

The Latino Adult Student Success Academy

Using a Collaborative Approach to Transform
Disparate Data Into Sustainable Solutions

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Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers; postsecondary educators; employers and industry groups; foundations and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, we foster a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. A membership organization established in 1974, CAEL is a part of Strada Collaborative, a mission-driven nonprofit. Learn more at cael.org and stradacollaborative.org.

Overview of the Latino Adult Student Success Academy

The Latino* population in the United States is large and growing. It is rich in diversity, representing a wide range of nationalities and cultures. As a whole, however, it has been challenged with inequitable educational attainment rates compared to other groups, meriting the attention of public agencies, postsecondary institutions, and advocates. Latino economic and career success — and the success of our overall economy — depend on alleviating current educational inequalities. The most effective way to do that is by directing resources to effective, data-driven strategies. In addition, we need to consider not only how to support young Latinos in high school or college but also those already in the workforce who need additional skills and credentials to access or maintain good careers in growth industries. Yet institutions often face limited resources, staffing, and in many cases, specialized know-how for effectively serving adult learners who are not coming to them directly from high school and who may struggle to fit learning into schedules that are already busy with work or family responsibilities. Many also lack procedures for disaggregating the data needed to accurately assess and optimize their effectiveness in serving important target student populations like Latino adults.

In 2018, 15 postsecondary institutions joined in the three-year Latino Adult Student Success (LASS) Academy to develop and implement targeted strategies that support Latino adult students (and adult learners generally) in their pursuit of postsecondary credentials. The LASS Academy was the inaugural cohort under the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)'s Adult Learner Academy model, an approach that combines data analysis, technical assistance, and peer-to-peer learning to support new action plans and strategies for improving services and programs for important target populations. The data used in the initiative included enrollment, course completion, persistence, and graduation metrics along with surveys of the institutions' staff and current adult students through CAEL's Adult Learner 360™ process (see *Assessing Needs and Identifying Service Gaps through Data*, on page 10, for more details about Adult Learner 360).

Through the LASS Academy, institutions learned more about the academic prospects of their current Latino adult and adult learner populations, collected and reviewed data on the needs of these students, and developed action plans to address them. Focusing on critical institutional goals such as improved enrollment, persistence, and completion, the institutions implemented strategies such as: targeted marketing and outreach, enhanced credit for prior

* We use the term "Latino" throughout this report except regarding federalized terms such as "Hispanic Serving Institutions" or when quoting federal data referring to Hispanics. Note that according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Office of Management defines "Hispanic or Latino" as a "person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race."



Despite COVID-19's disruptive impact on this initiative — and to higher education generally — the **LASS Academy outcomes show promise** for how more intentional support for Latino adult students, and adult students generally, can lead to greater student engagement and success.

learning (CPL) programs, improved onboarding of Latino adult students, intentional advising that addresses Latino adult student needs, and expansion of career services and post-graduation employment. While the LASS Academy's time frame was too short to capture the longer-term impact of these strategies in terms of student persistence and completion, the project focused on creating a more data-driven culture within the institutions by establishing processes for collecting and disaggregating such data to inform programs

and services in the long run. Positive trends in Adult Learner 360 diagnostics, average credits completed by adults and Latino adults, and other key student success metrics also emerged.

In addition, the experience offered several important lessons that underscored the advantages of the Academy model. The institutions benefited from the opportunity to connect with each other and share strategies, and they valued the emphasis on the use of both quantitative data from their own student records and the analysis of new qualitative survey results. The initiative further showed the creative resilience of the institutions to quickly change course during the pandemic and adjust their implementation plans in the course of its shifting circumstances. As their new approaches to supporting Latino adults continue beyond the project, the participating LASS institutions expect to see even greater benefits to their Latino adult postsecondary enrollment and success.

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The Why and How of the Latino Adult Student Success Academy

A RESPONSE TO EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES THROUGH A COLLABORATIVE, DATA-DRIVEN APPROACH

Latinos are an integral — and increasing — part of the U.S. population and workforce. Between 2010 and 2020, the Hispanic population grew from 50.5 million to 62.1 million, driving more than half of the country's population growth.¹ The U.S. Census Bureau projects the Hispanic population will reach 74.8 million by 2030 and 111.2 million in 2060, when it will comprise 28 percent of the U.S. population,² up from 20 percent today.³ As we look to a future when the labor market and the social mobility it enables will increasingly depend on postsecondary skills and credentials, Latino educational attainment will be an important contributor to local and national economic success.

Yet educational attainment and credential completion rates among Hispanics has trailed national averages. In 2020, only 29.8 percent of Hispanic adults (25+) had completed an associate degree or higher — 18.3 percentage points lower than the overall percentage of American adults with a degree.⁴ In terms of college completion rates for recent cohorts, the six-year graduation rate was 57.8 percent for Hispanic students in the cohort beginning in the 2013 academic year, compared to 63.4 percent for all students.⁵ In real numbers, there were more than 4.7 million Hispanic adults in 2018 who had completed some college but no degree, with an additional 10.9 million having no more than a high school diploma or equivalent.⁶

Amid the growth of the Latino population and the increasing urgency of accessible, work-relevant education in America, more institutions are focusing on developing and implementing strategies that support Latino student success. But the focus cannot only be on Latino students pursuing postsecondary directly after high school. As rapid workforce changes make rewarding careers dependent on continual upskilling and reskilling, it is also critical for postsecondary institutions to engage with Latino adults who are already in the workforce.

The LASS Academy was a three-year initiative (2018-2021) that provided technical assistance to help Latino-enrolling institutions assess how they are serving their adult students, followed by additional support in planning and implementing new policies and practices to drive better enrollment, persistence, and completion of adult students. The key to this approach was using data to guide decision making about adult learners, particularly Latino adult students.

Recognizing that institutions may need assistance in effectively meeting the intersecting needs of adult learners and Latino students, CAEL partnered with **Excelencia in Education** and **Strada Education Network** (Strada) to create the inaugural LASS Academy in 2018. Funding was made possible through **The Kresge Foundation**, **Ascendium Education Group**, and **Greater Texas Foundation**.

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The Academy model also cultivated and leveraged a community of practice among the 15 participating institutions. At the heart of this collaboration were a series of annual Latino Adult Student Success Convenings that created and maintained the momentum for formal and informal networking activities that sustained a nonjudgmental atmosphere in which participants could freely exchange best practices and common challenges and maximize the impact of the technical assistance, annual stipends, and other resources provided by the Academy.

ACADEMY OBJECTIVES FOCUSED ON LATINO ADULT STUDENT SUCCESS

The LASS Academy focused on the following objectives:

- Assessing how Academy institutions were meeting the needs of adult students in general, and Latino adult students in particular.
- Identifying sustainable institutional improvements in postsecondary models and support systems for Latino adult students.
- Establishing systems for capturing relevant and actionable data to track the impact of each institution's approach to improving support for Latino adult students, including the anticipated longer-term impact of these efforts.

LASS OPERATIONAL MODEL

Each institution formed an Academy team drawn from a range of departments. CAEL worked with these teams throughout the three-phase project, providing continual technical assistance to develop and implement goals and action plans as well as evaluation processes to collect data and monitor progress. The LASS Academy also provided participating institutions with stipends to support the implementation of the action plans. With this collaborative approach, the LASS Academy sought to surface sustainable practices for Latino adult student success and track institutional and aggregate advancement toward each institution's strategic objectives.

The participating institutions, along with CAEL and Excelencia support personnel, met in three annual convenings during the Academy, two of which occurred in person (Miami and Phoenix) prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the underlying engine of Academy engagement, these convenings offered institutional staff immersive learning experiences from subject matter experts and each other, including the sharing of best practices and prevailing problems.



Beginning with the kickoff meeting, the annual convenings also set the stage for the Academy's collaborative culture. This included monthly virtual meetings and continual ad hoc access to the Academy's network of experts and resources, creating a cadence of constructive collaborative culture that persisted throughout the Academy.

Research and evaluation activities began at the initial convening and continued throughout action planning and implementation. In the initial phases of the Academy, CAEL administered its adult learning diagnostic tool, Adult Learner 360, at each institution to help establish individual institutional frameworks for maximizing the Academy's impact. During the latter part of the Academy, institutions implemented action plans supported by Academy-provided technical assistance, training, professional development, and other resources.

To track progress, institutions regularly submitted data during the project period. Information gathered included:

- **Academic year and fall enrollment.**
- **Credits attempted and completed.**
- **Cohort metrics relating to persistence and completion;** and
- **Other institutionally specific data.**

Institutions reported the enrollment, credit, and cohort data for all undergraduates, adult undergraduates aged 25 years old or older (a subset of all undergraduates), and Latino adult undergraduates (a subset of adult undergraduates). Institutions also reported metrics specific to their action plans using this same disaggregation, where appropriate. While longer-term benefits to completion, retention, and even enrollment typically manifest beyond a three-year timeframe, the LASS Academy was nonetheless able to track quantifiable, near-term improvements related to the specific interventions carried out to better serve Latino adult students.

PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS WERE MOSTLY PUBLIC AND A MIX OF TWO- AND FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

The Academy invited college and university applicants committed to developing strategies to improve Latino adult learner success at their institutions. CAEL partnered with Excelencia in Education, a national leader in advancing Latino student success, to identify and select the Academy participants. Through an open application process leveraging the networks of

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Excelencia and CAEL, interested institutions submitted applications highlighting the current status and importance of Latino adults at their institutions.

Selection criteria included:

- Being an HSI[†] or emerging HSI.[‡]
- Demonstrated commitment to serving the adult Latino student.
- Ability to commit institutional resources to implement new programs and services for serving the adult (Latino) student.
- Ability to commit internal research staff and resources to track impact of the initiative on key measures and share these outcomes with the project partners.
- Having senior leadership (especially the provost, dean(s), and chief academic officer) who are in full support of the institution's involvement in the Academy.
- Commitment to engaging key faculty and staff across the institution to ensure sustainability of any new approaches to supporting the adult Latino student.

[†] Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) is a federal institutional designation that defines HSIs as institutions of higher education that have an enrollment of undergraduate full-time equivalent students that is at least 25 percent Hispanic students.

[‡] An Emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (EHSI) is a designation used by Excelencia for institutions that serve a large proportion of Hispanic students and may soon meet the federal HSI criteria. Institutions that have been identified as EHSI have an enrollment of undergraduate full-time equivalent students that is at least 15 percent Hispanic students.

[§] Five of the institutions were in Texas due to targeted project funding.

COHORT BREAKDOWN

6 TWO-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS



8 FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS



1 FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC, NONPROFIT INSTITUTION



The LASS Academy's inaugural cohort included 14 HSIs and 1 Emerging HSI. Six of the participating institutions were two-year public institutions, eight were four-year public institutions, and one was a four-year private nonprofit institution. The Academy institutions represented eight states[§] and enrollments ranging from 927 students to more than 61,000. In all, the 15 LASS institutions enrolled about 306,000 during the 2019-20 academic year. Of those, about 43,700 (14 percent) were Latino adults, who comprised anywhere from less than 5 percent to more than 30 percent of an Academy institution's total undergraduate enrollment. Across all age groups, institutions ranged from 15 percent Latino enrollment to more than 90 percent.

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PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

ARIZONA

Estrella Mountain Community College (EMCC)
Two-Year Public

Phoenix College (PC)
Two-Year Public

FLORIDA

Florida International University (FIU)
Four-Year Public

NEW YORK

Bronx Community College (BCC)
Two-Year Public

Lehman College (Lehman)
Four-Year Public

TEXAS

Austin Community College (ACC)
Two-Year Public

South Texas College (STC)
Four-Year Public

Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi (TAMUCC)
Four-Year Public

Texas A&M University – San Antonio (TAMUSA)
Four-Year Public

University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV)
Four-Year Public

CALIFORNIA

California State University – Sacramento (CSU)
Four-Year Public

West Los Angeles College (WLAC)
Two-Year Public

ILLINOIS

Richard J. Daley College (Daley)
Two-Year Public

OHIO

Union Institute & University (Union)
Four-Year Private, Nonprofit

WISCONSIN

University of Wisconsin-Parkside (UWP)
Four-Year Public



A multidimensional mix of faculty and staff from organizational levels ranging from front-line faculty and staff to pedagogical specialists to executive leadership represented the Academy institution and participated in its collaboration. Their departments/responsibilities included:

- Academic Advising
- Academic Affairs
- Academic Initiatives and Projects
- Admissions and Enrollment
- Adult and Continuing Education
- Adult Degree Programs
- Adult Education
- Career Center
- Continuing Education
- Curriculum Matters and Academic Program
- Disability Resource Center
- Enrollment Management and Services
- Enrollment Services for Dual Credit
- Experiential Learning and Community Engagement
- Grants Development
- Industry and Public Service
- Institutional Effectiveness
- Institutional Research
- Recreation
- Recruitment
- School and Community Relations
- Strategic Enrollment
- Strategic Initiatives
- Student Affairs
- Student Services
- Student Success
- Student Development
- Teaching and Learning Excellence Division
- Workforce Education

Defining Institutional Priorities and Assessing Needs

WHAT IS THE OVERALL IMPACT THE INSTITUTIONS WANTED TO ACHIEVE?

The first step in the process for the participating institutions was to clarify for themselves what, specifically, they wanted the LASS Academy to help change. By far, increasing graduation/completion was the outcome most frequently targeted among the individual institutional goals established; 12 of the 15 institutions included it as a focus during the Academy. Increasing enrollment, decreasing time to degree, and increasing persistence/retention were all prioritized by four institutions. Two institutions pursued improvements in post-college outcomes.

ASSESSING NEEDS AND IDENTIFYING SERVICE GAPS THROUGH DATA

An integral aspect of the Academy was identifying, collecting, and analyzing the data that helps institutions understand the current state of their Latino adult students and how they are meeting — or failing to meet — those needs. As a first step, the institutions collected benchmark data dating back to the 2014-15 academic year on enrollment trends, retention, graduation, and course completion rates for all students, as well as a disaggregation of that data for a targeted look at adult students and Latino adult students. This provided a starting point for understanding how the institutions were doing with Latino adult students on a variety of important access and success metrics.

Next, the Academy staff led each institution through CAEL's Adult Learner 360 process, which uses two different surveys — one for adult learners at that institution and another for institutional administrators — to provide a snapshot of institutional effectiveness in serving adult learners, identify challenges and opportunities, and chart pathways of improvement by comparing the results from each group and identifying significant differences in how the groups responded. The Adult Learner 360 diagnostic process at each institution includes a report highlighting strengths and areas for improvement, with suggestions for changes that can lead to better support for adult students. The report also provides a comparison of that institution's results with other institutions in the same sector (e.g., a community college would see its results against aggregate results from other two-year public institutions).

Priorities of the LASS Institutions

- Improved graduation/completion rates.
- Increased enrollment.
- Shorter time to degree.
- Improved persistence/retention.

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Adult Learner 360 is rooted in CAEL's landmark Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners, derived from decades of research and practice in the field of adult learning. Over the last 18 years, more than 140 postsecondary institutions have engaged with the Adult Learner 360 survey tools.



In addition to the Adult Learner 360 process, CAEL regularly collected other data from Academy Institutions. This included case study interviews with institutional staff, monthly update calls among Academy staff and supporting partners, and quantitative analysis of various institutional data.

CAEL staff then facilitated discussions with each institution's cross-departmental team about the results and recommendations from the Adult Learner 360 process within the larger context of institutional priorities and benchmark data. These discussions informed each institution's action plan that guided the implementation stage of the Academy. To measure individual and aggregate Academy progress, in 2021, near the end of the Academy, CAEL again administered Adult Learner 360 at each institution (see *Cohort Success and Credit Completion*, page 16 for details).



Implementing New Institutional Strategies to Support Latino Adult Students

As a result of the individualized data collection and action planning stage of the Academy, each institution began implementation of different strategies to meet the needs of their Latino adult students in the context of their institutional culture and priorities. Since the data collected covered a wide range of topics in the form of various policies, practices, and outcomes, each institution's data profile was unique. For many institutional teams there were several topics that stood out as opportunities for improvement for serving adult learners generally, and Latino adults in particular. Most of the action plans that the institutions developed addressed more than one of these areas for improvement.

There were five strategies that were the most commonly addressed in the action plans and subsequently implemented during the last half of the LASS initiative:



CREATING A TARGETED MARKETING AND OUTREACH STRATEGY TO ADULT LEARNERS AND/OR LATINO ADULTS *(Five institutions)*

Many of the participating institutions had been facing declining enrollments of either the traditional-aged student population, adult learners, or both, so several institutions placed great importance on how to improve marketing and outreach to new or returning adult learners.

- **California State University – Sacramento** (CSU) took a strategic, student-centered, and data-centered approach to this effort by focusing on previously enrolled adult students and Latino adults to understand the barriers they faced that led them to stopping out from their previous attempts at college. Sac State coordinated across multiple internal units such as the Administrative Barriers Committee, Student Academic Success and Educational Equity programs, Enrollment Services, Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness and Planning, Faculty Senate, and Academic Affairs. Institutional efforts to reengage with stopped out students took a new look at their data and disaggregated by age and race-ethnicity and were able to identify several barriers faced by adult learners, Latino learners, and Latino adult learners. That information was then shared internally, and the institution worked to develop a dashboard that will allow users (internal staff and learners themselves) to see barriers by demographic groups.

- **Florida International University** focused on how to market programs with a significant population of adult learners, including making their website more intentional in its communication, particularly around financial aid.
- Going into the Academy, **South Texas College** planned to have a more robust outreach and intake process bolstered by multiple events. When the pandemic forced them to move away from on-campus events, the college shifted to virtual outreach to adult learners, reporting that students responded favorably to the one-on-one interaction and the flexibility of engaging remotely.
- **Estrella Mountain Community College** applied Academy technical assistance toward marketing to adult students to improve overall communication and identify recruiting gaps.
- **University of Wisconsin-Parkside's** plans to conduct in-person outreach events were also disrupted by the pandemic, but the university still was able to benefit from technical assistance that enhanced their engagement of Latino students through nontraditional means, including a podcast.



EXPANDING OFFERINGS OR IMPROVING PROCESSES FOR AWARDING CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING (CPL)

(Five institutions)

One important strategy for supporting adult learner credential completion is to help those students accelerate by awarding college credit for what students

already know and can do – whether it is learning from work or life experiences, professional licenses or certifications, military training, or self-study. This is referred to as *credit for prior learning* (CPL) or prior learning assessment (PLA).

Research shows that CPL/PLA can save students time and money in earning credentials, and students with CPL/PLA credit are more likely to complete credentials than students without such credit (see *The PLA Boost*: www.cael.org/pla-impact). Five LASS institutions (ACC, Lehman, STC, UWP, and WLAC) identified CPL/PLA as a strategy to decrease time to degree, increase persistence, or increase completion. All five of these institutions

THE PLA BOOST

Adult students with PLA
saved money

 **\$1,500
to \$10,000**

Estimated adult student savings
through PLA, across sectors.

Institutions won, too

 **17.6 MORE
CREDITS**

Average additional course credits
taken by adult PLA students

saw increases in the average overall credit earning by Latino adults, with mixed progress in other student success metrics. At three of the four institutions for which data were reported, the number of Latino adult students earning CPL credits increased between fall 2018 and fall 2020. The greatest rate of CPL growth occurred at **Lehman College**, which boosted the number of CPL credits it awarded by 9.5 percent and the number of students earning CPL by 80 percent (fall 2020 vs. fall 2018).



ENHANCING ADVISING SUPPORT FOR ADULT LEARNERS AND/OR LATINO ADULTS (Four institutions)

One of the findings from the data collection stage was that many Latino adult learners wished to be more involved on campus for both activities and services, yet students were reticent about seeking help. Several participating institutions encountered an apparently common misconception that adult students “should have it figured out by now.” In fact, adult learners may not intuitively know how to navigate campus operations, and they may not know how to — or may feel uncomfortable — advocating for themselves. Some participating institutions, like **Phoenix College**, used resources from the initiative to take a case management approach to advising; as the pandemic threw students’ lives into uncertainty, advisors reached out and checked in with students to determine if they had any needs or concerns and to provide referrals to advisement, social service organizations, or other resources.

Several other participating institutions likewise invested resources into expanding advising capacity, with some measurable impact: the number of advising appointments scheduled by Latino adults at University of Wisconsin-Parkside and the number of credits obtained by Latino adults who took advantage of advising services more than doubled between fall 2019 and fall 2020; at **University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley**, the number of advising appointments did not increase between 2019 and 2020, but Latino adults who received advising earned more credits (10 compared to 6.5), on average, and completed a higher percentage of credits attempted (88 percent compared to 67 percent), compared to the Latino adults who did not receive advising; and at **Phoenix College**, Latino adults enrolled in the case management system graduated with fewer excess credits in 2020 than in previous years. Each of these three institutions also saw increases in the number of credits completed or graduation of Latino adults over the grant period.

Common LASS Strategies to Support Latino Adult Students

- Targeted marketing and outreach.
- Enhanced credit for prior learning programs.
- Improved onboarding of Latino adult students.
- Enhanced advising to address needs.
- Expansion of career services and post-graduation employment.
- Financial support and guidance.
- Childcare support.
- Better course scheduling.
- Improved pathways between non-credit and for-credit programs.



IMPROVING THE ONBOARDING PROCESS FOR ADULT LEARNERS AND/OR LATINO ADULTS (Three institutions)

Several institutions learned from the Adult Learner 360 survey process that they could be doing a better job supporting students during their initial transition to their postsecondary studies. **South Texas College**, for example, focused on maintaining a more coordinated approach between its marketing, communications teams, and enrollment teams to create targeted messages and enrollment events for Latino adults. They learned through this process that:

- Latino adults were motivated and encouraged by targeted messaging.
- Students preferred virtual rather than in-person appointments.
- Students also preferred an integrated approach to enrollment services.
- The institution needs to address the challenges that many students have with computer literacy.



IMPROVING CAREER SERVICES AND GUIDANCE FOR ADULT LEARNERS AND/OR LATINO ADULTS (Three institutions)

A common challenge for many institutions is helping students connect with work-based learning opportunities and providing career guidance more generally, so several participating institutions addressed this need in their action and implementation plans. At some, this meant promoting existing career services better to Latino adult students. **West Los Angeles College** approached it differently by setting a goal of increasing employment and work experience placements for all students, but with a focus on Latino adults. They created an online job board and a career center with bilingual Spanish staff, and they expanded vocational ESL career training and provided labor market information to ESL students in Spanish. They succeeded in increasing the number of employer partners offering work experience by 87 percent and increased the number of work experience placements available to students by 15 percent.

Other strategies implemented in the project included:

- Addressing financial barriers (*two institutions*).
- Improving childcare support (*one institution*).
- Creating better course scheduling for working adults (*one institution*).
- Creating better pathways between non-credit and for-credit programs (*one institution*).

Cohort Success and Credit Completion: Short-Term Metrics About the Long-Term Picture

As noted above, the LASS Academy initiative was a three-year initiative focused on using data strategically to focus efforts where they are needed to support adult learners generally and Latino adults more specifically. Oriented toward enrollment, persistence, and completion, it prioritized action planning and the implementation of new strategies that would set the stage for sustainable long-term success in these areas. This activity began in earnest about halfway through the project, during the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Primarily because of the short time horizon of the initiative, the LASS Academy never sought to demonstrate measurable impact on traditional student success metrics during the initiative itself. Yet it did focus on establishing within each institution a data-focused culture and new processes for collecting and using data to understand both successes and areas for improvement.

The project regularly collected data from the participating institutions to examine possible trends for three student population groups: all undergraduates, undergraduate adult learners, and undergraduate Latino adult learners. Although it is not presently possible to link specific LASS initiatives to particular outcomes such as enrollment, course completion, credit-earning, and credential completion, it is worth noting some trends that these institutions were seeing leading up to and during the initiative itself.

As a cohort, the group of institutions showed some positive indications, such as:

- **Progress on metrics measured through the Adult Learner 360 surveys.** In 2021, near the end of the Academy, Adult Learner 360 was again administered at the institutions. The aggregate cohort score increased in each of the Ten Principles. The greatest improvements occurred in “Life and Career Planning,” (6.6 percent), “Outreach” (5.5 percent), “Assessment of Learning Outcomes” (5.6 percent), and “Strategic Partnerships” (4.8 percent). The median increase among the Ten Principles was 3.6 percent over the three-year period. These outcomes correlate with the most common areas of focus during the Academy, which included CPL, marketing/outreach, and career services.
- **Overall stability in Latino adult student enrollment prior to the pandemic.** Latino adult student enrollment was approximately 15 percent of the undergraduate population across all 15 participating institutions in 2014-2015, and it was 14 percent in 2019-2020 (just prior to the start of the pandemic). Five of the individual institutions saw big increases in the number of enrolled Latino adults during that time (an increase of 29 to 65 percent), while five institutions saw noteworthy declines (14 to 27 percent). Overall enrollment of

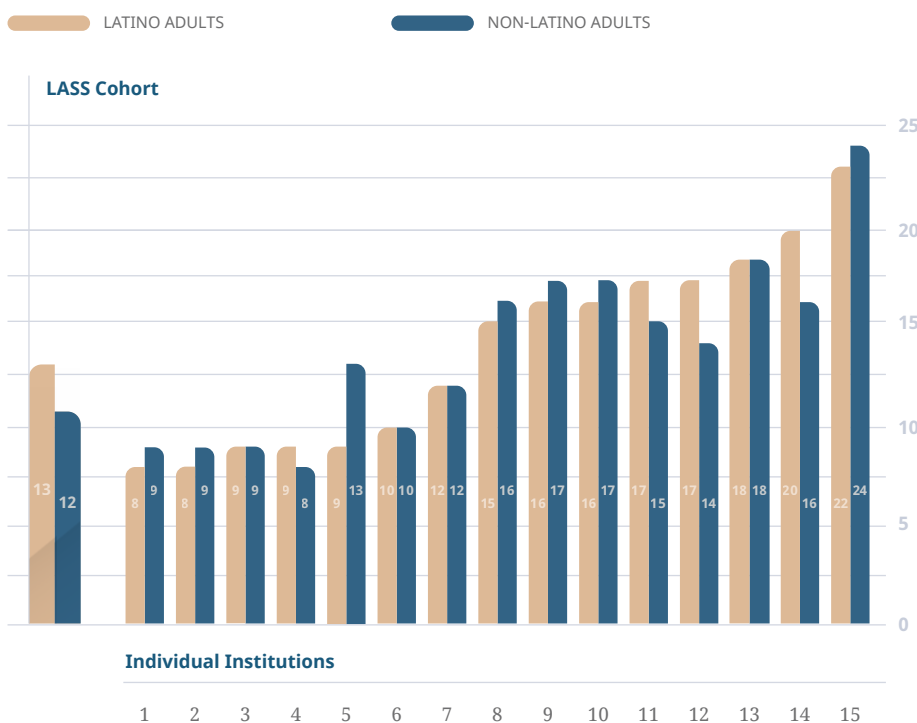


Latino adult students dropped by an average of 4.4 percent in fall of 2020, likely attributable to COVID-related disruptions, which caused nationwide enrollment declines on already-vulnerable groups. However, this enrollment drop among the Academy institutions was less than that of non-Latino adult students (6.3 percent) and only 0.8 percentage points greater than the national aggregated decline in postsecondary students at that time (3.6 percent).⁷

- Growth in the number of average credits successfully completed by adults and Latino adults.** Across the LASS institutions, Latino adults completed, on average, between 8 and 10 credits per academic year at two-year institutions and 12 to 22 credits per academic year at four-year institutions; at most of the participating institutions, and cohort-wide, Latino adults earned more credits, on average, compared to non-Latino adult students (*Figure A*). At all but four institutions, Latino adult students completed more credits on average in 2019-20 than they did in 2014-15.

FIGURE A

Average credits successfully completed by adults (2019–20)



- **Encouraging results in overall adult student success rates over time.** When looking at adult learner success metrics, it can be useful to consider not just graduation/completion rates, but also continued enrollment. Adult students are often juggling work and family responsibilities while pursuing education, so many study part-time or need to stop-out periodically. When looking at a “success metric” that examines the percentage of a student cohort that is either still enrolled or graduated, that can provide a more complete picture of adult student success in terms of overall engagement or persistence (“cohort success rate”). Among the LASS institutions, ten of the fifteen had increased the cohort success rate of their adult and Latino adult students (measured by looking at a combined metric of “still enrolled” and “graduated”) between 2014-2015 and 2018-2019. However, as noted earlier, there is no way to causally link particular outcome metrics with activities of the LASS Academy.

Since the Academy’s time frame generally precludes contemporaneous attributions of the initiative’s activities to overall student success results, the initiative committed to achieving a greater focus within the institutions on the value of examining their own data to inform needed changes or to raise awareness about the need to support key student populations in new and targeted ways. That indeed came through in the overall lessons and takeaways from the initiative.



“One of the best things about the initiative was that they [CAEL] worked to facilitate a collection of data that tied to data that focused on adult learners.”

PARTICIPATING LASS ACADEMY INSTITUTION

Lessons from the LASS Academy

Following the Academy's conclusion, participants shared feedback with a third-party evaluator. Valuable lessons emerged from their experience that can help any institution better serve its Latino adult learners. These ranged from the basic need to "know what you don't know" to a fuller appreciation of the Academy approach in light of the unprecedented upheaval created by the pandemic. Below are descriptions of four key lessons: the value of data-driven discovery, the value of the Academy approach, the resilience of institutions to course correct during an unprecedented pandemic, and the need for additional followup research to determine the longer-term impact of the various strategies on key institutional metrics related to the enrollment and academic success of Latino adults.

DATA-DRIVEN DISCOVERY

Institutions reported that by utilizing existing data and identifying new opportunities to identify and track KPIs to support their endeavors, they became more aware of what information would be important to collect going forward to sustain student success for Latino adults. Many institutions credited the Adult Learner 360 survey process and other Academy data collection for assisting with identifying Latino adult learner needs and bringing awareness to barriers this population faces. One institution shared, "One of the best things about the initiative was that they [CAEL] worked to facilitate a collection of data that tied to data that focused on adult learners." Several other institutions noted that prior to the initiative, they did not collect data in a way that would allow them to disaggregate to show information specific about Latino adult learners.

Additionally, some participants reported that the data often affirmed what they knew about their student populations or brought to light misconceptions about the needs of their students. One institution's staff disclosed that it was useful to realize staff "didn't know what [they] didn't know," and looked "to optimize data collection to serve students." For others, data collection provided the evidence needed to garner support and buy-in from others at their institution to move initiative efforts forward, lending credibility and validation to their efforts to assist Latino adult learners. One institution's staff shared that their work with the data provided through the initiative was "starting to change culture a little bit and how we think about students." Another institution stated these efforts have impacted how they think about and use data moving forward. Through their use of the survey findings to substantiate student needs, some Academy participants noted they were able to identify and provide additional services tailored to Latino and adult learners. These services varied by institution and included things like expanded evening and weekend hours for services (e.g., advising), addressing technological needs for adult learners, and creating bilingual signage and documents for use on campus and online.

VALUE OF THE ACADEMY APPROACH

Collaboration Was Key to Identifying Challenges and Targeting Opportunities

Institutions found the regular engagement with fellow participants and CAEL support staff to be helpful and productive. One participant described the annual convenings as the “best aspects” of the Academy. Institutional staff especially appreciated the in-person meetings held in Phoenix and Miami in the first two years of the Academy for the enduring connections formed with attendees; Academy members would use the networks they established among fellow participants in an informal benchmarking process. Institutions also reported that they found monthly check-ins with CAEL staff informative and productive in helping keep the project moving forward, even amidst the chaos of COVID-19.

In addition to insight around best practices, attendees described an **esprit de corps** that arose from the reinforcing realization that participants were facing and surmounting common challenges.



Intersectional Needs in Adult Learning

Conversations around recurring common barriers were prevalent in both informal Academy collaboration and the technical assistance it provided. A common theme was disproportionate difficulties in on-campus engagement with Latino adult learners because of external commitments including jobs and familial obligations. This affected students’ capacity to be fully involved in classes, utilize career and/or advising services, meet professors for office hours, and avail themselves of other campus support. Bringing these challenges to the forefront inspired institutions to enhance their responsiveness through after-hours services, refined marketing, and virtual offerings.

One institution shared that it found Latina students especially, “don’t get that talk [about going to college] as much as male Hispanics do.” Having determined this, the institution chose to craft outreach tailored specifically to Latinas. Language and technology barriers also surfaced. One participant concluded that Latino adults could be “uncomfortable with online learning,” while another felt that it was a challenge faced by adult learners more generally, saying, “Adult learners are specifically lacking in the tech area — knowing how to navigate.” To overcome language challenges, many institutions incorporated bilingual messaging in marketing and outreach materials whenever possible.

RESILIENCE OF INSTITUTIONS TO COURSE-CORRECT DURING A PANDEMIC

Several institutions appreciated the flexibility of the initiative’s “à la Carte” approach in configuring their selection of programs and deciding on the use of initiative funds. One participant described the Academy’s “menu of technical assistance options” that enabled the institution to look “at what we really needed to become more effective at.” The Academy’s inherent flexibility proved to be especially supportive during the challenges of the pandemic. Several institutions noted the initiative allowed them to adapt and find opportunities to better support the needs of their Latino adult students despite these difficulties. For example, though the pandemic required a rushed transition to online platforms, many of the Academy institutions had already identified virtual learning as supportive of adult learning. The Academy’s network and flexible framework enhanced their own ability — and agility — to make effective changes and parlay proactive planning into rapid results. One participant reported that a “big success that we did not intend when we started, offering all [e.g., student services, online course materials] virtually to students” was “something we never set out to do. Through circumstances, we achieved that.”

FOLLOW-UP STUDIES COULD OFFER MORE INSIGHT INTO IMPACT ON ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

The Academy model could benefit from complementary analysis beyond the conclusion of its formal activities, such as longer-term longitudinal studies, which could capture a clear picture of their denouement and provide additional insights on the far-reaching impact of investing in resources that support Latino adult learners.



Conclusion

The LASS Academy generated momentum for existing endeavors to support Latino adults while inspiring new ones. Qualitative data gathered through interviews with participating institutional staff revealed a broad consensus that the Academy experience has left institutions better positioned to foster important discussions around the need to better serve Latino adults. Moreover, as a result of the Academy's rigorous data-collection regimen, institutions found themselves better prepared to identify and measure key performance indicators about serving this population and use that data to inform multidisciplinary best practices, including enrollment, advising, career centers, and financial aid. Despite COVID-19's disruption of original plans, participants reported that their Academy work has laid the foundation for promising work that will be incorporated into institutional strategic plans.

Looking ahead, perhaps the most encouraging trend reported by participants is the certainty that the Academy inculcated an institutional culture centered on adult and Latino student success. For example, one institutional staff member shared that the experience had "lit a fire and made us stay on track for credit for prior learning." Some institutions committed to hiring staff members whose roles would include ensuring a persistent focus and dedication for Latino adult student success. One participant reported that the Academy's multiplier effect had taken root within the institution, noting that work had permeated diverse departments and reporting that the institution saw the initiative as something that keeps "coming back through cross-institution[ality] and intersectionality." Another institution's team reported that a focus on Latino adult students is now "part of their equity plan." In discussing plans for sustainability, staff from another institution shared, "having the grant and having a group talking about things has helped raise [the Latino] profile ... and equity-type thinking."

Such remarks indicate that the Academy's material gains, which were notable despite its limited period of formal activities, are transcended by the momentum created by the intention and initiative that drove them. This momentum has positioned LASS Academy institutions to continue the work begun during the Academy and multiply its effects for the benefit not only of the students framed within the three-year snapshot of the Academy but for countless cohorts to come.

We thank all of the postsecondary institutions that participated in CAEL's inaugural LASS Academy cohort and appreciate their input and willingness to share publicly the outcomes of this important national initiative.

CAEL anticipates holding future Academies following a similar model. If you have suggestions for specific Academy target audiences or are interested in involving your institution in a future CAEL Academy, please contact us at cael@cael.org to find out how your institution can participate and to learn more.

ENDNOTES

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