

# Perspectives

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Community College  
Leadership for the  
21st Century

Adults are the answer to our talent challenges, and our postsecondary system needs to change to accommodate their needs. We don't have time to waste.

- Haley Glover

The shifting demographics of our population have forced community colleges to reconsider both their offerings and their delivery methods to ensure adult student learners receive the educational options and the ancillary support they need to succeed.

- Joseph Worth and  
Christopher J.  
Stephens

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## Don't Call Our Students Kids!

**Pam Eddinger, PhD**

President  
Bunker Hill Community College  
Boston, Massachusetts

"Please don't call our students kids!" More and more over the past few years, I found myself gently reminding colleagues and friends that the profile of the community college student has grown complex. Sweeping all learners under the label of "kids" not only obscures the huge variations in age within the student population, but also diminishes the richness and promise in the lived experiences of this diverse community. At community colleges across the nation, the traditional 18-year-old high school graduate makes up only a portion of the student body – about a third at Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC). The majority are working adults. The average age on our campus is 26. With the anticipation of a steep drop in the national high school population in five years, we will need to look increasingly to adult students to bridge the enrollment, and ultimately, the workforce gap.

In Massachusetts alone, we must fill some 65,000 middle-skills jobs by the beginning of the next decade, jobs that are critical to economic growth and innovation. Adult learners are our best hope to fill this need. They tend to be goal-oriented and focused, and generally carry prior work experience with them when they return to college. In important ways, they are motivated and primed for success, if our colleges are truly adult-learner-ready to receive and support them.

**While most community college educators readily acknowledge the changing demographic trend, the ways we serve our adult learners are not always aligned with the reality and the needs of this emerging population.**

While most community college educators readily acknowledge the changing demographic trend, the ways we serve our adult learners are not always aligned with the reality and the needs of this emerging population. Consciously or unconsciously, we continue to center on the traditional four-year full-time college student as we shape our policies and practices, and treat adult working students as a sub-demographic, a deviation from the norm. In reality, the adult student has become the dominant group.

Educators are not the only ones out of step with the demographic shift to adults. The notion of the young entering freshman, with parental support and resources at the ready, continues to be the overriding image associated with higher education in the general public and in the media. Last year, having heard that the community college student population is trending older, a prominent education media outlet visited our college to ask if there is a Center for Adult Students on campus. When told that we are attempting

to shift our whole paradigm rather than providing isolated services, the reporter appeared disappointed at not having a particular space or a special program to showcase. The adult learner phenomenon still stands apart, and is not yet accepted as an integral part of the higher education narrative.

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**Adult Students: Complexity and Potential.** Like many urban community colleges in the US, the complexity of the student population at BHCC is astounding. Of the 18,000 students coming through our doors, two-thirds are adults. Three out of four work, many full-time. Half are parents; half of the parents are single mothers. 77 percent live within the two lowest quintiles of income. Forty five percent are food insecure; 14 percent struggle with homelessness.

Our adult students are financially fragile, and education is not always at the center of their lives. They prioritize family and work by necessity. Basic needs, in particular, food, housing, transportation and child care, loom large as critical factors of persistence and retention. One small health crisis, a sudden job loss, or a break in childcare routine, for example, could derail a student's college attendance. Despite these challenges, however, these adult learners clearly recognize that college is the means to socio-economic mobility for them and their children.

Between 1980 and 2015, the earnings of men with a B.A. rose 29 percent, while the earnings of men with only a high school education fell seven percent. Men who never finished high school saw their earnings decline 24 percent during those 35 years. The rise of earnings for women with a college education is even more dramatic. College used to be a sure ticket into the middle class; now it is a prerequisite. Moreover, educational successes fuel economic growth. The majority of our students live within eight miles of the college, and remain after graduation to make up the local and regional workforce and tax base.

**Seeing Through the Lens of the Adult Student.** Once we are willing to leave behind the traditional four-year college framework, our existing class schedules and services, our modes of instruction and our policies and procedures may seem antithetical to a welcoming environment for adult learners. At BHCC, we continue to struggle with aligning our teaching and learning, our services, as well as our business processes with the shifting adult paradigm: from creating a Schedule of Classes that is flexible and student-centered, reimagining internships for working adults, to changing attitudes and expectations in serving students with complex lived experiences and matured world views. This is an iterative, and sometimes painful process. I wish I could say that because we are aware of these mis-alignments, we can readily fix them. Practices predicated upon outdated ideas (continued on page 4)

## EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

Today we are seeing student demographic shifts which are beginning to transform the community college landscape, while also creating competitive pressures. Adult students are returning to college in growing numbers and are accompanied by a vast diversity of educational and life experiences. If community colleges are to compete effectively in the future, they must rise to the challenge and embrace this demographic change as an opportunity to grow and transform. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Michele Albright, MS-CTE

Coordinator of Career and Volunteer Centers  
Center for Leadership, Activities and  
Career Services  
Ferris State University, Big Rapids, MI

It is not in question; the demographics of post-secondary students are changing. Those formerly referred to as “non-traditional” have become the new normal. According to RTI International (U.S. Dept. of Ed, 2015), non-traditional students now outnumber those who start as 18 year olds. The recommendation of the Lumina Foundation (2017) calls for 60% of all adults to possess a post high school certification by 2025, with many states following suit. Colleges that fail to recognize and adjust marketing, services, and program offerings may be left trailing in enrollment, as workforce trends increasingly require more and better-qualified employees.

Adult learners bring a plethora of diversity and life experiences and their choice to attend college is deliberate, often a result of changes in life circumstances, family relationships, career transitions, or to improve their lifestyles. Most work full time and attend classes on the side, although many lack the guidance and information to make good financial decisions. Emotional support systems are a vital connection for older students as they have unique concerns and require accessibility to community services, local transportation, childcare centers, and meal options, all of which may improve their ability to persist.

Entering college, many adults have clear goals, although their expectation of the learning experience may have changed considerably. When positioned in a classroom, older and younger students may feel disconnected. This is typically the result of social discomfort and not academic fit (Worth & Stephens, 2011). Other obstacles for adult students include academic records no longer being available and/or representing poor performance, and the associated requirement of placement testing. In an attempt to level the academic playing field, some colleges are providing appropriate opportunities for academic forgiveness and grade point average adjustments, and may also evaluate life experiences for credit.

While older students may have greater difficulty with current teaching methods and technology, they may also possess more experience than the Instructor on a given topic. Lambert et al (2014) proposed that successful educators supplement pedagogy (learner-focused) with andragogy (self-directed learning) to meet students where their knowledge base exists. Additional options to support adult learners include fast track programs, short-term affordable training, weekend and evening courses, or personalized scheduling. To encourage student success, a good starting point for community colleges would be to educate instructors and professional staff on the specific concerns that adult students face.

Community colleges possess the ability to accommodate the varied needs of adult learners. However first, it is important to understand the unique motivations and factors that affect these students. If colleges fail to keep pace with changing student demographics and workforce needs, it is likely that the skilled labor crisis in the United States will continue to expand.

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**How can community colleges address the challenge of serving adult learners while keeping pace with the needs of more traditional college students?**

### Gwenn Eldridge, MA

Assistant Vice President,  
Academic Transitions and Support  
Ivy Tech Community College System  
State of Indiana

I started college as a first-generation adult student. Like many community college students, I went with a dream. That dream became complicated when I realized that I had no idea about what I wanted to study. I just knew I wanted to be there. Unfortunately, my admissions experience was less than stellar. In spite of that beginning, my path has led to the completion of two degrees and a career in teaching and higher education administration.

We do a much better job today of helping students, but we still need to do more. Increasingly, adult students are turning to the community college as a way into the workforce or to work toward a degree that will create new opportunities in their current jobs.

I would argue that the lines between what we may refer to as traditional and non-traditional/adult students are blurring. In the community college setting, we often have students who come to us right out of high school with similar needs and experiences as other adult students. They may be first generation students. They may have socio-economic challenges. They may have cultural factors that create challenges. As CCCSE asserts, to create positive, lasting change and opportunities for all students, institutions must create design principles critical for student success. These principles include a strong start, clear pathways, integrated support, high expectations/ high support, intensive student engagement, design for scale, and professional development (CCCSE, 2012).

At Ivy Tech Community College, we are working from a holistic approach to serving students. Among innovations are holistic placement, mandatory advising, completion pathways, co-requisites in math and English, and the Ivy Assist Program that connects students to local services. Perhaps the most innovative approaches to serving students are Ivy Tech’s efforts to align programs with workforce needs and the college’s new career focus. The first involves using workforce data to evaluate programs. This data is helping Ivy Tech to offer relevant programs that prepare students for high-wage, in-demand jobs. The second effort is the Career Coaching and Employer Connections initiative that will result in students having Academic and Career Action Plans that will include meaningful, work-and-learn experiences.

Clearly, community colleges are creating effective ways to help students to achieve their academic and career goals. As student demographics continue to change, it will be important for college leaders to continue to evaluate programs that assist all students, but especially those who may come to college at different points in their lives.

### Reference:

Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2012). A matter of degrees: Promising practices for community college student success (A first look). Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program.



Michele Albright, MS-CTE, returned to Ferris State University in 2011 as an employee and full-time student after 20 years in the business sector. She earned her Master’s degree in Career & Technical Education while advancing into a leadership role in Student Affairs, and has taught numerous courses and facilitated hundreds of workshops related to career development. Currently, she is pursuing her doctorate degree in the Ferris State University DCCL program.



Gwenn Eldridge, MA, serves as assistant vice president of academic transitions and support for the Ivy Tech Community College System in Indiana. Her work focuses on teaching innovations such as the co-requisite course model and placement policy. She earned a bachelor’s degree in English from Indiana University and a master’s in English from Butler University in Indianapolis. She currently is pursuing a doctorate in community college leadership at Ferris State University.

## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Today we are seeing student demographic shifts which are beginning to transform the community college landscape, while also creating competitive pressures. Adult students are returning to college in growing numbers and are accompanied by a vast diversity of educational and life experiences. If community colleges are to compete effectively in the future, they must rise to the challenge and embrace this demographic change as an opportunity to grow and transform. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Serving Adult Community College Students: Up Close and Personal

#### Steve Nunez, EdD

Vice President of Academics and Student Services  
Sauk Valley Community College  
Dixon, Illinois

My passion for the community college mission started as a young boy when I had the privilege of watching my mother graduate from Southwest Virginia Community College (SWCC) where my father worked as a founding member for over 25 years. As a stay-at-home mom, my mother had temporarily postponed her college education to raise my two siblings and me. As the youngest of her three children, my entrance into kindergarten marked a new chapter in my 35-year-old mother's life, as she was eager to earn a college degree. After graduating from SWCC, and with renewed confidence, my mother went on to earn a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and then taught 4th grade for 25 years. My mother's story is just one of millions of similar stories of how community colleges have positively impacted the lives of adults who returned to college to pursue their dreams.

#### Our local economies are heavily dependent upon having a highly skilled, trained workforce.

As a staunch supporter of the community college mission, I fully embrace the Open Door concept. This ideology, which illustrates that a college education is attainable by everyone regardless of race, gender, education, financial status, or age, is a simple concept, but when realized, helps millions of people achieve their dreams. We see it daily in our institutions, as one-third to one-half of our students are returning adults of various demographics and backgrounds. Often, these adult students quickly return to the workforce to support the local economies.

Our local economies are heavily dependent upon having a highly skilled, trained workforce. According to the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University, 65% of U.S. jobs require a person to attain a college degree or certificate. Both President Obama and President Trump have recognized this need in their economic development initiatives and in their clear support of community colleges. Unfortunately, the number of college attendees is expected to drop precipitously after 2025; this is directly related to a large drop in the number of high school graduates. Hence, community colleges should have a renewed focus on recruiting and retaining adult students who often come to us to earn degrees or certificates. Earning new credentials will help them reenter the workforce with more skills and higher earning power which will support the economic development of our communities.

Sauk Valley Community College, where I have worked for over 23 years, embraces the adult learner. Like many other community colleges, we do this by providing multiple entry/exit routes as well as robust student support services. Strategies include providing adult students with:

- ▲ The opportunity to earn a GED or to advance their written/spoken English skills. In rural Northwest Illinois, over 10% of our population has not attained a high school degree or the equivalent. GED and

#### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**How can community colleges address the challenge of serving adult learners while keeping pace with the needs of more traditional college students?**

ESL programs should also have clear pathways to advanced educational programs (e.g., nursing and welding).

▲ Robust developmental educational programs that efficiently and effectively remediate the skills of our adult learners so that they can quickly advance to college-level classes.

- ▲ Flexible schedules wherein colleges have invested in high-quality online and evening programming, providing the opportunity to complete a credential in a rapid fashion (e.g., finishing a certificate in a semester or a degree in less than two years), or by having stacked credentials within a degree. Competency Based Education (CBE) may provide the greatest benefit to skilled adult learners so they can rapidly advance through their education and into the workforce.
- ▲ Paid internships with local manufacturers and businesses that work around student class schedules. At SVCC, students in our Manufacturing Technology program take classes two days per week while working as paid interns three or more days per week at local manufacturers. This way, adults can still earn a paycheck while improving their skillset. Meanwhile, manufacturers are getting the skilled employees they need.
- ▲ Excellent student services that help students navigate college and support them as needed. Students must be provided proactive advising, robust tutoring, and a caring staff to support their educational journey.
- ▲ Quality non-traditional, non-credit instruction through the Business and Corporate training divisions of the college. This may provide one of the fastest ways for adult learners to skill up quickly without having to spend multiple semesters at the College.

#### It is a strong reminder to me that our collective Open Doors need to swing open widely to continue to embrace the adult learner...

Long after my mother graduated from SWCC, my father went on to lead the graduation processions at SWCC for my brother, my sister, and me. SWCC was at the core of my entire family. But it wasn't until years later that I realized the importance of having access to a quality education for all of us, but especially my mother – attaining that college degree was one of the most important moments in her life. It is a strong reminder to me that our collective Open Doors need to swing open widely to continue to embrace the adult learner because as we know, a college education is clearly one of the best ways to positively impact a person's life.

During his 23 years with Sauk Valley Community College in Dixon, Illinois, Dr. Steve Nunez has spent 15 years serving students as a faculty member in the Department of Biology, 14 years as Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society Advisor, and two years as President of the Faculty Association. For the past eight years, he has served SVCC as an administrator in various roles. In his current role as vice president, Steve provides leadership over academics and student services, the Small Business Development Center, adult education, and student recruitment. Additionally, Dr. Nunez has served as a Higher Learning Commission peer reviewer since 2012. He earned an associate's degree from Southwest Virginia Community College, a Bachelor and Master of Science in Biology from Virginia Tech, and his EdD from the DCCL program at Ferris State University.





## QUICK TAKES Highlights from the Field

### Five Things Student Affairs Professionals Can Do To Support Adult Learners

by Alexa Wesley

This NASPA brief suggests that student affairs professionals have a meaningful role to play in supporting the success of adult learners—a diverse and growing proportion of today’s students hoping to better position themselves economically. Since adults tend to experience unique challenges and barriers, to improve educational equity, this brief draws on national research findings and widely cited success strategies and outlines five tactics to support adult learners.

Access this work here:  
<http://bit.ly/2VthebD>

### Top Five Tips for Designing Adult Programming

by Fay Aubuchon

This practical approach to serving adult learners is predicated on the concept that adult learners are extremely busy and higher education institutions should aim to ensure that their programming is personalized to student needs. Since more adults are attending college than ever before, this article urges colleges to evolve with their student demographic and presents five useful ways a college can design programs to be adult friendly.

Access this work here:  
<http://bit.ly/2oXf5Zk>

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## Don't Call Our Students Kids! (continued from page 1)

of what a college “should be” are notoriously entrenched at each level of the institution, and pose systemic barriers to our adult learners at every turn. It will serve us well to challenge our assumptions, and learn to see through the eyes of our adult learners. As we examine the key interactions with our adult learners, from pre-admissions to graduation, how respectful are we of the complexity and richness they bring to us, and do we leverage their life experiences to help them succeed in this new college arena?

### Some Practices and Policies to Examine:

**The Dueling Logistics of Work and College.** Until a few years ago, BHCC was known for midnight classes. It was a unique approach and a real recognition that folks working the late shift need special accommodations to attend college. We have since replaced those with online classes, but the dilemma of the working adult remains. It is basic, but crucial, to examine the flexibility of the Schedule of Classes. Can a student who works full-time take enough classes to finish an Associate Degree in four to six years? Are all the required classes for a major conducted during prime business hours, when the adult learner is working? How many times must the student show up physically on campus each week to stitch together a coherent schedule? Are self-paced and accelerated programs readily accepted and well-planned? Are competency-based programs an option?

**Academic and Student Support, Unbound.** Academic and student support services are student lifelines, particularly for first-generation attendees or those returning to college. Aligning these services for adult working students may require thinking in alternatives, and asking questions from the perspective of the student rather than the operational norms of an institution: How many alternative ways can adult learners access library resources, tutoring, and advising? Is the IT Help Desk available on demand? How easily can students get in touch with the faculty, the department chair, or the dean? How much can we accomplish using the ubiquitous smart phone as an educational tool?

**Basic Needs.** In a 2018 study, The Government Accountability Office (GAO), a non-partisan agency that provides auditing and investigative functions for Congress, identified the level of food insecurity on campuses as over 40%. The equally pressing issues of affordable housing, transportation, and childcare heighten the barrier for adult students who are caring for family and children. All 28 public college and university campuses in Massachusetts have either a permanent or mobile food pantry. At least three bills on campus hunger have been filed in Congress, matching local and state efforts at legislative guidance to ameliorate this obstacle to retention and completion. Survey instruments are available for campuses to gather data. Where do student parents go for emergency assistance on your campus? Do you routinely incorporate public assistance information such as SNAP into new student orientation?

**Children in the Classroom and on Campus.** A majority of our faculty appreciate the efforts of student parents, and allow children in the classroom when regular care arrangements fall through, but some faculty strictly forbid children’s presence in the learning environment. How do we promote better understanding about the lives of student parents, and help negotiate flexible and occasional accommodations that would reduce absenteeism, and more importantly, foster an environment of belonging that is so important to persistence.

**Student Leadership and Representation.** Are requirements for participation in student groups and student governance leadership tied to full-time attendance, and therefore, restricting students who work or have other

obligations? Are activities engaging traditional and adult students? Encouraging student leaders to recognize and represent all students will help shape more inclusive policies and practices for student participation.

**Experiential Learning.** Paid internships, along with travel stipends, are critical to adult students who work. It is not possible for adults who support their family to give up current jobs to take up an unpaid internship, no matter how prestigious or enhancing it may be for their social network. BHCC employer partners offer at least \$15 an hour with a travel stipend to support student interns in our Learn and Earn program. Unpaid internships are an equity issue for adult and working students.

**Advocate for Adult Students in Financial Policy.** Adult students are frequently part-time, and excluded from benefits of scholarship and grants programs. Tying aid to credit intensity rewards traditional attendance behavior. Full-time attendance certainly leads to faster completion, but it also promotes an academic Catch-22, in which part-time adult students rarely qualify for aid (or enough aid to support a family) that gives them more flexibility or a financial advantage.

**Capturing the Lived Experiences of the Adult Learner.** It is worthwhile to develop a robust Prior Learning Assessment program to capture developed talent. Veterans, second-career seekers, foreign-trained professionals bring a wide range of skills to campus and our community. Recognition not only advantages their academic progress, but awards a sense of competence and belonging that furthers engagement. Equally important is the culture of professional development among those who serve students, and recognizing that talent comes in many faces and ages. Is there recognition in the college leadership, faculty, and staff that they are serving adults with full and complex lives? Does empathy and kindness win the day?

**Iterative Work and Culture Change.** To adequately serve our adult population requires more than setting up some Center on campus or providing a set of specialized services on the outskirts of the traditional college paradigm. At BHCC, we continue to interrogate our assumptions and our policies to see if they pose barriers to adult students. We are not experts at it, though we are becoming more mindful. Our hope is that one day, we will be a “student-ready-college,” and finally leaving behind the insistence that students be “college-ready.” We are not building a Center; we are hoping to transform a Culture.

*Pam Eddinger, PhD, is president of Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC), the largest of 15 community colleges in Massachusetts. Dr. Eddinger began her tenure at BHCC in 2013, and previously served as president Moorpark College in Southern California from 2008.*



*Dr. Eddinger’s service in the Community College movement spans more than 25 years, with senior posts in academics and student affairs, communications and policy, and executive leadership. In addition to the chairpersonship of the community college reform network Achieving the Dream (ATD), Dr. Eddinger serves on a number of boards and commissions, including the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), WGBH Boston, the Boston Foundation (TBF), the Massachusetts Workforce Development Board, and Boston Private Industry Council. Dr. Eddinger was honored in 2016 by the Obama White House as a Champion of Change.*

*She earned a bachelor’s degree in English from Barnard College in New York City and her masters and doctorate in Japanese Literature from Columbia University.*