

Building Inclusive Infrastructure

to Support the
Success of
BIPOC Adult
Learners at
Community
Colleges

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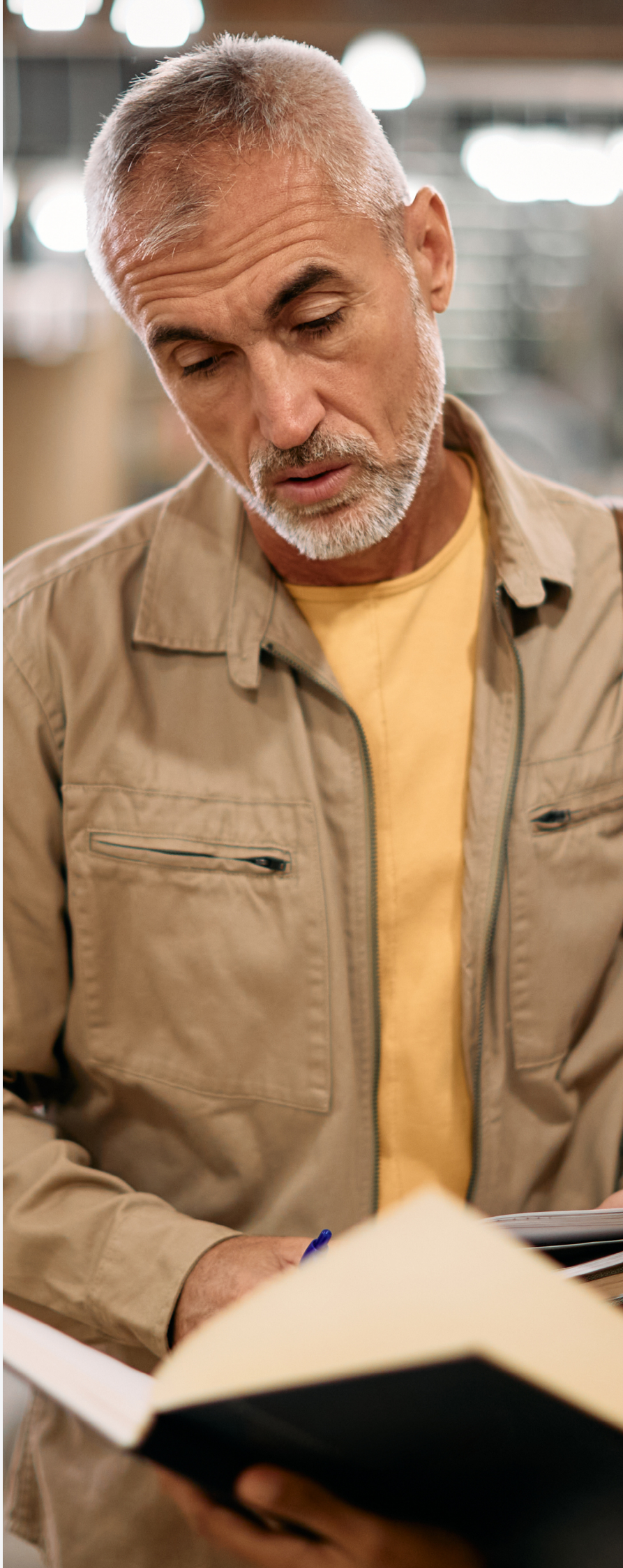


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Guiding questions:

What infrastructure do community colleges in New York have to support BIPOC adult learners?

What are best practices for anti-racist and equity-supporting infrastructure?

According to the [American Association of Community Colleges](#) (2021): “In 2020, more than half (52%) of both Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native undergraduates were enrolled in public two-year colleges” nation-wide; the number for students from Black communities was 40%.

These numbers are reflected in the percentage of BIPOC students representing the total population of students enrolled at public two-year colleges nation-wide in 2020, which was just over 50%, according to the same study.

On the state level in New York, BIPOC students represent approximately 30% of the total student population enrolled in The State University of New York’s community college system of 30 campuses. Over 20% of the population are adult learners over the age of 25, with 8.4% between the ages of 25 and 29 ([SUNY, 2021](#)).

Scholars have conducted studies across the nation and found a common link between anti-racist, culturally responsive practice in community college programs and student success. These findings are especially true for community college students of color. ([Owens, 2018](#); [Wilson, 2021](#)). In addition to helping shape curriculum, culturally responsive practices have informed student support services. Integrating culturally responsive practices into supports outside the classroom

creates the foundation for a culturally sustaining infrastructure. The positive impact of culturally sustaining practices embedded throughout the student experience is particularly evident for adult learners. Kachur and Barcinas (2020) argue that, for adult learners, a feeling of belonging and support can overcome academic setbacks because “when the environment is positive, but the academics are negative, the adult learner will be more likely to persist because support is in place to guide completion” (p. 107).

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While there is overwhelming evidence of the positive impact of culturally responsive and equitable practices for adult learners and students of color, there is a remaining lack of infrastructural and institutional support for culturally sustaining work. Much anti-racist work has relied on individual dedication, grant-specific funding, and short-term programs. Stand-alone projects can have significant positive impact on those who participate and help individual students reach their personal and professional goals. However, anti-racist work has the most potential for influencing systemic change in community college structures in which inequity and exclusion are embedded and reproduced ([Wilson, 2021](#)). Community colleges need sustainable equitable infrastructure that dismantles embedded inequities and is supported by an institutional mandate that addresses the specific needs of BIPOC adult learners.

Colleges have support systems in place, but information is not always shared directly or equally with all staff, faculty, and administrators who interact with students. All members need ready access to information about support and academic services, but the advising, support, and academic divisions of a campus remain divided into silos.

Strategies:

We identify three areas that can serve as the foundation for sustainable, inclusive infrastructure:

1. *Raising the consciousness-level of faculty, administrators, and staff to recognize and incorporate the specific needs and goals of adult BIPOC learners.*

All members of a community college community must learn and recognize the intersectional influences on adult BIPOC learners and that their needs can be distinct from traditional college students (Ross-Gordon et al, 2016). Student-centered conversations with administrators, faculty, staff, and students can strengthen the awareness of the specific experiences of BIPOC adult learners ([Bourke et al., 2020](#)). Adult learners bring work and life experience that could be integrated into their programs and goals. This experience may also include responsibilities that limit the time they can spend on assignments, projects, and meetings outside the time they have committed to the classroom.

These sessions can help launch assessments to identify necessary infrastructural changes and support from within. Possible questions:

- What is the accessibility of services the campus provides, regarding both hours and modes of services?
- How many steps are required to register and complete other processes such as financial aid? How can these processes be streamlined?
- What are the curricular and classroom policies, attendance requirements, external requirements, and grading structures?
- What kinds of adaptations are possible to reflect the experiences of adult learners?
- How can students pursue experiential and internship programs while on campus?

2. *Establishing collaborative systems for faculty, staff, and administrators.*

These systems can be based on both virtual and in-person relationships. The first point of contact for many students—the college website—often treats student services as a category separate from academics. The creation of virtual central communication hubs is one simple way to share information, linking academic department pages directly to student services.

These virtual collaborations can be supported with interdepartmental, curricular, and co-curricular networks that bring together faculty, administrators, staff, and students in common spaces with equal input.

3. Identifying metrics that see BIPOC adult learners and learner-centered definitions of success.

The data we use and find depends on the questions we ask. What institutions measure reflect what BIPOC adult learners contribute to the campus and what they say they need. Reassessment of data begins with rethinking questions such as:

- How does the institution define success? Kachur and Barcinas (2020) note that for adult learners, success may not be completion of formal program, but rather is “meeting their individual goals for their betterment or benefiting their careers” (p. 109). In the evolution of the guided pathways model, Jenkins et al. (2021) emphasize the need for “individualized educational plans” (p. 3).
- How are resources distributed to support BIPOC adult learners? What dedicated budget lines are aligned with data on BIPOC adult learners? (Commodore, Henning, & Ponjuan, 2022)

Examples of Building Sustainable Inclusive Infrastructure:

- Collaborative Networks: At Bronx Community College, The City University of New York, students, faculty, staff, and administrators came together to establish the Social Justice Network (SJN) in 2020, to “interrupt the silos of organizing” (Guishard et al., 2021). The three pillars of SJN are civic engagement, social justice, and radical wellness (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022) through which all divisions of the college engage. To take the next step in institutionalizing this network SJN created the Student Social Justice Student Leadership certificate program. In this semester-long co-curricular program, students choose to participate in at least five workshops in civic engagement, social justice, and radical wellness. Students then write a reflection to complete the program. They receive a certificate and may become peer mentors.
- On-Campus Experiential Learning: The *Get Psych'D Program* at Bronx Community College supports students interested in careers in psychology, mental, and health services through a peer mentorship program. Students receive a stipend, mentorship, and experience holding workshops in classes and on campus about personal wellness.
- Campus-wide infrastructure: The *Caring Campus model* implemented at 24 community colleges nation-wide identifies multilevel contact points for students, focusing on nonacademic staff in addition to faculty (Barnett & Bickerstaff, 2022).

Final Thoughts:

There are numerous examples of culturally inclusive programs that include addressing the specific needs of adult BIPOC learners. Initiatives such as Caring Campus point to the need to integrate this programming at a campus-wide level, across departments and divisions. The very infrastructure of community colleges must be rethought to go beyond culturally inclusive programming, and to insure culturally sustaining infrastructure.

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