

Revitalizing Community Colleges

Lessons from Programs Prioritizing Adult Community College Enrollment

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From 2021 to 2023, Lumina Foundation made a strategic investment in 20 community colleges across eight states through the Prioritizing Adult Community College Enrollment (PACCE) grant initiative.

The PACCE initiative aimed to bolster adult student enrollment by providing each college with a flexible grant of up to \$75,000 and comprehensive technical assistance. The support and capacity-building offered by the initiative positions these colleges to advance their PACCE initiatives from initial stages to achieve greater scale and long-term sustainability. As community colleges across the nation grapple with similar challenges in attracting new adult learners, the lessons learned from the grantees can offer valuable insights for other institutions considering similar strategies.

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the economic vulnerability of many working adults, particularly those without postsecondary credentials. It also has highlighted the opportunity—and growing need—for community colleges to play a vital role in serving this demographic. With their emphasis on employment-focused programs and affordable tuition relative to for-profit and four-year institutions, community colleges are uniquely positioned to address adult learners' varying needs.

Adult learners are expected to become increasingly important to the business model of community colleges given the anticipated enrollment decline for traditional-age (18 to 22-year-old) undergraduate students beginning in 2026. Even before the pandemic, community

colleges experienced a decade-long decline in student enrollment, losing 25 percent of the 7.1 million students enrolled in 2009. The pandemic further exacerbated this trend. By fall 2022, only 4.5 million students were attending community colleges, perpetuating financial stress within the sector.

Despite the accessibility and relative affordability of community colleges, adult students often face barriers to college participation, such as time constraints, complex family and work schedules, and poor prior college experiences or outcomes. While community colleges have experience in serving diverse groups of learners, many institutions still center enrollment strategies, offerings, and cultures designed around traditional-age students, despite the average community

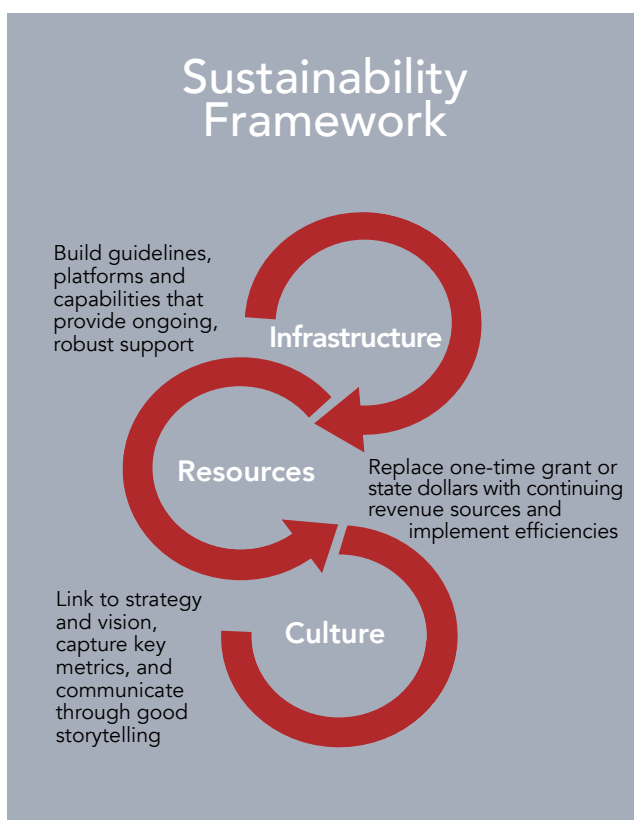
college student being 28 years old. Because of the wide array of constraints, investing in innovative approaches to recruiting and serving adults could benefit both colleges and learners.

Capacity Building

From 2021 to 2023, Lumina Foundation provided funding to 20 community colleges through the Prioritizing Adult Community College Enrollment (PACCE) initiative to support the engagement of adult learners. The PACCE initiative identified and supported promising strategies to increase adult participation in quality credit-bearing and non-credit programs, particularly among Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and Native American students.

The PACCE colleges adopted various strategies to attract and enroll adult learners. These included boosting online enrollments, increasing community-based recruitment at partner sites or with mobile recruitment centers, expanding adult-oriented programs and approaches (such as HyFlex courses, industrial workplace safety, and truck driving), and implementing adult-focused marketing and outreach plans.

rpk GROUP supported the PACCE grantees by hosting a series of workshops to build capacity among grantee teams at each college. These workshops focused on strategies for scaling enrollment and sustaining PACCE initiatives during and after the grant. rpk provided each campus with tools for communication, planning, and financial measurement,



along with custom technical assistance for their particular strategy. rpk's engagement with the colleges over the 18-month grant period provided valuable insights into challenges and progress observed across the institutions.

Sustainability Framework

The PACCE workshops were aligned around the three components of rpk's sustainability framework: infrastructure, resources, and culture. Sustaining and scaling programs requires more than just additional budget dollars. It also requires a well-designed and

supported initiative for both students and institutions.

First, programs need a solid infrastructure, including creation of guidelines, processes, and capabilities to provide on-going supports for the initiative. Adequate resources—which includes people and time, and well as money—are essential for successful implementation and continued operation beyond the grant period. And ultimately, fostering a campus culture that 1) values good decision-making, 2) creates and monitors key financial and student success metrics, and 3) prioritizes communication with other campus stakeholders is critical to align new initiatives with colleges' strategic priorities and vision.

Lessons Learned

rpk identified five practical lessons that may be valuable to other community colleges considering their own recruitment and enrollment initiatives focused on adult learners.

1. Community partnerships offer an effective pathway for student recruitment and training.

By leveraging existing community relationships and partnering with organizations, colleges can reach potential students in trusted environments. Recruitment teams visited or worked with sites where adults already have established a trusted relationship, rather than expecting prospective adult students to come to campus to learn about programs and enroll. Some colleges staffed tables at community sites and/or adopted a ‘train the trainer’ approach, providing partners with information on programs that may be attractive to adults.

Another way to leverage existing programs is to cover the cost of student training through partnerships. Two colleges that partnered with their local workforce investment boards (WIB) were able to use WIB funds to pay for student training. The approach also resulted in larger and more diverse non-credit programs than was typical. By recruiting and training students alongside organizations and institutions where they are already involved, colleges may strengthen their initial student experience and pathway to success.

2. Investing in marketing and communication technology could be a game changer for community colleges. Today, many higher education institutions struggle with outdated, siloed systems for managing communication and the overall student experience. The result: inefficient and ineffective relationship management at a time when students expect a seamless experience.

Modernizing communication systems and implementing tools can improve the student experience and facilitate more effective interaction with prospective students. Several PACCE colleges invested in new technology-based infrastructure like Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems, chat bots, websites, and web applications. These

investments in communication technology enable colleges to communicate more effectively with prospective students. The data these technology investments can generate provide opportunities for diagnostic uses as well, allowing colleges to identify the effectiveness of various recruitment sites and strategies.

3. Enrollment initiatives can quickly yield a positive return on investment (ROI) for colleges. Most colleges projected their PACCE initiatives to produce a positive net revenue very quickly—within just two years of launching their initiative. Once the programs were created and launched, colleges expected ongoing operating costs to average less than \$135,000 a year. Compensation accounted for the majority (75%) of those additional costs. Investments in professional development, new(er) technology, and marketing materials were also common expenses cited across projects.

The resources required to sustain any initiative are directly impacted by the ability to scale. The projection and subsequent real-time tracking of initiatives’ enrollments permits programs or institutions to calculate the per student cost of their programs. Although the cost to get a program off the ground or expand capacity of an existing program can be high (averaging nearly \$2,000 per student for PACCE colleges), reducing costs and/or enrolling more students can quickly reduce those per student costs over time. For example, continued investments PACCE programs are expected to average \$600 per student within five years. Understanding per student costs and tracking enrollment can help colleges measure the financial return on their investment and make better informed decisions.

4. Scaling enrollment is critical for financial sustainability. While most colleges with financially sustainable programs expected profitability to occur quickly, other were challenged by high costs or low

enrollment expectations. At most of the PACCE colleges, time is not expected to solve sustainability challenges. Certainly, some programs are projected to become financially sustainable in later years, but most that weren't financially sustainable early on will need to address their costs and/or scale expected enrollment more aggressively. About 70% of grantees project a positive ROI within five years.

Overall, PACCE colleges could generate even more net revenue by significantly scaling the enrollment and retention of new adult students. New enrollment and retention beyond what's needed for financial break even will immediately generate a stronger ROI for institutions. Scaling enrollment provides flexibility for institutions to capture ROI and reallocate it back into the initiative, or to support other campus initiatives. It also produces other tangible benefits, including pressure to secure additional external grant-related funding, which can limit initiative fatigue.

5. Creating a vision-based, data-informed culture can support future initiatives on campus. After launching and scaling their PACCE initiative, several colleges have taken the lessons learned and applied them elsewhere on campus. In fact, the takeaways outlined above can also be applied when launching and scaling similar types of campus initiatives.

By fostering a culture of data-informed decision-making, college leaders can set expectations and simplify the process of launching and scaling future

Fostering a campus culture that 1) values good decision-making, 2) creates and monitors key financial and student success metrics, and 3) prioritizes communication with other campus stakeholders is critical to align new initiatives with colleges' strategic priorities and vision.

initiatives. Different initiatives may need customized plans to scale and sustain. Recognizing that different populations may need tailored approaches will require campuses to break down some barriers and work more intentionally across departments. Leveraging this initial culture shift can support expectation setting on campus, leading to simpler on-ramps to begin launching and scaling future programs.

Final Considerations

Looking ahead, we expect to see many community colleges keenly focused on the recruitment of adult learners. But colleges must also focus on retaining adult learners in programs and providing the necessary support for their completion. Applying the lessons learned in recruiting and engaging adult learners is crucial to ensuring that community colleges strengthen their financial outlook while also expanding economic opportunities for this increasingly important student demographic.

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1. [National Center for Education Statistics. 2021. Digest of Education Statistics: 2021. \(Table 303.25\)](#)
 2. [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. 2022. Current Term Enrollment Estimates \(Fall, 2022\).](#)

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