



Case Study: Virginia Western Community College and Adult Learner 360

BACKGROUND

To help postsecondary institutions better understand and meet the needs of adult learners, CAEL developed the Adult Learner 360™. Adult Learner 360's parallel surveys, rooted in more than 25 years of practice, focus on multiple areas of the student experience through the adult learner lens. In addition to students, Adult Learner 360 surveys faculty and staff, providing unparalleled insight into both the student and institutional experience and perspectives. CAEL offers raw and comparison survey data, a gap analysis of the results, assessment relative to national median scores, and a comprehensive written analysis. CAEL's deliverables include specific recommendations aligned with CAEL's 10 Principles for Effectively Serving Adults and the Framework for Creating Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES). Throughout its history, more than 200 institutions have completed the Adult Learner 360, providing meaningful, applicable data of national trends in student needs, objectives, and expectations.

Virginia Western Community College (VWCC) is a two-year institution located in Roanoke, Virginia. The college serves regions of Roanoke, Salem, Roanoke County, Craig County, Franklin County, and southern Botetourt County. VWCC enrolls more than 8,500 students in credit-bearing courses and more than 1,200 in fast-track workforce and continuing education courses. Nearly 2,600 students at VWCC identify as adult learners. For the purposes of the Adult Learner 360 surveys, VWCC determined adult learners to be 20 and older.

CHALLENGES

Anecdotal information and generic research do not provide a clear and specific understanding of student needs. VWCC wanted to move beyond the assumptions and perceptions of faculty and staff and generalized adult learner research and theory to embrace a data-driven approach to assessing effectiveness.

Learn more at cael.org

VIRGINIA WESTERN

3

Adult Learner 360
survey cycles completed

54%

Increase in satisfaction
ratings in which VWCC
outperformed national
median scores

\$1.8 million

Title III funding
secured with the aid
of Adult Learner 360 data

“We wanted to make sure that our college was conducive to adult learners and really change that conversation from focus on traditional, right-out-of-high school students to are we meeting the needs of our adult learners opportunities.”



Shonny Cooke

Manager of VWCC's Hall Associates
Career Center

RISKS

VWCC recognized that without accurate insight into its adult learners' experience, efforts to improve can be limited to one-size-fits-all approaches. As a result, what appears to well-intentioned faculty and staff as meaningful action can instead be perceived as "change for the sake of change" by the students they are trying to impact.

APPROACH

VWCC engaged with CAEL on a series of Adult Learner 360 implementations. CAEL completed the first Adult Learner 360 in 2017, with subsequent iterations in 2020 and 2023. VWCC progressed through multiple surveys to build a multilayered array of data that tracked trends in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic while also measuring progress in the campus environment, changes in student expectations and needs, and impact from the work inspired by previous results.

SOLUTION

Adult Learner 360 allowed VWCC to "go straight to the source," endowing all areas of the institution with insight into what adult learners feel they most need and spurring inspiration among different departments about how they can adjust what they are doing to more effectively meet these students where they are.

SUCCESS

- **Grant funding:** VWCC presented data from its initial Adult Learner 360 cycle to substantiate and highlight areas of need that were well aligned with a five-year, \$1.8-million grant from the U.S. Department of Education Title III Strengthening Institutions Program
- **Additional staff dedicated to adult learners:** The Adult Learner 360 findings informed the allocation of the grant funds, resulting in a CPL specialist, an adult career advisor, and a career affordability navigator.
- **Buy-in at the institutional level:** Adult Learner 360 results have prompted a cultural shift so that adult learner-friendly policies and practices are embedded throughout the student experience, with adult learner needs enshrined in the college's strategic plan.



"Some of the information that went into the grant application was information from the Adult Learner 360 in 2017. To be able to have that data to show the areas we need to grow was instrumental in being able to get the grant."

Crystal Hall

Get REAL (Refocus Education on Adult Learners)
grant activity coordinator



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; and foundations and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, CAEL fosters a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. A national membership organization established in 1974, CAEL is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Workplace™ certified and is a part of Strada Collaborative, a mission-driven nonprofit. Learn more at cael.org and stradacollaborative.org.