

Racial Equity for Adult Credentials
in Higher Education (REACH):

→ **Insights from Adult Learners
of Color**

REACH
collaborative



**RACIAL
EQUITY for
ADULT
CREDENTIALS in
HIGHER ED**





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→ Introduction

The Racial Equity for Adult Credentials in Higher Education (REACH) Collaborative engaged 130 colleges across six states to develop pathways designed for adult learners of color to earn quality credentials that lead to a degree. Supported by Lumina Foundation, the REACH Collaborative aimed for a 2% increase in credential attainment among Black, Hispanic and Latino, and Native American adults, ages 25-64.

REACH was organized around three guiding pillars: aligning noncredit and credit programs within pathways, embedding holistic student supports in pathways, and centering racial equity in pathways design. Education Strategy Group (ESG) and the University of Pittsburgh School of Education provided technical assistance for this effort, working closely with state system office and success center leaders to support colleges as they identified pathways, ideated around problems of practice, and implemented innovative practices to better serve adult learners of color on their campuses. DVP-PRAXIS LTD served as the initiative's learning and evaluation partner.

A central challenge motivating REACH was that community colleges have historically organized academic pathways, policies, and programming in ways that do not adequately reflect experiences and needs of adults of color. A key motivation for REACH was to encourage and support colleges to intentionally consider adult learners of color in redesigning campus ecosystems so that

students' sense of belonging, educational access, and academic achievement is enhanced. Redesigning systems to value and empower adult students of color requires a holistic understanding of their perspectives, experiences, culture, identities, goals, and challenges. REACH encouraged campuses to gather and integrate student voices—direct feedback from adult learners of color about their experiences, needs, goals, and preferences—to guide the development of Culturally Sustaining Credentialing Pathways.

As defined by Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, these are pathways which, **“reflect explicit race conscious policies, programs, and practices that actively address racialized inequities to ensure student access and success”** and **“engage at an individual, system, and structural level to interrogate and ameliorate inequitable experiences and outcomes among racially minoritized students.”**¹

1 Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, 2021, “Definition of Culturally Sustaining Credentialing Pathways.” Shared with the REACH Collaborative. Unpublished.

DVP-PRAXIS LTD served as the evaluation and learning partner for the REACH Collaborative. In the context of the REACH Evaluation, it was important that the perspectives and experiences of adult learners of color framed our understanding of what is working well and how community colleges can create more equitable pathways, programs, and services. In April 2024, the evaluation team collaborated with four community colleges to conduct focus groups with adult learners of color on their campuses. These conversations were part of in-depth site visits that aimed to learn how REACH teams at each campus were centering racial equity for adult students in the (re)design of pathways. The evaluation team used these focus groups to learn about students' academic experiences, personal goals, supports that made a difference, challenges they've encountered as students, and feedback they'd offer their college to better serve adult learners of color.

During our site REACH visits, students shared their experiences and offered feedback about how to create spaces that nurture and catalyze their agency. This brief summarizes insights and themes from these conversations with adult learners and concludes with reflective questions to guide college leaders as they explore how to continue centering adults of color in the design and delivery of programs and services.

Background

The evaluation team conducted student focus groups in April of 2024 at four colleges—SUNY Westchester Community College (NY), Pueblo Community College (CO), Southside Virginia Community College (VA), and Lenoir Community College (NC). The team conducted two focus groups per college, engaging a total of 25 students across 8 focus groups.

Focus groups included representation from Black, Hispanic and Latino, and Native adult learners. Participants were predominantly Black, African American, and Black multi-racial (76%) and about two-thirds were between the ages of 30-49 (64%). Although several students entered their educational journey in noncredit programs, all students were enrolled in Associate's programs at the time of data collection. Students were pursuing a range of academic programs, including Construction Technology, Cybersecurity, Office Administration, Early Childhood Education, Nursing, Business Management, Fashion Design & Technology, and Criminal Justice.

Focus groups were scheduled for 90-minutes, and students were compensated for their time. Students were asked about their educational and career goals, the resources and supports that made a difference for them at the college, changes the college could implement that would support their educational success, what they would prioritize if they were designing a program for adult learners of color, and the programs they would like to see offered by the college.

→ Key Themes

Students offered a vision of community colleges as **adult-centered ecosystems**, where students were empowered to participate in all aspects of campus life and leverage educational opportunities at the college to achieve their goals. They highlighted the importance of relationships, resources, and experiences that 1) deepen their sense of connection and belonging on campus, 2) create space to build community on-campus, 3) meet their basic needs, and 4) empower them to navigate, lead, and give back to others. Students emphasized that colleges should approach the design of programs and services in ways that honor and reflect their lived experiences and realities as adult learners of color.

This section elaborates on each of the above themes, incorporating students' own words to provide context. It is important to note that while themes emerged across focus groups, each campus and demographic group had distinct lived experiences and educational journeys. This brief is intended to offer a framework for thinking about adult-centered college ecosystems, while acknowledging that the implementation of these ideas must be localized and reflect the lived experiences of adult learners of color at each campus and within each community.

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS:

Building Connection and Community On-Campus

Adult learners of color described feeling empowered through long-term, meaningful one-on-one relationships with faculty and staff, and desired more adult-focused and identity-focused spaces for support and connection.

→ Long-Term Supportive Relationships

Students emphasized the importance of finding a staff or faculty member on-campus who could serve as an anchor—connecting them to information and resources and providing encouragement and a sense of belonging. Almost every student in the focus groups identified

at least one person on campus who had anchored them to the institution. Students highlighted how these ongoing relationships were a source of encouragement but also information and assistance with applications, grants, and other funding opportunities. For example, one student described meeting with a financial aid advisor who sat with him, reviewed his financial aid options, explained the GPA he would need to reach to be eligible for more scholarships, and encouraged him to come back and see him the following semester after his grades improved.

Being able to see a pathway forward empowered this student, who proudly returned the next semester to this same financial aid counselor with a copy of their transcript: *“When I came back to show him, I said ‘look straight A’s. He said, ‘Good. Now here’s another scholarship.’ A lot of financial aid [officers] were not doing what he was doing. He was kind of overdoing it, but that’s the kind of people I want to see, people like him.”*

Students identified how these anchoring relationships helped them navigate campus by connecting them to the information, resources, and support they needed to be successful within and beyond the classroom. Students valued staff and faculty would *“not just say you can do it, but show me how I can do it,”* by providing clear guidance and feedback, answering questions, and offering direct information about whose classes to take or who to speak to in the financial aid office if they had a sticky issue. For example, one student shared how, when she decided to change career pathways, staff were *“understanding, helpful, and honest about what would happen if I do this. I appreciated their guidance, they didn’t just throw you to the wolves.”*

These anchoring relationships frequently extended beyond the classroom and outside of staff member’s functional areas. For example, one student also sought out guidance around scholarship opportunities for Native students from a staff member outside of financial aid. This person was from her same community and would remind her about upcoming deadlines and encourage her to apply for opportunities. As she reflected: *“students need people like that.”* Often but not always, students’ anchors were staff and faculty members who shared the students’ racial, ethnic, and/or Tribal identity, who were intentional in learning about students’ stories and offering individualized advice.

These staff and faculty took students under their wing, providing ongoing support and information as students progressed in their programs. For example, one student shared how a professor from a previous semester still checks in on her and stops to ask about her current classes whenever they run into each other on campus. In these check-ins, this professor made herself available for support and shared specific resources, such as an upcoming scholarship opportunity offered by a local employer, which she applied for and received. At the time of the focus group, that instructor was helping this student review and revise her resume.

Several students highlighted long-standing relationships with staff members they felt comfortable confiding in when they experienced challenges. For example, when one student had doubts about being able to fund her education, she reached out to a staff member she trusted outside of financial aid who sat with her and helped her understand pathways forward: *“She told me what I would need [to apply for student funding] and how I could write a scholarship essay; she gave me all the details of what I could do.”*

This student emphasized the importance of asking for help, ***“You have to ask, don’t be afraid to come and ask questions. Somebody will be there to help and will lend a helping hand.”***

Beyond sharing resources and information, adult students highlighted the care, encouragement, and understanding that individual staff provided. One staff member had previously worked at a local high school, and several adults who were currently enrolled at the college knew her from that time. They shared how this staff member had been *“a great role model”* who had *“given me some great advice and words of encouragement to keep pushing through each semester.”* We also heard how anchoring relationships connected students to meaningful campus events and activities. For example, encouraging a student to get involved in their campus’ student ambassador program. This student shared how, initially, *“...I didn’t really care to get involved in any programs, because I was like, ‘I’m just coming to get what I need to get, that’s for the young people’... They just really pushed me out there like, oh, no, I can see you doing it. You can do it. Just do it.”* She highlighted how her experience as an ambassador empowered her to make connections and help other students on campus in ways that were deeply meaningful.

→ Curating Spaces for Adults of Color to Build Community

Across all four focus groups, **students expressed a desire for spaces where they could build connection and community with others who shared their identities and lived experiences.** Several students had the experience of being the only adult and/or student of color in their courses. While students appreciated being able to serve as a guide and resource for younger students, they also explained that *“it can be overwhelming to always be the person to give advice. I feel like we could use advice too.”* As one student shared, *“The only class I have that is seated is majority high schoolers with only one other person that is my color or age group in there,”* with another student affirming that these experiences left them feeling like *“there’s*

nobody here I can really relate to.” This sense of isolation was exacerbated in online courses, where students found that they needed more time than younger classmates to navigate course technology and online assignments.

Students felt it was important to create spaces—such as support groups, classes, or networking events—specifically oriented towards adult learners of color.

Students identified two categories of spaces that would be valuable:

- 1) support groups, classes, or convenings that were geared towards adults, and**
- 2) identity-centered spaces that functioned as resource hubs and offered culturally sustaining support.**

In considering resources that would support their academic success, as well as the success of other adults of color, students wanted to see campus spaces that centered adult students and provided opportunities for meaningful connection with other adults. Several students suggested structured spaces, like a one-credit course, where students could build skills around stress management, time management, *“juggling family, classes, and work,”* as well as navigating campus processes that are more common for adult learners, like figuring out how to get credit for prior learning and work experience. Other students suggested more of an informal, support group structure, facilitated by *“someone who is really trained in analyzing and digesting feelings, someone who has been there, done that, and can assure us as adults*

that what we're going through is valid." In both examples, students envisioned spaces where they could bring and share their lived experiences with peers. As one student explained, *"We need somewhere to vent and network...our own dedicated space to pretty much just talk about things that are relevant to our age group."*

Students also spoke about the importance of building spaces on campus that center students' cultural identities. Ideas around the purpose for these spaces were somewhat varied. At one institution, students desired a Native American Center that could serve as a resource hub, *"where Native students can come anytime they need a tutor, success coach, or advisor, and that all that is housed in one area."*

Students emphasized the importance of a Center assisting students with *"basic life stuff, like opening a bank account and applying for scholarships"* and envisioned a space where students could also share resources with each other, like textbooks and other required program materials. At another institution, students were interested in a space that could curate programs around Black history and culture to cultivate community among Black students on campus but also to educate the community about *"the beginning, middle, and present day of our history, our culture, our hard work."* In both these instances, there was a shared interest in spaces that empower students of color by connecting them to history, language, role models, and mentors.

FLEXIBLE, HOLISTIC APPROACHES:

Addressing Basic Needs

Students emphasized how important it was for colleges to address barriers related to basic needs. They highlighted existing services as well as brainstormed wraparound supports that would actively and intentionally honor the needs of adult learners of color. Their personal stories and perspectives exemplify how addressing students' basic needs is deeply entangled with their academic success and emphasize the imperative for colleges to build supportive infrastructure at all levels on college campuses.

"Basic needs" encompass a range of essential services that include but are not limited to housing, food, transportation, student funding, childcare, health, community and wellness and healing. In our focus groups, adult learners of color highlighted how access to these resources shaped

their ability to be present and participate on campus. For example, students highlighted transportation accessibility and the amount of time and resources getting to campus required, which often meant students had limited time available between work and class, or between class and the next scheduled bus. Parenting students also stressed the importance of childcare or daycare services, including resources and spaces for older children.

The limitations around when and for how long students could be on campus made access to food a central conversation across focus groups. Students shared that having places to get food is of high interest and would support working adult learners that travel long distances to attend classes on campus and may not be able to get food as easily in between classes and familial and work

responsibilities, as one student shared: *“Especially for folks that commute, having like a space, like food trucks or a cafe, just be space to have more food options.”*

More broadly, students shared the importance of colleges considering access to campus outside of normal business hours. One student shared that they worked full-time and primarily took evening classes that ended at eight or nine, which limited their access to *“resources like the library if I wanted to research some stuff for class while I’m here on campus.”* Students were very cognizant about when buildings and campus offices closed and what it felt like to navigate campus after hours, for example, accessing Wi-Fi in the parking lot because student spaces, libraries, or classrooms are closed after class on the weekends.

When asked about the resources that made the greatest difference in their educational journeys, several students pointed to grants and scholarships. This included college-wide funding opportunities, but also the value of programs that integrated scholarships and funding.

As one student highlighted: ***“I had done a Workforce Development course that led me to the Cybersecurity program here. That was a course that was funded by PepsiCo Uplift. That was super helpful, because that would have been rather lengthy and costly. Those were certifications that I didn’t have to pay for.”***

Several students had also taken advantage of emergency funding available at the college, and highlighted how instrumental those services were in being able to address urgent basic needs for themselves and their families. As another student shared, their campus Emergency Relief Center would cover emergency funding needs as well as the cost of public transportation, which their financial aid wouldn’t otherwise cover.

Beyond highlighting the importance of comprehensive and wraparound approaches to basic needs support, **students also pointed out that services should embrace culturally responsive practice.** For example, Native adults in one focus group shared unique barriers that Native students came to college with, as far as understanding financial aid, banking, and paying for program costs. For several students, they shared that their families primarily used cash and relied on family networks to meet their needs. So, making sense of financial aid, setting up a bank account, applying to grants, and understanding the grants available for Native students were culturally-specific considerations for delivering financial aid support and services that students highlighted as critical for serving Native adults equitably.

EMPOWERING ENVIRONMENTS:

Giving Back to the Community

Students indicated that leadership and empowerment of adult learners of color is an integral aspect of creating an adult-centered ecosystem. For example, several students shared that their career choices (pathway) were shaped by their aspirations to give back to their families and communities. Students were interested in gaining skills that were needed within the community or that would empower them to support their family financially. As one student explained, *“As an adult, I don’t have that person that said, ‘Hey, you should go back to school.’ That was kind of my idea. I was just looking for something else to do to keep showing my wife and my two children that we have to continue to learn...”* Students consistently referred to themselves as “lifelong learners” who were interested in building skills in a variety of areas. So, not only were students coming to college to upskill (grow in their career) or reskill (change careers), but also were interested in learning non-academic skills, such as how to apply for grants, how financial aid worked, or how to start a business.

This desire to give back reflected the importance of community and familial relationships for adult learners of color. Students also shared that their grandparents, parents, aunts, and siblings were important sources of support, encouragement, and inspiration as they pursued their education.

For example, one student shared how, ***“my grandmother, mother, and aunts inspired me to become a nurse. Their strength, resilience, and hard work allows me to see that I can shine.”***

Another student highlighted the importance of family support with basic needs, explaining *“I wouldn’t be able to continue school with three kids without familial support, they keep my kids when I’m at school.”*

Finally, several students emphasized the importance of leadership development opportunities that expand their skills and address students’ holistic wellbeing. Examples of leadership experiences included tutoring other students, serving in student government or student ambassador roles, and participating in an adult student advisory council. Students emphasized the importance of adult-centered leadership opportunities and making sure adult students see themselves as active leaders on campus. These opportunities also provided opportunities for collaboration, networking, and community building among the adult student population. These leadership opportunities were also an important feedback mechanism for colleges, offering key insight around the ongoing and changing needs of adult learners of color.

→ Conclusion:

Creating an Ecosystem for Adult Learners of Color

As they reflected on their experience and generated ideas for how their college could better serve adult learners of color, the students we engaged highlighted the value and importance of college leaders reviewing their policies, practices, and processes through an adult-centered, racially equitable lens. For example, opportunities for student leadership on-campus are great, but ensuring there are designated leadership opportunities for adult students and encouraging adult learners of color to apply is better. Alternatively, library access for students is great, but ensuring the library is open at times when adult learners of color are predominantly on campus (e.g., evening and weekends) is better.

The insights shared by adult learners of color provide an opportunity for college leaders—administrators, faculty, staff, and Trustees—to reflect on how centering adult learners of color could improve college operations. This concluding section offers questions for college leaders to inform a process for creating and implementing a long-term vision of a campus-wide culture that welcomes the multiplicity of experiences and identities of adult learners of color. As a starting point for applying an adult-centered, racially equitable lens to college policies, practices, and processes, college leaders could facilitate campus-wide conversations around broad questions like:

1. What pieces of data or student stories have shaped your understanding of what it means to serve adult learners of color equitably?

- 2. How often do you have or create space to reflect on the experiences of adult learners of color within your functional area?**
- 3. What would it look like to bring an adult student-centered and racial equity lens to your individual practice (e.g., in your office, functional area, or interactions with students)?**

To take this reflexive work further, we offer additional reflective questions based on the three thematic areas summarized in this memo.

→ Consider where adult learners of color have opportunities for connection and community-building on your campus.

- How can your college support and encourage administrators, faculty, and staff to build anchoring relationships with adult learners of color?
- How is the labor of administrators, faculty, and staff who serve as anchors for adult learners of color, building long-term supportive relationships, recognized and valued by the college?
- How is your college creating spaces where adult learners of color can build community with other students, network with other adults, and connect around their culture?

→ Learn about the broader context of students' lives and consider how campus resources and services expand or constrain their ability to meet their basic needs.

- What are the lived experiences of adults of color within the community?
- What programs and services are most relevant to those experiences?
- How can your college assist adults in accessing programs and services on-campus and in the community?
- How accessible are programs and services for adult learners of color in noncredit programs and/or who are attending evening or weekend classes?

→ Reflect on how the college can use its role as an educational organization to advance, support, and participate in the empowerment of the community.

- How can your college learn about and elevate the culture, history, land, people, and experiences of adults of color in your community?
- How can your college provide students with the information and resources they need to have greater agency, make informed choices about their education, and build skills within and beyond the classroom?

We invite you to read more about how colleges in the REACH Network are implementing strategies to center adult learners of color in the companion brief: ***Moments of Insight: Practices for Creating Real Opportunity for Adult Learners of Color.***