



Adult Learner Transitions to Postsecondary Education: Promising Practices for Programs Serving Incarcerated Populations

A Promising Practice Brief

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We value these students, we believe in the work that we're doing, we believe that encouraging these students to pursue education is helpful not only to them, to their families, but to all of us as a community.

— K-12 Adult Education Corrections Instructor

The relationship between postsecondary education, earnings, and employment is well established (Kim & Tamborini, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022); each successive credential or degree increases the adult learner's employment and earning potential (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017; Kosyakova & Bills, 2021). Given this, transitions to postsecondary programs from adult education indicate that learners are on a productive trajectory toward higher wages and more stable employment. However, the availability of and ease with which an adult learner can navigate through educational and workforce systems affect equitable access to a lifetime of opportunities.

This brief presents results from a qualitative project that sought to understand key elements of and supportive practices for successful transitions for justice-involved adults from adult basic education programs to postsecondary programs. For the purposes of this work, a team of WestEd researchers explored successful transitions that included accessing higher education, achieving living-wage employment, and fostering integration into society. Our interest in exploring these transitions is prompted by the paucity of research on adult learners' transitions into postsecondary courses. Our guiding questions included the following: *How accessible are postsecondary opportunities? What supports learners' transitions? What do learner journeys look like? What outcomes are realized for adult learners who transition to postsecondary courses?*

Based on interviews with adult education professionals who run programs and teach in correctional facilities, we present a snapshot of promising practices that begin to answer some of these questions and support incarcerated individuals to access career and educational pathways.

In this brief, we begin by outlining our methods for examining transition practices in correctional facilities. We then discuss the context of adult education and postsecondary transitions

in California and review evidence-based strategies for moving adult learners from basic skills toward postsecondary education. We then present four strategies that were shared among the correctional facility providers and suggest recommendations for how similar programs can be improved.

Project Description and Methodology

The focus of this brief is the analysis and findings from a project that explored promising practices for supporting postsecondary transitions for adult learners in correctional facilities. This work was conducted as a follow-up to a quantitative analysis of postsecondary trend data reported into the [California Adult Education Pipeline](#) (AEP) dashboard, a statewide data system for capturing adult education learner demographics and outcomes (see the Appendix for more information on this analysis). In alignment with the AEP dashboard, postsecondary transitions are defined as a transition to a nondevelopmental credit class or to a career and technical education (CTE) class. As part of this effort, a WestEd team identified adult education providers (at community colleges and K-12 districts) with high rates of transitions. The analysis controlled for an institution's size and characteristics. The team conducted semistructured interviews to explore promising practices with these institutions.

During the analysis, the team discovered that eight adult education programs working in corrections facilities rose to the top for having high adult learner transition rates. Given the unique contexts that shape educational programs in correctional facilities, the team revised the interview protocol to better meet that context. Next, the team conducted interviews with correctional staff, administrators, and instructors at five of the identified programs to learn about their local contexts and the practices that might support high transition rates. The semistructured interview questions focused on program culture and values, policies, collaborations, instructional and program strategies, supportive services, and data use.

Context: Correctional Education and Postsecondary Transitions in California

California's correctional system works with regional adult education programs to offer incarcerated populations academic and skill-building opportunities that can provide rehabilitative benefits. The Office of Career and Technical Adult Education (OCTAE) notes that correctional education is a "fundamental component of rehabilitative programming offered in juvenile justice confinement facilities, most American prisons, and many jails and detention centers" (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2021). For incarcerated adults in California, the education code provides for basic education, a high school diploma, and English as a second language. The aim is to help adults gain competency for core academic (e.g., reading, language, math), vocational, and life skills while also fostering self-esteem (California Department of Education, 2021).

Interest in growing and learning from such programming is gaining traction among practitioners because of the possibilities offered to adult learners. There has also been renewed or growing policy and funding interests in correctional education and postsecondary programming (Castro et al., 2018). For example, the Second Chance Pell Experiment, which began in 2015, has continued to expand (Castro et al., 2018; Gravely, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The initiative offers a "fresh start" to incarcerated individuals by expanding access to Federal Pell Grants and aims to support reentry into communities and chances for success in the future (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). There has also been an emphasis on providing learners with equitable access across all educational segments, institutions, and programming in today's rapidly changing landscape, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, the evidence-based literature and research highlights the multiple benefits that education and transitions bring to populations within correction facilities. These benefits include a positive impact on individuals (e.g., increased self-esteem and widened opportunities), communities, and societies (e.g., integration into communities and safer environments). For example, participation in correctional

education and programming can result in lower recidivism postrelease, higher employment rates, or increased earnings (Borden et al., 2012; Delaney et al., 2016; Palmer, 2012). Personal benefits can also occur, such as improved behaviors and changed mindsets, relationships and peer role models, and self-esteem (Borden et al., 2012; Delaney et al., 2016).

Effective Evidence-Based Strategies for Postsecondary Transitions

In general, the field literature notes that promising programmatic practices for successful adult learners' postsecondary education and transitions include, although are not limited to, the following:

- Iterative processes of instructional innovation, enhanced services, and collaboration (Alamprese, 2005), such as offering credit-bearing courses that can address transferability, equal access, and quality education (Castro et al., 2018)
- Tailored and targeted wraparound services (Jobs for the Future, 2015; Van Noy & Heidkamp, 2013), such as financial aid, mental health counseling, and meeting social-emotional needs (Alamprese, 2005)
- Provision of advising, tutoring, and mentoring (Bettinger et al., 2013), such as counseling and a range of guidance activities for understanding college access (Castro et al., 2018), and provision of academic preparation, basic skills, and programming that aligns with postsecondary opportunities and courses (Alamprese, 2005)
- Establishment of means of fostering partnerships, relationships, and transparent communication among interested parties (e.g., staff with capacity and dedication, program departments and leadership, and "college-corrections" partnerships) (Borden et al., 2012; Delaney et al., 2016)

Additionally, the literature highlights that establishing and maintaining relationships with correctional education and programming takes key partners that include department of corrections education divisions for oversight, postsecondary providers for programming and delivery, and dedicated

educators who work with students and create connections (Borden et al., 2012).

Promising Practices for Postsecondary Transitions

The conversations with adult educators and other program and correctional staff at five institutions resulted in a rich array of practices that align with and further the evidence base for postsecondary transition success. Four overarching practices came to light: (a) building and fostering connections; (b) offering authentic, relevant education, training, and job opportunities; (c) addressing students' social-emotional and life needs to enhance education; and (d) engaging dedicated, committed partners and staff all make a difference. The experiences programs shared around these four practices can provide lessons and applicability for similar programs striving to support postsecondary transition and success for incarcerated adult learners.

The incarcerated students do such a great job of promoting not just the educational programs but also helping the other students as well. So, becoming these pseudo-tutors on the inside or these instructional assistants on the inside. ... It becomes an avenue for someone who is starting to experience a positive academic experience to transition into a lifelong, positive academic experience.

— K-12 Adult Education Director

Building and Fostering Connections

The interview findings highlighted the importance of building and fostering connections to support successful transitions for incarcerated or formerly incarcerated adult learners. Providers reported connections across four distinct populations: (a) teachers and staff, (b) community organizations and employers, (c) cross-institutional relationships, and (d) other adult learners. Aligned with the literature, programs used key strategies to establish connections; these included providing learners with mentorship from teachers, staff, or peers. Peer

mentorship proved particularly salient for building trust; these activities afforded adult learners the opportunity to engage in mutual tutoring and learning and served as a structure to both help support and uplift individuals. Programs also provided transition services or specialized support groups for the incarcerated or formerly incarcerated.

Our program has excellent relationships with various departments and areas at the college, like real good friends with Ag department, Ag department chair, heavy equipment. ... Additionally, ... one of the things that helps us be so successful in this particular program is our outstanding relationships that we have with the County Sherriff's Office. ... Our [staff] feel very connected with [the sheriff's office staff], and our instructor feels particularly close with the sergeant and his staff ... because she works very closely with them.

— Noncredit Community College Adult Education Specialist

Programs noted that connections with community and local employers or organizations created networking possibilities for their learners. These connections could, and in some cases did, lead to job or career access from exposure to business speakers, apprenticeships, and hiring opportunities—access that is particularly important for individuals after incarceration. The benefits of relationship building extended beyond employers and communities to tap into strong working relationships and collaboration within multiple systems that serve incarcerated individuals. This included maintaining relationships across education systems, community and industry partners, and divisions or agencies working within corrections and prisons.

Finally, programs emphasized that creating and maintaining connections with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated adult learners offered a pinnacle of support. Celebrating student success and achievements was a key strategy used by program staff to foster connections; these celebrations fostered self-esteem and a sense of pride for the learner while formally acknowledging goal attainment and accomplishment. Celebrations included holding official ceremony and certification events and inviting formerly incarcerated

individuals back to facilities to share experiences and success stories. These efforts complemented other programs that facilitated transitions to continued postsecondary education by connecting reentering citizens to on-campus peer and support groups to which staff were connected.

Offering Relevant Job Opportunities and Training

[The students are learning] construction trades—doing real life work, not just [building a] bird house! They actually build buildings. ... They build sets for deputy training exercises. They earn industry certification. Some construction trades will get all three certifications, and if they have more time to serve, they become a TA for classes—OSHA 10, HVAC 608, Southwest Carpenters. All [this] goes into a database, and then they're hireable.

— K-12 Reentry Adult Education Instructor

Program staff noted that offering authentic and relevant education, training, and job opportunities provided incarcerated adult learners with real-world opportunities that could make a difference for reintegration into mainstream society. Practices and approaches they used to offer relevant job training included onsite work experience in relevant settings, such as cooking and serving for officers' dining rooms, training in pathogen cleaning for health care environments, and maintaining a greenhouse to produce and supply vegetables for a local farmers' market.

An important feature of training and education programming was to follow national industry and education standards when building curricula or apprenticeship programs and offering recognized industry certifications that learners could leverage when seeking employment. Interviewees also pointed out that aligning local industry trends and data to job training and opportunities and workforce training from local industry partners and businesses could lead to more realistic career options. Moreover, a few of the programs stressed providing dual enrollment and possibilities for seamless transitions into college. These strategies offered a chance for some learners to experience or access postsecondary

education, especially if they never believed or thought they could be college ready. Another strategy that was perceived as supporting these adult learners' transitions and self-confidence was to articulate courses with community college courses so that learners could easily enroll in community college courses.

Addressing Social-Emotional and Life Needs

A key practice involved addressing learners' social-emotional and life needs to enhance opportunities for their educational success. Multiple strategies for this practice came to light across programs, including providing wraparound services that offered emotional support and financial or life-skill training.

The people involved in this work are very accepting and non-judgmental, very open-minded. [They are] honest, operate with integrity. We have to be trustworthy. These students frequently come to us without a lot of trust. They come with backgrounds that haven't engendered a lot of trust, and so they might be a little suspicious of "What do you college folks want with us?" We have to show that we are genuine, we are authentic human beings, and we believe in them, and that they can trust us.

— Noncredit Community College Adult Education Director

Two other strategies mentioned went hand in hand as ways to build individualized emotional-social supports—providing intensive encouragement and understanding and building trust. Establishing and maintaining trust between students and program representatives was seen as an essential practice and a way to open avenues of success for individuals both within and outside of a program's sphere of influence. Trust building occurred through teachers and staff who connected personally with incarcerated adult learners and remained in contact with students throughout various life stages. Likewise, program representatives observed that peers served as driving forces in motivating students and as navigators who could validate or speak to program services and benefits and who could build rapport among their

classmates, thus convincing others to take advantage of the educational opportunities available to them. The programs we spoke to also stated that it was important to continue the intensive social–emotional supports as much as possible after release.

Engaging Dedicated Partners and Staff

Echoing the research evidence, programs noted that dedicated and committed educational and community partners and staff within correctional facilities played a huge role and influenced adult learners' postsecondary transfer success. They highlighted the people who can make the most difference in the success of incarcerated adult learners:

- Instructors who foster connections, share their deep knowledge, and come to their positions with an understanding of working with incarcerated populations and their needs in addition to a high level of subject matter expertise
- Sergeants who offer their support and facilitate operations
- Counselors who play a particularly important role in the lives of incarcerated adult learners, as they serve as cultural brokers who help to facilitate program implementation, build relationships, and offer guidance
- Additional staff who are committed to implementing correctional programming and working with a wide range of educational and community partners, including those who provide important apprenticeships and workforce opportunities

Conclusions and Recommendations

In addition to having limited access to educational opportunities, a common factor among incarcerated populations is having poor educational experiences that lead to interrupted or low basic skills attainment (Shippen et al., 2010). The systemic inequities that lead to this outcome are well documented; however, our brief addresses the outcome of the educational differential and the resulting need for educational degrees and credentials for previously incarcerated persons to support economic stability and reduce recidivism (Couloute, 2018). This work explored how adult basic education programs can support incarcerated adults to increase basic literacy skills and transition to credential or postsecondary degree opportunities. Through interviews with providers who transitioned higher numbers of adults from prison or jail programs into postsecondary or CTE programs, we set out to document strategies that providers identified as supporting successful transitions that could set incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals on a pathway leading to economic viability and stability.

While we found that many of the strategies that are successful in transitioning adult learners to credit bearing postsecondary courses and CTE programs were similar for adult education programs, additional thought and intention were necessary to support transitions that meet the needs of incarcerated populations.

We found that key strategies were based on strong collaboration and meeting the concrete and social–emotional needs of the adult learner. Collaboration entailed a variety of audiences; collaboration was required to deliver cohesive and agreed upon programming, to ensure that educational institutions were positioned to build infrastructure to support reentering citizens as they continued their educational journeys, and to ensure trust and transparency was established with inmates throughout this process. Meeting adult learner needs focused on building social capital through tangible networks and opportunities alongside building self-confidence.

We recommend the following implementation strategies for other systems and institutions to promote transitions for incarcerated adult learners:

Create collaborative structures: Providing services to incarcerated individuals requires multiple partners and layers of approval to provide an adult education program that meets the needs of the incarcerated population. The range of partners includes local corrections staff, employers, postsecondary providers, and other local community service providers.

Provide relevant employment training and industry-recognized certificates: Offering incarcerated learners employment training and industry-recognized certificates that align with eligible occupations engages adult learners in applied learning activities, bolsters opportunities for employment upon reentering—a key recidivism-reduction strategy—offers stackable credentials for future training and education, and bolsters self-confidence and feelings of relevance.

Identify staff who are attuned to the needs of the population:

Hiring the right staff to serve incarcerated adult learners is imperative given the need to build and foster trusting relationships, address social-emotional needs, work with multiple interested parties, and teach required skills.

Build a coherent and overt transition plan that spans institutions:

Creating an infrastructure that provides ongoing transitional support and assistance for reentering and formerly incarcerated adult learners to continue their educational trajectory is key in adult learners' success. Providing opportunities such as check-ins with known staff, mentoring or peer support groups, articulation agreements, and dedicated postsecondary transitions staff can create on-ramps to postsecondary education and evidences interest and investment in the justice-involved adult learner.

Appendix: Methods

In 2019, WestEd conducted a mixed-methods project that explored California Adult Education Program (CAEP) rates of adult learner transitions to postsecondary and promising practices that supported learner transitions. The initial phase, Phase 1, was a quantitative analysis of data from the CAEP Adult Education Pipeline (AEP) dashboard, a statewide data system supported by the California Community Colleges. Phase 1 was followed by a qualitative phase, Phase 2, that explored adult education program staffs' perceptions of practices that supported high rates of transitions. WestEd's interest in exploring these transitions was prompted by the paucity of research on adult learners' transitions into postsecondary courses. Guiding questions included, Who is making postsecondary transitions? And what practices support learner transitions? Following the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, a transition to postsecondary was defined as a student's progression from adult education to an enrollment in (a) a Career and Technical Education (CTE) course or (b) a for-credit community college course.

In Phase 1, WestEd staff analyzed data reported to the AEP dashboard for program years 2017/18, 2018/19, and 2019/20 to understand transitions to postsecondary by the following:

- Student characteristics
- CAEP program area
- Institution type
- Institution size

For Phase 2, using the 2019/20 program year data, institutions from each Institution Type with a 35 percent rate of transition or higher were identified, and program staff were invited to participate in an interview with the WestEd staff. The final sample included a total of 20 programs: 6 small, 7 medium, and 7 large adult education programs. In the fall of 2021, WestEd staff conducted Zoom interviews with 46 key staff (e.g., career center directors, consortium directors, deans of adult and continuing education, school principals, adult school and community college educators, and other administrators and faculty). Interviews examined the values and culture of the adult education program, policies (either formal or informal) that did or could lead to improved transition, and practices the interviewees felt contributed the most to their success. Interviews were coded for promising practices from which themes were identified.

During Phase 2, eight adult education correctional programs were among those adult education programs identified as having high rates of transitions. Given the unique context of correction education, the research team separated the corrections programs out of the mainstream adult education program interview process. The interview protocol was adjusted to better capture the experiences and insights of adult education corrections staff. Of the eight programs, five programs agreed to participate in an interview with WestEd staff. The nine key staff members represented noncredit and K-12 administrators, instructors, program directors, and consortium leaders. Interviews focused on the same themes as the interviews conducted with mainstream programs, with an added emphasis on educational services within the corrections setting and transition to postsecondary opportunities as a reentering citizen.

CAEP Program Area

- Adult basic education
- Adult secondary education
- English as a second language

Institution Type

- Noncredit community college
- K-12 adult school

Institution Size

- Small: 1–300 students
- Medium: 301–1,000 students
- Large: 1,001 or more students

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