



Adult Learner Transitions to Postsecondary Education: Transition Practices That Help Students Face Personal Barriers

A Promising Practice Brief

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Introduction

For millions of California adults with limited English proficiency or without a high school diploma,¹ the California Adult Education Program (CAEP) offers an opportunity to improve basic skills and literacy.² CAEP's foundational skills courses can also lay the groundwork for further postsecondary and occupational training, providing the opportunity for students to attain college credentials, earn higher wages, and become upwardly mobile. Decades of research demonstrate that students with a postsecondary credential have higher earnings and better employment outcomes than do students with only basic skills training or a high school diploma (Kim & Tamborini, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Yet adult learners face a number of challenges in obtaining a postsecondary education. One of these challenges is managing and overcoming personal barriers. This brief describes the types of personal barriers adult learners face, presents feedback from adult education providers about how evidence-based strategies they use address this challenge, and provides recommendations for effective practices to mitigate the problem.

This brief is [one of several](#) that presents results from a project that sought to understand key elements of and supportive practices for successful transitions for adult learners from adult basic education programs to postsecondary courses. WestEd's interest in exploring these transitions is prompted by the paucity of research on adult learners' transitions to postsecondary courses. Questions of interest include the following: How accessible are postsecondary opportunities? What strategies support learners' transitions? What do learner journeys look like? What outcomes are realized for adult learners who transition to postsecondary courses? Based on interviews with 46 key staff from 20 noncredit community college and CAEP-funded K-12 adult education programs, this brief presents a snapshot of promising practices that begin to answer some of these questions.

Context: Adult Education in California

CAEP funds noncredit community college and K-12 adult schools in California. The legislation that established CAEP, California Assembly Bill 104 (AB 104), also created a structure of 72 regional consortia divided along the boundaries of areas served by community college districts (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2016). Formal membership in a consortium is limited to K-12 and community college districts, county offices of education, and joint powers agencies, although consortia also include partner agencies such as community-based organizations, libraries, workforce agencies, and correctional facilities.³ All of California's community college districts and nearly 300 K-12 school districts participate in regional consortia across the state.⁴

The consortium structure established by AB 104 represented a shift in state policy and played an important role in facilitating collaborative relationships. Prior to 2014, most California community colleges had "little or no relationship with adult education providers in their area" (Seymour, 2009, p. 6). However, since the consortia were established, school districts, county offices of education, and community college districts plan a regional delivery approach by documenting existing services, identifying unmet needs, and developing regional plans to coordinate and deliver adult education throughout the region. Consortia are awarded state funds that they can use across adult education instructional areas (e.g., basic skills, workforce preparation, pre-apprenticeship). The consortia promote collaboration between adult education providers and partner agencies by coordinating and integrating existing adult education programs in order to improve student success (Taylor, 2015). Key for consortia and their members is to provide both educational and wrap around services to support adult learners' engagement, retention, and success on their educational and career pathway.

1. Author's calculations are based on the one-year estimates of the [2021 American Community Survey](#). See also the [Migration Policy Institute's state immigration data profiles](#).

2. CAEP, established through Assembly Bill 86, provides for resources "to rethink and redesign an educational system that creates seamless transitions for students across adult schools and community colleges to accelerate academic and career success in order to earn a living wage." CAEP provides state funding to providers of adult education, including regional consortia, county offices of education, school districts, and community colleges.

3. For a description of consortia members, see the Legislative Analyst's Office's [Adult Education Consortium Tracker](#).

4. For a list of consortia members, see the [California Adult Education Consortium Directory](#).

Addressing Personal Barriers: Evidence-Based Strategies

Unlike most younger learners, adult learners must manage many demands that compete for their time and attention, often putting schooling and training at odds with the responsibilities of daily life (for example, see Collom et al., 2021, and Flynn et al., 2011). Barriers for adult learners are often categorized as situational, institutional, and dispositional.

- **Situational barriers** are those that structure daily life and access to resources. For example, adult learners often must decide between attending classes and working to support their family or seeing to their caregiving responsibilities. Mental and physical health can impact a learner's ability to persist along an educational pathway.
- **Institutional barriers** such as access, course structure, and cumbersome or insensitive enrollment processes serve to discourage adult learners who may have had poor educational experiences in the past and do not see themselves as student material.
- **Dispositional barriers** include self-perception and being able to see the concrete benefit of sacrificing for a long-term investment in the face of the daily need to survive. Dispositional barriers also include experiences with a racialized socioeconomic system. (Flynn et al., 2011)

To overcome the barriers they face, adult learners need flexible services and accelerated programming, smoother transitions from adult education to credit courses, career navigation and applied learning, and technology upskilling in order to make their academic journey successful and increase their sense of belonging.

Barriers identified by the 46 interviewees included life circumstances (e.g., the need to work, transportation challenges, lack of necessary technology), fear and trepidation (e.g., not seeing themselves as a college student, legal status), lack of skills (e.g., English language proficiency, academic or technical skills), and institutional issues (e.g., scheduling, cumbersome applications). Their comments echoed much of the current literature. Interviewees also noted that these barriers can cause substantial difficulties regarding not only successful transitions but also persistence and retention.

Ten Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners

- Adaptivity
- Assessment of learning outcomes
- Financing
- Life and career planning
- Outreach
- Technology
- Strategic partnerships
- Student support systems
- Teaching-learning process
- Transitions

Source. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, n.d., *Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults*, <https://www.cael.org/higher-education-ten-principles>

The literature on supporting adult learners to enter and transition along a career pathway that includes education and training offers some key practices that adult education providers can employ to mitigate barriers.

- **Wrap around services.** Given the variety and intensity of adult learners' needs, the literature refers to the importance of offering targeted, tailored wrap around services (Jobs for the Future, 2019; Van Noy & Heidkamp, 2013). These services might include transportation, childcare, food and housing support, and financial support for course equipment or testing fees.
- **Case management and advising.** A growing body of literature documents evidence that intensive case management and career and academic advising encourage and support learners' transitions (Alamprese, 2005; Bettinger et al., 2013; Jobs for the Future, 2019). For example, the intentional use of career navigators and mentors assist learners in navigating educational systems and provide a sense of belonging.

- **Academic services and basic skills classes.** Traditionally, students benefit from academic services, such as tutoring, and from preparatory or integrated basic skills classes that can accelerate progress and enhance success (Alamprese, 2005; Bettinger et al., 2013).
- **Collaboration.** Lastly, adult education programs need to collaborate with other educational institutions or departments so that processes and policies are aligned to facilitate transitions. This collaboration includes aligning the progression of content, offering more transferable credits, and providing a welcoming context for adult learners.

Services such as these, when exercised in their entirety, support learners in advancing along a pathway more quickly by ensuring transitions are facilitated and students are bolstered emotionally, financially, and academically.

Addressing Personal Barriers: Promising Practices

In addition to identifying the personal barriers adult learners face, the adult education providers the WestEd team interviewed provided robust examples of how their programs encouraged and supported adult learners in transitioning to postsecondary education. As part of the interview data analysis, the team identified a variety of strategies that can be categorized into three primary approaches the providers used to ease the barriers adult learners experience:

- meeting students' needs by providing wrap around services,
- coalescing a committed group of partners willing to meet learners where they were, and
- providing opportunities for adult learners to navigate and experience a well-supported low-risk educational system.

Interviewees also believed that how they provided services, interacted with adult learners, and built navigable structures made a difference in whether adult learners considered and transitioned to postsecondary education. The majority of interviewees WestEd spoke to perceived that their schools

had some influence on impacting student transitions, particularly when it came to helping students navigate institutional pathways and support services. Strategies included

- helping guide, ease, and smooth transitions for students;
- supporting community outreach so that students can connect with local services, employment opportunities, and others who can help them build social capital; and
- understanding the student population, their needs and experiences, and how to provide services given that adult learners are different from traditional college or high school students.

Understand and meet individual student needs through wrap around services.

The interviewees recognized the complicated lives of adult learners, the barriers and challenges they face in their educational journeys, and the tipping points to the decisions to transfer and continue on those journeys. Through collaboration and partnerships, consortia offer a host of services that can support an adult learner. Institutions make use of these services, which include referrals to legal services, social services that help students meet ongoing or crisis needs (e.g., food or housing insecurity), and health services. Many of these services are also available on school campuses. Additionally, services such as academic counseling and tutoring; providing professional and peer mentoring opportunities, internships, and work experiences; and planned visits to relevant next steps on their pathway (e.g., employer visits, university campus visits) can help build learner efficacy, confidence, and knowledge. Having knowledge of these services and building rapport with students are essential for being able to serve adult learners quickly and knowledgeably.

Interviewees offered examples of how they identified and provided tailored services for their adult learners:

- intentional and robust intake and orientation that helped identify student need and information about services,
- informed and interconnected staff, and
- dedicated counselors or transition specialists who met regularly with students and had an open-door policy.

Take the approach of “it takes a village,” from front-end staff to administration to cross-institutional collaboration.

Programs that were able to create a unified approach to engaging and supporting adult learners were effective in creating a welcoming atmosphere. They identified the need to

- develop a well-delineated process for students from the outset,
- provide supported navigation, and
- ensure that learners received consistent messaging at all points in their journey.

Adult learners' initial contact with an institution can create a “make-or-break” situation for pursuing future schooling or transitions. An adult learner who has a poor experience (e.g., unsupported or confusing enrollment process, negative staff encounter) may decide to abandon transition efforts out of frustration or disappointment. Programs with dedicated staff that understand the needs of adult learners were key in helping learners feel comfortable asking questions and navigating the transition process.

In addition, having the full support of the school; collaboration among departments, staff, and institutions; and a welcoming school environment supported student transitions. Interviewees highlighted the following:

- Get buy-in from administration and leadership within and across institutions.
- Create structures to build rapport among administration, faculty, and staff in order to build interconnectedness and ensure that everyone understands how services and courses fit together for adult learners.
- Understand that adult learner transitions require layered and interwoven processes to meet the individual needs of students and support navigation of the often complex enrollment process, including filling out financial aid applications, understanding course scheduling and requirements, accessing wrap around services, and establishing short-term and long-term goals for their schooling and career pathway.
- Create a welcoming student ethos and culture from the moment a student walks in the door (e.g., open-door

policies, compassionate staff who are trained to work with adult learners with different needs).

- Provide guidance while ensuring student choice and autonomy.
- Ensure a warm handoff through structured interactions with learners.

Interviewees noted that multiple, often coalescing, role groups played a part in impacting successful transitions for students. This included everyone (e.g., all staff) playing a part in successful student transitions from the moment a student starts thinking about their pathway to when they step onto campus. The whole school/staff approach incorporated a culture and understanding of all roles having responsibility for preparing students for success.

Key roles to consider are the following:

- **Front-end staff** who can create connections and build trust with students are particularly important for setting the tone of how students feel seen and how they perceive their ongoing academic and training experience. These staff often provide intensive navigational services, such as walking students to relevant offices or helping them through the enrollment and intake process. Front-end staff are often the friendly face an adult learner can turn to for help.
- **Counselors and advisors** keep students motivated and on track. In particular, it is important to have a counselor dedicated to transition processes. Also key are on-site affiliated college advisors and transition specialists/ advisors who provide students with ongoing support by helping them plan their pathway and checking in with them regularly and intentionally.
- **A dedicated staff person** who works across institutions. For example, some consortia hire counselors who are shared across institutions, thereby creating a connection point for students as they transition. In other consortia, one institution may have a counselor or transition specialist who is assigned to regularly spend time working with students at other institutions in order to build rapport and an understanding that transitioning from one institution to another is simply a continuation of their current experience. In other words, key to supporting adult learner transitions is creating the structure for a warm handoff.

Make a place for noncredit courses and dual enrollment.

Adult learners can be constrained by time and money as they are often already navigating busy lives filled with expenses, work, and other responsibilities. In addition, many adult learners have not had successful interactions with the formal school system, so they can be tentative about investing time and money in what they perceive as a risky endeavor. Strategies that mitigate students' fear of failure, lack of confidence, or implications of immigration status and that accelerate their progress along a pathway are helpful in engaging and building the likelihood of a transition.

Interviewees worked across their institutions and consortia to provide the following supports:

- Allow students to access courses without paying a fee or for less cost so that they can take a course without the fear of failing and losing money while gaining a taste of college. Providing noncredit options was perceived as being less risky for students.
- Create a well-articulated pathway, supported by dedicated staff, from noncredit to credit courses that can serve as a pipeline for leading students to credit courses, helping with the transition to college.
- Provide mirrored courses that offer adult learners a low-risk opportunity to experience a credit-bearing course and build confidence that they can be successful in a college setting. For example, some mirrored courses offered by schools were ESL culinary, engineering, and interior design classes that had components designed to help students transition to college courses or get a feeling for on-campus classes. These types of classes are seen as pipelines or bridges to college or career experiences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Transitioning out of adult education into postsecondary or career courses is essential for ensuring that more adults earn higher wages and become upwardly mobile. What can adult education providers do to increase the number of adults who transition from adult schools to postsecondary and career

pathways? Through interviews with California adult education providers, the WestEd team set out to uncover shared practices among providers who transition a large share of students into postsecondary and career and technical education (CTE) pathways.

The team found that providers were well aware of how challenging transitioning to postsecondary education is for adult learners. They acknowledged that adult learners face multiple barriers to enrolling in postsecondary courses: multiple demands on their time, limited finances, negative previous educational experiences, and challenging logistics (e.g., childcare, transportation), to name a few. In addition, interviewees identified key institutional processes for adult learners transitioning to postsecondary education, including providing inclusive, comprehensive, and wrap around supports that help encourage and ease student transitions and that mitigate institutional trepidation regarding college readiness and retention.

Based on the literature and the findings from this project, WestEd recommends the following strategies for other systems and institutions to promote.

Provide an array of services that meet the diverse backgrounds and needs of adult learners.

Adult learners are multifaceted in experiences, goals, and needs and therefore require an array of services from which they can choose to support them as they transition and continue their educational trajectory. These services can be provided by educational institutions or offered through other organizations.

Create a welcoming, supported transition and enrollment process.

A friendly and open front-end staff is a priority for engaging adult learners who are unfamiliar with or have had poor experiences with educational systems. This staff should be willing to spend time initially and on an ongoing basis with adult learners, serving as a key resource for them throughout the transition process and the ongoing educational journey. As the key resource for adult learners, staff should be knowledgeable about the system and the available supports. This

single point of service reduces adult learners' need to spend time and effort trying to navigate and access processes and needed services.

Develop a streamlined transition and enrollment process.

Not only is a warm welcome essential, so is an agreed-upon process for transitioning and enrolling adult learners. Transparent delineated processes across educational institutions and within institutions are necessary to reduce any transition pitfalls for adult learners. A jointly written explanation or visual image of the transition process can ensure that institutions are in agreement. If written in accessible language, this resource can also serve as a resource for adult learners.

Provide opportunities for adult learners to test out college.

Mirrored, dual-credit, and bridge courses that incorporate postsecondary elements offer adult learners the chance to experience higher-level academic content and expectations in a low-risk environment. These opportunities also serve to build self-esteem and confidence for learners who may not perceive themselves as being successful college student material. Dual enrollment courses provide learners with evidence that they can be successful in postsecondary education. Additionally, the credits earned with these courses speed an adult learner along their educational pathway, saving them valuable time.

Appendix: Methods

In 2019, WestEd conducted a mixed methods project that explored 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 Chancellor's Office (CCCCO). Phase 1 was followed by a qualitative phase, Phase 2, that explored how adult education program staff perceived 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 elicited feedback about, among other things, who is making postsecondary transitions and what practices support learner transitions. Per the CCCC's definition, a transition to postsecondary was defined as a student's progression from adult education to an enrollment in (a) a CTE course or (b) a for-credit community college course.⁵

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

- student characteristics,
- CAEP program area,
- institution type, and
- 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 team. The final sample included a total of 20 programs: six small adult education programs, seven medium, and seven large. In fall 2021, WestEd staff conducted Zoom interviews with 46 key staff: 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 programs, formal and informal policies 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.

5. For additional information, see California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office's [Adult Education Pipeline: Metric Definition Dictionary](#).

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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