Racial Equity for Adult Credentials
in Higher Education (REACH):

→ **Moments of Insight: Practices
for Creating Real Opportunity
for Adult Learners of Color**

REACH
collaborative

**RACIAL
EQUITY** for
**ADULT
CREDENTIALS** in
HIGHER ED

DVP-PRAXIS

ESG | Education
Strategy
Group

Friday

Lumina
FOUNDATION

University of
PITTSBURGH
School of Education

Suggested Citation

Karpicz, J. R., Price, D. V., & Conde, D. (2024). REACH: Moments of Insight: Practices for Creating Real Opportunity for Adult Learners of Color. DVP-PRAXIS LTD. Indianapolis, IN.

→ Introduction

The REACH Collaborative was a national network comprising six states and 130 colleges that committed to redesigning pathways in ways that center and honor the experiences, strengths, and needs of adult learners of color. REACH was organized around three pillars: aligning noncredit and credit programs in career areas that are high-demand and high-wage within the community, building holistic support for students as they move through the pathway, and centering racial equity in the design and implementation of these pathways. By focusing on systems change, REACH aimed to increase credential attainment among Black, Latine, and Native adult students (ages 25 and higher) by 2%.

DVP-PRAXIS LTD served as the learning and evaluation partner for the REACH Collaborative. As part of this effort, the evaluation team conducted four site visits and three focus groups with colleges participating in REACH in four states to document how change was happening at the college-level. The team conducted site visits at: SUNY Westchester Community College (NY), Pueblo Community College's Southwest Campus (CO), Southside Virginia Community College (VA), and Lenoir Community College (NC). Virtual focus groups were conducted with the teams leading REACH efforts at Eastern Shore Community College (NC), Pikes Peak State College (CO), and McDowell Technical Community College (NC).

Overall, the evaluation team engaged 63 individuals across seven colleges who were engaged in efforts to better serve adult learners of color through pathways redesign, including staff, faculty, senior leaders, industry partners, and community leaders.

Background

In conversations with leaders across these seven colleges, the evaluation team learned that REACH's focus on increasing credential attainment among Black, Latine, and Native adult students was aligned with colleges' strategic goals around enrollment and retention. For most colleges, ongoing demographic shifts in their communities meant their colleges were serving an increasingly diverse population of students by race, ethnicity, and age. Several colleges had student populations that were majority adult learners, majority students of color, had a minority-serving designation, and/or were working towards a minority-serving designation (e.g., an HSI designation). Within this landscape, college leaders emphasized the importance of ensuring adult learners of color were welcomed and served equitably by their institution. Leaders framed this work as a responsibility that was critical to the growth of their college and their ability to meet the needs of their communities.

What did REACH look like? Colleges leveraged REACH's focus on noncredit-to-credit alignment, student supports, and racially equitable practices to accelerate existing and new efforts aimed at recruiting and retaining adult learners of color. The way REACH was implemented was localized to each college's context and shaped by their state's approach to integrating REACH alongside other statewide initiatives. For example, SUNY Westchester Community College was working to streamline the process for students to award credit for microcredentials and their Faculty Senate had recently passed a local microcredential policy, building on efforts by the SUNY System to develop a framework and definitions around micro-credentialing.[1] Meanwhile, Eastern Shore Community College was leveraging Virginia's FastForward program to stand up short-term workforce credential programs in nursing and construction.[2] The materialization of REACH looked and felt differently at every college. The localized nature of REACH calls for continuous reflexivity, at all levels, of what this work might look like in future and ongoing practice.

1 For more information about SUNY's work to develop a system-wide guide for the use of micro-credentials, see https://www.suny.edu/microcredentials.
2 For more information on Virginia's FastForward initiative, see https://fastforwardva.org.

Building an Adult-Focused College Ecosystem

In reviewing the diverse range of work that colleges embarked on during the REACH initiative, the evaluation team identified two broad themes. The first, **being intentionally adaptable,** involved finding ways to bring services to where students are and embracing flexibility in the delivery of courses. The second, **building strong relationships on campus and in the community,** involved building trust and partnerships with community organizations and industry, forming coalitions of the willing on-campus, and cultivating anchoring relationships with adult students. Weaving through these practices are several values, which we believe are important for institutions to adopt in cultivating adult-centered college ecosystems. **These values include: flexibility, humility, consistency, care, relationality, and commitment.**

These values and actions emerged from various "aha moments" that college leaders shared with the evaluation team. For example, faculty across colleges emphasized the importance of honoring adult students' dynamic and complex lives outside of the classroom that shape how they are able to engage. This recognition led faculty to be more mindful of students' family and caregiving responsibilities, transportation barriers, pedagogical preferences, learning anxieties, life challenges, and work-related obligations among other factors. Another essential moment of insight for college leaders was seeing the college as part of the fabric within

"You don't know the courage it took for your adult students to get into that room, or just to show up virtually, to that classroom. So, try to meet them where they are. See the obstacles that they've already overcome. See their goals as strengths. You can turn those strengths from life into strengths in a classroom. But they have to know that you actually care and you want to see them win in life. If they know that you want to see them honestly win in life, then they're going to buy into what you're giving. You've got to see them as human."

// Whitney Tarver, Program Chair of Human Services and Social Work, Lenoir Community College

a broader community, which led to new and stronger partnerships and relationships with organizations, tribal nations, agencies, and employers off-campus.

The remainder of this memo lays out the lessons we heard from college leaders about being intentionally adaptable and flexible, and building strong, authentic relationships on campus and in the community.

FLEXIBLE, HOLISTIC APPROACHES: Being Intentional and Adaptable in the Design of Courses and Services

Colleges recognized they were organized in ways that often didn't align with the lived realities of adult learners of color, who had a variety of work and family responsibilities that shaped when they were available to take courses, their ability to physically get to campus, and their need for support and services. We saw that colleges intentionally embraced values of flexibility and care by innovating new approaches to providing basic needs support and delivering courses.

Across all seven colleges, there was a recognition of the importance of holistic approaches to serving adult learners of color. There was a shared understanding that academic success is predicated on students' social and emotional wellbeing, which requires colleges to ensure students' basic needs are met and that they feel connected and supported at the college. Colleges also highlighted online course offerings, and individual-level practices like extending an assignment deadline and assuming best intent, as important practices that support adult learners of color.

→ Providing Basic Needs Supports and Services

Among the many conversations around basic needs, colleges highlighted food access and student funding as critical to the success of adult learners of color. **Colleges connected students to supports and services to meet these basic needs by bringing services to student spaces.**

*"It comes back to building that community aspect. It can be really simple things like are adult students welcomed into the building? Is food accessible? Is it a time after work that they still feel like they have a minute to breathe? Can they check on animals? Can they check on kids? It seems simple to say but it's important to humanize the experience. Are they having a class experience where people are laughing and having a good time and we know each other name by name? **That's what makes it successful - just having a warm, welcoming space."***

// Community Partner with Pueblo Community College, Southwest Campus

Food insecurity and food access were barriers raised at several colleges. Interviewees noted that adult students can face both income-related barriers to accessing food, but also barriers related to their work and course schedule.

For example, students leaving work and going straight to campus for an evening class, when food services on campus have closed. At several institutions, adult students were often on campus in the evenings and on weekends, when access to food on campus was limited. Colleges addressed this by making it easier for students to access food anytime they were on campus:

- Eastern Shore Community College (VA) organized a *"healthy snacks table that is set out in both the academic and workforce buildings where all students have to do is just put a check that they're taking something so we can track an inventory."*

- An instructor in McDowell Tech's Construction Academy (NC) organizes a *"closet that is filled with easy to prepare food, so that at the end of the day, after they've been working, [students] can grab whatever they want and eat before they have class, because we know nobody can learn on a hungry stomach."*

Several colleges expanded student's agency by providing financial coaching and support to improve their professional skills.

Eastern Shore's Moment of Insight: Financial literacy is essential to our students' success

For the past 3 years, Eastern Shore Community College in Virginia has been offering students a "Fundamentals" course in their nurse aid, trades (construction), and CDL programs, as part of their Career Studies Certificate program. These are noncredit courses that students receive credit for prior learning (CPL) towards the Career Studies Certificate. Curriculum embeds financial and digital literacy support, as well as professional skills like interviewing and resume writing. Recognizing that roughly 60% of their service area are low- to moderate-income, the college recruited SNAP and TANF recipients as well as single mother students to these courses. From their first Fundamentals in Nursing cohort, they had three students complete their nurse aide certification exam who were also able to purchase homes for the first time, ***"because of the financial literacy instruction they received. That's a model that works."***

→ **Embracing Flexibility in the Delivery of Courses**

"You see the difference when a community member is teaching a class; it's a lot more interactive, the students are a lot more energetic and participatory. This model of identifying local talent that can be developed into teaching talent, and then offering classes in the community is very innovative, very successful, and much appreciated in the community."

// Glenn May, Director of Higher Education for the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe

Several colleges in communities with a growing Latine population were developing resources, services, and courses to facilitate greater access for Spanish-speaking adult learners. This included offering workforce courses where the language of instruction was Spanish. For example, McDowell Technical Community College (NC) offered construction, electrical, plumbing, and HVAC courses in Spanish, and were working towards offering an early childhood education program in Spanish. Their college also translated several resources, such as registration forms, and ran a Facebook page in Spanish to outreach and provide information to the community. Eastern Shore Community College (VA) offered construction courses in Spanish, and also would coordinate access to textbooks in students' native language, whenever available, to empower students and support their learning in courses where the language of instruction was English. To gather robust feedback from Latine adults, Pikes Peak State College (CO) was organizing a focus group for adult learners that would be facilitated in Spanish.

Lenoir Community College's Moment of Insight: Translating recruitment materials into Spanish isn't nearly enough

For over a decade, the Centro Educativo Latino at Lenoir Community College in North Carolina has organized a portfolio of workforce programs aimed at serving Latine adult learners across the state and nationwide. Building on LCC's robust continuing education program, the Center offers cosmetology, EMS, HVAC, electrical technician, and automotive technician courses and programs. They take a holistic approach to delivering Spanish-language credentials: their advising, website, outreach, and language of instruction for courses are provided in Spanish. Courses that run on the weekends bring in adult students from across and outside of the state, and the Director of the Center coordinated room blocks at a local hotel for a reduced rate to provide affordable housing options for students. Being mindful of barriers around documentation, students can register for classes with a valid passport and Tax ID number. The Center organizes and participates in community events, such as parades, galas, and hair shows to showcase and celebrate their students' work and creativity. This past academic year, the Center offered 59 classes and enrolled 572 students. In interviews with staff outside of the center, several were working on learning Spanish to be able to welcome and create a sense of belonging for Latine students.

Several colleges had started to deliver courses off-campus to better serve adults in the community. For example, Lenoir Community College (NC) partnered with Hope Restorations to deliver training and workforce programs to justice impacted students and students in recovery from addiction. Southside Virginia Community College (VA) coordinated with a large, local employer to offer training on-site for their staff. Eastern Shore Community College (VA) organized workforce programs at the correctional facility within their service area.

Pueblo Community College's Moment of Insight:
Who teaches the course, and *where* it's taught, matters

As part of REACH, Pueblo Community College's Southwest Campus (CO) leveraged a grant from the Colorado Community College System Office to work with the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Tribe's Higher Education Departments to develop noncredit courses that could be offered in-community and taught by members of the community. The Southern Ute Higher Education Department focused on developing a IT and Computer Skills course, as well as a course in drone aviation, which were offered at their Education Center in Ignacio.

The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe's Higher Education Department supported courses in construction technology and drone aviation, which were held at their Learning Center in Towaoc. Although there were challenges in recruiting and retaining local instructors, this model of delivery was recognized as a success, offering an innovative way to bring learning opportunities directly to Native adults in both communities.

We heard several interviewees rejecting the idea that leveraging noncredit 'took away' from credit enrollments, and instead focused on how noncredit offerings 1) allowed them to be flexible to students interests and create highly relevant courses that complement students' learning in academic pathways, and 2) attract students into co-enrolled courses who would not otherwise participate (e.g., be interested in enrolling) to make it easier to run courses with low credit enrollments. Insights from this work included the importance of aligning contact hours to make it easier to establish course equivalency. As Carla Jones, Program Chair for Office Administration and Medical Office Administration at Lenoir Community College (NC) explained, "the first thing we had to do was look at our curriculum to see how we could match it up with Continuing Education (Con Ed). And that took some challenges, because there are credit hours that we have in our curriculum versus credit hours in Con Ed, we had to work to get that straightened out. On the back end, we had to work with the Registrar's Office to give students curriculum credit." At Westchester Community College (NY), they added a lab component to noncredit courses in the Interactive Technologies program to ensure students got equivalent contact hours, which made it easier to connect non-credit and credit pathways.

Multiple colleges spoke about expanding the use of credit for prior learning (CPL) in recent years or leveraging CPL as part of their REACH pathways.

- McDowell Technical Community College (NC) implemented a credit for prior learning policy after faculty and college leaders learned that a lot of their workforce development classes were in line with our curriculum classes. *"When we teach those [classes in] parallel, [it] kind of got the conversation started: if we're teaching the classes parallel, same*

instructor, same material, we should be given the same credit and that's where the conversation started down that path. And then we just expanded from there." These efforts expanded as faculty and deans realized *"it was a gateway to help increase enrollment in their programs."*

- At Westchester Community College (NY), *"we have a lot of adult learners who didn't go to college or don't have the credits to transfer, but have learning experience, they could have been managers or directors or higher level positions for multiple years in a company and they have so much business knowledge and experience that we really need to give experiential learning for that."*

- Pueblo Community College (CO) developed a noncredit, construction course that was offered off-campus in partnership with the Ute Mountain Ute Higher Education department. After completing the course, students earned an industry credential that the college used to provide credit for prior learning towards PCC's Construction NCCER Certificate.

Several colleges offered classes at times and in modalities that aimed to accommodate working adults and adults with children. These included weekend and online courses, accelerated formats, but also extended formats.

Pikes Peak State College's Moment of Insight: Adult learners of color value choice

Leveraging a REACH Grant from the Colorado Community College System Office, Pikes Peak State College adapted the delivery of courses to better serve the needs of adult learners of color. Their first project involved redesigning a section of their Advancing Academic Achievement (AAA) course for adult learners with the goal of creating a space where adult learners of color could bring their skills and experiences to the classroom. The redesign of this course demonstrated that having flexibility and choice in assignment topics made a significant difference for adult learners in the course. Their second project involved reviewing student data to identify courses that adult learners of color needed to complete their program of study. After identifying a group of gateway courses in English, Communications, and Psychology that adult learners of color needed to complete their degree, the REACH team identified faculty who could redesign these courses to be delivered in an accelerated, hybrid format. These accelerated courses ran in the morning and evening to accommodate parenting students who had availability in the day, as well as adult learners who worked full-time and were only available in the evening. Peer mentors were embedded in each course, who were available during and after class to help students connect to college resources such as tutoring support. These mentors then provided feedback to the REACH team about the types of questions and barriers that came up for adult learners in the course.

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS: Building Connections on Campus and in the Community

Colleges highlighted their efforts to cultivate strong relationships on-campus and in the community as part of their work to redesign programs to remove barriers for and better serve adult learners of color. These included connecting and working with community-based organizations, building strong and consistent relationships with tribal nations, identifying opportunities to collaborate with employers, building coalitions of like-minded individuals on-campus to accelerate a shared vision around adult-focused work, sitting down with colleagues in other offices to figure out sticky issues like aligning noncredit and credit opportunities within a pathway, and building intentional relationships with adult learners of color to anchor them to the institution.

*"It started with looking at data. It began by being data informed, and the President of the college did a great thing early on by having us go through a CLARUS market study. This process gave us a foundation to look intrusivelty at who we're serving. I think that was critical, because then we had a roadmap to direct us towards strategically focusing on the needs of the various markets we needed to impact: adults, veterans, students of color. **The data guided us towards developing a host of activities to implement in support of the program."***

// Dr. Daryl Minus, Vice President, Enrollment Management & Student Success, Southside Virginia Community College

"Partnerships are at the heart of all we do, being a rural community college you have to partner with everyone."*

// Workforce Partner, Southside Virginia Community College

→ Building relationships with community and industry partners

In a survey of REACH teams at colleges in five states, over half of respondents reported that they worked most frequently on engaging local community partners and employers (58%).[3] Partnerships with community organizations empowered colleges to outreach and deliver programs directly to adults of color who were served by these organizations. Partnerships with employers and state agencies made it easier for colleges to track the pulse of shifting labor market needs and connect students directly to career opportunities.

Several colleges built or expanded industry partnerships during REACH. McDowell Technical Community College (NC) continued to convene a Workforce Pipeline Committee that comprised industry partners, local government representatives, and college personnel who met quarterly to discuss workforce needs, opportunities, and how to connect students to local jobs. Eastern Shore Community College (VA) and Southside Virginia Community College (VA) developed partnerships with several local employers to enable

3 Deal, S.A., Price, D.V., Lubera, A.L., and Karpicz, J.R. (2024) Pockets of Innovation and Ongoing Challenges to Build and Expand Equitable Pathways to Support Adult Learners of Color among REACH Colleges, 2022-2024. Non-public report. DVP-PRAXIS LTD. Indianapolis, Indiana.

employees to receive credit for prior learning for their required workforce training, such as training academies offered by the Virginia Department of Corrections and the Virginia State Police. They also leveraged industry partnerships to provide training to employees; for example, working with Rosa and Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Offices to develop a certificate in Telecommunications for E-911 dispatchers. SVCC also partnered with Microsoft to develop a Datacenter Academy, offering workforce programs in IT, with a particular focus on recruiting women and Black students into the field. This partnership allowed SVCC to invite IT professionals from Microsoft to lecture, teach classes, and facilitate hands-on learning opportunities.

Colleges were also pursuing opportunities to partner with local community-based organizations to more effectively reach adult learners of color. For example, McDowell Technical Community College (NC) worked with leaders from four local communities to stand up community forums, spaces where community action groups could convene, identify community priorities, and share information. One of these forums led to the creation of a program to offer ESL courses at a local church with childcare provided. Eastern Shore Community College (VA) highlighted their work with public agencies like the library, Department of Social Services, and WIOA to recruit and outreach to adult students.

→ Building on-campus commitments and coalitions

REACH colleges shared the importance of cultivating on-campus coalitions of committed people. The structure, membership and time commitment looked differently at every campus. A shared overarching belief in finding willing partners and collaborators committed to sustainable long-term change for adult learners of color as well as cultivating and nurturing

relationships across campus was critical to making change. Several interviewees spoke to the importance of getting the "right people" at the table and identifying a coalition of the willing. For example, when the REACH team at Pikes Peak State College (CO) decided to redesign several courses to be oriented towards adult learners, they sought out experienced faculty who were interested in andragogy, the theory and practice of teaching adult learners, and wanted to adapt their courses.

Several colleges highlighted the importance of support from their president or other senior leaders on campus. This support included initiating a call to action and having enthusiastic support from the top to move forward with implementing new program and course ideas. Colleges shared that *"the only way it could evolve is if I had the support of the president."*

SUNY Weschester Community College's Moment of Insight:
The work never really ends

SUNY WCC's REACH Committee or "Implementation Team" has been meeting bi-weekly since 2022. This work is coordinated by Dr. Sandra Ramsay, who was nominated by the President. Sandra recruited members widely from across the college, but over time, "this group self-selected; what we have remaining, the core group, are the committed folks." The committee regularly looks at enrollment and completion numbers in their REACH pathways, have presented to a wide range of audiences on-campus about REACH, and have participated in several REACH-related training on culturally sustaining practices and aligning noncredit-to-credit that have been organized through state.

→ Cultivating anchoring relationships with students

Colleges approached efforts to better serve adult learners of color with an ethos of care and intention to build anchoring relationships. This approach recognized that "we want adult learners to feel seen and to understand that they are a part of our community" and that *"If you are going to be successful academically, you have to be successful socially and emotionally."* Getting to know students often involved gathering and reviewing college's student-level data; this work is important though insufficient unless complemented at an individual-level through one-on-one conversation and relationships. "Data is good, but we also have to remember that they are people." Several interviewees highlighted the importance of getting to know students' stories and individual lived experiences in order to understand what they need and to build trust and strong relationships. For example, the Centro Educativo Latino at Lenoir Community College (NC) focused on growing the reputation of the center through grassroots community outreach and by building strong connections with students who would then share information about the program with family and friends.

Several colleges used the metaphor of "family" in highlighting their intentionality around ensuring students feel connected to someone and cared for. As Whitney Tarver of Lenoir Community College highlighted, *"I try to make a family base, once they feel comfortable and confident, they're more likely to spread their wings."* These "family" relationships reflected long-term relationships with students that often extended even after a course concluded or the student graduated.

"I always encourage students to connect with someone, with whom they feel comfortable. If they are having problems in a particular area, they can go the person they connected with to get assistance. Also, there is information that others can provide for them that they may not know about. When you connect, you feel like you're part of, **when you feel like you're a part of, then you're more inclined to do much better."**

// Melonie Cassells, Enrollment Program Specialist, SUNY Westchester Community College

A staff member of Southside Virginia Community College shared, *"I have one of my former mentees that I still keep in contact with, she's graduated and is now in graduate school, she still calls with like 'I have a question about something, what do I do?'... It's a really good feeling to have students come back, you're part of the family."*

Programs with a cohort structure and/or using peer mentors in the classroom was often mentioned as helping create *"a family type community atmosphere"* for adult learners. As Perry Pepper of Pueblo Commuity College described, *"people knew each other in the classroom... the theme that we see in each of these programs is that we're all going to do it together, it's not an individual effort."* Building community for adult learners of color in the classroom also facilitated grassroots outreach via word of mouth. Colleges shared that adult learners would come, have a good experience, and then tell their family, friends, neighbors, which led to more people enrolling and expressing interest in programs from the community. *"Some of our former students, once they've gone through the program, they are more than willing to tell people they know, their family members, 'make sure you go talk to this person or that person.'"*

Insights from Pueblo Community College

To recruit and retain Native adult students, a few colleges in the REACH network were beginning to (re)build relationships with Tribal Leaders in their service area and identify opportunities to recruit students and deliver courses in the community. The relational nature of these efforts was exemplified by Pueblo Community College's effort to leverage REACH funding to develop programs in community and partnership with the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Tribes.

Faculty and staff at Pueblo Community College's Southwest Campus (PCC-SW) in Colorado worked directly with leaders at the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe's Higher Education Department and the Southern Ute Higher Education Departments to co-design noncredit courses for Native adult learners. Located in Southwestern Colorado, PCC-SW serves an expansive region that includes the Southern Ute Indian Reservation and the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation. In the past, there had been stronger connections between PCC-SW and leaders from the Ute Mountain Ute and Southern Ute Tribes; however, these relationships shifted due to changes in leadership and organization at the college. When the Colorado Community College System Office announced the availability of grant funding for projects that centered adult learners of color, Perry Pepper, Regional Director of Academic Services at PCC, saw this as an opportunity to rebuild and strengthen these partnerships with the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute communities.

The team at PCC had previously reviewed demographic and socioeconomic data for their region to identify pathways areas that would lead to mid-wage wages, meaningful career employment, and that aligned to the needs of the community. They took these program ideas to leaders from the Ute Mountain Ute and Southern Ute Higher Education Departments to explore programs of interest for them. To learn about each community's history, interests, and needs, the REACH team at PCC engaged and spent time in both communities, participating in listening sessions within both communities, meeting with leaders from their Higher Education Departments, and sharing information with members of the Tribal Councils. These discussions led to the development of noncredit courses in construction, drone aviation, and IT that were offered on-site at learning centers on the reservations.

There were several dimensions that were critical to the success of these partnerships:

- **The REACH team at PCC approached these partnerships as learners,** looking to the leadership of the Ute Mountain Ute and Southern Ute Higher Education Departments to determine the courses and program structure that worked best in each community. As Perry described, the team at PCC was *"working on learning how this works here [in the community],"* rather than "managing this program and placing it here." Leaders in both communities acknowledged the attention that Perry and the team at PCC paid to learning about the different histories, interests, and needs in each community.

- **The partners embraced flexibility in the delivery of the courses.** Offering noncredit, rather than credit, courses enabled PCC to defer to the Higher Education Departments to determine the structure and pacing of the course, rather than imposing the college's traditional deadlines. As a result, classes in both communities took longer than initially planned, moving at a pace that worked for students in the course, which included pausing one course in Winter due to COVID, illness, community events, and holidays. Leaders at PCC and the Higher Education Departments identified the college's willingness to be flexible in the delivery of courses as critical to the success of these partnerships. PCC's willingness to practice genuine institutional flexibility created a space for culturally generative course design and delivery that centered the needs of Native students and their communities.

- Finally, **the team at PCC showed up consistently,** were transparent around what they could offer, listened to the community, and followed through on ideas generated by Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute community members and leaders. PCC's commitment to being responsive to community interests, respecting the agency of tribal leaders in making decisions about courses, figuring out challenges together, and supporting students through and beyond the course was foundational to the success of the partnership.

By Spring 2024, there was shared optimism that these relationships would persist and grow. PCC and the Southern Ute Higher Education Department, under the leadership of former Director and tribal member LaTitia Taylor, were developing a Memorandum of Understanding to support future programming in the community. The Ute Mountain Ute Higher Education Department was working with PCC to develop a new program in Early Childhood Education that could be taught by an educator from the Tribe's Head Start program. PCC continues to carve a path towards (re)building and strengthening relationships and partnerships with Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Tribes. As REACH team members reflected, over the past few years, the pace, trust-building ,and institutional humility and flexibility are pointing towards a sustainable and collaborative future between the institution and tribal nations.

Identifying Next Steps

// Key Takeaways

This memo features how colleges in the REACH Network were approaching the work of designing pathways, programs, and services that centered adult learners of color. Colleges within the REACH network highlighted in this memo are putting into practice a vision of change that honors, affirms and uplifts adult learners of color and are informed by the local needs and experiences of their adult student population with close attention to Black, Latine, and Native student learners. Working towards these localized visions of change are individual, collective and institutional commitments that begin in everyday practices and relationships and are solidified through college-wide policies, student services, and design of pathways.

The strategies identified included **being intentionally adaptable and embracing flexibility in the delivery of courses and services as well as building strong relationships on campus (with students and like-minded colleagues) and in the community.** Effectively designing, implementing, and sustaining strategies to serve adult learners of color requires moments of insight that transform the mindsets of faculty, staff, and administrators. This mindset shift is about seeing the reality of adult students' lives, whether that includes family and caregiving responsibilities, transportation barriers, pedagogical preferences, anxiousness about returning to the classroom, life challenges, and work-related obligations. It is also about seeing the college as part of the fabric within a broader community.

This type of transformational change takes time. For example, a recent report on Guided Pathways Implementation highlights that whole college change is feasible, but takes time to carry out – at least five years.[4] Prior research on large-scale systems change also points to time as a critical factor – suggesting that transformative change requires several stages or life cycles that evolve over 7-10 years.[5] Learnings from the REACH Collaborative reinforce that whole systems change often starts small, as pockets of innovation that gather momentum over time. As a starting point, we recommend the following action steps to create an adult-centered college ecosystem and establish a foundation for building momentum.

→ Get to know your students – beyond the institutional data.

Mindset shifts and transformative action is facilitated by insightful data – especially data gathered directly from adult learners of color. See your adult students, learn their stories, the complexities of their lives, and the community that supports them. Ask yourself:

- What programs are your adult learners of color enrolling in – and what programs are they not pursuing? Where are adult learners of color dropping out?

---

4 Jenkins, D., Lahr, H., and Brock, T. (March 2024). Lessons from Two Major Evaluations of Guided Pathways. Available at: https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/lessons-two-major-evaluations-guided-pathways.html
5 Coburn, C. (August/September 2003). Rethinking Scale: Moving Beyond Numbers to Deep and Lasting Change. In Educational Researcher, V. 32 N.6, pp.3-12.

- What do adult learners of color say they need in terms of academic supports, basic needs like transportation, childcare, and healthcare, and spaces for peer community engagement?

- What are the community assets that can support adult learners of color in their postsecondary pursuits?

→ Build relationships with community partners.

Colleges need to see themselves as part of a broader community. Building relationships with community partners takes time, requiring consistent engagement and a willingness to be flexible in addressing community needs as they arise. Community organizations can be external partners who help the colleges support adult learners of color by providing support services like child care or transportation or by offering spaces for people to gather. Colleges also need to be good partners by supporting community leaders to convene groups, identify community priorities, and share information. In addition, colleges can demonstrate their commitment by bringing resources into the community, such as delivering education and training programs in community locations, facilitating employer and community engagement, and providing remote services like enrollment advising and financial aid counseling. Bottom-line: effective partnerships between colleges and community are reciprocal.

→ Support your champions on campus.

Tackling long standing structural barriers that inhibit success for adult learners is hard work – and it can be a professional and emotional burden for campus leaders who are committed to this work. The coalition of the willing (faculty and staff) need the public and vocal support of college leaders – especially the President and their Cabinet. This transformational work needs regular encouragement, real resources to do the work (e.g., release-time, dedicated time, space), and senior-level accountability to make sure the work grows beyond the initial champions.

→ Start small in someplace to demonstrate success and use this experience as a model.

Be willing to start small and "figure it out" then use this success as a model to expand to other areas. For example, work on noncredit and credit alignment for one course, program, or pathway to demonstrate feasibility, and to identify the roadblocks to be removed. This work is relational, and may require sitting down one-on-one with colleagues in another office to work through issues like hours equivalency and policy issues around awarding credit for prior learning. It could also reveal that budget allocations need to be redistributed and that additional resources are needed to become an adult-centered ecosystem.

From more than sixty interviewees at seven colleges in the REACH network, we learned that creating and cultivating adult-centered ecosystems elevates the values of flexibility, humility, consistency, care, relationality, and commitment. The work to build equitable and racially-just pathways for adult learners of color is a collective endeavor and requires institutional change and transformation. At the same time, this **transformational work begins in micro-moments.** The stories and experiences from these institutions serve as a reminder and invitation that **change can begin anywhere and in any role.** Casual conversations, an aha data point, consistent nudges— these moments make all the difference in supporting adult learners of color along a pathway to their goals. **Will you meet the moment?**