

RE-IMAGINING WHAT WORKS FOR ADULT LEARNERS OF COLOR

An Unfulfilled Promise for Adult Learners of Color

Across the country, millions of Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults are working, caring for children and other dependents, and trying to provide the best possible quality of life for their families and for themselves. While sheer determination and persistence have paid off for some, enabling them to achieve greater social and economic mobility, many more have had their efforts to improve their circumstances impeded by racial inequities in our higher education, workforce, and economic systems.

A degree or valuable workforce credential continues to be the best path to a good career,¹ and yet far too few adults of color possess one, contributing to troubling opportunity and earnings disparities. In professional occupations, 48% percent fewer Black workers are represented than White workers, and the median wealth for a White family is eight times greater than that of a Black family and 4.8 times greater than a Hispanic family.² While significant gains have been made over the past decade in college enrollment of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students, increases in the percentage of those students that ultimately complete their degree programs have not kept pace.

The rates at which adult students of color, either returning to college or attending for the first time, are able to stay on track to a degree lag even further behind traditional-age students of color. This is not surprising as, in general, college programs are not designed to fit the complex lives of adult learners, regardless of race. The graduation rate for students over age 24 is 18 percentage points lower than that of

younger students. These gaps grow even larger when disaggregated by race and ethnicity, with the greatest chasm between traditional-age White students and Black students over age 24 at 37 percentage points. The separation between traditional-age White students and Hispanic students over age 24 is 34 percentage points.

Efforts to better serve all students have resulted in higher retention and graduation rates overall, but they have not closed equity gaps.

In fact, those gaps have now widened, due in large part to the global pandemic and the resulting disruptions to our educational institutions and workplaces, particularly those with the highest representation of marginalized communities. Black and Hispanic Americans have experienced more widespread job and income loss than other racial groups. Level of education has also been a factor, as adults with some college, a high school diploma, or less education have been more likely to struggle to pay their rent or mortgage and other bills.³

The disproportionate nature of the pandemic's effects has also been exhibited in college enrollment, with overall enrollment for Black students falling by 7.5 percentage points and an even steeper decline in first-time enrollment for Black students, 19 percentage points.⁴ Considering the attainment gaps that existed before the pandemic, the potential for inequities in our society to be further compounded is real and alarming.

1 Trends in Higher Education Series, Education Pays 2019, n.d.

2 Racial Representation in Professional Occupations: By the Numbers, 2021

3 Economic Fallout From COVID-19 Continues To Hit Lower-Income Americans the Hardest, 2020

4 Anthony et al., 2021

An Intentional Focus

Recognizing the urgency of this situation, Lumina Foundation is making significant investments in initiatives specifically aimed at improving educational attainment for adults of color, including the Racial Equity for Adult Credentials in Higher Education (REACH) Collaborative. Nearly 140 community colleges in states including California, Colorado, New York, North Carolina, and Virginia are participating in the REACH Collaborative, creating academic pathways that acknowledge and address the needs and lived experiences of adult students of color. If REACH's goal is met—increasing credentials earned by Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults, ages 25-64, enrolled at participating colleges by 2% within two years—thousands of lives will have been impacted, a measurable step toward greater racial and economic equity in our country.

Why Community Colleges?

Community colleges have long had the reputation of being engines of economic and social mobility. Deeply embedded in and connected to the communities in which they are located and more affordable than their four-year counterparts, community colleges serve a racially and age-diverse population of students. Half of all Black and Latinx students in postsecondary education are served by community colleges, and the average student age is 28.⁵

With adults of color being disproportionately burdened by the pandemic's effects, it's no surprise that community college enrollments have dipped by more than 10% since it began.⁶ At the same time, the pandemic has emphasized the need for many adults, particularly those in low-wage jobs, to grow their skills or reskill in a new field—and they're turning to community colleges to do it. An estimated 20.5 million working-age adults, between the ages of 25 to 64, indicated they intend to enroll in community or technical college in the next two years.⁷

Adopting pathways that are designed to support adult students of color before this influx will increase the likelihood that these students get what they came for and leave with the ability to pursue better professional opportunities.

The REACH Framework

The REACH Collaborative strives to improve attainment for adults of color by building on practices that have led to better outcomes for adult students and students of color. Community colleges that are part of REACH will follow its intentional framework for developing academic pathways for adult students of color. This framework has three main pillars, the effectiveness of which were researched in a set of studies commissioned by Lumina Foundation and conducted by the Community College Research Center (CCRC), *Strategies for Improving Postsecondary Credential Attainment Among Black, Hispanic, and Native American Adults*.

1. Credentials to Degrees Pathways

By stacking short-term credentials in a sequence that leads to an associate degree, students can start to make faster academic and career gains, allowing them to apply for higher-wage jobs more quickly, while continuing to grow their skills and work toward their larger goals. To be most effective, these pathways should be built to progress toward high-wage, high-demand careers available in the same region as the college.

2. Bundled and Sequenced Supports

Combining academic supports, like tutoring, and non-academic or basic needs supports, such as food, transportation, or childcare, in a sequence that is designed to meet adult students' needs at each stage of their college journey proactively eliminates barriers to success. It also increases the likelihood that these students will be able to meet the demands of school and their busy lives, even if issues arise.

3. Culturally Sustaining Practices

A one-size-fits-all approach to educating and supporting adult students of color fails to acknowledge their unique backgrounds, identities, or culture. Culturally sustaining practices are designed to embrace students' lived experiences and contribute to their sense of belonging in college.

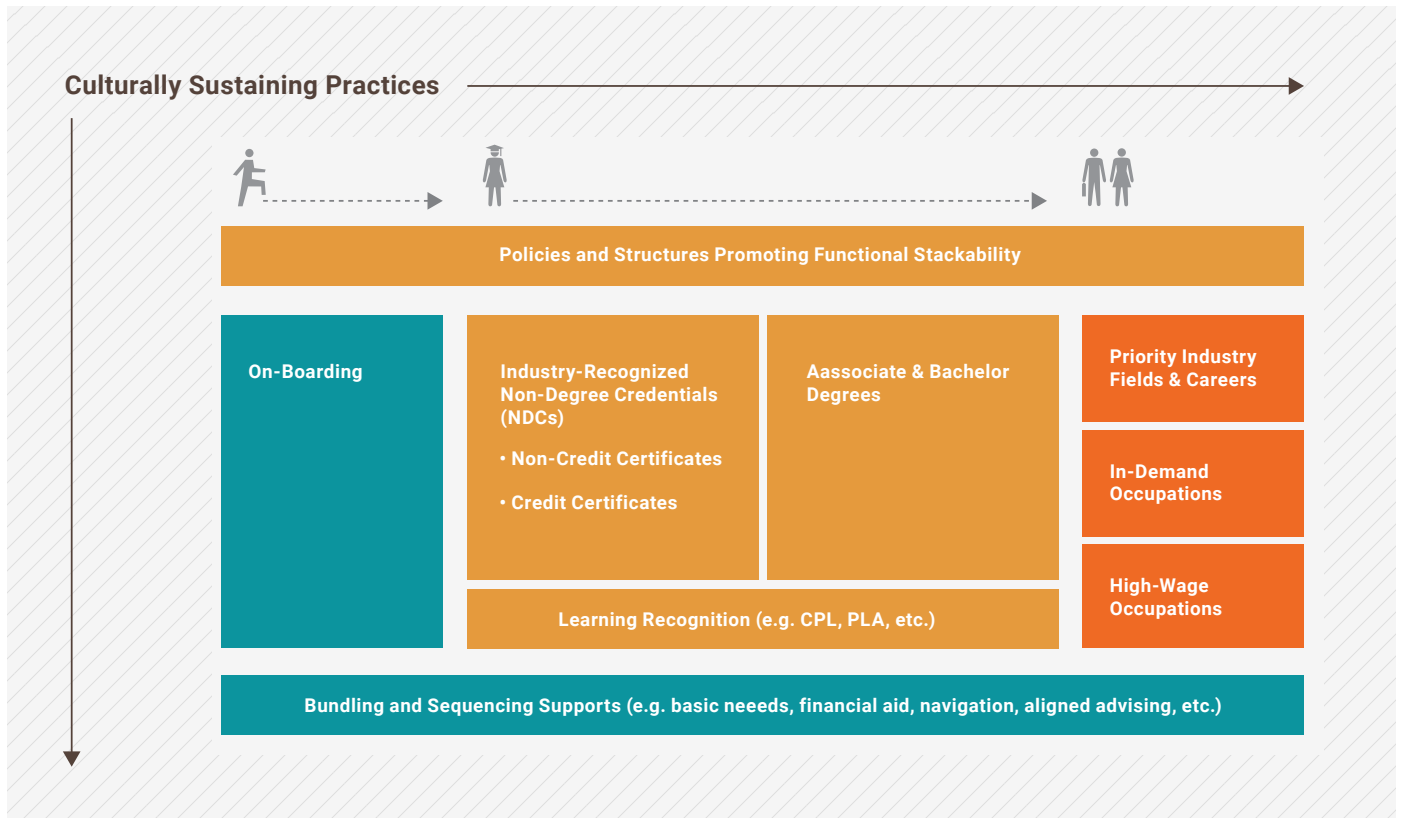
5 (Strada, n.d.)

6 (Strada, n.d.)

7 (Strada, n.d.)

The REACH Collaborative will develop briefs that explore these three pillars of the initiative, providing actionable information and guiding questions for each one. They will provide states, systems, and institutions with a framework to begin thinking about how this work might be approached within the context of their own communities.

The REACH Universe



CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PRACTICES
 BUNDLING & SEQUENCING SUPPORTS
 CREDENTIAL TO DEGREES ALIGNMENT

SOURCES:

Anthony, M., Howard, A., & Wil, P. (2021, May 13). [Raising Undergraduate Degree Attainment Among Black Women and Men Takes on New Urgency Amid the Pandemic](#). The Education Trust. Retrieved March 14, 2022

[Economic Fallout From COVID-19 Continues To Hit Lower-Income Americans the Hardest](#). (2020, September 24). Pew Research Center. Retrieved March 14, 2022,

[Racial representation in professional occupations: By the numbers](#). (2021, June 8). Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved March 8, 2022.

[Strada](#). (n.d.) Strada. Retrieved March 18, 2022.

[Trends in Higher Education Series, Education Pays 2019](#). (n.d.). College Board Research. Retrieved March 22, 2022.

REACH COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS:

