Institutional Change for Adult Learner Success

Lessons Learned from Postsecondary Education Institutions

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Executive Summary

Many postsecondary institutions seek to enroll and support adult learners—commonly defined as learners aged 25 and over—especially given that the number of high school graduates is projected to decrease after 2025 (Lane et al., 2024). The population of potential adult learners is large: more than 82 million adults have never enrolled in postsecondary education, and nearly 43.1 million have earned some college credit but no degree, with disproportionate representation from Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults (National Student Clearinghouse, 2025). By engaging adult learners of color, institutions can not only improve their own enrollment numbers but also enhance economic opportunity in their communities and support local workforce development in their regional economies.

Despite this growing emphasis on enrolling and serving adult learners, many institutions have not yet made changes that support these adults, including meaningfully adopting research-based strategies and practices, such as offering credit for prior learning, flexible scheduling, and competency-based education. One potential reason is because these strategies and practices often require deep and substantive changes to the ways institutions operate across units and divisions. Such transformational change is challenging to undertake, requiring significant institutional commitment, effort, and investment.

This report is part of a series of resources from a study examining how colleges and universities are adapting their practices, policies, and cultures to better support adult learners—especially adult learners of color. We focus on institutions that strive to serve these populations because these groups represent a large population and are particularly likely to include individuals with some college credit but no degree, or with limited college experience.

This report presents findings on the motivations, challenges, and successes of the strategies and practices employed by a set of postsecondary institutions that actively support adult learners; sheds light on their approaches to institutional change and transformation; and identifies practices and lessons that could inform efforts at other postsecondary institutions interested in making similar changes. Key findings from the study include the following:

- **Core change strategies:** Institutions engaged with their communities to understand prospective learners and inform and drive their transformation efforts. They sought feedback from and reviewed data about multiple constituent groups, including local employers, community members, and adult learners. In addition, for many institutions in our sample, institutional missions and goals influenced their change efforts, particularly for those with access missions and/or those designated as Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs).

- **Structural changes:** Institutions focused on making large structural changes to mitigate barriers to adult learner success and better enable them to implement adult-friendly initiatives. These structural changes ranged from small-scale changes like establishing new roles that offer students personalized support (e.g., student success coaches or navigators) to large-scale changes like forming new centers or offices that provide centralized adult learner support or reorganizing institutional offices to improve staff collaboration.

- **Process changes:** Institutions made changes to the ways they operate to better equip faculty and staff to implement changes. They invested in professional development designed to support data literacy, cultural competence, andragogy, and experiential learning. They also focused on building a data-driven culture to allow them to make more targeted decisions and changes that support adult learners on their campuses.

- **Institutional culture changes:** Institutions used data and storytelling to engage champions—committed leaders and staff that support the work—and advocate for the growth and sustainability of changes that will more effectively serve adult learners of color. They often started with pilot programs or initiatives in one department, collecting evidence and generating momentum that enabled them to gradually secure buy-in and broaden initiatives across the campus.

A common thread among the institutions in our sample is their commitment to deeply understanding their learners' experiences, which motivates and drives transformation efforts. Although their journeys echo the phases and steps of institutional transformation more generally, we find that journeys toward better supporting adult learners are deeply rooted in an understanding of the communities they serve and a desire to advance their institutional missions. This report concludes with reflections on the potential implications for research and practice aimed at institutions seeking to transform and improve outcomes for adult learners.

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Many postsecondary institutions seek to enroll and support adult learners, commonly defined as learners aged 25 and older, especially given that the number of high school graduates is projected to decrease after 2025 (Lane et al., 2024). The population of potential adult learners is large: over 82 million adults have never enrolled in postsecondary education, and nearly 43.1 million have some college credit but no degree, with disproportionate representation from Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults (National Student Clearinghouse, 2025). By engaging adult learners of color, institutions can not only improve their own enrollment numbers, they can also enhance economic opportunity in their communities and support local workforce development in their regional economies.

Research has shown that practices designed to support adult learners—such as credit for prior learning (CPL), flexible scheduling, and competency-based education—demonstrate early success in leading to improved enrollment, completion, and other outcomes (Daugherty et al., 2003; Klein Collins et al., 2020; Parsons et al., 2016; Reichlin Cruse, 2021; Spires et al., 2022). That said, challenges remain. AIR's previous research has shown that, although institutions may provide some of these supportive practices, many adult learners still face institutional barriers to making college "work with their lives," pointing to the need for institutions to consider how best to support adults across the full student lifecycle (Parsons et al., 2023). In addition, adoption of these research-based strategies, whether on an individual basis or as part of campus-wide changes, remains relatively low (Mason et al., 2021; Reichlin Cruse, 2021).

One reason institutions may not be successfully adopting broad research-based strategies is that they require substantive changes to the ways institutions operate across units and divisions, including reforms to policies, practices, and structures (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Mason et al., 2021; Reichlin Cruse, 2021). Meaningfully improving adult learners' experiences requires institutions to develop institutional cultures that communicate to adult learners that they belong. For postsecondary institutions, this journey involves constituents across campuses, from front-line staff who engage deeply and directly with students to institutional leaders who play a key role in deciding strategic direction and then marshalling resources to support that direction.

This Series

This report is one of a series of resources from a study that seeks to understand how colleges and universities are incorporating changes to their practices, policies, and cultures in ways that support adult learners—particularly adult learners of color. This study builds on previous research by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) that focused on sharing a guiding framework that practitioners at institutions could consider in better serving or communicating with adult learners through their websites. To find contact information for the authors of this report; ask questions about this work; or access additional insights, perspectives, and findings from this body of research, please visit www.air.org/postsec-adultlearners.

This Report

In this report, we examine institutional transformation efforts at a set of postsecondary institutions across the United States, focusing on institutions that actively support adult learners—particularly adult learners who are 25-64 years old and who are Black, Hispanic, and Native American. This report refers collectively to adult learners who are Black, Hispanic, and Native American as "adult learners of color." We focus on institutions working to serve these groups because these groups represent a large population and are particularly likely to have people with some college credit but no credential or no college experience. Adult learners who are Black, Hispanic, and Native American represent 22.1%, 24.9%, and 1.4% of learners, respectively, who have some credit and no credential but only 14.3%, 22.1%, and .9% of the total undergraduate population (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2025).

We examine the motivations and key strategies of these institutions and explore the challenges and successes they encounter, with the aim of identifying practices and lessons that could inspire other postsecondary institutions and help them understand how to make similar meaningful changes on their own campuses. **The following guiding questions informed our study:**

1. **What changes do institutions implement that lead to meaningful changes in the experiences of adult learners of color, and what motivates these changes?**

2. **How do institutions change to support the (re)enrollment and success of adult learners? What investments do institutions make to structures, processes, and cultures to enable successful changes?**

A common thread among these institutions is their commitment to deeply understanding their learners' experiences, which motivates and drives transformation efforts. **Although these institutions' journeys echo the phases and steps of institutional transformation more generally, we find that transformation journeys toward better supporting *adult learners* are deeply rooted in an understanding of the communities they serve and a desire to advance their institutional missions.** Throughout this report, we will outline how these institutions navigate the main stages of transformation, emphasizing their motivations, approaches, and unique outcomes aimed at serving adult learners.

Transformation for Adult Learner Success: Conceptual Framework

AIR's research has shown that although individual programs or supports can be helpful to adult learners at certain points in time during their postsecondary journeys, adult learners experience institutions holistically and frequently and have experiences that remind them that institutions were not designed for them (Parsons et al., 2023). This suggests that institutions need to move beyond implementing individual adult-friendly initiatives or practices to make wholescale changes that meaningfully change adult learners' experiences across campus.

Thus, to guide our research, we drew on a framework for institutional transformation that identifies what it takes for postsecondary institutions to "transform" the experiences of adult learners of color–that is, to make deep and meaningful changes that have an impact on learners' experiences (Kezar, 2013). Rather than focusing on implementing one policy or practice, the framework emphasizes the need for more comprehensive and profound changes to institutions' structures, processes, and cultures.

For institutions to truly transform, the changes must

1. **change the overall institutional culture** through modifications to structures, processes, and behaviors;

2. **be deep** (i.e., experienced and enacted at all levels of a unit or department) and pervasive (i.e., experienced and enacted across the institution);

3. **be intentional**; and

4. **be sustained** over time.

As noted above, Kezar's (2013) model of institutional transformation highlights three dimensions of transformation:

- **Structural changes**, which include changes to institutions' organizational structures and/or hierarchies and the creation of new or reorganized departments, programs, and services;

- **Process changes**, which include developing a culture of evidence and data use to drive strategic decisions and continuous improvement and investing in faculty and staff development; and

- **Culture changes**, which include changes to institutional constituents' attitudes and behaviors that are deep and pervasive across the institution.

Additional research that explored institutional transformation in postsecondary institutions reinforced the need for deep and pervasive changes to structures, processes, and behaviors and also highlighted the importance of a targeted approach to transformation (Karp et al., 2016; Kezar, 2013). Transformation efforts were often accelerated when driven by a collective framework, goal, or mission (Poole et al., 2023). Still, existing research on institutional transformation primarily has focused on efforts aimed at student success more broadly and/or for traditional-age students. In addition, some scholars have pointed to the importance of understanding how campuses support learners of color and of including learner voice in research on transformation (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

To illustrate how the institutions in our study are enacting wholescale transformation with a specific focus on supporting adult (re)enrollment and success, we offer a refined conceptual framework (Exhibit 1) that builds on the Kezar's (2013) framework for institutional transformation. Informed by our findings, this framework situates the changes to structures, processes, and culture as deeply influenced by the unique contexts and missions of institutions that serve adult learners of color. Specifically, we found that the transformation work among institutions in our sample was driven by a deep understanding of the local communities and the learners of whom they were trying to serve and align their missions.

EXHIBIT 1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ADULT LEARNER-DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION

CORE CHANGE STRATEGIES

STRUCTURAL CHANGES

PROCESS CHANGES

STUDENT VOICE

CULTURE CHANGES

INSTITUTIONAL MISSION • LOCAL COMMUNITY • EMPLOYERS • STUDENT VOICE

- Changes to institutions' organizational structures and/or heirarchies
- Creation of new or reorganization of existing departments, programs, and services
- Culture of evidence and data-use to drive strategic decisions and continuous improvement
- Staff and faculty development
- Changes to institutional constituents' attitudes
- Deep and pervasive changes

Data and Methods

To understand the changes postsecondary institutions are making to better support adult learners of color and how they are managing those changes, we used a case study approach that involved interviews with a range of constituents at 11 postsecondary institutions from May 2024 to January 2025. The appendix presents more detailed information about the sample selection, data collection procedures, and analysis.

Sample

We first conducted introductory, **first-round foundational interviews** with staff from 11 postsecondary institutions. To identify institutions for the first-round foundational interviews, we used data from an institutional website scan of 350 institutions' websites that AIR conducted in early 2024. Using a rubric we developed to identify how information on websites addressed common questions and needs of adult learners of color, we selected institutions with websites that signaled an institution was offering supports for adult learners of color. The foundational interviews served two purposes: (1) to understand the extent to which these institutions—whose websites signaled strong support for adult learners of color—had made transformative changes designed to improve the experiences of adult learners of color and (2) to identify institutions for the second-round case study interviews.

Based on the foundational interviews, we selected four institutions to participate in **in-depth case studies**, using purposive sampling focused on identifying cases with a range of unique characteristics. The four institutions included 2-year and 4-year public institutions in different geographic locations (Alabama, California, Maryland, and Texas). Two were community colleges designated as Hispanic-serving institutions (HSI), one was a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), and one was a predominantly white, upper division-only institution that focused on transfer students.

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[1] The full report about the institutional website scan report, including details about sample selection and key findings, is available at https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Lumina-Adult-Learners-of-Color-Websites-July-2024.pdf.

[2] Upper division institutions are four year colleges and universities where students typically begin their junior or senior year of undergraduate study.

Analytic Approach

A **multiple case study approach** is ideal for our goal of developing an understanding of the transformation efforts of postsecondary institutions because it allows us to understand both unique details of each institution's efforts within their unique contexts and the broader organizational change processes (Garcia et al., 2018; Kezar, 2006). The case studies included 5–8 interviews with senior leaders, mid-level leaders (e.g., deans, directors), institutional research personnel, faculty, advisors, and adult learners and focused on strategic goals, practices, strategies for supporting adult learners of color, and the process for institution wide change. To analyze the data, we used cross-case, thematic analysis that was informed by our conceptual framework. Cross-case analysis allowed us to develop a deep and broad understanding of institutional transformation. First, we explored each case study individually, and then we turned to cross-case exploration of all data (including first-round foundational interviews) to identify themes and key similarities and differences. The cross-case analysis was guided by principles of thematic analysis, which seek meaning across a dataset and shared themes related to the identified research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Throughout this report, we present both themes from all 11 institutions and more detailed examples of institutional change efforts from the case study institutions.

To ensure trustworthiness of our data, we sought information from multiple sources, including institutional websites and strategic plans, and we conducted interviews with a range of institutional constituents to triangulate our findings. We also conducted member checking with all four case study institutions to review drafted language. Lastly, we engaged with a Learner Advisory Board of four adult learners (Chicago Beyond, 2019). These adult learners participated in and/or gave feedback about the research process at multiple steps, including reviewing data collection materials and aiding in recruitment efforts. During the analysis phase, they worked with the research team in a series of collaborative meetings to co-interpret findings and provide feedback on the basis of their lived experiences. The members of the advisory board were compensated for their time.

Case Study Institutions

These institutional profiles briefly introduce the four institutions that participated in the in-depth case studies. The profiles detail each institution's background and mission and preview its approach to change, which we describe in more detail throughout the report.

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[3] Co-interpretation is a process that brings researchers and members of the communities that are the subject of the research together to make sense of the data (AIR, 2021)

Athens State University

Athens State University is a public 4-year, upper division university in Athens, Alabama, offering 300- and 400-level undergraduate coursework and graduate degrees. Founded in 1822 as a women's academy, it opened to all students in 1929 and transitioned into an upper division college in 1975. The university's vision is to "be the premier destination for transfer students seeking the highest quality education and cutting-edge delivery at the most affordable cost" (Athens State University, n.d.). Since 1975, Athens State University has been dedicated to serving transfer students, with a significant focus on adult learners.

Athens State University has taken a **structure-forward** approach to change. The president's strategic plan emphasizes adult learners and student success, and the institution has undergone a restructuring plan that combines student services and academic affairs to foster better collaboration and efficiency among departments. This effort is intended to break down silos and further improve student success.

> The way we define student success is different. . . Most of our students being non-traditional, they have families, they have a number of courses. They've made mistakes in their lives. They've lived life. They have jobs and obligations, but they also have a dream of finishing their degree. And so we want to do that efficiently and effectively. . . We want them to feel seen and safe as they've taken that step to get back into college.
>
> **— Senior Leader**

Who enrolls at Athens State University?

Total Undergraduate Enrollment: **2,531**

56%
Adult Learners
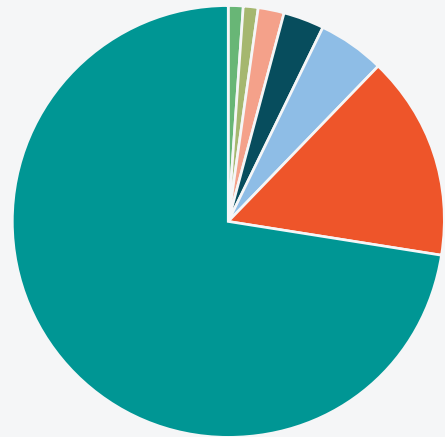
White	**72%**
Black or African-American	**15%**
Hispanic	**5%**
Two or more races	**3%**
Race/ethnicity unknown	**2%**
Asian	**1%**
American Indian or Alaska Native	**1%**
U.S. Nonresident	**0%**
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	**0%**

Cerritos College

Cerritos College is a public 2-year HSI located in Norwalk, California. Founded in 1955, the college offers comprehensive, high-quality, and affordable education and career training (Cerritos College, n.d.). The student body has a significant number of returning students, many of whom are adult learners balancing education with work and family responsibilities. Cerritos College serves these adult learners through certificate and degree programs, as well as additional adult education programs.

Cerritos College's approach to change is **data-driven**. Under the direction of an educational master plan titled the Students First Framework (2024), Cerritos College is actively transforming the institutional culture through data-driven practices. Cerritos College aims to graduate 50% of its students in five years or less. The college is dedicated to enhancing the student's overall campus experience, resulting in an increase in student graduation. Supporting a diverse local community is central to the college's mission, as many students remain in the area to live and work, benefiting from educational opportunities for growth.

💬 Because a lot of times, adult learners have families, are caretakers, have—you know—other obligations, full-time jobs, responsibilities, a lot of different things. And so, you know, being able to cater to those needs, right, you know, we try to do that here at **Cerritos College**.

— Mid-Level Leader

Who enrolls at Cerritos College?

Total Undergraduate Enrollment: **21,046**

40%
Adult Learners
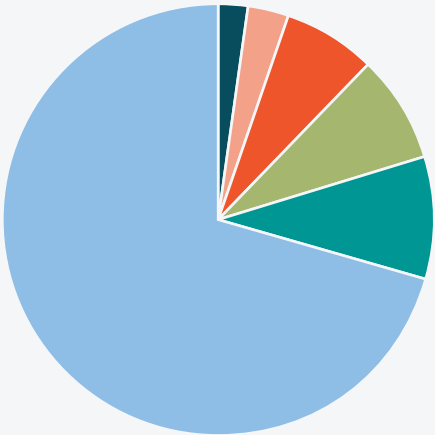
Hispanic	**70%**
White	**9%**
Asian	**8%**
Black or African-American	**7%**
Race/ethnicity unknown	**3%**
Two or more races	**2%**
U.S Nonresident	**0%**
American Indian or Alaska Native	**0%**
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	**0%**

Dallas College

Dallas College is a public 2-year HSI located in Dallas, Texas. Established in 1965, it is one of the largest community colleges in the state. It offers a wide range of associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and career and technical certificate programs. Guided by its mission "to transform lives and communities through higher education" (Dallas College, n.d.), the college aims play a vital role in expanding access to education and advancing economic and social mobility in the region. Dallas College's commitment to adult learners is evident in its holistic approach to education and support services. The college has four primary strategic priorities that guide its work and advance its mission: student success, employee success, community engagement, and institutional effectiveness.

Dallas College offers an example of a change approach **motivated by the specific needs of its learners and community**. In 2020, Dallas College underwent a significant transformation by uniting seven independently accredited colleges into a single institution, the Dallas County Community College District. This unification aimed to remove institutional barriers, streamline operations, and facilitate seamless academic progression and degree completion for students. This strategic move was aligned with the statewide 60x30 plan which aims for 60% of the 25- to 34-year-old workforce in Texas to achieve a postsecondary education credential by 2030.

> **Dallas College** is the only one I would trust. And that's just because I've never had a problem with course transfer. I've never had a problem with them honoring the course. I've never had a problem with the faculty fully supporting students. I've seen it firsthand where they've done above and beyond to assist students. It's just, they take it very personal. The staff at **Dallas College** takes it very personal. So you win, they win.
>
> **— Adult Learner**

Who enrolls at Dallas College?

Total Undergraduate Enrollment: **66,592**

22%
Adult Learners
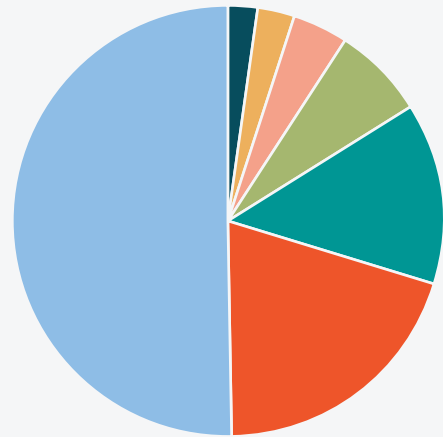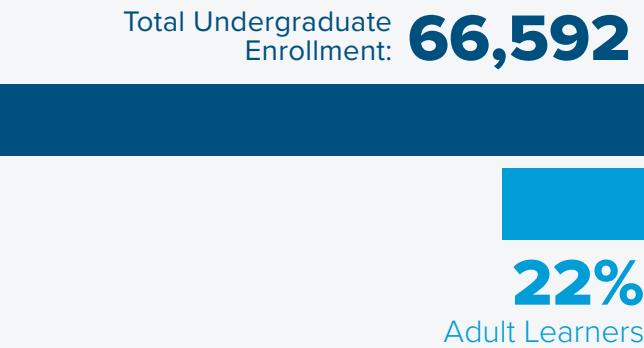
Hispanic	**51%**
Black or African-American	**20%**
White	**14%**
Asian	**7%**
Race/ethnicity unknown	**4%**
U.S Nonresident	**3%**
Two or more races	**2%**
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0%

Source. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall Enrollment (EF) survey component (2023).

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Morgan State University

Morgan State University is a 4-year public HBCU founded in 1867 in Baltimore, MD. As the largest HBCU in Maryland, it is designated as Maryland's pre-eminent public research university. The university's mission emphasizes leadership, integrity, innovation, diversity, excellence, and respect and aims to serve the community, region, state, nation, and world (Morgan State University, n.d.). Morgan State University is currently designated an R-2 (high research activity) university, and through its strategic plan, it aims to reach R-1 (very high research activity) designation by 2030.

Morgan State University's approach to change demonstrates the importance of building institution wide support to **scale and sustain change efforts**. Morgan State University has a long-standing commitment to adult learners, which began with the establishment of the Center for Continuing and Professional Studies (CCPS), in 1963. The university created CCPS after recognizing the need to support non-traditional students—that is, those who have been out of school for 5 years or more, are 25 years of age or older, are parents or caregivers, or are employed full-time while attending school.

> And adult learners . . . were quite an endeared population at **Morgan** because if you look at the African descendant culture, eldership, we revere it, we will do anything we can in service of their success. That's part of our cultural value set. It just flows right in. So that tributary meant that we were always going to be looking at opportunity for how to help this population subgroup succeed here.
>
> **— Mid-Level Leader**

Who enrolls at Morgan State University?

Total Undergraduate Enrollment: **8,300**

10%
Adult Learners
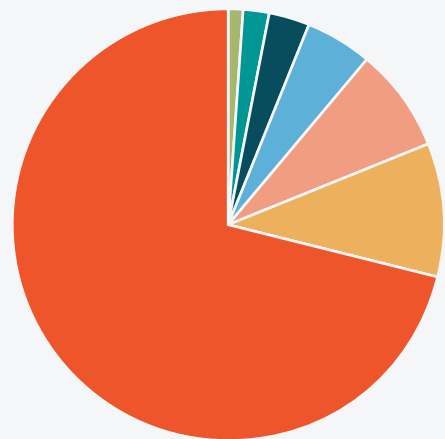
Black or African-American	**72%**
U.S Nonresident	**10%**
Race/ethnicity unknown	**8%**
Hispanic	**5%**
Two or more races	**3%**
White	**2%**
Asian	**1%**
American Indian or Alaska Native	**0%**
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	**0%**

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Findings

The institutions in our sample described ongoing transformation journeys that focused on making changes to their structures, processes, and cultures to enable them to more effectively implement strategies and practices to support adult learners of color. Throughout this report, we explore what is unique about how these institutions are transforming and how transformation efforts are driven by each institution's mission and context. We explore findings related to our conceptual framework, including:

- **Core change strategies**: Institutions' transformation efforts were driven by core change strategies that were informed by concerted efforts to engage the community and understand the prospective learners.

- **Structural changes**: Institutions focused on making changes to structures that removed institutional barriers to the success of adult learners and better enabled the institution to implement adult-friendly initiatives across campus.

- **Process changes**: Institutions made changes to processes that increased the capacities of staff and faculty to implement changes.

- **Institutional culture change**: Institutions reported using data and storytelling to engage champions and make the case for growing and sustaining changes that will enable them to better serve adult learners of color.

What makes the journeys of these institutions unique is that the changes, investments, and practices focus on and are driven by a deep understanding of the experiences of adult learners. Although some of the changes these institutions have made or practices they are implementing may not be specific to adult learners (e.g., increasing data-driven decision making), a key distinction is that these practices enable institutions to better implement changes that specifically support adult learners (e.g., data-driven decision making supports many goals, but specifically allows institutions to disaggregate student outcomes to focus on supporting adult learners and/or learners of color).

In this section, we highlight the motivations behind change, investments to create change, and sustainability efforts to maintain change and enable widespread adoption of practices that are supportive of adult learners of color, with an eye toward how these change efforts are driven by institutions' learners and contexts.

CORE CHANGE STRATEGIES:
What Motivates and Organizes an Approach to Change?

A key component of institutional transformation is a core change strategy; in particular, a framework or organizing goal for change can be especially effective in driving institutional transformation efforts (Poole et al., 2023). Two drivers often inform the changes that the institutions in our sample are making: a deep understanding of their specific students and specific institutional missions that focus on supporting adult learners, workforce development, and learners of color. In these cases, institutions are going beyond student success frameworks that are centered on traditional-age students, which is consistent with prior research that pointed to the importance of adapting frameworks to reflect a deeper understanding of the experiences of adult learners (Parsons et al., 2023). In this section, we explore the unique ways in which our institutions' understanding of their students and their missions informed how they approached their institutional transformation efforts.

Aligning Change Efforts With Community and Learner Needs

Although many institutions, especially community colleges, make efforts to engage with their communities, these institutions demonstrated an understanding of how being responsive to community needs also meant being responsive to the needs of their adult learners. This is consistent with research that has shown that adult learners often attend local institutions and make decisions based on the reputations of the institutions in their communities. In addition, and in contrast to recent high school graduates, adult learners often are seeking additional job training or pursuing a degree specifically to enhance their careers, meaning that opportunities for programs that are aligned with workforce needs in the community are important for them, which institutions in our sample also understood (Parsons et al., 2023; Hatcher et al., 2025).

Several institutions in our sample described establishing collaborative partnerships with local employers and community organizations, which helped them align initiatives and program offerings with the needs of the local workforce. For example, a 2-year institution in the West has industry advisory boards comprised of leaders from large companies in the area; feedback from those advisory boards informs the kinds of career and technical education (CTE) programs the institution designs. Similarly, Dallas College's strategic partnerships with employers aim to address regional workforce gaps and support adult learners in upskilling and achieving livable wages. A senior leader at Dallas College stated,

> *We're uber-focused on being a community presence. We know we can't do everything. However, if we can be part of the solution in helping our region solve complex problems, that's a table and a space we want to be in.*

Other institutions took on similar efforts with community organizations and local governments, through the use of surveys, advisory boards, and direct engagement and feedback.

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[5] Institutions that participated in the first-round foundational interviews but not the case studies are de-identified throughout this report.

In addition to engagement with the community, institutions also described ways in which they seek feedback from students and use data to inform how they design and offer programs and services. For example, a 4-year public institution in the Northwest uses student engagement sessions, focus groups, surveys, and a text bot to check in regularly with students and learn more about their experiences and needs. Leaders at the institution use these data to influence the development of programs and support services. In addition to these methods, institutions also use data tools, like CollegeApp, which uses consumer data to identify and engage potential students through personalized outreach campaigns, and data dashboards to align services and program offerings with the needs of students. For example, a community college in the Northeast analyzes data to identify patterns in student enrollment, program interests, and demographic indicators. This analysis helps the college ensure that its courses and support services are aligned with the needs of students. A senior leader at the college described this process:

> *We've been looking at each of our campuses to see which ZIP codes students are coming from to each of the campuses, to identify, are people coming to one that's close to where they live or close to where they work, or what's going on in terms of the patterns that are bringing students to a particular place. But then also what their most popular programs of study are so that we can ensure that we have those courses and the tutoring and other kinds of support around it.*

Similarly, Dallas College used data on their transient student body to drive the decision to merge and become one college. This merger was aimed at enabling students to graduate with a credential despite attending multiple campuses, as a senior leader described: "Even the decision to merge and become one-college was driven by really looking at the data on our student body."

Institutional Mission as a Driver for Change

Another common driver of change specific to supporting adult learners of color for the institutions in our sample was a desire to advance their missions. These missions often reflected a commitment to access, equity, and student success, driving change processes that align with these values. For example, a 4-year public institution in the Midwest works with major employers in its region to offer scholarships and support and increase access for its students, many of whom are adult learners. A senior leader explained, "We are deeply committed to serving the population of our region, including the Appalachian region, and we're deeply committed to ensuring that as many people as possible have access to high quality, affordable education." Similarly, a community college in the Northeast described how it has explicitly integrated adult learner success and equity into its mission, vision, and strategic plan goals, driving initiatives that support adult learners of color and learners from low-income backgrounds. And at Athens State University, the institution's position as a transfer institution also drives how it engages with students; the university works to support transfer students by focusing on initiatives that recognize prior learning and experiences.

In addition, several institutions in our sample are minority-serving institutions (MSI). They described the ways in which their student populations shape their institutional change efforts. For Morgan State University, the institutional mission is deeply rooted in advancing opportunities for Black students and students of color, as one staff member noted: "I think just the nature of it being an HBCU. . . This is the history of the institution, to support all learners of color." In another example, a 4-year public institution in the Northwest is pursuing HSI status, which reflects its commitment to serving the Hispanic population in the region. One senior leader explained, "Once we achieve that 25 percent, and we can apply as a Hispanic-serving institution, we are going to shift our focus from the H of HSI to the S, and that's the serving."

Spotlight on Dallas College:
Major Changes Driven by an Understanding
of Learner and Workforce Needs

Changes to institutional structures at Dallas College were driven by a recognition that the existing decentralized model created systemic barriers for adult learners—particularly those navigating multiple campuses to access required courses and services. Dallas College staff analyzed internal data about how students moved through and across their individual colleges, which revealed that many students were unable to complete credentials due to residency requirements tied to individual colleges, despite accumulating sufficient credits across the system. This, combined with the demographic reality of a predominantly adult, working learner population, prompted executive leadership at the college to initiate structural changes aimed at streamlining pathways to completion and addressing students' educational and workforce needs.

Informed by a comprehensive data collection effort that included surveys, town hall meetings, and focus groups with students, faculty, and staff, institutional leaders led a merger of seven independently accredited colleges under the Dallas County Community College District into one institution known as Dallas College. This merger was aligned with Texas's statewide 60x30 plan, with a goal of increasing credential attainment by streamlining operations and making it easier for students to progress and complete their degrees. In contrast to the previous campus-based model—where college leadership, programs of study, and student services varied across each of the independent colleges—Dallas College now has central executive leadership and program-based hubs where mid-level leaders, faculty, and staff are effectively based. The unified Dallas College also provides standardized student and academic services.

A senior leader at Dallas College described the motivation for this merger, noting that the previous model limited options for adult learners who needed to attend multiple campuses to access courses but were required to have a certain amount of coursework at one college:

I would say almost all of this was driven by our student body. So even the decision to merge and become one college was driven by really looking at the data on our student body. They were transient. They moved around. They attended several different campuses to get the courses they needed. However, because of our setup and structure, they couldn't graduate with a credential because you had to have at least 25 percent of the coursework at one institution. And we had people that were taking classes all over. So we had to merge in order to enable that type of student to be able to get the credential on time.

In another example of larger structural changes, after the merger, Dallas College's School of Education developed a 4-year baccalaureate program to address a regional demand for educators, particularly targeting teacher assistants and paraprofessionals who did not have a degree. The program is designed to support adult learners who are already in the workforce and are interested in upskilling. Enrolled learners take job-embedded courses, have opportunities for work-based learning and paid teacher residency, and participate in cohort models aimed at creating a sense of community. Since its inception, the program has exceeded enrollment expectations and maintained a 69% graduation rate.

Core Change Strategies: Key Findings

The institutions in our sample went beyond student success frameworks that were centered on traditional-age students, developing core change strategies that were informed and motivated by a deep understanding of and desire to serve their specific students and the communities in which they work.

- Institutions worked directly with their communities and local employers to develop an understanding of community and workforce needs, which often drove the change efforts they undertook.

- Institutions sought to incorporate learner voice in their transformation efforts by engaging directly with learners through surveys, focus groups, and other qualitative methods and by analyzing extant data on learner outcomes and behaviors.

- Institutional mission and context were key drivers of many change efforts, especially for institutions in our sample that had access missions and/or are MSIs.

NEW INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES:
What Major Changes Are Institutions Making?

A key component of institutional transformation is implementing structural changes, like changing organizational hierarchies, redesigning systems, and adjusting business practices. Institutions in our sample made these kinds of structural changes with the intention of removing institutional barriers that adult learners often face as a result of attending institutions that were historically designed for traditional-age students. These structural changes included redesigning student service models to enable more personalized, high-touch supports for adult learners; making broad changes to course structures and schedules to offer more flexibility for learners, and restructuring organizational units to enable deeper collaboration between staff so they can serve learners more efficiently. The most consistently referenced structural changes, among other examples of structural changes like those noted above, at institutions in our sample were those that enabled more personalized supports. In this section, we focus on how institutions changed their structures to remove barriers and enable them to provide more personalized supports to learners.

Enabling Personalized Supports for Adult Learners by Redesigning Student Service Models

Research has shown that tailored communication and support are important throughout adult learners' educational journeys, especially because many adult learners make a series of continuous decisions to stay enrolled (Darnell, 2022; Goble et al., 2021; Parsons et al., 2023). Based on their deep understanding of their adult learners, administrators, faculty, and staff across the institutions in our sample came to recognize the importance of these kinds of personalized, high-touch supports. To make these more intensive supports possible, institutions focused on making structural changes—that is, redesigning models for delivering academic and student services to be more responsive to the needs of adult learners. These changes range from smaller scale, like creating new roles and positions, to larger scale, like completely rethinking an approach to advising or reorganizing existing departments to centralize services.

On the small-scale end of the structural change spectrum, many institutions in our sample described creating new positions and roles dedicated to providing more proactive, personalized support—especially related to choosing academic pathways, transferring credits, and seeking financial aid—throughout the learners' educational journeys. For example, a 4-year public institution in the Midwest provides newly enrolled students with coaches who offer them one-on-one support for navigating the application process and for helping them establish a community of support. A mid-level leader shared that once learners are enrolled, the institution offers a comprehensive "lifecycle experience" that includes personalized coaching, quick turnaround on transfer credit evaluations, and tailored support services. Similarly, Cerritos College established a new, grant-funded position within its retail management program that is designed to provide a concierge-like approach to student support services. This position encompasses personalized, on-demand assistance from enrollment through graduation to ensure a seamless journey for students. Further, a senior leader from a community college in the Northeast shared the institution created new "navigator" roles for coaching that complements the institutions' case management academic advising. The navigator role is designed to "encourage the student to persist, and to identify and remove any obstacles that may be affecting the student's ability to be successful."

Examples of large scale structural changes typically focused on redesigning existing models or developing new structures. For example, some institutions created dedicated centers to provide high-touch supports, like the development of a resource center for transfer and returning learners at a 4-year public institution in the Northwest. The center connects learners with advising and community-building services even before they enroll, with the goal of increasing a sense of belonging and preparedness. Other institutions rethought the ways that they delivered services. For example, a 4-year public institution in the Midwest moved from a faculty advising model to a new caseload approach using professional advisor teams. Other institutions made structural changes that helped them streamline work and increase collaboration. For example, Cerritos College created Student Success Teams that include both staff and faculty and are designed to increase collaboration between academic and student affairs to serve learners more efficiently.

Spotlight on Athens State University: Restructuring to Centralize Services for Adult Learners

Athens State University has undertaken a series of structural changes to better serve its growing population of adult and transfer students, rooted in a strategic commitment to center the student experience. Recognizing that many adult learners are balancing work, family, and education, institutional leaders prioritized building a holistic support ecosystem that aligns advising, mentoring, and academic services. This shift was guided by the institution's ongoing strategic planning process, which is focused on student success—particularly for adult and transfer learners—and high-quality teaching and learning.

Athens State University has changed its structures to increase collaboration among faculty and staff and enhance the experiences of adult learners. First, the new president introduced a restructuring plan that combines student services and academic affairs under one Provost, with the goal of improving collaboration among departments. This move was part of a strategic direction to ensure that faculty and staff work together to identify and implement solutions that meet the needs of all students on campus, as one senior leader shared:

> *What a 20-year-old transfer from community college needs is very different from what the, you know, 35-year-old, you know, mom of two . . . is coming back in. And we want to get them to the same place, but they may need different support structures. . . . And so putting people sometimes in the same room together to talk about things and to figure out how to do that is, again, part of that strategic direction.*

An example of faculty collaboration at Athens State University is the recent initiative to redesign the institution's advising model. A Student Success Center was established which enables faculty and student services staff to work together in regards to advising students. One faculty member reflected on how faculty committees and task forces support change on campus, noting that "a lot of the heavy lifting and a lot of the work is done by faculty committees" and that all committees and shorter term task forces include faculty members from every college across campus. In addition to this restructuring plan, Athens State established the Adult Learner Services Office (ALSO), which expanded the institution's adult learner-focused initiatives. This office is responsible for providing a one-stop shop with wraparound services for adult learners, including recruitment, review of prior credentials, financial aid, ongoing advising, and support services. ALSO was developed as a rebrand of the university's Adult Degree Program Office that was established in 2012 in response to the statewide (Re)Engage Alabama initiative; this rebrand is intended to signal what Athens State wants to be as an institution. With strong support from senior leaders, ALSO now assists any student with professional, work, or military experience in completing their degree, underscoring the institution's commitment to serving adult learners. Leaders explained that the catalyst for this rebrand was "owning their strength" in supporting adult learners. The leaders emphasized the importance of recognizing the institution's expertise, sharing it with others, and taking ownership of their success.

New Institutional Structures: Key Findings

The most common structural changes that institutions in our sample described were those that focused on enabling them to provide more personalized, high-touch supports for adult learners. These changes ranged in scale and included the following types of changes:

- Many institutions made small-scale structural changes that focused on creating new positions or roles that provide the personalized supports that adult learners value, like student success coaches or navigators.

- Larger scale structural changes that institutions made included developing new centers or offices that created centralized spaces for institutions to provide personalized support, rethinking advising models, and creating structures that enhance collaboration and communication among staff.

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[6] (Re)Engage Alabama is a grant program that aims to increase the number of Alabama adults with college degrees and to encourage adults who have earned some college credit hours to return to college and complete a college degree program connected with the workforce development needs aligned with Alabama's high demand occupation list. For more information, see: ReEngage - Alabama Commission on Higher Education

REDESIGNED PROCESSES:
How Do Institutions Facilitate Widespread Implementation of Supports?

Even within existing structures, institutions described changing and adjusting processes that enabled them to make their services and programs more adult friendly. These changes include using data to drive strategic decision making that focuses on supporting adult learners of color and building the capacities of staff and faculty to better serve adult learners of color. By redesigning institution-wide processes and systems, campuses are implementing broad changes that reach across departments and units. These efforts help to institutionalize shifts in ways that are both deep and pervasive—embedding new practices into the core operations of the institution rather than limiting them to isolated units or individual departments.

Enhancing Institutional Capacity Through Professional Development

Institutions have invested in professional development for faculty and staff with the goal of increasing their awareness of the experiences and cultural competencies of adult learners and of implementing adult-friendly teaching and learning practices. Faculty and staff across institutions noted that it is critical to provide training across entire campuses, as adult learners interact with multiple departments. Without institutional commitment, understanding and effectiveness may be inconsistent across faculty and staff. As one administrator at Dallas College expressed, "that unevenness can be detrimental to student success, especially adult learners."

Cerritos College provides professional development for faculty and staff to increase cultural competence and better understand the experiences of learners of color. For example, a senior leader shared an instance where a team—comprised of members of the board of trustees, mid-level leaders, and faculty and staff—was sent to Africa to participate in training to learn more about the African diaspora and how these cultural identities affect student experiences:

> *The program in Africa was very strategically designed that there were leaders from our Umoja team that would have gone, but then very conscientiously people who would not have backgrounds in working, or in Black culture, so that they can better understand things that they wouldn't have known, and having that mixture of people.*

Other professional development efforts focus on improving faculty understanding and application of the principles of andragogy to support adult learners. For example, as part of its broader change strategy to better support adult learners, Dallas College has invested in faculty development focused on skills-based coursework and practice-based teacher education. These efforts are designed to ensure instruction is more aligned with real-world applications and the goals of adult learners. Faculty participate in monthly collaborative meetings to share best practices and engage in a "community of learners," fostering a culture of continuous improvement and shared accountability that supports long-term instructional change. Athens State University has provided professional development that focuses on several key initiatives related to the success of adult learners. A faculty member indicated the institution provides training opportunities for faculty and staff members "to learn more about experiential education and how they can incorporate it, what they can do." The university also offers weekly Zoom sessions that cover such topics as effective teaching strategies and classroom management. Additionally,

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guest speakers from the community, such as K–12 principals and advisory board members, share their experiences and knowledge. In addition to direct professional development, Athens State University has also developed crosswalks for awarding CPL that help identify how to award credit for learners' prior experience, like certifications and trainings. One staff member explained how this has been helpful:

> *That has helped on the faculty end because we're not the experts in all this credit for prior learning and all these programs. The faculty are. So, we have to work closely with them. They have to tell us what kind of professional certifications would count in their programs.*

Using Data to Set Goals and Drive Continuous Improvement

As previously discussed, institutions collect and use data and feedback from students and communities to drive change. However, the move toward a deeper and more pervasive culture of data-informed decision making and student support represents a shift in how institutions operate. This process involves refining day-to-day operational decisions and integrating data into strategic planning, ensuring that data informs immediate actions and long-term goals. As one senior leader from a 2-year institution in the West described, "It's about making processes work better so our focus can be more strategic and less reactive." Building a more data-driven culture helped institutions in our sample support adult learners in more targeted, effective ways, which is key to providing the kinds of personalized, high-touch supports that institutions in our sample are working to implement.

Institutions in our sample are exploring ways to encourage data-driven decision making in strategic planning and to strengthen daily the operational data literacy of staff, because leaders at the institutions recognize that tools alone may not lead to meaningful change without the capacity to interpret and apply data effectively. For example, a senior leader from a 4-year public Tribal institution in the Southwest shared an example of how its institutional research office supports operational data literacy through regular "data days:"

> *So our institutional research office has started having data days. So she [research director] would make it fun to where she talks about . . . and she invites people . . . about how to find certain data . . . . People provide examples of what the data they use within their department. And it goes all across. It's not just academics. . . . So we're given opportunities. Once a week, somebody's invited to speak and they have either Zoom or . . . They have it in person and people come over and they listen and they talk and they ask questions so they get to understand more about it. So she's doing that as well. And she also does a series of what kind of data would you like to collect and what are you going to use it for? Things like that. Little workshops. So that's very helpful.*

To support increased campuswide use of data, Dallas College has invested in the use of data for standard institutional research functions and to encourage research that leads the college's efforts to ensure student success. For example, within academic affairs, leaders established a "data incubator" team that is using data to identify new programs the college can offer to better meet labor market and workforce demands by supporting adult learners. The college also established the Research Institute, which is an in-depth research unit that conducts research embedded in the context of the students they serve. A senior leader described this unit, noting that it is "trying to take best practice[s] and be regional and national, but also address[ing] our own students and hopefully [creating] better action items from their research."

Spotlight on Cerritos College:
Fostering a Data-Driven Culture to Enhance Student Success

Guided by the college's "Students First Framework" and goal to graduate 50% of students within five years, Cerritos College's story is focused on leading change via a data-informed approach, organizing change efforts around detailed key performance indicators that apply to each department and ladder up to the college's 50% graduation goal. This data-informed approach was driven by institutional leadership and the Board of Trustees, who recognized the need for greater institutional alignment and accountability, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on student success.

To support this initiative, Cerritos College has invested in professional development for faculty and staff, ensuring they have the skills and knowledge needed to effectively use data in their roles. Additionally, the college has implemented new technologies and systems to streamline data collection and reporting processes. Staff receive training—including hands-on demonstrations and workshops—on how to use, track, and interpret data dashboards. These trainings are intended to build faculty and staff competencies with data dashboards and encourage them to use data to inform the work they do. Fostering this mindset has been a key part of the college's work on building a data-driven culture.

Leaders, faculty, and staff at Cerritos College pointed to the college's Retail Management Program, which is a certificate program designed specifically for adult learners who are employed at grocery stores and are returning to complete a credential that leads directly to advancement and salary increases. This program accounts for 32% of the college's total completions, job placements, and overall student satisfaction. Within the Retail Management Program, collaboration with the institutional research office has enabled the transition from manual to automated tracking of class rosters and grades, supporting a program of over 2,000 students. This shift has also supported collaboration with the counseling department. Although counselors do not advise Retail Management students directly, many students who complete the Retail Management certificate express interest in continuing their education. Staff and faculty indicated that this leads to stronger relationships with the counseling team and increased awareness of partnerships between the Retail Management Program and of other 4-year colleges for students who are interested in transferring. According to a member of the institutional research staff,

The high-touch component has really made a difference. They also directly enroll students as well. But having that student list, we provide the specific criteria that they ask us for to make sure students are on track. And so it's essentially like a degree audit is the way I look at it. It's something we just purchased and we're hoping to roll out in spring [2025]. So I'm hoping that we'll have a bigger impact. But that's one program I often talk about where it's super successful. And so trying to expand that campuswide.

Although Cerritos College has made progress toward a data-driven culture in the past several years, the accuracy of the data was not trusted initially. Introducing new data systems and modifying existing ones to provide strong, accurate, aggregated data was a significant challenge. Leaders indicated that the data needed to be tied to success metrics, such as retention, employment, and living wages. Educating faculty leadership and department chairs on the meaning and purpose of these numbers, as well as the funding associated with them, was crucial. It was essential to help them understand the possibilities and potential benefits of a data-driven approach. A senior leader commented,

> *So the change of the goals start from the top, but the activities, the changes start at the grassroots with the departments. They look at their data for the student achievement data, learning outcomes data, and they then determine what are the changes that they need to make in order to improve these. They identify the changes. We link those changes to the Students First Framework, the levers and the strategies, and then they're eligible for funding.*

To do this, Cerritos College provides resources to support faculty and staff in using data. For example, the college has nine Learning and Career Pathways. Each pathway is comprised of a dean, faculty member, counselor, and a student success coach. This holistic support team oversees the progress and needs of students and provides comprehensive guidance and assistance. Depending on the specific requirements, each pathway is supported by data coaches who provide relevant data to help teams plan their retention efforts. These data coaches play a crucial role in ensuring that the support teams have access to accurate and actionable information, so they can make informed decisions and tailor strategies to better support students.

Additionally, the institution offers workshops each semester where staff and faculty can ask questions, receive feedback, and engage in data planning. These workshops are designed to create a collaborative environment where faculty and staff can share best practices, discuss challenges, and develop effective strategies for using data to enhance student success. By providing ongoing professional development opportunities, the institution ensures that its educators are well-equipped to leverage data in their teaching and support roles, ultimately contributing to a more data-driven and student-centered culture.

Redesigned Processes: Key Findings

In addition to making structural changes, these institutions also are transforming their processes and systems to better support adult learners by focusing on building the capacities of staff through professional development and encouraging a culture of data-driven decision making:

- Investments in professional development focus on better equipping faculty and staff with the specific skills they need to better serve adult learners. Such professional development topics include data literacy, cultural competence, andragogy, and experiential learning.

- Institutions are integrating data into their processes, from strategic planning to daily operations, and are encouraging more data use by embedding it into performance management for staff, building data literacy, and investing in research initiatives.

CULTURAL CHANGE:
How Do Institutions Grow and Sustain Changes?

Many institutions in our sample described encountering challenges related to scaling initiatives institution wide and gaining trust and buy-in across campus. They often addressed these cultural barriers by starting small and making the case for these programs, gradually building momentum and buy-in and supporting sustainability. Institutions began with smaller scale initiatives or pilot programs to build evidence and make the case for change to others on campus. In addition, institutions described the importance of people in this process; leaders often engaged "champions" for their initiatives by building a network of supporters across campus. This approach helped institutions in our study to test new initiatives, gather data on their effectiveness, and make the case for broader implementation.

As is the case at many postsecondary institutions, study participants reported facing challenges to sustaining grant-funded initiatives. Across interviews, study participants from institutions reflected on the importance of people and processes that can help drive the work forward, regardless of future grant funding. Having leadership support, champions across campus, and dedicated and committed staff were especially important for study participants when thinking about how to sustain the work they were doing. A senior leader from Morgan State University said, "you can't be the only champion on campus. So it's making sure that you build a network of champions who are like you, engage, and you amplify when they are supporting and helping."

In the context of institutional change designed to support adult learners, building networks of champions and individuals who are invested in the cause is especially important. For example, finding the right balance for senior leaders at Cerritos College to understand the value of high-touch initiatives, even at a smaller scale, is crucial. One faculty member noted, "That's my role and that's how I'm like, okay, I need to start figuring out what I can do to sell that to the higher up so then they can support as well." Another participant highlighted the importance of making sure people can see who their students are, stating, "My approach has been to get it in the hearts and minds and on the budgets of everybody on campus as much as we can, so it matters to a lot of people and we'll figure it out." Especially for initiatives that use grant funding, this approach has helped staff at Cerritos College, as one participant described: "It gives me peace of mind to know that if our funding goes away, there's a lot of other people that are also committed and care about this."

The institutions in our sample initially tested specific practices within individual degree programs, apprenticeships, workforce training, micro-credentials, and Earn and Learn models. Although these efforts started as pilot projects, they introduced new ways of thinking and working for faculty and staff. These efforts laid the groundwork for better support of adult learners and gradually shifted the institutional culture toward more flexible, career-aligned, and learner-centered approaches. Many initiatives aimed to enhance skills and facilitate degree completion, particularly in response to challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a community college in the Midwest described its Earn and Learn model as a response to an identified need in the local region. This model began in a micro-electrical mechanical systems program, a field in which local employers urgently needed workers. Through partnerships with local employers, students worked in the field while attending classes. The institution codesigned the curriculum based on a feedback loop from industry partners to meet rapidly evolving industry demands. Based on the success of that initial program, the initiative expanded to other academic programs and eventually became a strategic priority for the college. Respondents indicated that this initiative has been a priority in the college's strategic plan but that they are continuing to communicate about it to support more widespread understanding:

> *Our ultimate goal is that if anyone at the college is asked about Earn and Learn, they should be familiar enough to discuss it and understand that this is a priority for us. The specific teams working on it should be connected through layers of communication, from committees down to the teams actively advancing it.*

The adoption of the program was a direct response to industry needs. Implementing this initiative began with co-designing the curriculum alongside local partners, and this collaborative approach gradually expanded across different areas of the institution. Over time, it evolved into a strategic priority, marking the beginning of deep and pervasive cultural changes aimed at aligning the institution more closely with industry demands while fostering a more flexible, responsive, and learner-centered environment. The Earn and Learn model is one of many initiatives that often start small and require additional advocacy or support to sustain long term.
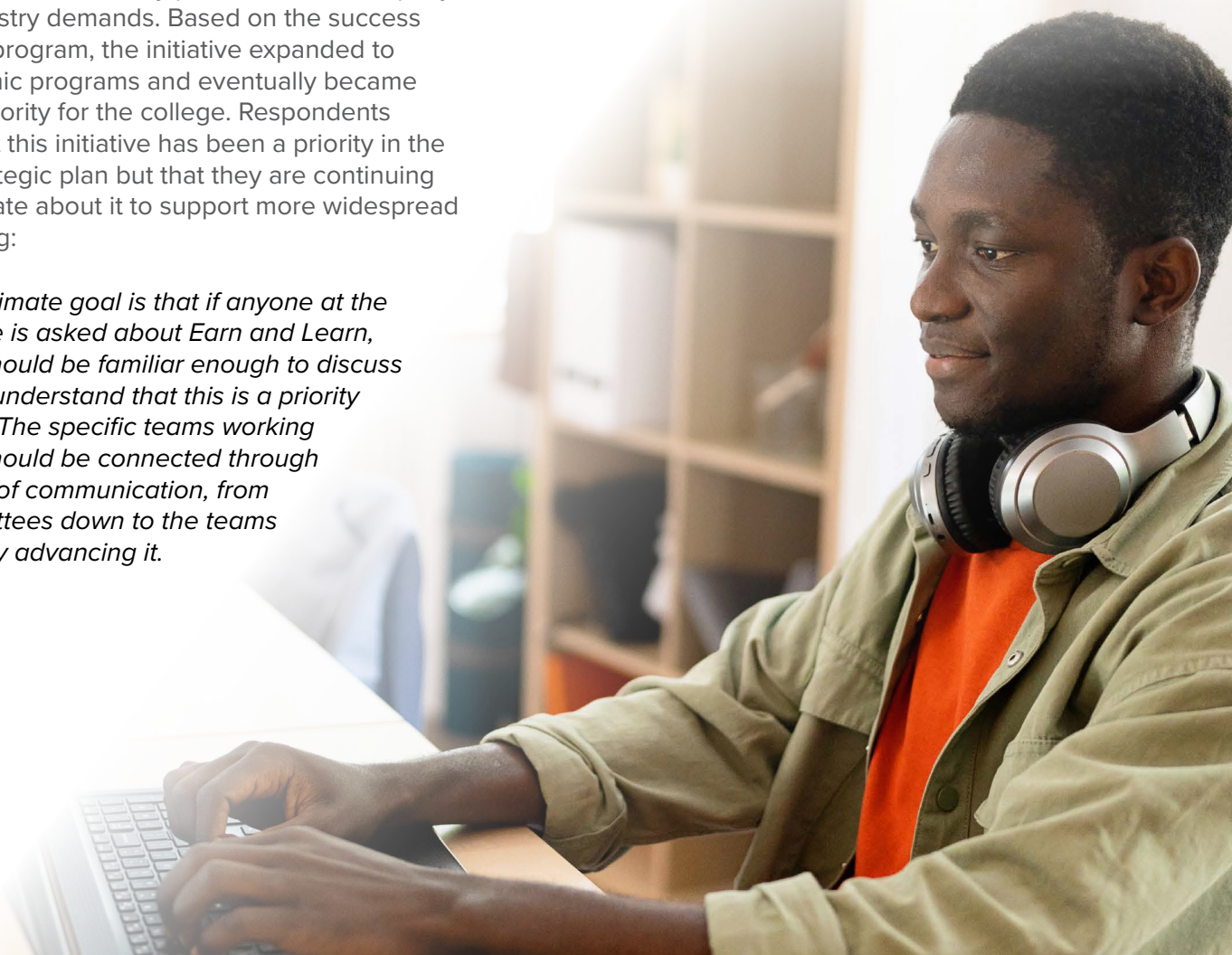
Spotlight on Morgan State University: Starting Small and Championing Change

Morgan State University has expanded its efforts to support adult learners through institutional changes aimed at increasing degree completion. These changes are grounded in a broader institutional commitment, as an HBCU, to educational justice, with a focus on closing racial equity gaps in degree attainment, particularly among Black households in Baltimore. While this commitment is longstanding, students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic helped create a catalyst for particular changes as Morgan recognized learners' increased demand for flexible, high-quality online learning.

Morgan State University has been serving adult learners since 1963 through CCPS, which focuses specifically on non-credit courses, workforce training, and workshops. However, respondents shared that faculty in the College of Liberal Arts noticed a significant number of adult learners who had accumulated many credits but had not chosen a major. These students were close to graduation but needed a pathway to complete their degrees, signaling a need to focus on supporting adult learners in credit-bearing programs.

In response to the growing needs of this population, Morgan State University launched the College of Interdisciplinary and Continuing Studies (CICS) in 2021, a strategic initiative aimed at expanding educational opportunities for non-traditional students, including the "Morgan Completes You" initiative. CICS, which offers a range of degree programs (from bachelor's to doctoral degrees), was in large part a response to the rising demand for flexible and online education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders at Morgan State University took an incremental approach to implementing CICS, starting small and prioritizing research to better understand the experiences of adult learners. As a result of this research, the university began with initiatives, like CPL and Competency-Based Education, that were designed to acknowledge the skills and knowledge that adult learners bring from their prior experiences, thereby shortening the time to degree completion. Although these policies

were in place for several years through a small grant, they were not prioritized until the establishment of CICS under new leadership. Still, as one leader noted, "It takes some time to establish" new practices; the approval process for these new initiatives took nearly a year of institutional advocacy and navigating state-level changes.

CICS leaders also met with resistance from some faculty and staff across campus who perceived these new initiatives as being at odds with the university's history as a traditional 4-year public institution with a focus on in-person instruction and community. To gain buy-in for their initiatives, CICS leaders acted as champions of the work and developed a network of advocates across departments and units on campus. Respondents noted that connections among colleagues and leaders were essential for sustaining new strategies; for example, one staff member said,

> *Because our department is so small and we exist at the margins, I often hear like, 'Oh, we didn't know that you were here,' or 'We didn't know that you did that.' For me, I rely on those collaborative relationships, my connections with other vice presidents and leaders on campus, to help usher in those changes and make them sustainable.*

At Morgan State University, leaders emphasized advocating for change requires compelling evidence and a strategic, structured approach. Respondents shared it is essential to demonstrate how effective practices can develop into formalized processes and, when appropriate, transition into sustainable policies. Leaders highlighted CPL as an example—what began as informal practices was refined into a structured process and ultimately formalized into a comprehensive policy through a rigorous governance framework. Navigating policy and shared governance processes may require multiple conversations and persistent advocacy; however, such efforts are crucial for driving progress. Although the CICS initiative is still in its early stages, the journey toward gaining support for these policies has been significantly enhanced by sharing the powerful stories of the affected students. One leader highlighted, "The moments that resonate most are when we bring our students' stories to light—showcasing the obstacles they have faced and demonstrating how these challenges impact their lives." By sharing these narratives, staff at Morgan State University increased awareness of the challenges that students face across campus and helped to formalize practices across campus.

Cultural and Pervasive Change: Key Findings

Having made changes to their structures and processes that are informed by a deep understanding of their learners and communities, institutions in our sample are working to grow and sustain that work by starting small, making the case for their initiatives, and building networks of champions to support the work.

- Institutions often begin with pilot programs or initiatives in a single department, gathering evidence and building momentum that allows them to gradually gain buy-in and expand initiatives across campus.

- Engaging dedicated leaders and staff across campus has proven to be helpful for institutions in our sample that are working to scale changes, especially when those changes are initially met with resistance from other departments and units.

Conclusion and Implications

The report highlights how postsecondary institutions are transforming their structures, processes, and cultures to better support adult learners, particularly adult learners of color. Although the transformation journeys of the institutions in our sample have many aspects in common with other institutions that have transformed in support of student success more broadly (e.g., reorganizing institutional structures, focusing on data use, investing in professional development), these institutions were motivated by and approached their change initiatives with a deep understanding of the learners and the communities they serve. Key findings related to the dimensions of institutional transformation include:

- **Core change strategies:** Institutions began by engaging with local community members, employers, and current and prospective learners to better understand the needs of these groups. Institutions used the knowledge and understanding they gained through this engagement to inform core change strategies that are aligned with the unique needs and experiences of the learners they serve.

- **Structures:** Institutions are implementing structural changes to provide more personalized, high-touch supports for adult learners, ranging from creating new roles, like success coaches, to establishing centralized support centers and enhancing collaboration among staff.

- **Processes:** Institutions are enhancing their processes and systems to better support adult learners by investing in professional development for staff and fostering a culture of data-driven decision making, ensuring that faculty and staff are equipped with necessary skills and that data are integrated into strategic planning and daily operations.

- **Culture:** Institutions are sustaining and scaling their transformation efforts by starting small to build evidence and momentum and by engaging champions across campus to help gain buy-in and support, especially when facing resistance to change.

These findings point to several implications for research and practice.

Implications for research:

- This study provided important insights about how institutions that are managing change efforts when transforming to better (re)enroll and support adult learners of color. However, our case study approach used a limited sample size, and it reflects learnings from one point in time. The field would benefit from additional research at a range of institution types and over a longer period of time to better understand the changes they have made and how those changes may evolve and persist over time.

- Future research should consider how to incorporate mixed methods approaches and consider the extent to which institutional transformation efforts are improving student outcomes. Although establishing causal effects of such complex efforts may not be possible, researchers can consider other ways to understand progress and assess the extent to which changes institutions make are indeed affecting the experiences and outcomes of learners.

Implications for practice:

- A key takeaway from this report is that when working to enact wholescale institutional transformation in support of adult learners of color, institutions are informed by a deep understanding of the needs of their communities and learners. Institutions that are interested in better serving adult learners of color—or any other specific groups of learners— should consider how they can engage with and learn from their communities to design initiatives and manage change in ways that are aligned with the needs of those communities and learners.

- In this report, we focused on describing the transformation efforts of the institutions in our sample, with an eye toward understanding the *how* of these efforts. For more information about what these institutions are doing and the promising practices for serving adult learners of color that emerged, AIR's Toolkit for Supporting Adult Learners in Postsecondary Enrollment digs into three promising practices and offers concrete action steps that institutions can take to begin this kind of transformation work.

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Appendix A.
Data Collection and Methods

We used a multiphase sample selection process to identify institutions for the final sample:

- **Institutional website scan** (January–March 2024)**:** To understand how colleges and universities are incorporating changes to their practices, policies, and cultures in ways that support adult learners, particularly adult learners of color, we reviewed 350 higher education websites, as this is often the primary source for prospective adult learners to seek information about college. We used data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the U.S. Census American Community Survey to identify priority regions that had low postsecondary credential attainment and higher shares of individuals of color, and we selected a representative sample of institutions within each priority region. Using a rubric we developed to identify how the information on websites addressed common questions and needs of adult learners of color, we then reviewed the websites of the selected institutions. More information about the sample, methodology, and key findings from the website scan is available from *Beyond the Homepage: How and Whether Websites Address the Questions and Needs of Adult Learners of Color.*

- **First-round foundational interviews** (May–July 2024): Those that scored highly on the rubric would be invited to participate in interviews about their efforts to intentionally and sustainably serve adult learners of color. On the basis of the rubric, we identified a subset of 11 institutions that provided relevant and clear information for adult learners on their websites. Three criteria informed the selection of these institutions: 1) they were not commonly cited in other literature about adult learners, 2) they employed various approaches to support adult learners, and 3) they demonstrated evidence of change management strategies and/or were working toward institutional transformation. We used these selection criteria to identify institutions with a range of approaches to institutional transformation to include in deeper case studies. The sample included diverse types of institutions (2-year, 4-year, MSI, and non-MSI) and geographic locations. It also included institutions with substantial or growing populations of adult learners and student enrollees who are Black, Native American, or Hispanic. The sample included five 2-year institutions and six 4-year institutions. Among the institutions we spoke with during this phase, two were located in the Midwest, two in the Northwest, two in the West, two in the Northeast, two in the South, and one in the Southwest.

- **Second-round case study interviews and focus groups** (November 2024–January 2025): To develop a deeper understanding of how institutions from various contexts are enacting wholescale changes to better (re)enroll and support the success of adult learners of color, we conducted in-depth case studies with a subset of four institutions. These four institutions included 2-year and 4-year public institutions in different geographic locations (Alabama, California, Maryland, and Texas) to participate in deeper case studies. Among the selected case study participants, two were community colleges with a Hispanic-serving designation, one was a historically Black university, and one was a predominantly white upper division-only institution that focused on transfer students.

For the first-round foundational interviews and the second-round case interviews, we conducted virtual and in-person semi-structured interviews and focus groups, each lasting 45 to 60 minutes. The interview questions focused on strategic goals, practices, strategies for supporting adult learners of color, and the process for institution wide change. Our sample included senior-level leaders, mid-level leaders, faculty, staff, advisors, and adult learners. Following the institutional interview phase, senior-level representatives from each of the four case study institutions identified institutional constituents at various levels, with the goal of capturing diverse viewpoints and experiences related to institutional change efforts. For the institutional interviews, we interviewed 1–3 individuals from each institution. For the in-depth case studies, we conducted 5–8 additional interviews or focus groups with key constituents, including senior leaders, faculty, advisors, and adult learners. We conducted on-site interviews with three of the four institutions, with the other occurring virtually. Exhibit A.1 provides a summary of respondent types across all participating institutions.

The research team conducted a thematic analysis to identify key practices related to our guiding research questions. This approach is designed to uncover significant themes and patterns within the data. In thematic analysis, the researcher seeks meaning across a dataset and shared themes related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Our approach was informed by Eckel and Kezar's framework (2003), which offers a broad perspective on institutional transformation. We reviewed transcripts from both rounds of data collection, institutional websites, and strategic plans and developed a codebook to categorize the responses. We then used NVivo, the qualitative data analysis software, to code the interviews and identify key themes relevant to the study's research questions. This coding process involved responses from participants at all levels (Exhibit A.1). Following the coding, we created analytic memos to capture insights, reflections, and nuances from the data.

All research team members have postsecondary education backgrounds in the behavioral and social sciences and various levels of behavioral and social science research training and experience. Collectively, the researchers have first- or second-hand experiences with themes that pertain to the educational experiences of adult learners (e.g., experience as an adult learner, a person of color, a first-generation postsecondary student).

EXHIBIT A.1. INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

TYPE OF PARTICIPANT	FIRST-ROUND FOUNDATIONAL INTERVIEWS	SECOND-ROUND CASE STUDY INTERVIEWS & FOCUS GROUPS
Senior-level leaders (administrators)	2	4
Mid-level leaders (administrators)	14	3
Faculty, staff, and advisors	2	17
Institutional research staff	1	4
Adult learners	0	7

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