BARRY DARNELL, REBECCA KLEIN-COLLINS & KARI SHAFENBERG

Building Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES)

Research findings and a new framework for supporting institutional change

cael.org

Executive Summary

The Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES) Framework contains a series of planning and operational domains through which institutions can more effectively support today's adult learners.

cael

Link Learning and Work

Executive Summary

Last year, CAEL launched a series of research activities designed to develop a new framework to help guide institutional policies and practices in their work to support adult learners. The research activities included interviews with currently enrolled or recently graduated adult learners, an examination of 10 high-performing programs serving adults, a review of existing research on effective practices to meet adult learner needs, a survey and focus groups of never-enrolled adults, consideration of lessons from CAEL's most recent work with institutions wanting to better serve adults, and additional consultation of CAEL staff and other subject matter experts.

Combining this new research with the lessons from our own experience working with adult-serving institutions, and recognizing that the postsecondary environment is a different world compared to the one that existed 20 years ago, CAEL developed a new framework to help guide institutional policies and practices in their work to support adult learners. The **Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES) Framework** contains a series of planning and operational domains through which institutions can more effectively support today's adult learners. In this new framework, the focus is as much on the process for becoming an adult learner-focused institution as it is on the programs and services that are most visible to the adult learner as they make decisions about where to enroll.

HIGH-LEVEL FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

The research revealed several important themes and insights about the needs of today's adult learners for successful postsecondary experiences:

- **Affordability.** Adult learners, more so than their traditionally aged peers, are often balancing multiple financial obligations as they seek their postsecondary credential. This can include housing costs, child or dependent care, and other family expenses. The affordability of a program and the potential return on investment of their postsecondary education weigh heavily on the decision to pursue additional education. Adult learners are highly cost-conscious, and financial factors are often central to their enrollment decisions.
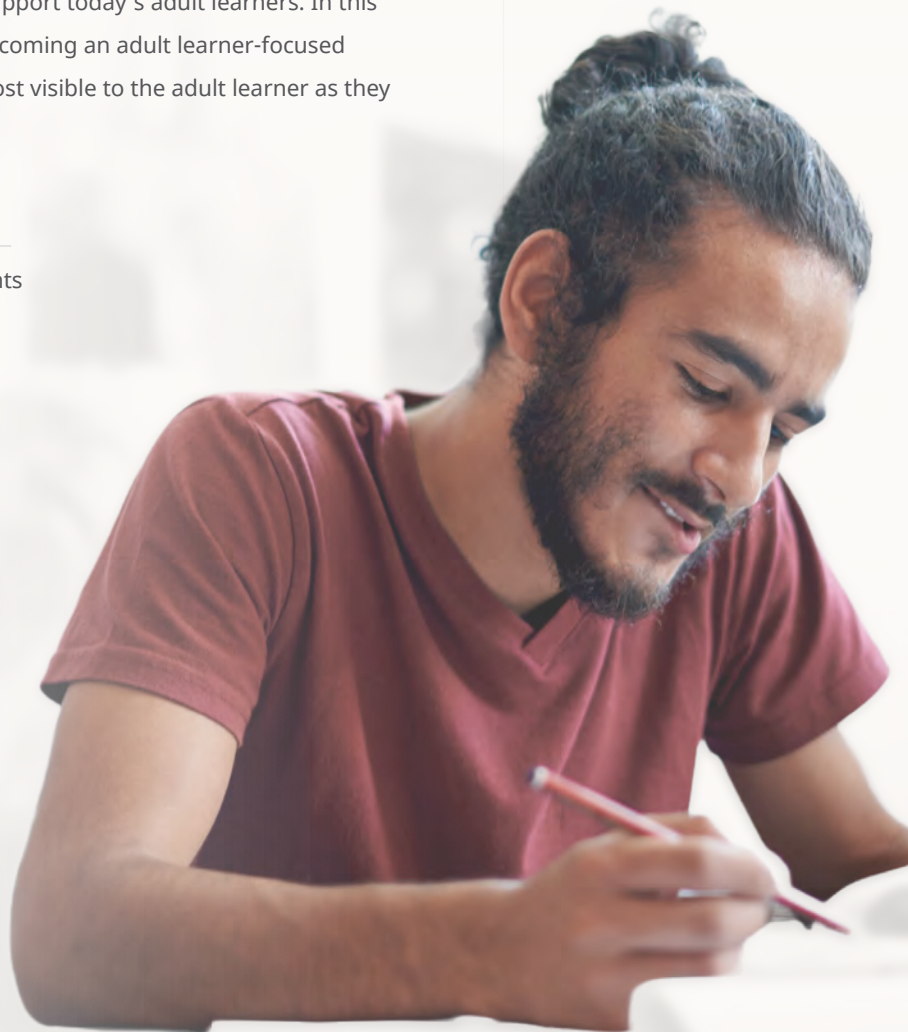
- **Career Connections and Relevance.** Professional growth and development is often cited as the primary motivating factor for enrollment in higher education. These students seek to improve their professional status, either by growing in their current role or moving into new positions upon completion of their credential. Adult learning theory states that adults draw from their internal motivation to stay committed to education, and that they benefit from applying their learning directly to their daily lives (Knowles, 1980). The never-enrolled adult surveys, as well as the CAEL-conducted interviews with current adult learners, reinforced the role that career development plays in the decision to return to school, with professional goals such as obtaining a new job as a top motivator. Additionally, the high-performing institution study demonstrated consistent attention to career relevance and services, both in the classroom and in structural supports.

- **Academic Empowerment.** Adult learners seek institutions that recognize their complete experience and provide opportunities to control their own progress and development. These students have specific goals and milestones to reach, and they know themselves well enough to recognize what they need to be successful. Ownership of learning modalities, schedules that fit an adult's busy life, opportunities to count prior learning, and engaging classroom experiences equip adult learners with the ability and confidence to succeed in postsecondary institutions.

- **Student Support.** A range of student support services is critical for student success — particularly when focused at the front end of an adult learner's journey. The transition to postsecondary learning is a time when adults need help navigating and balancing education with their other daily responsibilities. While student support takes many forms, at its core it should enhance the learning journey with collaboration across institutional offices, internal support teams, and the learners themselves to meet the students where they are and guide them through their education. This support is crucial at all stages of the student experience, but the initial transition into a postsecondary program is especially fraught for adult learners at the beginning of their program, as they require additional assistance and support to navigate their new institution and academic standing. Pillars of support, including academic and financial advising, career counseling, and personalized outreach work in concert to provide guidance and direction for these learners.

- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.** Adult learners embody multiple roles and identities in their lives, yet gaps in diversity efforts, recognition, and acceptance can result in students feeling like outsiders in a postsecondary environment, particularly for those who are part of historically underrepresented populations. Institutional systems and structures may perpetuate inequities in both access and student success.

NEW ADULT LEARNER LEADERS FOR INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS (ALLIES) FRAMEWORK

In the framework, depicted in *Figure 1*, the adult learner is at the focal point of the process as a whole. In **Level 1: Data-Driven Planning**, the institution engages in a set of activities that establish the first part of the foundation: making data-driven decisions that ensure equity and success. In **Level 2: Organizational Capacity and Policy**, the institution focuses on expanding and improving internal capacity to meet adult learner needs. In **Level 3: Student Experience**, the institution focuses on designing, developing, and improving the program- and service-design components that the adult learner sees and experiences.

FIGURE 1

Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES) Framework

LEVEL 1: DATA-DRIVEN PLANNING

Level 1 in the ALLIES Framework focuses on gathering data (*Student and Labor Market Data*), using that data to help shape a new strategy (*Adult- and Equity-Focused Strategic Plan*), and fostering a new culture within the organization that prepares for change and embraces new ways of learning and operating (*Culture of Change and Adaptivity*).

- **DOMAIN 1: Student and Labor Market Data**
An institution that effectively serves adults collects data on adult learner outcomes throughout and beyond the academic journey, ensuring programs equitably and reliably bridge adult learners to enrollment, gainful employment, socioeconomic advancement, and further academic success. It is important to know the institution's main constituency: adults who have already enrolled there and adults who could potentially enroll there. Institutions need to know about those individuals — who they are, their work histories, their educational histories, what they want from postsecondary learning, and so on. In addition, it is critical that the institution serving them pay close attention — and adapt its program offerings — to the needs of the labor market. This means that the institution is aware of the skills that employers want and need, and takes the necessary steps to ensure that graduates are prepared to meet those skill expectations.

- **DOMAIN 2: Adult- and Equity-Focused Strategic Plan**
An institution that effectively serves adults is aware that adult learners come with different backgrounds and experiences, and they also come with different barriers to learning and success. Institutions need to establish programs that support every adult learner persona, as well as systems to ensure that solutions and strategies are helping to narrow — and not exacerbate — achievement gaps for underrepresented groups. Questions around equity are particularly important given that adult learners tend to be a more diverse population. Issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion therefore matter quite a bit when it comes to building a strategy for becoming an adult-focused institution.

- **DOMAIN 3: A Culture of Change and Adaptivity**
An institution that effectively serves adults will recognize that creating an adult learner-focused institution is a big change for multiple functions and departments. All involved need to both understand the reason for the changes and then also want to be a part of the changes. Change needs to then become embraced as part of the culture, so that the institution continues to adapt to meet the current and anticipated needs of the community it serves.

LEVEL 2: ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AND POLICY

Level 2 in the ALLIES Framework involves building institutional capacity to support adult learners. The institution operationalizes adult learner inclusion and success (*Inclusive Policies and Governance*), prepares faculty and staff to support and engage adults more effectively (*Faculty and Staff Professional Development*), and identifies ways to expand the institution's capacity to meet adult learner career and support needs (*Impactful Partnerships*).

- **DOMAIN 4: Inclusive Policies and Governance**
  An institution that effectively serves adults establishes policies that: emphasize an adherence to quality standards; remove structural barriers facing adult learners; embrace learning rather than seat time; and leverage the expertise of its leadership, faculty, and staff to ensure that its programs and services support the success goals of adult learners. Institutions should also explore whether and how their governance structures — the ways in which an organization operates and how decisions are made — are designed to consider adult learners. This starts with revisiting the mission statement and strategic goals that the institution has set pertaining to adult learners.

- **DOMAIN 5: Faculty and Staff Professional Development**
  An institution that effectively serves adults ensures that all faculty and staff are prepared to provide adult learners with flexible formats, support services, opportunities to connect their life experiences to what they are learning, and assignments that are predictable and potentially adjustable. When all faculty and staff are trained to serve adults well, that strengthens the overall capacity of the institution and its ability to sustain a long-term focus on adults. In addition, faculty and staff have important roles to play in helping adults feel like they belong in a postsecondary environment, and professional development is key to making that happen.

- **DOMAIN 6: Impactful Partnerships**
  An institution that effectively serves adults partners with employers, workforce boards, industry associations, employment-focused centers, trade unions, community-based organizations and leaders, alumni, and other postsecondary providers. These partnerships provide expanded opportunities for experiential learning, enhance the student support structure, develop and validate relevant stackable credentials, and ensure equity in access to its programs and services. Part of building the capacity to serve adult learners involves knowing what the institution can provide through its own resources versus what the institution should rely on others to do. Partnerships with external organizations can expand the institution's capacity to create strong connections between learning and the workplace, seamless transitions to further learning, and access to wraparound support services that adult learners may need to succeed.

LEVEL 3: STUDENT EXPERIENCE

An institution that effectively serves adults draws on data and available resources to design the best possible program for its current and prospective adult learners. Activities in Levels 1 and 2 create a strong foundation for the development of adult-focused programs and services, with special attention to: affordable programs; student support, particularly at the front end of the student's journey; academic empowerment; and career relevance and connections. These program elements should also be featured in adult student outreach and recruitment efforts, as these elements will make postsecondary education possible, attractive, and welcoming to prospective adult learners.

- **DOMAIN 7: Affordable Programs**
  There is considerable evidence that one of the biggest barriers for adult learners is the cost related to pursuing postsecondary education and credentials. An institution that effectively serves adults provides detailed information about the total costs, finds ways to reduce overall costs, and offers avenues for recognizing learning from all sources. Important strategies include: financial aid and debt advising; scholarship assistance, completion grants, and other financing strategies; program design/cost reduction options; open educational resources; transparency on program costs and flexibility in payment schedules; and removing financial barriers in the application process and to enrollment.

- **DOMAIN 8: Student Support, Particularly at the Front End of the Student's Journey**
  The importance of providing support to adult learners throughout their educational pursuits cannot be overstated. Adult learners often have "time poverty" as a result of juggling education with work and family obligations. They may have unexpected costs or family health care challenges that can derail their progress. They may be academically rusty from being out of the classroom for many years. They are often first-generation college students without a personal network to help them navigate how postsecondary institutions work. They may have a lot of self-doubt in their own ability to succeed. They may struggle to feel like they belong in higher education. An institution that effectively serves adult learners provides a wide range of student support, with a special focus on the early stages of the student's postsecondary experiences. An institution can help to ease transitions and create a sense of belonging by front-loading advising and outreach into the application, admission, enrollment, and onboarding processes and during the first term of study. Other strategies include helping with: understanding career and degree options (particularly before enrollment); navigating the postsecondary process; building self-efficacy; ensuring that all learning accounts; balancing education with work and life; guiding and coaching; and emergency grants/funds.

- **DOMAIN 9: Academic Empowerment**

  An institution that effectively serves adult learners empowers them by making it possible for them to balance learning with their other life responsibilities, and by valuing their work-based and experiential learning. Of the many ways in which institutions can empower students in their academic experiences, four areas are particularly helpful when designed with adult learners in mind: coursework modalities; pacing and scheduling; teaching and learning; and recognition of all learning (transfer policies, credit for prior learning, and reverse transfer degree options).

- **DOMAIN 10: Career Relevance and Connections**

  An institution that effectively serves adult learners recognizes that for most adult learners, postsecondary education is one step toward a career goal and economic mobility. Programs therefore need to have clear connections to the workplace, and instruction needs to include a focus on the competencies that employers seek in job candidates. Institutions can enlist several different kinds of strategies to help students meet their career goals, such as: work-relevant programs; career advising and other services, including help with developing social networks; work-based learning or experiential learning opportunities; and connections to employers.

USING THE FRAMEWORK

The ALLIES framework is a starting point for institutions to take their adult-focused programs and services to the next stage. Institutional planning groups can use the levels and domains as a guide when considering how to build or strengthen their foundation. **The main report provides a list of questions to help institutions begin that process.**

Going forward, CAEL's work with institutions and other organizations will use this framework and approach, and we will design new tools and resources based on the new framework for our members and partners. We hope that sharing the framework with a broader audience will have an impact on how adult learners are served in all postsecondary institutions and programs.

BUILDING ADULT
LEARNER LEADERS
FOR INSTITUTIONAL
EFFECTIVENESS (ALLIES)

Research findings and a
new framework for
supporting institutional
change

cael.org

CONCLUSION

Since the initial publication of CAEL's *Ten Principles for Principles for Effectively Serving Adults*, the postsecondary education landscape has transformed. Institutions are increasingly offering different modalities, types of credentials, flexible schedules, attention to needed workplace skills, and online programs and services — the last of which was, of course, buoyed by the sudden switch to remote learning during COVID-19. All of these developments help postsecondary institutions more effectively serve adults.

But we know that even the most adult-friendly programs and practices don't reach their full potential if they are not built on a solid foundation of change management and attention to capacity, with a trained and prepared staff focused on data-driven decision making. **The Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES) Framework** provides guidance to help institutions through these necessary levels of planning and development so that they can build the foundation needed for effective and equity-focused adult learner initiatives — and continue to grow and evolve over time.

For more details on the ALLIES Framework, please see the full report, *Building Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES): Research Findings and a New Framework for Supporting Institutional Change*, at www.cael.org/news-and-resources/adult-learner-framework.