional about designing the work with the long-term goals in mind, digging into the details of the institutional and state-level changes needed to improve adult learner success

This brief explores how colleges and their state partners used a variety of strategies, including process mapping, data analysis, and stakeholder engagement to make changes that would improve the adult learner experience. We also show how these early efforts are creating the conditions for longer-term change.

Key Takeaways

→ Promise programs—including those designed for high school graduates and those intended for adults—play an important role in supporting access to higher education. But to live up to the promise, colleges need to be reimagined to focus on success for all learners and connections to high-quality jobs.

→ For adult learners, credit for prior learning, career advising, and labor market alignment are important because of their collective potential to accelerate enrollment in and completion of programs with value in the local labor market.

→ Strategies like process mapping, data analysis, and internal/ external collaboration provide key insights to drive short-term and long-term change.

Introduction

Across the country, policy makers, postsecondary leaders, and students themselves are engaged in questions about the purpose and value of college. Learners are trying to reconcile concerns about the cost and relevance of postsecondary education with the increasing importance of postsecondary training and credentials for attaining good jobs. Many of these learners—and especially adults—are looking to community colleges to enhance their knowledge and skills.

These adults—who make up 43% of community college enrollments—are returning to college, or entering for the first time, after experience in the workforce.[1] To support this growing population of adult learners[2], many states have begun to adopt programs with names such as Adult Promise and Adult Reconnect as financial incentives to urge adults to enter college.

Financial Incentives for Adults in IEMAL States[1]:

Michigan Reconnect (Reconnect) is a last-dollar scholarship program that pays for students to attend their in-district community college tuition-free or offers a large tuition discount if attending an out-of-district community college.

New Jersey Community College Opportunity Grants are awards that will pay the costs of tuition and approved educational fees not already covered by other available grants applied to the student's account for New Jersey residents (including adults) with eligible adjusted gross incomes (AGI).

Virginia's G3 tuition assistance is for students who qualify for state financial aid with a household income less than $111,000. G3 is available for select programs in six of Virginia's most in-demand industries, including Education, Health Care, Hospitality & Culinary Arts, Information Technology, Public Safety, and Skilled Trades & Manufacturing.

Most community colleges were designed to meet the needs of last century's economy, where most individuals went to college directly after high school, then entered the workplace and pursued a career. Colleges have made many changes over the past decade to adjust to growing numbers of part-time learners and in response to concerns about completion rates and labor market outcomes. Yet colleges are still designed around the needs of students coming directly from high school, who have different needs and time constraints compared to adult learners. Most are still learning how to serve as institutions of lifelong learning, supporting adults as they come back to college to learn new skills and advance their careers.

Today's economy, and today's learners, need a new model—one that allows continual entry and exit throughout a career, that values the skills adults have learned through work and life experience, and that offers accelerated opportunities to earn credentials with labor market value. Workers who want to advance and keep pace with new technologies and new demands are looking for ways to enhance their knowledge and skills throughout their careers. Community colleges that adapt their policies and practice to this new reality will be better positioned to meet the needs of all learners, including adults as well as traditional-age students.

Promise programs—including those designed for high school graduates and those intended for adults—play an important role in supporting access to higher education. But to live up to the promise, colleges need to be reimagined to focus on success for all learners and connections to high-quality jobs.

Restructuring for a New Purpose

The Improving Economic Mobility for Adult Learners Initiative (IEMAL) provides an illustration of how colleges, along with state organizations, are working to create new policies and structures that are responsive to a changing economy and student demographics. IEMAL is a two-year initiative led by Jobs for the Future (JFF) and Achieving the Dream (ATD) to support colleges and state entities to build policies and practices that would better meet the needs of adult learners and result in better career outcomes. Nine community colleges and three state offices in New Jersey, Michigan, and Virginia have pursued changes to meet the following three goals of the initiative:

- Improve the overall adult learner advising experience, including improved career guidance, use of labor market data, and discussing opportunities to earn credit for prior learning experiences early in the student journey.
- Make measurable progress on at least two policy or practice changes at state and institutional levels.
- Tailor strategies to enhance support for adults most marginalized by existing systems: adults experiencing economic hardship and Black, Latine, and Indigenous populations.

Small Changes Toward Bigger Impact

The colleges and state organizations within IEMAL have made tremendous strides toward these goals, especially given the short timeframe of the initiative. Importantly, the work doesn't end here. Transforming an institution is a long-term proposition; colleges must leverage multiple grants, reallocate internal funding, and capitalize on available opportunities (such as state initiatives) to advance their long-term goals. While many of the changes made by the states and colleges are relatively small in scale, they have been pursued and designed in a manner that adds to work already underway *and* lays the groundwork for large-scale change. States and colleges were intentional about designing the work with the long-term goals in mind, digging into the details of the institutional and state-level changes needed to improve adult learner success.

One of the goals of this work was to identify high-impact processes, policies, and strategies that support adult learners *and* could be applied to other populations not well-served by traditional models. The implementation levers used at the college level promote longer-term systems change by addressing policies, practices, relationships, and mental models.[3] For example, colleges engaged in process mapping and data analysis to understand how career advising and credit for prior learning currently work at their institutions. These exercises revealed a wealth of information about gaps, barriers, and overlaps that create unnecessary burdens on students. The findings gave colleges an indication of where they could make high-impact changes. The learning from the process mapping can also inform efforts beyond the grant—colleges can now apply process mapping to other parts of the college or other specific populations. Colleges also focused on building leadership and faculty buy-in for credit for prior learning and career advising, which will support continued expansion of the adult learner work beyond the grant. While the long-term impact is yet to come, we have documented in this brief the early work at the state and college level and share how these changes set the stage for future work.

Key Levers for Implementation at the College Level:

Redesign Student–Facing Materials

Train Faculty and Staff

Align Credentials

Systematic Data Collection & Access

Leadership Buy-in for Policy and Practice Change

Restructure Existing Departments

Inventory Current Processes

Address Undeclared & General Studies Students

Building Systems That Work for Adult Learners

The colleges and state organizations participating in IEMAL each chose evidence-based practices and policies that they would implement to make a difference for adult learners. Collectively, these changes are intended to provide targeted advising and career services, reward prior learning and work experiences, accelerate credential attainment, and ensure that students are earning credentials with labor market value. These areas were selected because of their collective potential to accelerate enrollment in and completion of programs with value in the local labor market.

These three areas—advising, labor market information, and CPL—are deeply intertwined: the work at the college level in particular integrated elements of all three.

Credit for Prior Learning

Labor Market Information Integration

Advising/Career Services Redesign
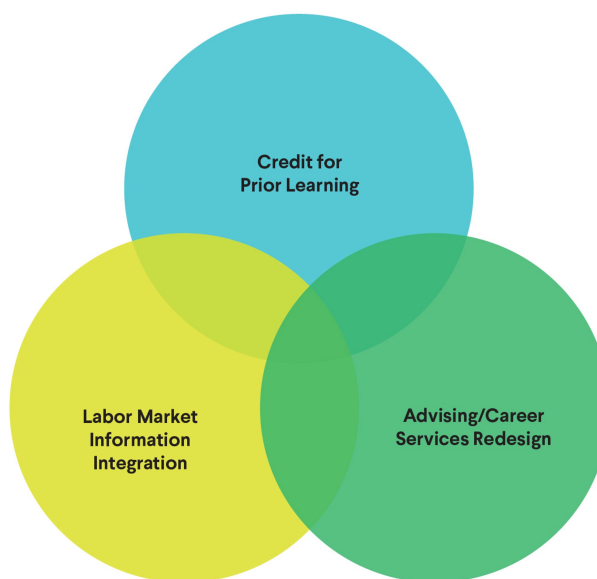
Credit for Prior Learning

Credit for prior learning (CPL), also referred to as prior learning assessment (PLA), is an important practice for serving adult learners because it honors and validates the skills that adults bring with them when they enroll in postsecondary education. CPL/PLA is not a new approach, yet it is the rare college that recognizes and accepts students' prior work and life experience to reduce the courses they must take to obtain a credential. Major obstacles exist to effective implementation: advisors and other staff are unfamiliar with the process; there are rarely standard procedures to ensure that every student is informed of the opportunity and understands how the process works; faculty may question the assessment process and not be provided financial compensation/incentive to do so. Many IEMAL colleges were excited about the possibility to use this initiative to dig more deeply into their CPL processes and make long-overdue process improvements as well as expanding CPL opportunities. The structure of this initiative, with collaboration between the state entity and the colleges, allowed for tackling of some of the larger issues impeding uptake of CPL, including inconsistency across colleges in terms of accepted forms of CPL and course equivalencies.

Labor Market Alignment

At the onset of this initiative, the JFF/ATD team highlighted use of labor market information (LMI) as an important area of change for supporting adult learners, given the importance of career-connected learning for most adult learners. LMI provides colleges and learners with important insights into which jobs are in demand locally, what they pay, opportunities for career advancement, and the skills and credentials employers are looking for. When advisors and career services staff have access to LMI and training on how to use it, they are better able to help learners develop and achieve their career goals. Over the course of the initiative, we found that the work of labor market alignment focused less on using LMI and more on creating seamless pathways that use CPL and noncredit/credit articulation to create career pathways in high-demand industries such as health care.

Advising and Career Services Redesign

The past decade of postsecondary reform has emphasized advising redesign as critical to getting students onto and through a pathway. Many of the colleges in this initiative had engaged in advising redesign, but not with an explicit focus on adults. In addition, few had focused on infusing career services and access to labor market information into their advising processes. Adult learners come to college with different needs and aspirations than students coming straight from high school and thus require a different approach to advising. In particular, adults need up-front guidance on how to select a program that fits with their career goals, and they need to know about opportunities to accelerate credential attainment through tools like CPL. They may have different priorities when selecting a career path, and may need different supports, such as access to childcare. Advising plays a key role in helping adult learners feel like they belong in college.

Spotlights: Change in Action

In the next section of this brief, we will examine work in three different states to explore how colleges—and their state partners—used a variety of strategies, including process mapping, data analysis, and stakeholder engagement, to make changes in these areas. The spotlights will also show how their early efforts are creating the conditions for longer-term change.

College Spotlight #1:
Delta College

Innovation: Streamlining and simplifying Credit for Prior Learning (CPL)

Across the Michigan learners surveyed for the project, only 35% reported having any advising conversations about credit for learning, training, or work experience (n=459).

Recognizing the Need: With an average student age of 24 and 71% of learners attending part-time, Delta College's leadership knew it was important to accelerate student degree completion. President Michael Gavin had a prior focus on adult learner success and identified CPL and seamless transfer as key methods for enhancing retention and completion.

The college decided to start with a focus on veterans because there was more familiarity with CPL as a resource for learners with military training. They also identified computer science, and Google certifications in particular, as a starting point owing to LMI showing high wages and high demand. The initial goal was to help 5% more students earn credentials in computer science.
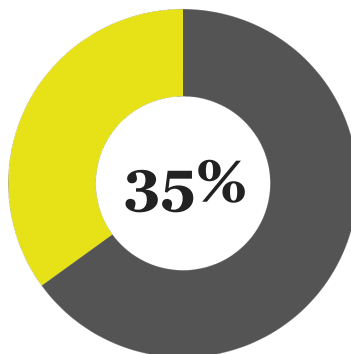
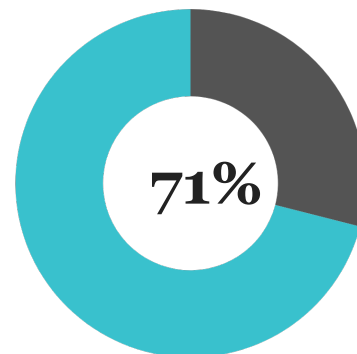## University City, Michigan

Setting: Rural

7,646

Fall 2023 Enrollment

35%

Adult Learners 25+[1]

71%

Part-time Enrollment

Process Mapping: The team started with an inventory of current processes and realized there were six different methods students could use to earn CPL at the college, which created confusion and acted as a barrier to students making use of CPL. Delta staff themselves didn't know if the college had an existing CPL tool or student-facing website. Therefore, there was a demonstrated need to simplify the CPL awarding process and improve student-facing materials.

Creating a One-Stop Shop: Once the team confirmed that no comprehensive CPL website or landing page existed, the IEMAL team decided to create an accessible, one-stop site for students and staff and a concise one-page student flyer to promote awareness of CPL and direct students to the newly designed webpage. They also worked to create an online ad campaign to encourage prospective students to come to Delta and use its CPL options.

Best Practices from Michigan Colleges	
Fellow Michigan colleges Macomb and Grand Rapids have developed their own innovative practices to expand and facilitate awarding of CPL. The Michigan team is also sharing best practices across the state. Delta College, Macomb Community College, and MiLEAP presented on *CPL for the Adult Learner* at the Michigan College Association Student Success Summit and the TRENDS in Occupational Studies Conferences held in Fall 2024.	
Grand Rapids Community College changed institutional policies to eliminate the fees for PLA review ($150 per class) and allow CPL for general education classes. Both of these changes will make it easier for students to make use of CPL. The college has also dedicated a CPL coordinator and is working on revising student-facing materials as well as outreach to advisors and faculty to increse awareness of CPL.	**Grand Rapids, MI** Setting: midsized city Fall 2023 enrollment: Total:12,142 71% Part-time 31% 25 and over
Macomb Community College made several changes to make it easier for students to earn CPL, including hiring a dedicated CPL manager, reducing portfolio assessment fees, creating a student-facing inquiry form, offering workshops for students, developing a standardized assessment rubric, and conducting targeted outreach, including to MI Reconnect students. The team began with a deep dive into CPL data to identify student populations that could benefit from greater engagement with CPL opportunities. Building on that, they collaborated with the IT department to create a CPL dashboard that provides real-time data to inform future decision-making.	**Warren, MI** Setting: midsized city Fall 2023 enrollment: Total: 15,983 69% Part-time 32% 25 and over

Increasing Impact Through Infrastructure: Beyond awareness and process improvement, the team wanted to create infrastructure to help more students access CPL. The most significant and impactful student-facing tool the college implemented during the grant period was an interactive online CPL Wizard. While this was a new subject and learning curve for most on the IEMAL team, Delta's Office of Information assisted in the development of the CPL Wizard and CPL landing page. It not only provides personalized recommendations based on a comprehensive set of questions, but it also encourages students to schedule a meeting with an advisor to go over additional details and next steps. By its launch, college advisors were trained in the CPL Wizard and made aware of the new CPL landing page and print materials.

Stakeholder Engagement: It is important to note that the team's success in improving CPL practices and CPL awarding for adult learners in large part hinged upon senior leadership empowering other leaders throughout the college to embrace the work. It was particularly crucial for advisors and administrators alike to understand how CPL awarding can boost access, outcomes, and trust among student populations who may otherwise find traditional education pathways too burdensome and impersonal.

Early Impact: The college has already seen early success in terms of computer science CPL equivalency awarded to more learners—approximately a 5% increase[4]. Current data has shown an increase in the number of students who were awarded credits this year versus the past year. The expectation is that the number of students, and amount of CPL awarded, will continue to grow with increased student awareness and buy-in from faculty, staff, and leadership across the College. The CPL Wizard can be used 24/7 to guide students through the process and is an early touchpoint with their student academic advisor. The Delta team's efforts have created a robust CPL infrastructure that will last well beyond the grant. Over time, the new process they have designed will be used to assess all students for work and life experience that may be eligible for credit.

> **"We know this is a beginning point, but the lift that the team has done … was pretty significant from an operational and cultural standpoint for the college."**
>
> **- Ed Suniga, Delta Community College**

Spotlight #2: Virginia Community College System

Innovation: Leveraging data systems to provide comprehensive advising and supports
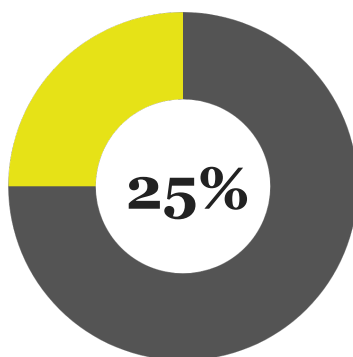
Central Virginia Community College
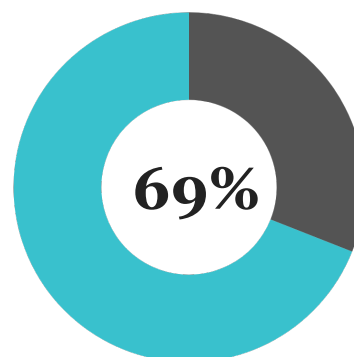
Lynchburg, Virginia

Setting: Small City

3,410

Fall 2023 Enrollment

25%

Adult Learners 25+

69%

Part-time Enrollment

Recognizing the Need: In Virginia, a more centralized community college system led to tighter coordination between the system office and the participating colleges on the selected policy and practice changes. The three colleges worked with the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) to implement the EAB Navigate CRM platform as a tool to support noncredit-to-credit pathways, CPL, and career advising. This focus stemmed from data analysis showing that too few students were moving from the noncredit programs offered through the state's FastForward program into academic programs that could support longer-term economic advancement. This trend was even more apparent when they disaggregated their enrollment and completion data by race and gender.

Integrating Noncredit Workforce Students into Navigate: One important change was adding noncredit workforce students into the CRM platform, which allows advisors to see all the classes that students have completed and identify credentials that might be eligible for CPL. At the college level, implementation of Navigate supported several practice and process changes and launched the process of breaking down longstanding institutional silos. At Central Virginia Community College (CVCC), this change has supported greater transparency and collaboration across noncredit and credit programs. This new streamlined approach gives students more visibility into their pathway options and, with the inclusion of advisor notes, a better way for students and advisors to track progress.

Best Practices from Virginia Colleges	
Germanna Community College used process mapping to identify the barriers that adult learners encounter. Based on what they learned, they are developing new, simplified student-facing materials and are developing a CPL committee to develop a streamlined approach to CPL awards.	**Locust Grove, Virginia** Setting: rural Fall 2023 enrollment: Total: 8,082 72% Part-time 22% 25 and older
Tidewater Community College integrated Workforce Solutions (noncredit) students into Navigate, which has improved both communication to students and between departments. The college is creating stackable programs to streamline the transition from noncredit to credit programs and is improving uptake of CPL by incorporating questions about prior learning and experience into student onboarding.	**Norfolk, Virginia** Setting: midsized city Fall 2023 enrollment: Total: 15,912 69% Part-time 31% Full-time

Improving Career Advising: Another component of Virginia's strategic plan was to develop advising processes that support the career choices of adult learners. A benefit of including credit and noncredit programs in Navigate is that both FastForward and academic advisors have the information they need to support career planning discussions with students. At CVCC, this change has supported more effective communication with credit and noncredit learners alike, especially for prospective students and those onboarding as new students. To support this work, the CVCC team sought out additional enrollment and demographic data, including qualitative data via an adult learner focus group. CVCC also conducted process mapping of its overarching student advising process. This led to the development of a new advisor checklist to support a consistent onboarding process. Meanwhile, the system office focused on providing colleges with more comprehensive information on health care pathways, so that students could understand the full range of options available to them. VCCS also supports greater use of labor market information (LMI) by providing Lightcast licenses free of charge for colleges to use and by offering training for community colleges on implementing LMI best practices in program design and advising.

"[Process mapping] was an eye-opening of how we see the work that we need to continue to do to streamline it for our students."

- John Stroffolino, Germanna Community College

Supporting Effective Use of Advising Tools: Through IEMAL, VCCS and the three colleges have been able to collaborate on rolling out Navigate in ways that work well for advisors and students. CVCC has provided VCCS with regular feedback about implementation and has been able to suggest changes that will benefit all colleges. For example, they suggested adding a CPL question to the state's template EAB Navigate application, which would better aid colleges in identifying early interest and tracking of CPL-interested students.

Long-term Vision: The Navigate platform provides valuable data infrastructure, but the change in student experience requires colleges to continue improving their advising processes and practices. In the future, VCCS will build on this work by increasing access to labor market information that advisors can use in support of career navigation and continuing to support advisor professional development. The forthcoming strategic plan for the state will further incentivize LMI alignment from colleges, and there are notable efforts to increase a statewide capacity in job tracking and wage data. For example, VCCS and colleges intend to continue to strengthen partnerships with workforce agencies, which could eventually provide real-time, digestible LMI in student-facing resources that have already been created. VCCS also continues working on a health care–pathways LMI resource with collaboration from community colleges and is exploring applying learning from this initiative to other sectors, such as the construction trades. In collaboration with the Student Success Center (SSC), the state made significant progress in further providing professional development opportunities to student advisors at community colleges across the state. This collaboration, combined with research findings and discussions from an Adult Learner Summit, will culminate in an Adult Learner Toolkit. The toolkit will equip student advisors statewide with pertinent, uniform information on how to discuss LMI, understand unique barriers that affect adult learners, and provide a recommended adult learner onboarding checklist.

At Central Virginia, future plans include using Navigate to support the development of stackable career pathways that bridge noncredit and credit programs. The college is also exploring process mapping of other workforce programs. Furthermore, it intends to add information on CPL to its New Student Checklists.

"Embarking on this process was really eye-opening for us"

– Kodi Fleming, Tidewater Community College

College Spotlight #3: Union College of Union County

Innovation: Targeted orientation and advising for adult learners, with an emphasis on English learners
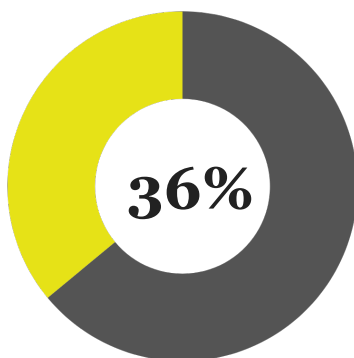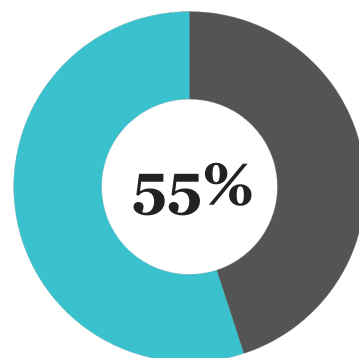
Cranford, New Jersey
Setting: Large Suburb

8,081
Fall 2023 Enrollment

36%
Adult Learners 25+[1]

55%
Part-time Enrollment

Recognizing the Need: Early in the initiative, UCNJ Union College of Union County, NJ realized that while a significant portion of its students are 24 or older, many of its engagement and advising strategies are designed for traditional college-aged learners. The college started by looking at data on adult learners (age 24 and older) who had completed 30 or fewer credit hours and had declared Liberal Studies as a major. This focus was aligned with a larger institutional concern with the Liberal Studies major given post-completion outcomes. This data analysis yielded valuable insights about the needs of this specific adult learner population, including a significant number of English learners who were enrolled in Liberal Studies alongside their English language coursework. Based on this analysis, UCNJ implemented a variety of programmatic changes to address the barriers facing their adult learner population.

Specialized Orientation and Intensive Career Advising: During the grant period, the team worked with the admissions office to create a specialized Pathway for Adult Learners (PALs) Orientation that

was designed for the unique needs of adult learners. The orientation provides opportunities for adult learners to connect with each other as well as their advisors while learning about the resources available at the college. In addition to offering a more tailored and comprehensive orientation experience, the PALs Orientation gave adult learners early insight into the multiple career exploration platforms available to them, including;

- Handshake to connect students with local employers;
- Stepping Blocks and Focus2, personalized career assessment tools that match students with potential majors;
- VMock, an AI-powered resume review tool that provides applicable feedback to increase employability; and
- Career Coach to explore job descriptions, required qualifications, and pathways to advance in their chosen careers.

Best Practices from New Jersey Colleges

All three New Jersey colleges made improvements to advising and onboarding for adult learners.

Atlantic Cape Community College focused on reengagement of part-time adult students with 52+ credits, with the goal of connecting these students with the One Stop Center and a Navigator to support completion of a pathway leading to a good job. The college provided professional development for advising staff and process mapped the current reenrollment process for adult learners. It is creating a dedicated webpage for adult learners that will include guidance on reenrollment and working on strategies to address prior balances that may be prohibiting reenrollment.	**Mays Landing, NJ** Setting: Rural Fall 2023 enrollment: Total: 4,273 59% Part-time 31% 25 and older
To achieve its goal of increasing returning adult student retention by 10%, **Hudson County Community College** piloted a version of its nationally recognized Hudson Scholars program for returning students (Restart Scholars). The Restart Scholars program provides additional supports, including proactive outreach, stipends paid directly to students, and dedicated advisors for adult learners. The project team examined current CPL policies and practices to identify opportunities to streamline the process for students, including purchasing CAEL's Credit Predictor Pro.	**Jersey City, NJ** Setting: Large city Fall 2023 enrollment: Total: 7,229 49% Part-time 36% 25 and older

The team also changed college procedures to keep students on an academic pathway: prior to July 2024, students could change majors with minimal touchpoints and requirements. Based on a careful review of change-of-major data, UCNJ now strongly encourages students to complete a career assessment through the SteppingBlocks platform before or during their meeting with an advisor to process a change in major.

Targeted Support for English Learners: UCNJ developed specialized intrusive advising models for students at different levels of the English language course sequence, including bilingual advisors for levels 3 and 4, career services advising in levels 5 and 6, and further targeted career advising as students transition into degree programs.

Future Impact: Through this initiative, UCNJ has developed a much deeper understanding of its adult learner population. This will lead to a stronger college-wide focus on better serving these students as well as more targeted supports for the English learners and adult learners. In addition, the improvements to advising and career navigation will benefit all students to consider their end goals at the beginning of their journeys.

State Entities as Facilitators of Change

A key feature of the IEMAL initiative was to have the three colleges in each state work in collaboration with a state-level entity (such as a community college association or system office). This approach recognizes that state entities and institutions have unique but complementary levers they can use to drive change for adult learners. Two ways that state entities can support the adult learner work are through overall advocacy—including building an adult learner focus into statewide strategic plans—and supporting consistent CPL practices across institutions.

Strategic Plan Alignment

All three states recognized the importance of aligning the adult learner work of this initiative with broader statewide higher education strategic plans and priorities.

New Jersey Opportunity Agenda

- The New Jersey Council of County Colleges (NJCC) uses its relationships with college leaders across the state to advocate for policy and practice change. The Council was able to use what it learned from the three colleges participating in IEMAL to inform its Opportunity Agenda, which includes a pillar focused on adult learners. It was also able to create a sense of urgency among college leaders across the state for improving policies and practices related to adult learners and point to specific examples across the three colleges.

> **"We've been working with our State Legislature to advance an Opportunity Agenda bill package, incorporating strategies that reflect what these colleges are learning about working with adult learners."**
>
> **– Maria Heidkamp, NJCCC.**

Virginia Accelerate Opportunity

- VCCS's strategic plan for 2024-2030 is focused on increasing the number of meaningful credentials awarded and includes specific metrics for increasing adult learner enrollment and expanding CPL. Connecting the work of IEMAL to these strategic plan objectives helped the VCCS team gain buy-in for the state-level action plan. In addition, the insights gained from the student focus groups and advisor surveys helped make the case for investment in staff development as a key lever for achieving these strategic plan goals.

Michigan

- In Michigan, participating colleges were excited about increasing use of CPL but concerned about the transferability of these credits to four-year colleges. A new statewide focus on transfer success, which launched as part of the FY25 budget, is now creating opportunities to align the CPL work that the state and colleges engaged in through this initiative with the broader conversation about transfer pathways and credit mobility.

Consistent CPL Practices

One theme highlighted by both states and colleges was that the process for earning CPL, as well as the number of credits associated with different trainings/credentials, varied dramatically across institutions. All three state entities worked on different methods for achieving greater alignment across their colleges.

Michigan: Data collection to understand CPL use

- Prior to the launch of IEMAL, the Michigan 60x30 office had been charged with implementing a CPL reimbursement process for colleges that would pay colleges $80 per credit awarded through CPL to Michigan Reconnect scholarship students. By working in partnership with the three colleges and listening to what they wanted to do and where they needed state-level support, the state team was able to create a process that didn't cause undue amounts of work for colleges, created shared data definitions, and will eventually calculate the reimbursement automatically. The data collected through this process will help the 60x30 office understand how each college is awarding CPL and for which programs/credentials, which will help identify opportunities for colleges to enhance their CPL-awarding processes.

New Jersey: Inventorying CPL across the state

- The NJCC conducted a CPL landscape scan of all 18 colleges to determine current policies, types of CPL awarded, processes, and fees. This information will help NJCC and the colleges identify best practices, create greater CPL policy alignment across colleges, and eventually create a statewide Credentials-to-Credit website that provides greater transparency about CPL processes.

Virginia: Deep Dive on Academic Equivalencies

- The VCCS began with the goal of standardizing the academic course equivalencies of its FastForward (noncredit) health care programs. To get started on this ambitious goal, the system office convened faculty from the three colleges to review current CPL processes as well as credit and course equivalencies. As a starting point, they were able to create a repository of certification outcomes that help colleges evaluate different credentials and work experiences. Longer term, a newly created CPL Policy Task Force will continue convening faculty from across the colleges to review credentials and academic equivalencies across disciplines.

The Future for Community Colleges

Based on initial reports from colleges, the changes documented in this brief are beginning to have an impact on the experiences of adult learners. Over time, the states and colleges will continue to track enrollment and completion of their adult learner populations and use that data to make additional process improvements. At the capstone event for this initiative, each state and college shared how it plans to build on what it has accomplished to continue improving outcomes for adult learners. For example, Hudson Community College in New Jersey has decided to incorporate returning students into the core Hudson Scholars program, with the goal of scaling the program to serve more adult learners. Grand Rapids Community College in Michigan has identified a dedicated staff person to support the ongoing work of expanding awarenss and uptake of CPL. Tidewater Community Colleges plans to increase the number of programs that offer opportunities for students to earn CPL.

Beyond the specific changes implemented for this grant, states and colleges are learning how to use process mapping, data analysis, and internal/external collaboration in support of continuous improvement. In the future, these strategies can be applied to specific adult learner populations (as well as more traditional-aged student populations) and programs to guide further changes to the student experience. They are also changing mindsets among faculty and leadership about their adult learner populations and more specifically about the importance of strategies like credit for prior learning.

The participating states and colleges have also learned how they can be better collaborators on systems change initiatives, creating structures that give colleges the flexibility and autonomy to

pursue the changes that make sense for their context while leveraging the state entity's ability to advocate for statewide policy and disseminate information across colleges.

"We will continue to formalize and strengthen our pathway for adult learners, expanding our efforts and deepening collaborations across the institution to ensure greater support and success for this student population. This work would not have been possible without the support of my colleagues, and I look forward to seeing what the future holds as we continue this important work."

— Jasmine V. Jilus, Union College of Union County, NJ

Endnotes

[1]American Association of Community Colleges, *Fast Facts 2024* (Washington, DC, 2024), https://www.aacc.nche.edu/research-trends/fast-facts/.

[2] National Student Clearinghouse, First Look at 2024 Highlights, https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/

[3] John Kaniam, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge, *The Water of Systems Change* (FSG, June 2018), https://www.fsg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Water-of-Systems-Change_rc.pd.

[4] Delta Community College final grant report