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The Overlooked Working Majority:
Supporting Working Adult Learners at California Community Colleges with Intentionality

By

LIZETTE NAVARETTE
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

Educational Leadership

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

Approved:

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Committee in Charge

2021

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The Overlooked Working Majority
Supporting Working Adult Learners at California Community Colleges with Intentionality

## ABSTRACT

One populations of current and prospective students that is too diverse and too important to ignore is working adult learners, especially at California Community Colleges, the only public open access option in the state. Working adult learners are characterized as students 25 years or older who work more than part-time and are often low-income. Unfortunately, traditional pathways to a degree are not designed for post-traditional students such as working adults. This three-part sequential mixed methodology study builds a profile of working adult students at California Community Colleges by exploring the characteristics and trajectories of working adults in the system through an analysis of economic and enrollment data. Second, the study explores how welcoming and receptive colleges are to this key population through a document analysis. Third, through focus groups and interviews, the study explores the extent and ways in which institutional structures, experiences, and interactions with the institutions influence working adult student persistence, completion, and success. The concluding seven recommendations deviate from the bygone notion that students adapt to their colleges and instead suggests that colleges adapt to its students. Most importantly, this study challenges common assumptions that working adult learners are "non-traditional."

*Keywords:* community colleges, working adults, adult learners, post-traditional students

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ..... iii
DEDICATION ..... vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... vii
TERMINOLOGY ..... ix
LIST OF TABLES ..... x
LIST OF FIGURES ..... xi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ..... 1
Research Questions ..... 5
Design and Sequence ..... 5
CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ..... 8
CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW ..... 12
Dispelling the Notion of the "Nontraditional Student" ..... 12
Who are Working Adult Learners? ..... 15
Determinants of Student Success ..... 16
Investigating California's Policies and Practices to Address Student Success ..... 19
Institutional Structures for Working Adult Learner Success ..... 23
Gaps in Existing Research ..... 26
CHAPTER FOUR: CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND ..... 28
The Case for A Focus on Working Adults ..... 28
Setting ..... 30
Positionality ..... 31
CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH QUESTION 1 ..... 33
Data and Sample ..... 33
Measures ..... 35
Quantitative Results ..... 37
Discussion and Summary ..... 61
CHAPTER SIX: RESEARCH QUESTION 2 ..... 64
Sample ..... 66
Data Collection and Analysis ..... 69
Qualitative Results ..... 72
Discussion and Themes ..... 86

Summary ..... 88
CHAPTER SEVEN: RESEARCH QUESTION 3 ..... 90
Data Collection ..... 90
Sample ..... 92
Profiles of Working Adult Learners ..... 94
Data Analysis ..... 95
Qualitative Results and Emergent Themes ..... 98
Summary ..... 123
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION ..... 124
Key Findings for Research Question 1 ..... 124
Key Findings for Research Question 2 ..... 125
Key Findings for Research Question 3 ..... 126
Crosscutting Themes ..... 126
Assumptions and Limitations ..... 129
Implications for Policy & Practice ..... 131
Recommendations ..... 134
Conclusion and Future Research ..... 141
Synthesis of Learning Snapshot ..... 142
Appendix 1: MIS Sample ..... 143
Appendix 2: Numbers of Working Adult Students by California Community College District 145
Appendix 3: Focus Group Recruitment ..... 149
Appendix 4: Focus Group Questions ..... 150
Appendix 5: Example Protocols ..... 152
Appendix 6: Pilot Document Analysis ..... 153
References ..... 155

## DEDICATION

The love and commitment poured into this dissertation is first dedicated to my sisters, who embody the overlooked individuals whose experiences this study aims to elevate. They are my source of inspiration and admiration. Sisters, you have my commitment to dedicate my life's work to helping create a system where no student faces that barriers you encountered.

I also dedicate my work to the strong "chingona" women that raised me - my mom and my grandma. I love you very much.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In this era, no individual reaches their dreams without the support of a village. My village is large, loving, and exceptional. My village is comprised of people, programs, and policies that made it possible for a first-generation low-income Latina to successfully go to college and break glass ceilings. I am indebted to all the educational leaders who continually strive to investigate, challenge, and improve policies and practices for the generations that follow them.

As a working learner myself, I begin by expressing gratitude to my employers, the California Community Chancellor's Office and the Community College League of California, whose support made it possible to balance school and work. May more employers follow your example and support their staff in their academic pursuits. I also have deep appreciation for the University of California, Davis, School of Education for creating a doctoral program where individuals don't have to leave their profession. Thank you CANDEL faculty for giving up your weekends to support our educational journey.

Deep gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Michal Kurlaender for your academic guidance, genius, and commitment to advancing student centered policy through robust research. Many thanks to committee members Dr. Paco Martorell, who also interviewed me when I applied to CANDEL, and Dr. Francisco C. Rodriguez, who so kindly gave of his time while servings as chancellor of the largest community college district in the country.

Almost four years ago, following a community college conference, I bummed a ride to the airport from my friend Dr. Keith Curry. Our conversation changed my trajectory. He told me about CANDEL and added the simple but encouraging words, "you've got this". Thank you for believing in me. Along the way great CEO colleagues like Dr. Pam Luster and many others, with more than enough on their plate, would check-in and provide the confidence to keep going.

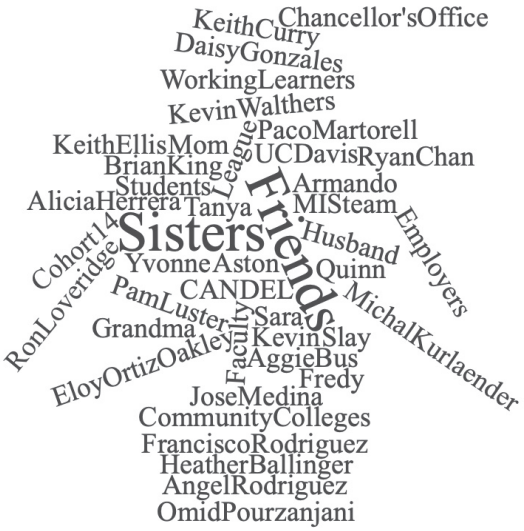
Thank you, Cohort #14Strong! The long class weekends and research process, especially during a pandemic, would be so lonely without great peers and now lifelong friends. A heartfelt thanks to Heather Ballinger, Alicia Herrera, Keith Ellis, and Ryan Chan for making it fun and memorable. Go Aggie Bus and can't wait for more Worthwhile Innovations for New Educators.

So often, as you'll read from the experiences of students in this study, our families share in the sacrifices one makes in simultaneously tackling school and work. Mine is no exception. Love and gratitude to my husband, Aston Tennefoss, for his support and patience. Thank you for being my trusted sounding board and for helping me check one more thing off my bucket list. Deep thanks to my mom, grandma, sisters, and niece who are my unwavering champions. Sorry for the moments I've missed over these three years. I'd also be remis if I didn't thank my portie, Quinn, for being at my side for all the long hours.

To the study participants who generously gave of their already limited time – THANK YOU. My hope is that this study gives voice to your experiences and compels action.

**Figure 1**

*My Village*



## TERMINOLOGY

Higher education is brimming with terms and lingo. This study adds to the higher education lexicon by building from emerging literature and adopting key terms to begin to setting a standard for this subject matter. As such, it is important to explicitly define some of the terminology used in this study and the literature or rationale for such definitions.

**Adult Learners**: Individuals age twenty-five or older. This is the age at which students are automatically considered independent from their parents for financial aid purposes.

**Post-Traditional Students**: Based on the applied definition by the Postsecondary National Policy Institute "post-traditional" is inspired by specific student characteristics. Post-traditional students share characteristics such as delayed enrollment in college after high school, part-time enrollment, full-time employment while enrolled in college, financially independent, and possibly having dependents.

**Working Adult Students/ Working Adult Learners**: Individuals age twenty-five or older who work 20 hours or more per week. To meet the criteria of working adult student or working adult learner, an individual must meet the both age and working criteria. Throughout the study, I use the terms working adult student and working adult learner interchangeably.

**Working Learner:** Individuals enrolled at a higher education institution while also working 20 hours or more per week.

**Working Learner Receptivity**: An institution implements welcoming practices for working adult students by providing services and supports which recognize the complexities of their lives, the limits on their time, the need for clear and direct guidance, and one which creates conducive environments for post-traditional learners.

## LIST OF TABLES

**Table 1** Research Design and Sequence ..... 7

**Table 2** Variables and Definitions (2017-2019-20) ..... 36

**Table 3** Comparison of Total Adult and Traditional Learners by Academic Year ..... 41

**Table 4** Adult learners by program of enrollment (n= 1,767,680 across sample years) ..... 43

**Table 5** Four Year Cohort Transfer Outcomes ..... 54

**Table 6** Four Year Cohort Degree Outcomes ..... 55

**Table 7** Four Year Cohort Certificate Outcomes ..... 57

**Table 8** Snapshot of Transfer Outcomes ..... 59

**Table 9** Snapshot of Degree Outcomes ..... 60

**Table 10** Snapshot of Certificate Outcomes ..... 61

**Table 11** Ranking for Website Sample Selection ..... 67

**Table 12** Crosswalk of Constructs and Review Areas/Topics ..... 70

**Table 13** Matrix of Focus Group Participant Registration Survey Responses ..... 95

**Table 14** Coding, Definitions, and Emergent Themes ..... 96

**Table 15** Types of Factors ..... 98

**Table 16** Matrix of Participant Polling Responses, Part 1 ..... 100

**Table 17** Matrix of Participant Polling Responses, Part 2 ..... 105

## LIST OF FIGURES

**Figure 1** My Village ..... viii

**Figure 2** Tinto's Institutional Action Model ..... 11

**Figure 3** Comparison of working and non-working learners ..... 39

**Figure 4** Proportion of total enrollments working greater than or equal to half time ..... 39

**Figure 5** Comparison of adult learner to learners under age 25 ..... 40

**Figure 6** Working adult learners compared to non-wage adult learners ..... 42

**Figure 7** Adult learners by wage data and academic year ..... 43

**Figure 8** Adult learners in credit programs vs. adult learners in noncredit programs ..... 44

**Figure 9** Adult learner credit enrollments by level of employment ..... 45

**Figure 10** Adult learner by age range and working status ..... 46

**Figure 11** Female and Male working learners by hours works ..... 48

**Figure 12** Working learners by race/ethnicity and average hours worked ..... 49

**Figure 13** Working learners by race/ethnicity and average hours worked ..... 50

**Figure 14** Working learners by time of day enrollment ..... 51

**Figure 15** Working learners by units completed per term ..... 52

**Figure 16** Working Learner Receptivity Scale ..... 73

**Figure 17** Santa Barbara City College. College of Working Adults Webpage ..... 80

**Figure 18** Fresno City College. Webpage for 25 Month Business Administration Degree ..... 81

**Figure 19** Bakersfield College Program Pathways Mapper ..... 82

**Figure 20** Santa Ana College Pathways Webpage ..... 82

**Figure 21** Allan Hancock College Degree and Program Exploration Tool ..... 83

**Figure 22** Bakersfield College 8+8 Program Webpage ..... 83

**Figure 23** San Diego City College Flexible Schedule Website Banner..... 84

**Figure 24** Fresno City College Course Scheduling Platform..... 85

**Figure 25** Allan Hancock Homepage and Scheduling Platform..... 85

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*"For sure they know that we're working. But I don't know if they care."*
- Female participant from Southern California

Today's college population has shifted from a mainstay of full-time 18- to 22-year-old students to a far more diverse populace that typically works part-time or full-time, has greater family commitments, is over 24 years old, and is managing competing responsibilities while attending college (Bergman, 2017). Adelman (2006) shows that even among traditional-age college students this pattern of linear enrollment is less and less common. Yet, standard pathways to a degree are not designed for nontraditional students such as working adults (Bailey, 2015). The very label of "nontraditional" suggests that colleges are not structured or intended to serve this population of current or potential students (Pelletier, 2010). Notably, around 80 percent of community college students work, with 39 percent working full-time (CCRC, 2019). With the shift in demographics, is it time for community colleges to have a more intentional focus on working adult students?

One compelling reason to focus on working adult students is found in recent data from the California Student Aid Commission's 2019 Student Expenses and Resources Survey (SEARS), which reports that 64% of California students indicate that their single greatest obstacle to succeeding in college is "balancing school and work responsibilities." These data suggest that students identify their need to earn an income as directly in conflict with their ability to succeed academically. As California looks to close growing degree gaps, working adult students should be a critical focus, especially those that have stopped-out.

Though expectations for college attainment have increased (Goyette, 2008) and college access has expanded across the United States (Ma et al., 2018), many individuals who enroll

leave without earning a degree (Baum, Kurose, & McPherson, 2013), with community colleges reporting particularly low rates of persistence and graduation (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011), especially among adult learners. A 2019 National Student Clearinghouse report found that 40 percent of students left college with no credential, many of them adults at two-year institutions, with higher rates of exit among students of color (Inside Higher Ed, 2019; National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). Moreover, gaps in educational attainment persist across groups of students identified by family income (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011) and race and ethnicity (Kao & Thompson, 2003). An improvement of structures and practices geared toward increasing adult degree completion can be an effective strategy to raise overall state educational attainment levels. But what type of college structure do working adult students need in order to succeed at California Community Colleges?

Students who are also working adults often have complex demands on their time such as juggling familial responsibilities, long hours of work, and other challenges in their personal life. While adults are part of the comprehensive mission of California Community Colleges, degree program and structures are not intentionally designed with a working adult student's schedule, career goals, and life demands at the forefront. Though many working adults may seek the opportunity to complete a college education, their options can seem limited. In the absence of public postsecondary programs and structures that support the working adult, prospective students often turn to expensive for-profit colleges (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2013).

The California Master Plan, adopted over 60 years ago, designated the University of California system to serve the top 12.5% of high school graduates, the California State University system to serve the top 33.3% of high school graduates, and the community colleges to serve the remainder of California students under a comprehensive mission (California, 1960).

Due to this longstanding structure of broad access to higher education, California Community Colleges are a rational choice for working adults seeking to obtain or complete a degree. After all, California's community colleges enroll more students than any other college system in the country, including large shares from groups that have been historically underrepresented (National Center for Education Statistic, 2008 & 2018). Across California, countless adults have pursued a college education but ultimately left with some college credits but no degree. Many of these individuals are working adults. But what do we know about the millions of Californians with some college and no degree? And, why didn't they complete a degree at first (or several) attempts? According to data presented by California Competes, 77% of Californians with some college and no degree are working adults (American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample, 2016). Yet, minimal attention is being paid to the educational experiences of working adults, and what their academic outcomes may tell us about the role of the California Community College system in supporting these working adults' educational goals. If a college education is necessary to obtain stable employment and a living wage, then all individuals, regardless of demographic characteristics, should have equal opportunity to participate and complete a degree (Cahalan, et al., 2019).

Improving student outcomes has long been a challenge for community colleges; fewer than half (48%) of students earn a degree or certificate or transfer to a four-year college (PPIC, 2019). The community college system is implementing a broad range of reforms designed to address these low rates of degree completion. Completion rates for nontraditional adults continues to be stagnant (Student Success Scorecard, 2018). Low success rates for this population may be representative of existing inefficiencies of an educational system that does not adequately provide or align services and resources which enable working adult students to

succeed (Shapiro, et al., 2014). Among employed and adult students at community colleges, the perceived or actual lack of information and limited flexibility may discourage enrollment and even suppress completion (Bailey, Badway, and Gumport, 2001). California Community Colleges' focus on reforms to improve the student experience from initial enrollment to graduation have yet to focus on the specific needs of working adults. Broadly for California, working learners represent a paramount opportunity for increased socio-economic mobility, equity, and access (Jassal & Clark, 2016).

For the purposes of this study, I define working adult students as individuals age twenty-five or older (which is the age at which students are automatically considered independent from their parents for financial aid purposes) who work 20 hours or more per week. Throughout the study, I use the terms working adult student, working adult learner, and working learner interchangeably. Ultimately, there is limited information about the institutional barriers working adult learners face, nor is there comprehensive information about the factors that enable their degree completion. This study explicitly addresses these limitations and will deepen our understanding of the factors that influence working adult learners to complete a degree at California Community Colleges. This study will explore institutional design, structures, and programs that support the needs of working adult students through the perspectives of students. This study incorporates a conceptual framework that influenced the evolution of persistence and completion in higher education and calls attention to the necessary action by institutions. I use this framework to analyze my findings and to explore the ways community colleges adapt, or fail to adapt, to the needs of working adult students.

## Research Questions

This study aims to build a profile of working adult students at California Community Colleges and understand what factors influence their degree completion. Specifically, I explore the educational experiences of working adult students enrolled at California Community Colleges, and how colleges might better working adult student needs. The primary research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the characteristics of working adult students at California Community Colleges?
2. How do California Community Colleges communicate their receptiveness of working adult students?
3. In what ways do institutional structures, experiences, and interactions with the institutions, influence working adult student experiences, persistence and educational goal attainment?

## Design and Sequence

I utilize a mixed methods design to build a profile of working adult students at California Community Colleges and to develop a deeper understanding of how structures, experiences, and interactions with the institution influence these students' persistence, completion, and success. The research includes a mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. "This "mixing" or blending of data, provides a stronger understanding of the problem or question than either by itself" (Creswell, 2014, p. 264). Specifically, this study uses an explanatory sequential mixed methodology which first conducts quantitative research, analyzes the results and then explores the results for further nuances with qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). First, quantitative descriptive data will be gathered and analyzed to understand the characteristics of working adult

learners at community colleges and their participation patterns. Second, I will conduct a qualitative document analysis to assess institutional structures and resources that influence the persistence and success of working adult students, such as existing support services, academic planning information, course scheduling, among other factors. The final approach in this explanatory sequential mixed methods study is to incorporate data from three focus groups to gain a better understanding of working adult student interactions with institutional structures that support or hinder their progress.

Focus groups will provide valuable insight into the experience and perspectives of students regarding practices colleges employ to support working students. Colleges were selected based on region, size, and district-level working adult student characteristics data. The focus groups explore a student's reasons for working while attending community college and whether it affects their enrollment decisions (e.g., majors, degree pathways, units taken, courses, etc.). The discussions build understanding of the experiences and motivations of working learners who are attending degree programs at community colleges. For the qualitative portion of this study, I am not interested in testing a hypothesis but instead collecting data to build theories, concepts, or themes (Merriam, 2002). According to Creswell, qualitative research contributes best when "studying people who have not often been studied such as individuals from diverse cultures, socioeconomic levels, racial groups and gender orientations" (Creswell, 2014). This sequential mixed methodology approach (see Table 1) will provide valuable information toward answering the question: Who are working adults in the California Community College system and what factors influence their degree completion?

**Table 1** *Research Design and Sequence*

| Quantitative Data | | Qualitative Data | | Qualitative Data |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Research Question:**<br><br>What are the characteristics of working adult students at California Community Colleges? | → | **Research Question:**<br><br>How do California Community Colleges communicate their receptiveness of working adult students? | → | **Research Question:**<br><br>In what ways do institutional structures, experiences, and interactions with the institutions, influence working adult student experiences, persistence and educational goal attainment? |
| **Purpose:**<br><br>Collect and analyze demographic characteristics. | | **Purpose:**<br><br>Review messages by colleges to understand whether adult students feel welcome. | | **Purpose:**<br><br>Gain student perspectives about their experiences as a working adult students. |
| **Data and Methodology:**<br><br>Review of existing statewide datasets:<br>• Datamart<br>• Chancellor's Office management information system (MIS)<br>• Employment Development Department (EDD) | | **Data and Methodology:**<br><br>Document analysis of a representative sample of CCCs:<br>• College websites<br>• Course schedules and program catalogues<br>• Student services materials | | **Data and Methodology:**<br><br>1. Focus Group of a Northern College<br>2. Focus Group of a Central College<br>3. Focus Group of a Southern College |

# CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

*"I've been to board of trustee meetings and they're all about those enrollment numbers. Are they worried too much if you graduate? No, they'd rather just have you in class."*
- Male participant from Northern California

Increasing the number of adults with high-quality degrees and certificates continues to be a primary challenge for community colleges. The Center for the Study of College Student Retention lists eight major concepts and models of student retention and persistence developed over the past 83 years: 1) John McNeely's college student mortality (1937); 2) John Summerskill's concept of personality attributes (1962); 3) William Spady's model (1971); 4) Kamens's studies comparing institutions of different sizes (1971, 1974); 5) Vincent Tinto's model of student retention (1975, 1993); 6) Alexander Astin's theory of involvement (1977, 1985); 7) John Bean's model of work turnover to student attrition (1980, 1983); and 8) John Bean and Barbara Metzner's conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition (1985) (Morrison & Silverman, 2012; Retention theories, n.d.).

A look at specific populations such as working adult learners, reveals dismal progress since the emergence of student attrition theory (Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1993, 2006; Seidman, 2005; Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Berger, Ramirez, & Lyon, 2012). To better understand the factors that influence degree completion among working adults in the California Community College system, this study utilizes Vincent Tinto's Model of Institutional Action (Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Tinto, 2012) as its guiding blueprint. While there have been many student retention and completion studies conducted and theoretical models developed, including Tinto's Institutional Departure Model (1975, 1993), Bean's Student Attrition Model (1980, 1982), the Non-traditional Student Attrition Model (Bean & Metzner, 1985), and the Student Retention Integrated Model (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993), most of these place the primary onus of

completion on students characteristics and behaviors rather than on institutional actions. Less attention has been paid to institutional actions that guide effective, or ineffective, policies and practices to increase student persistence and ultimately student success.

Tinto's Model of Institutional Action (Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Tinto, 2012) offers a framework for organizing institutional policies and practices that can positively influence student persistence and degree attainment. Tinto's Model of Institutional Action is, in many ways, a critique of institutional complacency and disjointed interventions. Tinto asks institutions to reflect on how they can successfully develop, implement, sustain, and expand practical interventions that address student attrition through a more comprehensive and holistic approach. This analytical approach undergirds assertions that institutions should be held accountable for creating environments that enable students to persist and complete a degree. Specifically, Tinto argues that student retention has not improved in higher education because much of the work "makes the implicit assumption that knowing why students leave is equivalent to knowing why students stay and succeed" (Tinto, 2016, p. 4). This study is interested in factors that influences a working adult student's ability to persist and complete as a means to craft more effective institutional strategies. Notably, Tinto is attentive to institutional actions that can improve the graduation rates of students from historically underserved groups; this is a useful lens when looking at working adult learners. Tinto's description of institutional actions begins with the institutional environment and conditions that shape student success and are within an institution's ability to change. These conditions include commitment, expectations, supports, feedback, and involvement.

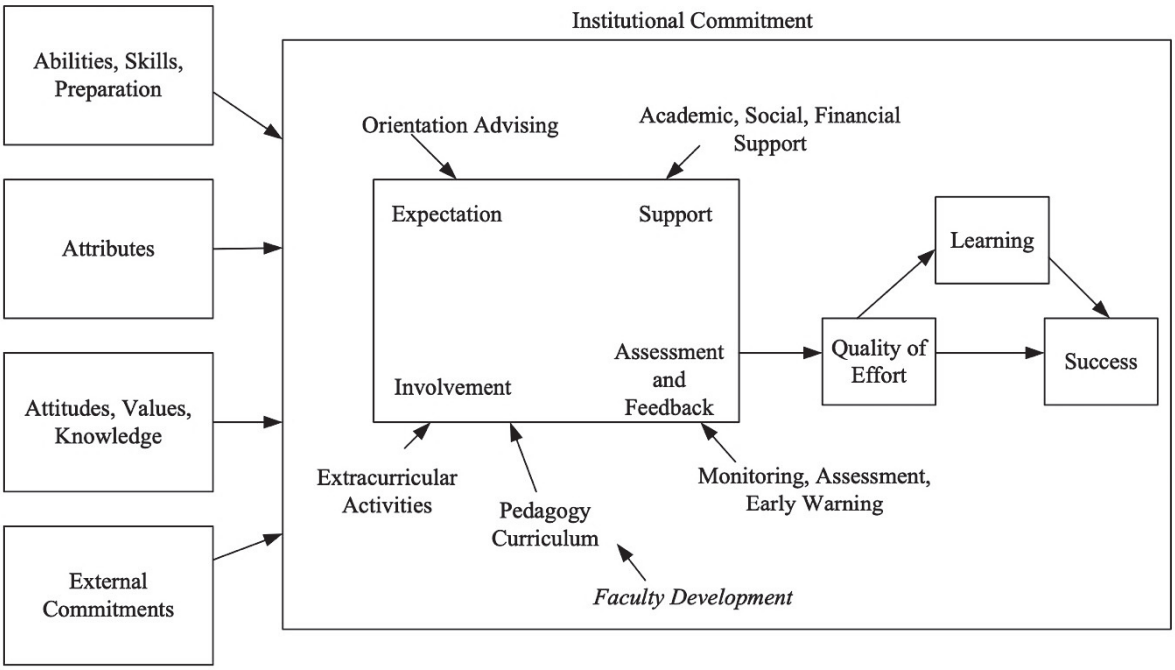
After evaluating institutional conditions, identifying the types of institutional actions that enable student success become the key focus of Tinto's framework. Figure 1 describes the basic

structure of a model of institutional action for student success. The figure describes how students enter an institution with certain attributes (e.g., gender, socio-economic status, race, ethnicity), abilities, skills, and levels of prior academic preparation (e.g., academic and social skills), and attitudes, values, and knowledge about higher education (e.g., goals, motivations, and expectations). The model is multilayered and suggests that the effect of actions around student success at the organizational level, such as those by administrative leaders to build institutional commitment, are largely indirect and serve to influence the behaviors of faculty and staff whose actions directly affect students and provide the scaffolding they need for success. For working adult students looking to succeed at a California Community College, rhetoric and mission statements must meet actions. The framework emphasizes categories of actions which include:

- Institutional commitment to the goal of student success. This is seen as a reflection of institutional leadership.
- Expectational climate, or campus climate, which speaks to the expectations the institution holds for student, faculty, and staff. Tinto explains that for underrepresented groups, such as working adult students, campus climate and micro-aggressions that may occur within the institution also influence persistence by shaping students' sense of belonging.
- Support for students which can cover a wide array of types of action ranging from financial aid, academic advising, scheduling, and social emotional well-being.
- Involvement and engagement have proven to be important factors for success. This includes a student's engagement on campus and with other faculty, staff, and students. Equally important, students who are more engaged show greater learning gains (Endo & Harpel, 1982).

**Figure 2**

*Tinto's Institutional Action Model*




*Note.* From "Moving from Theory to Action: A Model of Institutional Action for Student Success." by Vincent Tinto in A. Seidman (Ed.), College Student Retention, 2nd ed. Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

Tinto's framework guides this study, with an eye for the necessary adaptation for working adult student experiences. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the impact institutional structures and policies have on working adult learners. I leverage this framework to gain an understanding of the impact administrative actions have on working adult learners' ability to complete a degree or credential. A compelling argument for this framework is its recognition that increased rates of student success do not happen by chance but are in fact the result of a series of intentional institutional actions, policies, and practices that are consistently applied long term (Carey, 2005).

# CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

*"I have to keep working 'cause I can't just drop out of life while I go to school."*
- Female participant from Northern California

To situate this study, this literature review will focus on the following six areas: (1) dispelling the notion that community colleges are serving working adults, (2) who are California's working learners, (3) determinants of student success, (4) review of relevant policies and practices, (5) institutional structures for working adult learners, and (6) gaps in existing research.

## Dispelling the Notion of the "Nontraditional Student"

In analyzing patterns of higher education participation, Ross-Gordon (2005) highlight data supporting the conclusion that students of color are especially likely to follow patterns of college enrollment that deem them as "nontraditional." The National Center for Education Statistics shows large increases in the enrollment of students that have typically been characterized as nontraditional because their demographic makeup identifies them as an atypical college student. Yet many scholars, (Iloh, 2018; Ross-Gordon, 2005) argue that even the term "nontraditional" is problematic and instead propose the alternative term "post-traditional." Like Iloh and Ross-Gordon, Gulley (2018) also makes the case that the label of "nontraditional" is problematic, adding that "the message that these students are the outsiders is persistent and causes much psychological distress and self-doubt." Across the United States, 85% of students are considered post-traditional. The Postsecondary National Policy Institute explains that post-traditional students share characteristics like delayed enrollment in college after high school, part-time enrollment, working full time while enrolled, and financially independent or they have dependents. These students are "a diverse group of adult learners, full-time employees, low-income students, students who commute to school and working parents" (Postsecondary National

Policy Institute, 2018, p. 1). More narrowly focused, many post-traditional students are adult students, defined as having two or more of the following characteristics: they are 25+ years old and are working full-time, enrolling part-time, raising children, coming back to school after time away, and/or supporting themselves financially (Kasworm, 2003).

Post-traditional students are also more likely to enroll at two-year, public institutions (ibid, p. 1). As open access institutions, community colleges naturally serve larger proportions of post-traditional students. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, a higher percentage of students in community colleges work while enrolled in courses when compared to students in public four-year universities. Fifty-one percent of students with dependents, 47% of students aged 24 to 39, and 52% of students 40 and older all attend two-year institutions (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018).

For over 100 years, California Community Colleges have provided educational programs and services to people who otherwise would not have enrolled. Through a primary mission defined by the Legislature, California Community Colleges "offer academic and vocational instruction at the lower division level for both younger and older students, including those persons returning to school" (California Education Code, Section 66010.4). Its wide-ranging mission has sometimes been a cause for criticisms as overly broad and lacking clear delineations between precollegiate and collegiate coursework (LAO, 2012). Within colleges' comprehensive mission is the "provision of adult noncredit education curricula in areas defined as being in the state's interest" and training and services "that contribute to continuous workforce improvement" (California Education Code, Section 66010.4). Noncredit or adult education programs include various segments of higher education and have used terms such as extension, extended-day, part-time, adult, evening classes, and continuing education to describe these programs (ibid).

Consequently, community colleges often see their role in the education of adult learners through the narrow scope of noncredit and workforce education (Van Noy & Heidkamp, 2013). Yet, noncredit programs, valuable as they are to precollegiate education, rarely offer a seamless transition to degree programs or transfer to four-year institutions (Van Noy, Jacobs, Korey, Bailey, & Hughes, 2008). When asked about their educational aspirations, more than 70 percent of incoming adult students at a community college state they seek to earn a bachelor's degree (Scobey, 2016). Community colleges lack the realization that adults are, and have been, a growing part of their responsibility and therefore demand the necessary conditions to meet their educational goals.

Societal norms have notoriously defined higher education through the lens of traditional-aged students. In 2017, Washington Monthly took note of this and launched a first-of-its-kind ranking of two-year colleges that do the best job of serving adult learners. "They aren't recruiting more adult students or offering them the services they need—like abundant evening and weekend classes to accommodate work and family schedules. And the publications that ignore these shortcomings are part of the problem, not the solution" (Washington Monthly, 2017). Glastris (2017) argues that policymakers, like journalist, have a blind spot when it comes to adult learners because their journey doesn't align to their own traditional college experiences. Yet, since the 1990s, census and survey data indicate that post-traditional undergraduates constituted the majority of American college students (Scobey, 2016), with only an estimated 26 percent of college students fitting the conventional profile of a recent high school graduate who is financially dependent and enrolled full time (NCES, 2015). The omnibus "nontraditional" label – blending age, employment, educational status, familial responsibilities – is instead describing the new majority in higher education (Scobey, 2016).

## Who are Working Adult Learners?

The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC, 2019) argues that substantially improving career prospects, including access to high-quality education and training programs, is a necessary condition for improving the prospects of working Californians who are still in poverty. One area of research requiring increased attention is that of the working learner, specifically the working adult student age 25 and older who works for a living, as opposed to working for career experience (internships, fellowships, etc.). Nationally, 79% of all community college students work and, among those who work, compared to those who attend four-year institutions, 50% are more likely to do so full-time (Levin et al., 2011). Explicit research on working adults age 25-64 seeking a college degree is limited but can prove essential in designing programs for this growing population. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), enrollment levels among adult students have been consistently on the rise for the past 30 years, with recent figures indicating that adult students account for 40% of total postsecondary enrollment. The greatest increase in postsecondary enrollment from 2009 to 2020 is projected to be among students who are 25 and older. Those students who are between the ages of 25 to 34 years old have the highest projected increase of 21%, whereas traditional-age students (between 18 and 24) are projected to increase by only 9% (Fenster & Muse, 2018).

Given the shifting population, traditional models of higher education may not meet the needs of an older student population. “The story of a full-time college student whose only obligation is to his or her studies is increasingly rare for most Californians, and even less relatable for adults contemplating re-enrollment” (California Competes, 2018, p. 9). Many working adults are breadwinners juggling the demands of work, childcare, and their household, with limited time to get to school, attend class, and study at home—much less see a counselor or

find a tutor (CCCCO, 2017). Some are transitioning back to civilian life after serving in the military (nearly 42 percent of California veterans receiving GI benefits attend a CCC) (ibid). Work is a central characteristic of community college students and yet "research is scarce on the understanding and theorizing about students who work and attend community colleges" (Levin et al., 2011, p. 74). A 2003 NCES report titled "Work First, Study Second," indicated that at least 56 percent of students over age twenty-four saw themselves as workers first and students second, while 26 percent identified themselves as students who work. Adult learners navigate these two, sometimes conflicting, identities. Given the reality of the higher education student population, institutions should no longer view the role of student employment as an "unnecessary, unfortunate distraction" from undergraduate studies given the prevalence, intensity, and necessity of employment (McCormick et al., 2011). Rethinking how education enables the success of working learners is not only important to this population of students, but also critical to making good on our shared economic—and equity—expectations for higher education. Life circumstances can be complicated for adult learners. Facing job, family, housing, transportation, or debt pressures, adult learners run a high risk of falling behind academically or stopping out (Scobey, 2016). And for adult students who are also parents, a missed bus, child's illness, or change in work schedule can precipitate a crisis (Matus-Grossman and Gooden 2002). While colleges may only influence limited aspects of an adult student's ability to persist and complete, their impact is still important (Capps, 2012).

## Determinants of Student Success

While employment can help a student pay for classes and other living expenses; it can also be associated, either positively or negatively, with a student's academic performance (NCES, 2020). Thus, it is important to examine employment patterns and student characteristics

in the context of what prominent literature tells us about community college student persistence and success. Specifically, for this study, it's important to understand what the literature says about barriers and opportunities to persistence and success among working adult students. Understanding the factors influencing student success can provide practitioners insight into program design, institutional investments, and promising interventions to address them (Burns, 2010; Millea, 2018). Given the emphasis on the role of institutions, Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993, 2006) formative papers remain most applicable to this study. Key to understanding persistence and success is knowledge about student departure and the challenges students face in successfully navigating the college community (Tinto, 1995). This encourages colleges to recognizes that while not all factors influencing student success are within their control, many are, including the academic and social development of their students. Tinto (2006) also later suggested that institutional factors such as services, specific academic programs, student experiences, financial aid, among others, encourage students' persistence.

The use of completion, transfer, or graduation as measures of student success has been controversial in the community college ecosystem. In 2009, at the height of The Great Recession, President Barack Obama set 2020 college completion goals (Obama, 2009) which increased national attention around the importance of education beyond high school. President Obama's initiative spotlighted low six-year completion rates at community colleges and further fueled external pressure on colleges to increase student persistence and success (Pierce, 2015). Importantly, this confluence of events also occurred as the community college student population further diversified. Increasingly, there is recognition that community colleges can, and should, improve their support of students toward degree attainment (Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins 2015). Critics argued that most colleges haven't adapted to the changing demographics of their students,

such as working adult learners (Glastris, 2017). For instance, they still schedule most classes around midday, rather than at night and weekends, when adults with jobs and families can actually attend them (ibid).

Extensive research shows the characteristics of students most likely to graduate—students who have strong high school preparation, enter college immediately after high school, come from high income families, have parents who attended college, and attend full-time uninterrupted (Holzer & Baum, 2017; Porter & Umbach, 2019). Astin (1990) notes that differences in persistence rates are a function of student preparation, background, ability, selectivity, and how well the academic environment aligns with student needs. Community colleges, however, cannot improve graduation rates and other outcome measures by becoming more selective. Instead, colleges are likely to serve adult learners who are returning to college after having started their degrees years earlier.

One way to improve retention is to change the institution's perspective toward adults as students. Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) claim that educational institutions are "out of sync" with adult students (p. 8). Students who feel connected to their academic journey are more likely to succeed (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Baker & Robnett, 2012; Hunt, Boyd, Gast, Mitch- ell, & Wilson, 2012; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Svanum & Bigatti, 2009). However, high-impact educational practices that provide greater connections for students (such as learning communities, community-based learning, and capstone projects) are often small and found at the margins of colleges (Roy et al., 2017). Even when these practices are an institutional priority, they often do not reach the students who may most benefit: adults, low-income students, students of color, and first-generation students (Kuh 2008). Colleges cannot simply enroll post-traditional students, advise them on what classes to take, and send them on

their way (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). Adult students often feel isolated and out of place on college, so using a framework of care and providing a social support system is helpful (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998). Madfes (1989) recommended college create specific post-traditional student activities to provide activities that are relevant to the student's interest and time allowances and include both the students and their families, including children. While the literature on persistence and success is extensive, because community colleges are distinctive compared to other institutional types, findings from research conducted in four-year postsecondary setting may not be a valid basis for understanding deterrents and determinants for community college students. A more focused review of community college specific literature is key.

**Investigating California's Policies and Practices to Address Student Success**

In its framing, the California Community Colleges' Vision for Success (2017) begins by recognizing some of the most serious challenges students face: low completion rates, an over-accumulation of credits, and a system where older and working students are often left behind (Vision for Success, 2017). Effectuating change, however, means reviewing existing policies and practices that perpetuate challenges for working adult students. It requires analyzing programs which have systemically low success rates for adult learners. With the passage of SB 361(Scott/chapter 631, statues of 2006), noncredit instruction saw significant changes including funding equalization of noncredit College Prep Career Development (CDCP) type instruction. Noncredit education has been described as a solution where "many of the needs resulting from the changing demographics in the economy and employment in the future of work can be addressed" (ASCCC, 2019, p.11). Yet, at an estimated 5% (Datamart, 2020) of all full-time equivalent students (FTES), noncredit is not utilized at a scale capable of keeping pace with a growing working adult learner population. Further yet, with a 15.5% six-year degree, certificate

or transfer-related completion rate (Scorecard, Datamart, 2019), noncredit CDCP is not a viable option for working adults seeking such outcomes.

In 2015, the passage of the Adult Education Block Grant created adult education consortia between K-12 and community college adult education providers (AB 104, Chapter 13 of 2015). The program, part of the California Adult Education Program (CAEP) umbrella, funds more than a million adult learners in California (CCCCO, 2019). While the program has made strides towards closing achievement gaps among adult learners, rather than inspiring whole host institutional reform, it tracks such students into a small subset of programs, including: elementary and secondary reading, writing, and mathematics (basic skills); English as a second language and other programs for immigrants; workforce preparation for adults (including senior citizens) entering or re-entering the workforce; short-term career technical education with high employment potential; pre-apprenticeship training activities coordinated with approved apprenticeship programs; programs for adults with disabilities; and programs designed to develop knowledge and skills that enable adults (including senior citizens) to help children to succeed in school (LAO, 2016; ASCCC, 2019).

For California Community Colleges, the modern era of student success reforms begins with the Student Success Task Force, an independent group of academic and administrative practitioners, researchers, and educational policy leaders involved in a 12-month study of best practices in higher education systems throughout the nation (CCCCO, 2012). The work of the Task Force culminated in the Student Success Initiative, a set of 22 recommendations designed to dramatically increase completion and transfer rates (ibid). These recommendations were adopted by the Board of Governors in 2012, with some becoming part of the Student Success Act of 2012 (SB 1456, Lowenthal). The bill enacted requirements for student support services at

the beginning of their educational experience, establishing policies to ensure all students received orientation, created an education plan, and declared a program of study. It targeted student success and support funds for matriculation services critical to helping students progress towards their college goals and required the posting of student success data on a campus scorecard. Since then, California Community Colleges have transitioned to the Guided Pathways framework (CCCCO, 2018).

The Guided Pathways framework builds on earlier student success tenets but goes a step further by incenting colleges to create a highly structured approach that provides all students with a set of clear course-taking patterns to promote better enrollment decisions, persistence, and success. The Guided Pathways framework, inspired by the Bailey, Jaggars, Jenkins' *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success* (2015) book, suggests that community colleges could drastically increase rates of student success if they are willing to rethink the ways in which they organize programs of study, support services, and instruction. The authors note that community colleges were originally designed to expand college enrollment at low cost, not to maximize completion. The result was a "cafeteria-style" model that provides students with a long menu of program and course choices but very little direction, resulting in low completion rates, extended time to degree, and a less than cost-efficient system (Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins 2015).

The four pillars of Guided Pathways – mapping pathways to student end goals; helping students choose and enter a program pathway; keeping students on path; and ensuring that students are learning – comprise a comprehensive reform model intended transforms the entire college to focus on student success (Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins 2015). Recast with working adult students in mind, the Guided Pathways framework presents an opportunity to increase

persistence and success. Such an approach means expanding and reshaping not only student services, but also the underlying infrastructures of academic institutions: offering alternatives to the conventional work week and the conventional semester. “It will mean creating degree programs and curricula that are both practical and reflective, streamlined and exploratory, avoiding both the narrow reductionism of targeted job training and the formless sprawl of the current cafeteria model” (Scobey, 2016).

Survival and affordability are preeminent concerns for working adult students. For most adult students, the indirect costs of education—such as housing and food—are far greater than actual tuition, books, and fees (TICAS, 2018; Strawn, 2007). Carnevale (2018) adds that students can’t work their way through college anymore. While over 70 percent of all college students work, they don’t make enough to be able to afford college as a result of wage stagnation and the rising total cost of college attendance (Carnevale, 2018). California’s community colleges offer one of the least expensive tuition rates in the country (CCCCO, 2020). Still, students face significant challenges as costs of living in California rise and students experience the limits of financial aid available for CCC students. While about half of CCC students have their tuition waived, few qualify for financial aid to cover their living expenses such as transportation and textbooks (ibid). In fact, the actual cost of attending a community college for a student living independently is nearly $20,000 per year when room and board, transportation, textbooks, and personal items are factored into the equation (TICAS, 2018; CSAC, 2019). Currently, state and federal financial aid programs are designed to primarily serve traditional-aged students and offer limited options for adults returning to college (TICAS, 2018; California Competes, 2018). This is due to numerous eligibility and availability restrictions: Federal Pell Grants are only available for up to 12 semesters over one’s lifetime; Pell Grants are not available for students enrolled in

short-term or noncredit vocational certificate programs; Cal Grants, the state's financial aid program, limits grants for students who are more than a year out from high school graduation and who do not qualify for a transfer entitlement grant (TICAS, 2018; California Competes, 2018; CCCCO, 2019; CSAC, 2019). Combined, these policies leave adults with few feasible financial assistance options.

## Institutional Structures for Working Adult Learner Success

Although community colleges provide many services, programs, and activities, it is often up to each student to navigate the complexities of the college experience. Students get lost and confused amid hundreds of options (Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins 2015). A 2019 survey, *Revealing Institutional Strengths and Challenges* (RISC), reiterates how adult students can be particularly harmed by these confusing and inefficient environments. The survey of students across ten community colleges in multiple states, including California, directly asked students to describe the major challenges they face (Porter, 2019). *Revealing Institutional Strengths and Challenges* found that the top five challenges students faced were work, paying for expenses, family and friends, online classes, and parking on campus. Among the students who reported work-related challenges, 61% indicated that their work hours did not leave enough time for study. One-third of students surveyed by RISC said their work schedule conflicted with class times (Porter, 2019). While many community colleges provide academic resources, an additional 36% said that work prevented them from using campus resources as such resources are often offered during limited and inflexible times (ibid).

Beer (2019) argues that community colleges can help students balance their responsibilities with a focus on the types of academic and non-academic supports that are intended to better connect students' academics to their work, provide flexible scheduling options,

and ease the challenge of balancing life (work, family, debt) responsibilities. Such claims are supported by years of research (Kerka, 1989; Madfes, 1989; Eifler & Potthoff, 1998; Carnevale & Smith; 2018). Building on these identified focus areas, the following are institutional opportunities to provide access to academic and non-academic supports, flexible scheduling options, and support to balance life responsibilities.

*Access to Academic and Non-Academic Supports*. One of the first pitfalls post-traditional college students face is when information provided by institutions isn't sufficiently clear. One study noted that community college students are offered a "confusing array of hard-to-understand course and program choices with unclear connections to future career trajectories" (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006, p. 129). While having a broad range of choices presents more opportunities for students to be successful, it also points to the need for clearer, more nuanced guidance (Purnell & Burdman, 2020). College students report that online resources are an important source of information for making such decisions (Purnell & Burdman, 2020). For some community college students, websites are a primary source of advice (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018). Students' use of online information may not provide the full picture of the role websites play as an information source. Prior research has shown that websites can either enhance or detract from colleges' role in guiding students to make the best decisions about their educational goals and how to achieve them. Students need online resources that proactively and transparently support their academic progress, not a compliance-oriented maze in which students get lost trying to decipher the signals (Schudde, Bradley, & Absher, 2019). According to Hayes and Flannery (2000), "adult educators need to be both cognizant of systemic forces, institutionalized oppression, and dominant norms and practices that

affect adult learners differently and be vigilant in ensuring and advocating for greater inclusiveness, safety and voice, particularly for marginalized groups" (Kiely, et al., 2004, p. 20).

*Flexible Scheduling Options.* For students who balance work and academics, including family responsibilities, time can be a scarce commodity (Beer, 2019). Institutional barriers for adults in college include the lack of accommodation in addressing external constraints to their education, which may require more flexibility and may also lead them to stop and start their education (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Adult and Vocational Education, 2009). Studies of working students lead to many divergent conclusions. Bradley (2006) organizes the literature into four threads: (a) that work is detrimental to students' academic success, (b) that there is a negative correlation between the number of hours worked and grades, (c) that work in excess of 15 to 20 hours per week is detrimental to academic performance, and (d) that the quality or relevance of the work moderate the effects of work on academic success. Few studies evaluate the conditions working adult students need to succeed. Ziskin et al, (2010) found that working students must create highly structured schedules to manage their conflicting responsibilities. Alvarez (2017), Scobey (2016) and Kasworm (2001) among others emphasize a departure from conventional semester schedule by highlighting such approaches as compressed terms, accelerated programs, structured schedules (Complete College America, 2018), flexible course delivery, and more enrollment periods. Programs like Accelerated College Education (Shasta College, 2019) have seen early success with such approaches. California Competes (2019), Chen (2017), and Navarre Cleary (2017) also highlight credit for prior learning, including prior military training, and competency-based education, an approach that relies on mastery of academic content regardless of time, place, or pace of learning (Porter & Reilly, 2014), as promising practices for working adult learners.

*Support to Balance External Responsibilities*. Managing work and academic pressures is far from straightforward for adult learners, therefore access to student supports befitting their busy lives is important. Institutions can become more attractive to working adult learner through two main strategies: educational models that fit their life needs and by offering support services relevant to them (Chen, 2017). Available literature emphasizes several emerge practices. Financial support is one of the commonly identified needs for working adult students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2009; Bragg & Barnett, 2008; California Competes, 2018; Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson, 2007, 2008; Lane, Michelau, & Palmer, 2012; Strawn, 2011; Wachen, Jenkins, & Van Noy, 2011), including availability of aid for older students and access to accurate information. Adult learners also demonstrate a need for more proactive and comprehensive counseling to help address their needs (Bragg & Barnett, 2008; Bragg et al., 2011; Frey, 2007; Lane, Michelau, & Palmer, 2012; Spaid & Duff, 2009; Wachen, Jenkins, & Van Noy, 2011). Extensive literature also emphasizes the need for additional non-academic supports like transportation, childcare, and mental health services (Bragg et al., 2007). Shasta College's Accelerated Education College (ACE) describes its structure through five "C's": compressed classes, consistent schedules, comprehensive program offerings, community, and case management. Similarly, City College of San Francisco's Working Adult Degree Program offers structure and predictability, including pre-selected classes, learning communities, proactive check-ins with students throughout the semester via phone, emails, in-person, or virtually, and dedicated tutors for social sciences, English, and math (CCSF, 2020).

## Gaps in Existing Research

A key gap in existing research is statewide statistics about working students that profile their experiences and needs. Few studies focus on the institutional actions, or inactions, taken to

support working adult students. Further, most studies don't include the perspective of an everyday community college student who works while attending college. Such an approach can give voice to students as they reflect on their experiences as working adults. This study helps fill some of these gaps by exploring student outcomes for working learners, and the institutional structures at colleges that enable students to successfully balance their work life and their school life. Such data is critical to advance policies and practices that support a growing population of working students. Specifically, my study of the largest community college system in the country analyzing working adult students addresses a major gap in existing research and offers wide applicability.

# CHAPTER FOUR: CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

*"I work more than 35 hours just so at least I can go home with something that I'm able to pay the rent and other bills."*

- Male participant from Central California

## The Case for A Focus on Working Adults

Adults turn to community colleges, especially during economic downturns, to advance their professional goals and seek alternative or new training (Chen, 2019). This makes sense since community colleges serve the majority of individuals seeking upskilling or career changes. (Spellman, 2007). According to Kohl (2010), several factors incite adults to return to the classroom: the need for updated skills to compete in the knowledge-based economy, a change in demographics, technological advances bringing the classroom to the student, and a globalization of the higher education system. Still, many prospective adult students are facing barriers in returning to college, with time and finances cited as the most common barriers faced by adult students (Fain, 2012).

During the Great Recession, individuals ages 40+ constituted 22% of total California Community College enrollments (Datamart, 2019). Today, this age group constitutes 15.3% of all credit enrollments, down 6%, representing a 28% change since 2008-09 (ibid). One key question is whether this drastic decrease in adult enrollment is solely driven by an improved economy, or if choices made by community colleges have favored traditional-aged students over adult learners. Several policy and operational changes have been instituted throughout the California Community College system within the last 10 years that may have affected the enrollment patterns of individuals 40 years or older, including the reduced availability of evening courses (Navarette, 2019). Statewide, evening course offerings decreased by 25% between 2008 through 2013 and decreased another 15% between 2013-2019 (ibid).

There are many reasons for higher education institutions, especially community colleges, to reframe their thinking about the primary student groups they serve. Growing demographics of theses populations aside, increasing emphasis on student outcomes is one important reason. Nationally, 39% of students at community colleges intend to transfer yet leave community college without a degree or certificate (Levine, 2011). In California, of the 2,089,209 students enrolled in 2018-19, 12,844 earned a noncredit certificate, 70,318 earned a Chancellor's Office approved certificate, 84,152 earned an AA or AS degree, and 50,707 earned an Associate Degree for Transfer (Cal-PASS Plus, 2020). The statewide six-year cohort completion rate for degrees and transfer stands at 48.9% (first-time students starting in 2012-13 through 2017-18) (CCCCO, 2019). Six-year completion rates by program type vary but remain low. We also know that California will have a looming deficit of more than two million workers with degrees or certificates by 2025; a fact that threatens the state's ability to meet its economic needs (Johnson, 2018). With the shift in demographics, is it time for community colleges to have a more intentional focus on working adult students? A focus on working adult students should also consider the intersectionality with other post-traditional student populations. Iloh (2018) argues that colleges must first understand the limited options that have been presented to post-traditional and working adult students. For examples, the concept of "choice" is fundamentally problematic because the term is entangled with assumptions that unravel upon consideration of race, socioeconomic status, gender, location, time period in a prospective student's life, and other important factors (Iloh, 2018). The notion of choice is highly constrained, if existent at all, for students who depend on employment for survival and therefore, understanding this lack of "choice" is key to recognizing the need for institutional action in support of working students.

Policies and practices geared toward increasing adult degree completion can be an effective strategy to raise overall state educational attainment levels.

## Setting

This dissertation analyzes working adult learners attending California Community Colleges during 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20. During this period, the state had 73 established college districts. In 2020-21, those college districts consisted of a total of 116 colleges and 77 educational centers. Two-thirds of all California college students all attend a California Community College (Kurlaender, 2018, p. 176). The system serves the most diverse students in California. Forty percent of students are 25 and older. By design, California's community college districts incorporate all of the state's territory (CCCCO, 2019). Virtually all Californians are within commuting distance of a community college. Seventy-two community college districts have a locally-elected board of trustees, responsive to local community needs and charged with the policy leadership for the district. The statewide California Community Colleges system is governed by a Board of Governors (BOG), a 17-member Board which establishes policy and regulations, interacts with the Legislature and federal and state organizations, and selects the Chancellor for the system. The BOG also governs the online community college. The State Chancellor serves as the CEO of the system, overseeing state operations and systemwide implementation through regulations and apportionments to colleges. However, the state Chancellor has no formal authority over the CEOs of the 72 districts. Locally, a district is overseen by a chancellor or superintendent/president who is selected by a board of elected trustees. They oversee the operations of the district and colleges and work with the board to set and implement a vision for a district. The California Community College system operates like a loose confederacy of districts and colleges. The system is celebrated for its comprehensive, affordable, and open access mission. However, the colleges are also continually criticized for

low degree outcomes and transfer rates to four-year institutions (Shulock & Moore, 2007; Sengupta & Jepsen, 2006). In 2020, the community college system served more than 2.2 million students from a broad range of demographic, academic backgrounds, and workforce experiences. California's community colleges are situated in urban, suburban, and rural areas of the state. California Community Colleges are an ideal system to study institutional factors that influence working adult students' persistence and completion because of the large number of institutions situated in every corner of the state and the diversity of its student population.

## Positionality

My positionality and purpose for engaging is this study includes a drive to understand what colleges are doing, or can do, to adapt to and support a growing working student population (Merriam, 2016). Within this study, I bring my role of higher education stakeholder, policy leader, community college professional for over 10 years, as well as my role as a researcher, and sister/family member to students similar to those I focus on in my study. My positionality as a scholar and researcher begins by acknowledging my cultural, political and social context, and reflecting on the ways that these contexts influence how I see the world, my weaknesses, and my strengths. To external observers, I am the Vice Chancellor of College Finance and Facilities Planning for the California Community Colleges, entrusted by college leaders to implement fiscal policy, negotiate budget actions, and advocate on behalf of the interests of all community colleges. Those in my trusted circles know me as a daughter, granddaughter, and father-like big sister who grew up in a home of mostly women. Yosso (2005) suggests that communities of color utilize forms of capital in college that are unique to them due to the historical inequities they have had to overcome. Among them is aspirational capital, which speaks to the hopes and dreams of these communities. Growing up and attending college in California's inland empire,

all students I knew worked. They struggled balancing their college aspirations with the toll working simultaneously takes on individuals. And, unfortunately, many gave way to the pressures of life and bills. To understand my positionality, one must also understand the influence my sisters' experiences have had on my views on our education systems. Through them, I have seen how inaccessible higher education can be for individuals who don't fit the mold of a traditional student – one that enrolls directly after high school and is academically positioned to take college-level courses. After six years, one of my sisters made it out of a community college and transferred to a four-year university, while the other eventually gave up as a result of course schedules which were not conducive to a working mother. Their experiences have shaped my belief that colleges should do more to adapt to the realities of today's student composition.

# CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH QUESTION 1

*"Your main services are difficult to access if you're working in a normal 9:00 to 5:00 job – financial aid, counseling, admission and records even can be difficult."*
- Male participant from Northern California

## Quantitative Descriptive Analysis: Understanding the Characteristics of Working Adult Students at California's Community Colleges

Guided by the research question: *What are the characteristics of working adult students at California's Community Colleges?* This part of the study analyzes descriptive data about working adult learners at 72 of the 73 districts within the California Community College system. Descriptive research seeks to provide systematic information about a phenomenon (Fox & Bayat, 2007). Descriptive data for this study will provide a general overview of the demographic characteristics of working adult students attending California Community Colleges.

### Data and Sample

To understand statewide working adult student characteristics, I use a two-pronged data approach. Across California, comprehensive, cross-sector data are limited. California Community College do not collect employment data from students. As a result, colleges do not generally track whether enrolled students are working learners. As an effective work around, this study uses two distinct data sets to build a profile of working adult learners. First, I use the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) Management Information System (MIS) data, which includes student-level administrative data. MIS data generally collects information in three areas: students, faculty, and courses; I primarily use information on students' demographic characteristics and enrollment information. These data are submitted by college districts consistent with the MIS Data Element Dictionary (CCCCO, 2019), which offers some quality control and improves my confidence about its reliability and validity.

Second, I supplement this information with the State of California Employment Development Department (EDD) data. Through a formal memorandum of understanding, the Chancellor's Office submits data to EDD for a quarterly match. This quarterly match allows the Chancellor's Office to identify which of its students have earned wages. The EDD match provides information about students' ages during the match period. An EDD match can only be made for students with a valid social security number, those whose employer pays into employment insurance, and those employed in-state. The matched data covers about 90% of students within the California Community Colleges. The EDD data match may exclude undocumented students, individuals attending border state community colleges potentially working out-of-state, and those who may work independently and don't report their wages. Key parameters and variables from the matched data are described below.

The study sample consists of California Community College students over three years from MIS data pulled for academic years 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20. Additionally, to explore student success, I explore two views of outcome data; one which analyzes longer-term outcomes by focusing on a cohort of adult working students with first time enrollment in 2014-15, and the second which looks at a more recent snapshot of outcomes for academic years 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20. As open-access institutions, California Community Colleges accept the enrollment of all individuals in a multitude of program types with varying levels of time commitment. As a result, it is important to answer the question: what constitutes enrollment? For the purposes of this study, I define an "enrollment" as essentially anyone with at least a 0.5 credits or noncredit contact hours equivalent. The sample based on the variable and definitions in Table 2 includes a total of 5,093,187 students.

## Measures

This study assembles a unique data set of working learners in California Community Colleges that is broader than any previously studied. Though counts of adult student data have been previously used in other papers on the California Community Colleges, they are rarely, if ever, integrated with the EDD data. The purpose of this portion of the study is to compare the differences between working adult students and non-working adult students on key measures. This study defines adult students as all students who are twenty-five years old (or older), the age at which students are automatically considered independent from their parents for financial aid purposes, in their first term of enrollment. Throughout the study I use the terms "working adult students," "working adult learners," and "working learners" interchangeably. Working adult students are defined as students age twenty-five or older who work 20 hours or more per week. Working more than "half time" is defined as having a quarterly income of at least $12 an hour per week at 20 hours per week for at least three months.

I analyze working adult learners compared to non-working adult learners across several measures including program type, average units per term, age, gender, and time of day of enrollment. Three program types are considered and defined as follows: credit degree program are ones which provide students with units towards an associate's degree or transfer to a four-year university; career technical education programs are ones which provide students with units toward certificates and credentials in workforce aligned fields; and noncredit programs are courses which are not applicable toward an associate's degree, no units are earned, and can only be offered in specific areas detailed in regulation and Education Code. To answer research question one, the study analyzes the list of measures and variables summarized in Table 2 within the existing MIS and EDD datasets based on the outlined definitions.

**Table 2**

*Variables and Definitions (2017-2019-20)*

| **Variables** (Years) | **Definition** |
|---|---|
| *Adult Students (25+)* | All students who are, or turned, 25 years old in their first term of enrollment, with a minimum enrollment of .5 credits in the academic year in question, binary yes/no. |
| *Working Adult Students (25+)* | Working adult students (students age twenty-five or older who work 20 hours or more per week).<br><br>Because EDD income data only has quarter records, for a given academic year, if a student worked more than half time for more than 2 quarters, then they are defined as working more than half time for the entire academic year;<br>"Worked more than half time" is defined as having a quarterly income of more than $12/hour * 20 hour/week *4 week *3 months = $2880.<br><br>The number of adults (age 25+) working while attending college, binary yes/no.<br><br>**This measure will define the total working adult students at California Community College and support the extrapolation of data for remaining measures below.** |
| *Program Type* | Details program types, specifically:<br>a) Credit Degree Program<br>b) Career Technical Education Program<br>c) Noncredit Program |
| *Average Units Per Term* | The average number of units taken.<br><br>Average units successfully completed (C or better) within the specified term (Fall or Spring) within the year – no intersessions, no winter quarter, no summer terms. |
| *Age* | Age ranges:<br>a) 25 to 29<br>b) 30 to 34<br>c) 35 to 39<br>d) 40 to 49<br>e) 50 + |
| *Gender* | Self-reported gender compared to non-working adult students. MIS categories:<br>a) Female<br>b) Male<br>c) Nonbinary<br>d) Unknown |
| *Race & Ethnicity* | Self-reported race and ethnicity using MIS categories:<br>a) African-American<br>b) American Indian/Alaskan Native<br>c) Asian<br>d) Filipino<br>e) Hispanic |

| | |
|---|---|
| | f) Multi-Ethnicity<br>g) Pacific Islander<br>h) Unknown<br>i) White Non-Hispanic |
| *Time of Day Enrollment* | Indicates whether a student is a day student or evening student as of the end of the term (MIS definition).<br>• Day: Student is enrolled in one or more sections that have a "Day Class" designation.<br>• Evening: Student is enrolled in at least one section that has an "Evening Class" designation and the student did not meet the criteria of Day Student. |
| *Three-Year Cohort Outcomes* | Student outcomes for 2014-15 cohort, Outcomes include:<br>a) Transfer to a four-year institution,<br>b) Completion of degrees (AA/AS/ADT)<br>c) Certificates and Credentials.<br><br>Measure will provide cohort information on three outcomes: Transfer, Degree receipt, Certificate receipt, binary yes/no. |
| *Snapshot Outcomes* | Student outcomes for Years: 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20, Outcomes include:<br>a) Transfer – any adult student enrolled from current or previous years with a transfer to any CSU, UC or any private or public in-state or out-of-state four-year institution within the sample academic years.<br>b) Degree – any adult student who earned an associate degree within the sample academic years.<br>c) Certificate – any adult student who earned a Chancellor's Office approved certificate within the sample academic years.<br><br>These measures will provide a point-in-time information on three outcomes: Transfer, Degree receipt, Certificate receipt, binary yes/no. |

## Quantitative Results

Existing research broadly documents the challenge of juggling academic demands and employment. Little is known, however, about the number, characteristics, and enrollment patterns of working learners, specifically working adult learners. To answer the first research question, I produce a set of descriptive statistics and figures comparing adult learners to learners under the age of 25, commonly referred to as "traditional" learners. Descriptive data also compares working adult learners compared to non-working adult learners. To carry out my analysis, I employ existing statewide data on the variables identified in Table 2. The data in this

study builds a cross-sectional portrait of working adult students in recent years (academic years: 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20) and identifies statewide trends. Because my aim is to describe the characteristics and composition of adult learners, I analyze multiple facets of the measures in Table 2.

**Comparison of Working vs. Non-Working Learners Across All Ages**

To understand the size of the population of working learners at California's community colleges, my first analysis looks at all enrollments and compares working and non-working students. As shown in Figure 3, I find that across the sample academic years, working learners comprise a majority of student enrollments at California Community Colleges. Specifically, on average 61% of California Community College students work while enrolled[1]. When disaggregated for the total hours worked, Figure 4 shows that across the sample years, an average of 759,058, or 32%, of all students enrolled in at least 0.5 credits, or noncredit contact hours equivalent, work 20 hours or more per week. This finding also indicates that of the students who work, a majority of them work half time or more.

[1] Since EDD data only captures formal or "reported" earnings, this is likely an undercount.

**Figure 3**

*Comparison of working and non-working learners*

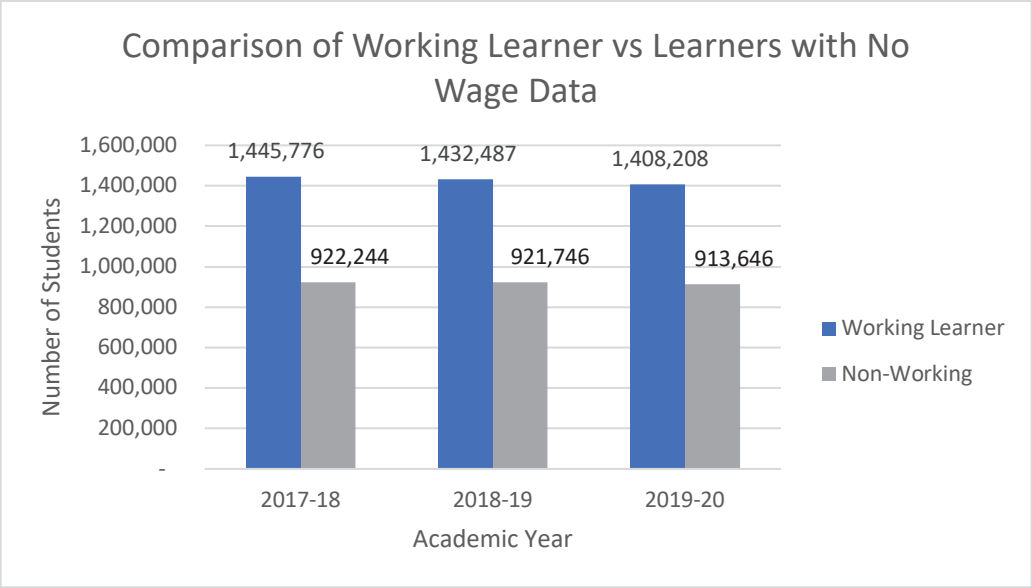
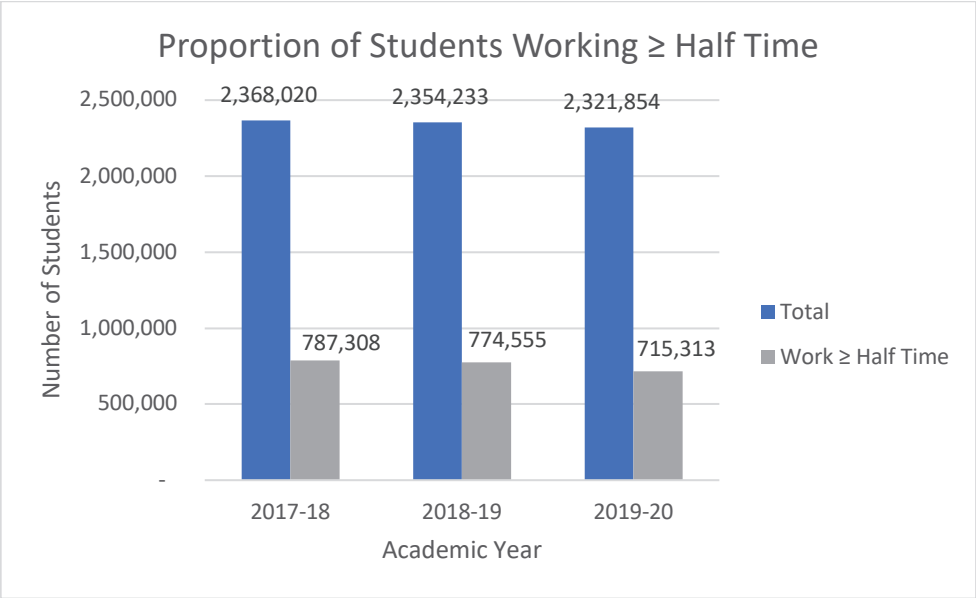



**Figure 4**

*Proportion of total enrollments working greater than or equal to half time*



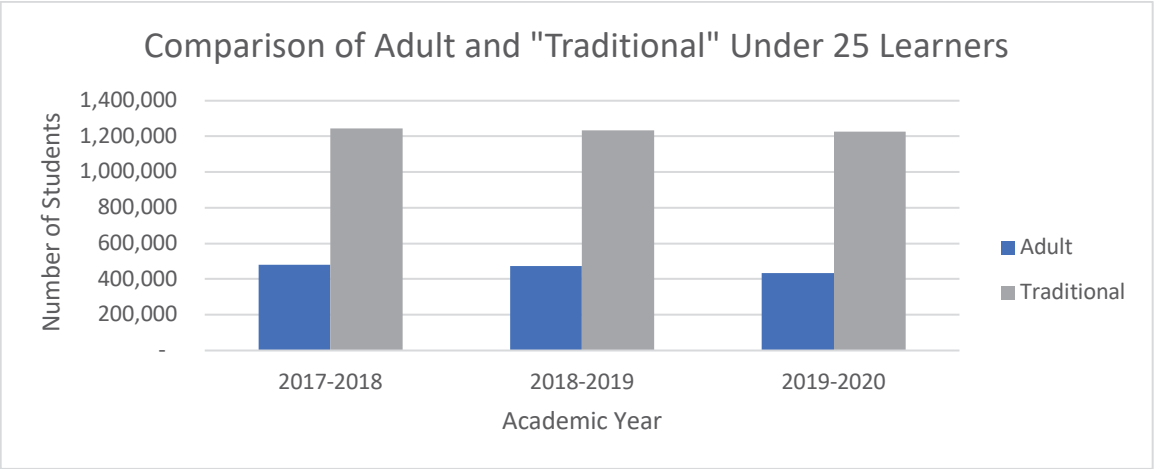
**Adult Learners Compared to Students Under Age 25**

Next, I consider the proportion of total California Community College enrollments who are adult learners (students ages 25 and older) compared to traditional learners (the common term for students under 25). Again, enrollment is defined as any student taking at least half a unit. This definition can include students who applies to a community college but only enrolled in the half unit orientation course. I maintain this unit threshold to consider enrollments because it comprises a population of individuals who have demonstrated interest in higher education and have taken the initial steps to begin an educational journey.

For the sample academic years, Figure 5 illustrates that traditional learners comprise a larger share of total enrollments, ranging from 72% to 74%. Adult learners comprise 27% of total enrollments, or an average of 462,217 students in academic years 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20. This finding is inconsistent with national studies which indicate that enrollment levels among adult students have been consistently on the rise for the past 30 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Still, the result is relevant as over a quarter of total California Community College enrollments are adult learners.

**Figure 5**

*Comparison of adult learner to learners under age 25*



Of total enrollment in 2017-18, 408,807 were adult learners (28%), 473,155 in 2018-19 (28%), and 432,690 in 2019-20 (26%). As stated earlier, sample data also identifies that a large proportion of California's community college students are working learners, however, my focus here is specifically the intersectionality of working and adult learners. As a result, these counts become the basis for the remaining analyses.

**Table 3**

*Comparison of Total Adult and Traditional Learners by Academic Year*

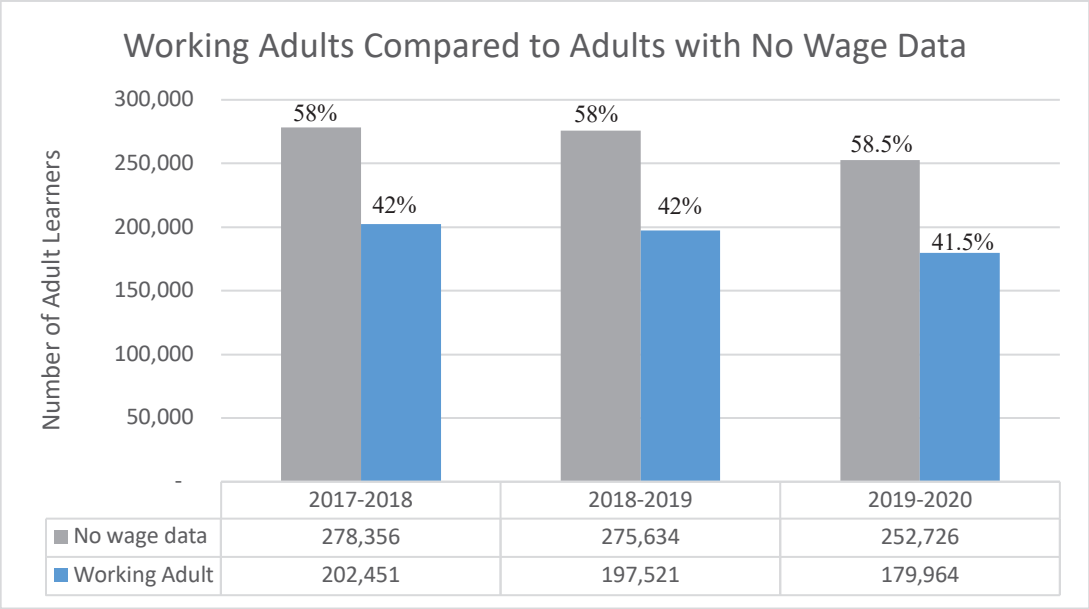
| Academic Year | Adult | Traditional | Total | Percent Adult | Percent Traditional |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2017-2018 | 480,807 | 1,243,325 | 1,724,132 | 28% | 72% |
| 2018-2019 | 473,155 | 1,234,966 | 1,708,121 | 28% | 72% |
| 2019-2020 | 432,690 | 1,228,244 | 1,660,934 | 26% | 74% |

## Working Adult Learners Compared to Non-Wage Adult Learners

Next, I examine working adult learners compared to non-working adult learners across various measures. Within the sample years, Figure 6 illustrates that a greater share of adult learners did not have EDD wage information available. On average, 193,312 adult learners have reported EDD employment and wages, representing 42% of adult learner enrollments across California Community Colleges. Though this study only analyzes statewide working adult learner data, Appendix 2 provides a breakdown of the number of working adult learners by California Community College district for academic year 2017-18 through 2019-20.

**Figure 6**

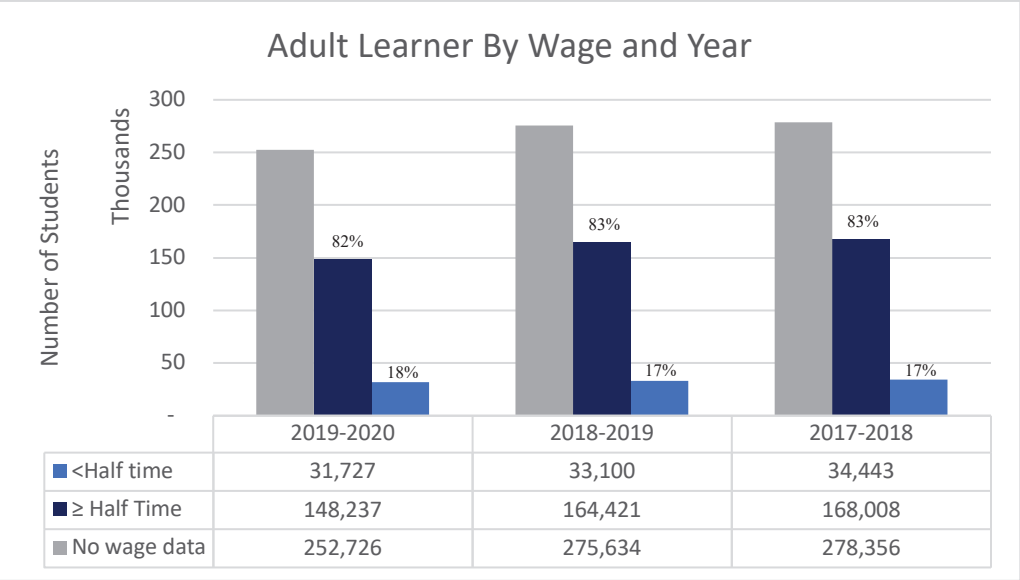
*Working adult learners compared to non-wage adult learners*




When further disaggregated, the sample reveals that of the total adult learners who work, a majority work half time or more. Specifically, as shown in Figure 7, across the sample years, 83% of working adult learners are employed half time or more.

**Figure 7**

*Adult learners by wage data and academic year*




## Adult Learner by Program Type and Working Status

Next, this study explores the types of programs in which adult learners are enrolled. I analyze enrollments in credit, career technical education (CTE), and noncredit programs. Table 4 illustrates that a majority of adult learners, or 50%, are enrolled in credit programs.

**Table 4**

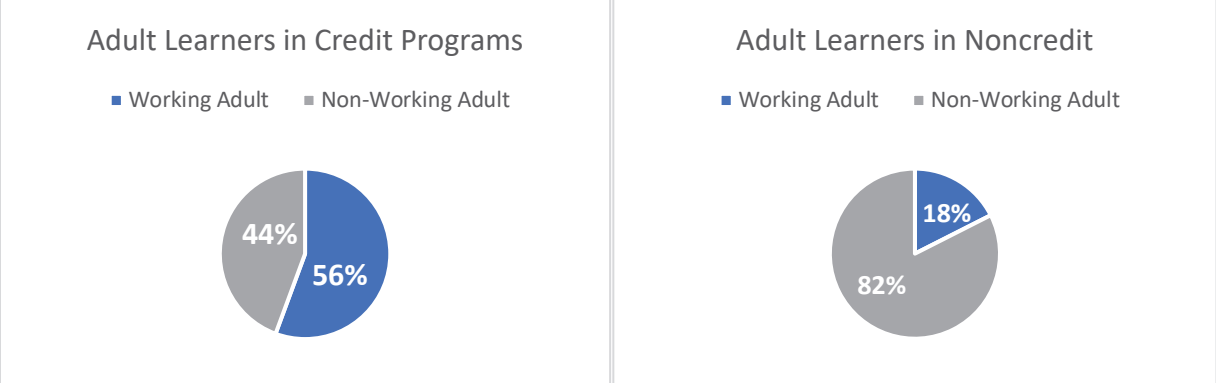
*Adult learners by program of enrollment (n= 1,767,680 across sample years)*

| Program Type | Working Adult | Non-Working Adult | Percent of Adult Learners in Program Type |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Credit** | 491,818 | 392,256 | 50% |
| **CTE** | 173,514 | 207,514 | 22% |
| **Noncredit** | 88,118 | 414,460 | 28% |
| **Total Adult Learners** | 1,767,680 | | |

Further, this particular analysis reveals that 56% of adult learners in credit program are simultaneously employed (Figure 8). By contrast, only 18% of adult learners in noncredit programs are concurrently working. Overall, the majority of adult learners are enrolled in credit programs designed to lead to an associate degree or transfer to a four-year university, and within credit programs, adult learners are more likely to be working.

**Figure 8**

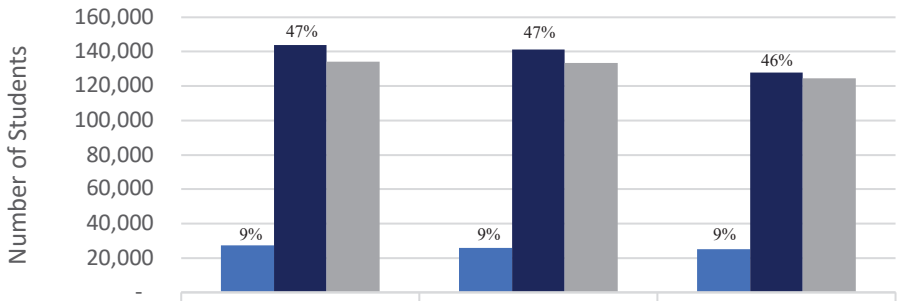
*Adult learners in credit programs vs. adult learners in noncredit programs*




Given the finding that 50% of adult learners are enrolled in credit programs, I next explore the level of employment (less than half time or equal to or greater than half time) for adult learners in credit program. To do this, I review the total credit adult learner enrollments (n= 884,074) by academic year and level of employment. As shown in Figure 9, across the three sample years, an average of 137,772 (average *n*= 296,691) of adult learner enrolled in credit courses work an amount equal to or greater than half time. This means that on average 46% of adult learner credit enrollments are individuals working 20 hours or more per week.

**Figure 9**

*Adult learner credit enrollments by level of employment*




| | 2017-2018 | 2018-2019 | 2019-2020 |
|---|---|---|---|
| <Half time | 27,205 | 26,046 | 25,249 |
| ≥ Half Time | 144,010 | 141,276 | 128,032 |
| No wage data | 134,153 | 133,439 | 124,664 |

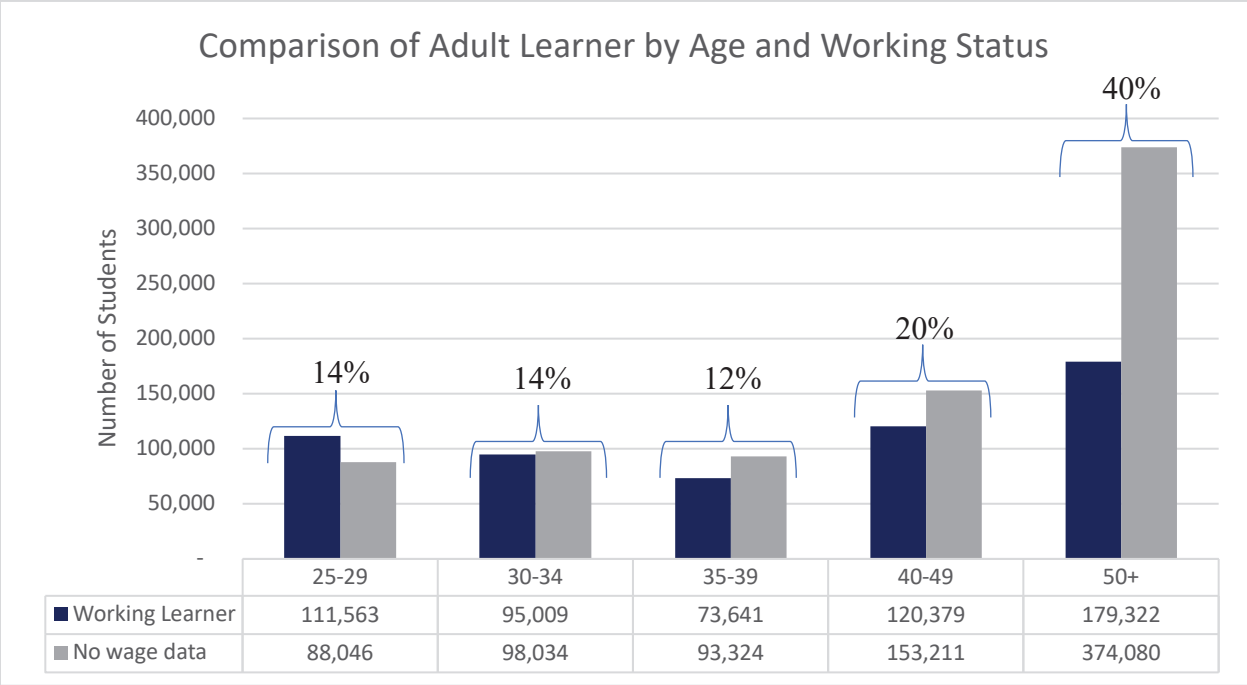
## Adult Learner by Age and Working Status

To further understand and build a profile of adult learners at California's community colleges, I next explore the number of adult enrollments by age group. This is an important measure as it can demonstrate whether California Community Colleges are serving a greater proportion of adults in one particular age group over the other. Data are organized according to the age ranges established within DataMart. The total sample consists of 1,386,652 students across the three academic years. Enrollment patterns generally remain the same across the three sample academic years.

As show in Figure 10, I find that students ages 50 and over comprise 40% of adult learner enrollment; a much larger proportion when compared to all other age groups. The second largest adult learner enrollment group, at 20%, is students ages 40-49. Students in ages 25-29 and 30-34 each comprise 14% of the adult learner population.

**Figure 10**

*Adult learner by age range and working status*




Due to this finding of a skewed age distribution, I adjust the remaining analytic dataset to exclude adults over the age 60. This modification can account for a possible over-representation of adults of retirement age in noncredit recreational or personal enrichment courses. The exclusion of individuals ages 60 and over also potentially excludes adults whose educational goal may not be to obtain a degree, certificate, or credential.

When excluding students ages 60 and over, 48.5% of adults ages 25-59 work while enrolled at a California Community College. This is an increase of 6.5 percentage points when comparing working adult learners across all ages.

**Working Adult Learners by Gender and Working Status***

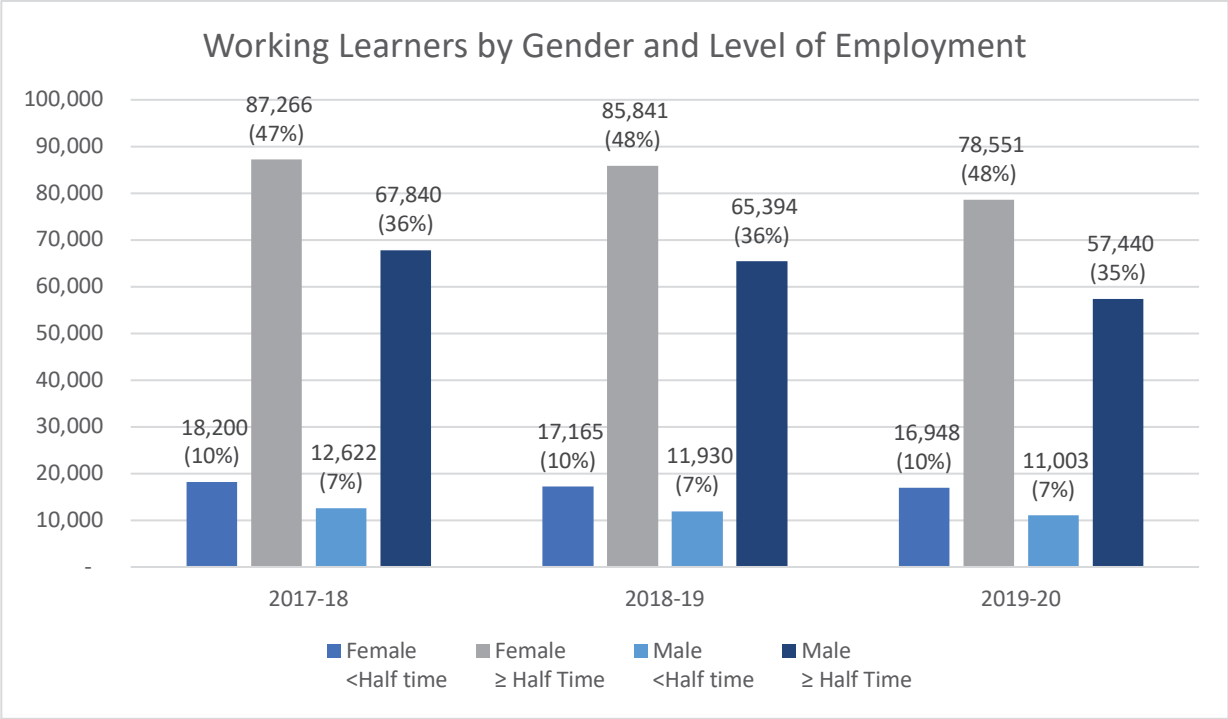
To continue building a profile of working adult students, I next analyze gender and levels of employment. I use the gender categories within MIS which include female, male, non-binary, and unknown. Given low sample sizes for non-binary and unknown gender identity students, I focus primarily on female and male working adult student enrollments across the three selected academic years.

On average, 56% of working adult students are female and 42% are male. Figure 11 shows female and male working adult learners by level of employment. For all female and male working adult learners in academic years 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20, females working more than 20 hours per week comprised 47%, 48%, and 48%, respectively, and males employed more than 20 hours per week comprised 36%, 36%, and 35%, respectively. Further analysis illustrates that among the population of female working adult learners, a majority (83%) are employed more than half time while attending college. Working adult male learners followed a similar pattern. Within the male working adult learner population, a majority work 20 hours or more while attending college – an average of 84% across the three sample years. This demonstrated that both females and males are working long hours, but a larger share of women are working over half-time while attending college.

* All remaining analysis exclude enrolled students ages 60 and over.

**Figure 11**

*Female and Male working learners by hours works*




**Working Adult Learners by Race and Ethnicity and Working Status***

In order to build a more complete profile of working adult learners at California's community colleges, the study next explores the race and ethnicity of working adult learners by level of employment. I analyze the race and ethnicity of working adult students' enrollments for academic years 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20. For consistency and replicability, I use the existing race and ethnicity categories within MIS data set.

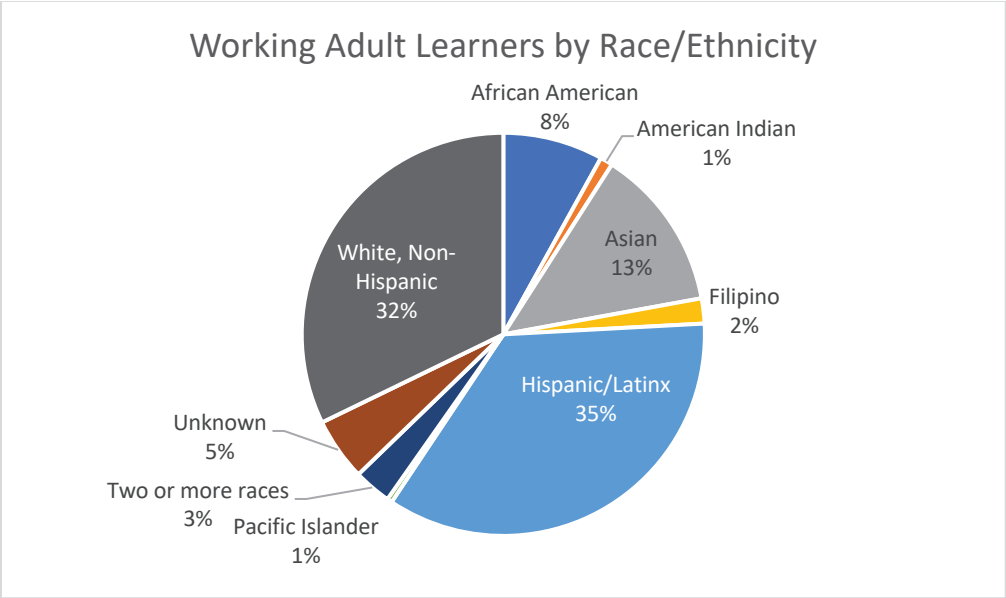
Figure 12 illustrates that a majority, or 35%, of working adult learners are Hispanic/Latinx. The next largest group of working adult learners is White/non-Hispanic at 32%, followed by Asian at 13%, and Black at 8%. By comparison, California census data indicates

* All remaining analysis exclude enrolled students ages 60 and over.

39% of Californians are Hispanic/Latinx, 36% are White, 15% are Asian, and 6% are Black (U.S Census Bureau, 2019).

**Figure 12**

*Working learners by race/ethnicity and average hours worked*

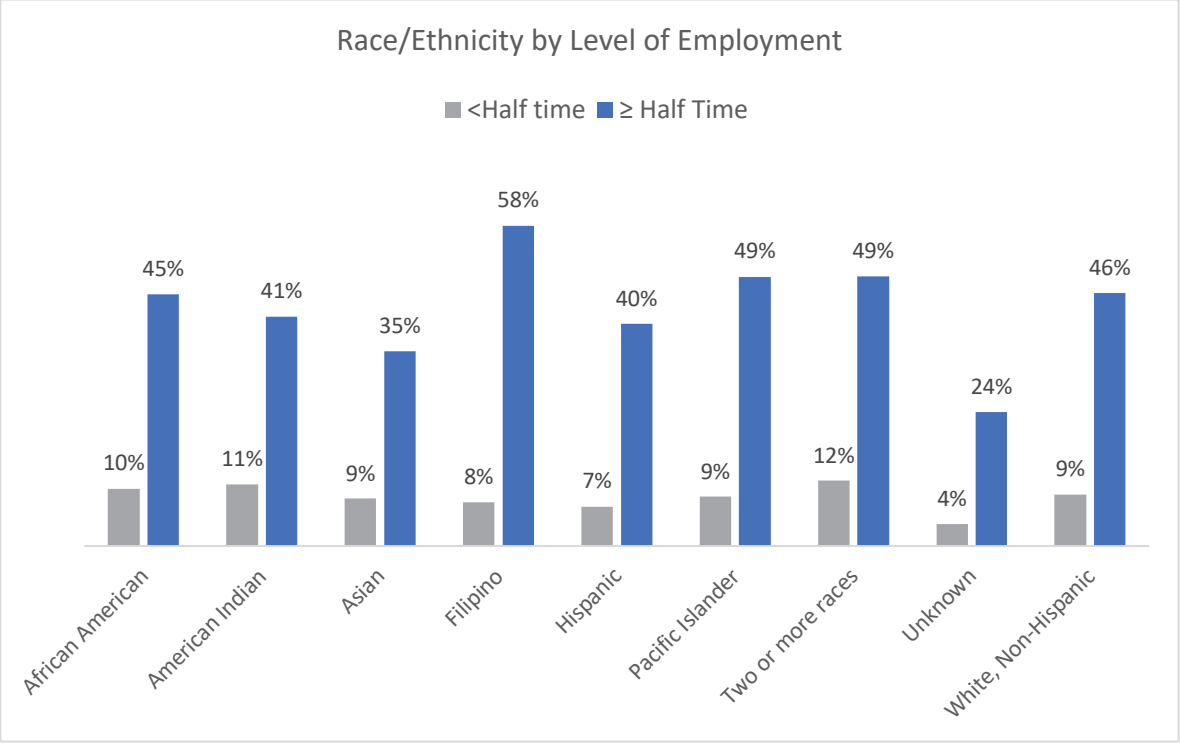



Next, this study investigates the level of employment (less than half-time versus half-time or more) by race and ethnicity to understand if certain groups of students work longer hours than others. When analyzing levels of employment, the first major observation is that across all race and ethnicity groups, most working adult learners are employed half-time or more. Figure 13 looks at level of employment by race and ethnicity as a share of the total population within each group. Strikingly, as shown in Figure 13, the two categories of working adult students with the highest proportion employed half-time or more are Filipino learners at 58%, followed by Pacific Islanders at 49%. Most other race and ethnicity categories are not far behind, White working adult learners at 46%, with followed by Black learners at 45%, and Hispanic/ Latinx learners at 40% - all employed more than half-time. This finding illustrates that most racial and ethnic

groups of working adult learners are balancing the responsibility of long hours or employment while striving to earn a degree, certificate, or transfer.

**Figure 13**

*Working learners by race/ethnicity and average hours worked*




**Working Adult Learners by Enrollment by Time of Day** *

In order to understand whether working adult learners predominantly enroll in courses during the day or evening, the next analysis explores enrollment by time of day. For this analysis, I used pre-established MIS definitions for day and evening students. A student enrolled in one or more sections that have a "Day Class" designation is categorized as a day student. A student enrolled in at least one section that has an "Evening Class" designation and did not meet

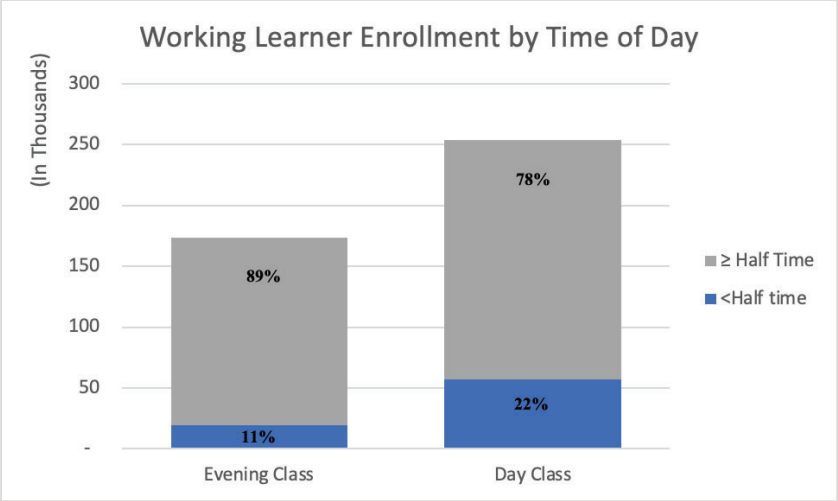
* All remaining analysis exclude enrolled students ages 60 and over.

the criteria of Day Student is categorized as an evening student. The analysis does not identify whether a student would prefer day or evening courses but rather the actual enrollment behaviors they follow.

As illustrated in Figure 14, across the three sample academic years, more working adult learners enroll in day classes. On average, 84,662 (or 59%) working adult learners enroll in day classes, compared to an average of 57,801(or 41%) who enroll in evening classes – a difference of 26,861. Of evening class working adult enrollments, a majority, 89%, are individuals who work more than half-time. Even among day class enrollments, 78% of working adults are employed more than half-time. It is difficult to indicate students' preference for day and/or evening classes without information about the proportion of course offerings between both times.

**Figure 14**

*Working learners by time-of-day enrollment*

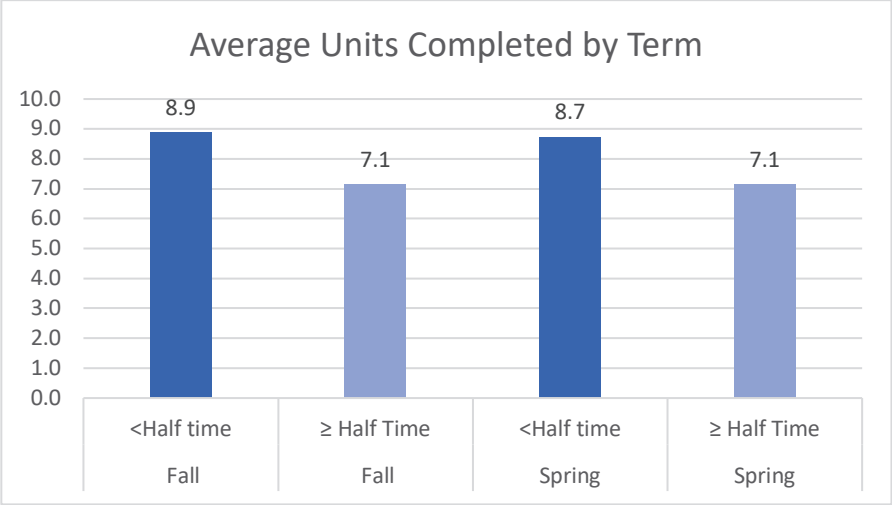


**Working Adult Learners by Units Completed***

My analysis yielded important details about the unit completion rates of working learners attending California Community Colleges, and how they differ based on the hours they spend working. This analysis looked at the average number of units completed per term by working adult students. Figure 15 shows that working learners who work longer hours complete fewer units, on average 1.7 fewer units per term. Most striking is the number of additional terms it would take an adult learner who works more than half-time to complete, if they persist. It would take an adult learner who works more than half-time two additional terms to complete a 60-unit degree. This represents a 31% increase in time and expense for completion, assuming the rate of credit accrual and the cost per credit remain constant throughout the entirety of their completion.

**Figure 15**

*Working learners by units completed per term*




* All remaining analysis exclude enrolled students ages 60 and over.

## Working Adult Learners Four-Year Cohort Outcomes*

Advancing equity and increasing completion among working adult learners is key to improving outcomes statewide. To understand the educational experiences and trajectories of working adult learners, the remaining sections of this chapter examine the outcomes of working adult learners. This section looks at the cohort of students who took their first community college course in the fall of 2014. Specifically, I review the four-year outcomes of the 2014-15 first time cohort of adult learners compared to students ages 25 and under (typically called traditional learners), and examine their success rates across the following measures in 2018-19:

a) Transfer to a four-year institution
b) Completion of degrees (AA/AS/ADT)
c) Certificates and Credentials

I chose to analyze four-year outcomes because a growing body of research, including a national study conducted by Complete College America,[2] indicates that the longer it takes an adult to complete college, the less likely the adult learner will finish. The all-too-common adage comes into play; the longer adults are in college, the more likely it is that life will get in the way.

### Four-Year Transfer Outcomes to a Four-Year Institution

The transformation of the world economy has put a premium on higher education, particularly baccalaureate degrees. However, many conversations surrounding transfer outcomes fail to include information about adult learners, specifically working adult learners. This analysis examines the transfer outcomes of adult and traditional learners with and without EDD wage data, and differential work hours per week (i.e., < 20 hours per week and 20 hours per week or more). Though outcomes vary for adult learners, they are particularly grim for adult learners

* All remaining analysis exclude enrolled students ages 60 and over.
[2] Time Is the Enemy (Washington, DC: Complete College America, September 2011).

working more than 20 hours per week. For these students, successful transfers to a four-year institution are a dire 11.1%. As seen in Table 5, overall, only 8% of adult learners who started in 2014-15 transferred within four years.

**Table 5**

*Four Year Cohort Transfer Outcomes*

| Four Year Cohort Transfer Outcomes | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Adult** | | | | | | | | |
| **Transfer** | **No wage data** | | **< Half time** | | **≥ Half Time** | | **Total** | **Percent Outcomes** |
| **No** | 71,443 | 94.6% | 5,563 | 84.7% | 31,048 | 88.9% | 108,054 | 92% |
| **Yes** | 4,044 | 5.4% | 1,004 | 15.3% | 3,873 | 11.1% | 8,921 | 8% |
| **Total** | 75,487 | 100.0% | 6,567 | 100.0% | 34,921 | 100.0% | 116,975 | 100% |
| **Traditional** | | | | | | | | |
| **Transfer** | **No wage data** | | **< Half time** | | **≥ Half Time** | | **Total** | **Percent Outcomes** |
| **No** | 78,613 | 72.2% | 21,781 | 54.1% | 112,213 | 67.9% | 212,607 | 68% |
| **Yes** | 30,248 | 27.8% | 18,483 | 45.9% | 53,018 | 32.1% | 101,749 | 32% |
| **Total** | 108,861 | 100.0% | 40264 | 100.0% | 165231 | 100.0% | 314,356 | 100% |
| **Total Non-Transfer (Adult and Traditional)** | | | | | | | 320,661 | 74% |
| **Total Transfer (Adult and Traditional)** | | | | | | | 110,670 | 26% |
| **Total Students (Adult and Traditional)** | | | | | | | 431,331 | 100% |

Within four years, 8% (or 8,921) adult learners of the total population of 116,975 had transferred. Table 5 illustrates that transfer outcomes for traditional learners are much higher, 24 percentage points higher, than those of adult learners across all employment types. Still, four-year transfer outcomes for all students, adult and traditional, were only 26%. Traditional learners working less than half time had the highest four-year transfer outcomes at 45.9%, even higher than non-wage traditional learners whose transfer outcomes were at 27.8%. A similar pattern is seen for adult learners, with adults working less than half-time having the highest outcomes among this group, at 15.3%. Surprisingly, non-wage adult learners had the lowest transfer outcomes among adult student, at 5.4%. Table 5 also shows that among working adult learners, students who work more than half time had lower four-year transfer outcomes, at 11.1%,

compared to 15.3% for those working less than 20 hours. The successful transfer rates of traditional students who work more than half-time is 32%, a striking 21 percentage points higher than for adults working at the same intensity. In total, 88% (or 36,611) of a total working adult learner population of 41,488 had not transferred within four years. Comprising 45% of the total four-year cohort population, traditional non-wage students demonstrate a more prominent transfer advantage. This table also describes that adult learners consist of 13% of successful transfers within four years, with working adults comprising 7% of those transfers. By contracts, working adults are 9% of all non-transfers.

**Four Year Cohort Degree Outcomes**

Postsecondary degrees have become critical to keep pace with the changing economy. This section compares the four-year degree and transfer outcomes of the 2014-15 cohort in 2018-19, degree outcomes of adults and traditional learners who: 1) have no EDD wage data, 2) work less than 20 hours per week (< half time), 3) work more than 20 hours per week (≥ half time). Table 6 below illustrated that only 4% of adult learners earn a degree within four years. This is in contrast to the 13% of traditional learners that earn a degree within four years. Though the degree outcomes are low for both groups, adult learner degree outcomes are 9 percentage points lower than those of traditional students.

**Table 6**

*Four Year Cohort Degree Outcomes*

| Four Year Cohort Degree Outcomes | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adult | | | | | | | | |
| **Degree** | **No wage data** | | **< Half time** | | **≥ Half Time** | | **Total** | **Percent Outcomes** |
| **No** | 73,555 | 97.4% | 6,152 | 93.7% | 33,168 | 95% | 112,875 | 96% |
| **Yes** | 1,932 | 2.6% | 415 | 6.3% | 1,753 | 5% | 4,100 | 4% |
| **Total** | 75,487 | 100.0% | 6,567 | 100.0% | 34,921 | 100.0% | 116,975 | 100% |

| Traditional | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Degree** | **No wage data** | | **< Half time** | | **≥ Half Time** | | **Total** | **Percent Outcomes** |
| **No** | 96,101 | 88.3% | 34,105 | 84.7% | 142,977 | 86.5% | 273,183 | 87% |
| **Yes** | 12,760 | 11.7% | 6,159 | 15.3% | 22,254 | 13.5% | 41,173 | 13% |
| **Total** | 108,861 | 100.0% | 40,264 | 100.0% | 165,231 | 100.0% | 314,356 | 100% |
| **Total Non-Degrees (Adult and Traditional)** | | | | | | | 386,058 | 90% |
| **Total Degrees (Adult and Traditional)** | | | | | | | 45,273 | 10% |
| **Total Students (Adult and Traditional)** | | | | | | | 431,331 | 100% |

Table 6 illustrates the surprising finding that 97.4% of non-wage adult learners do not complete an associate degree within four years; a completion rate of 2.6%. Degree completion rates for working adults however are not much higher. Adults working less than part-time had a cohort degree completion rate of 6.3%, which means that 93.7% did not finish a degree within four years. Four-year cohort degree completion rates for adults working more than 20 hours per week were even lower at 5%, with 95% not completing in this time period. In contrast, traditional learners working 20 hour or more per week had a completion rate of 13.5%, 8.5 percentage points higher. Overall, for adult and traditional learners combined, only 10% completed a degree within four years.

Among traditional learners, students working less than part-time had the highest outcomes at 15.3%. Still, 84.7% of students working at this intensity did not complete a degree within four years. When looking at traditional students working 20 hours or more per week, Table 6 shows that 142,977, or 86.5%, did not complete a degree within four years. A combined analysis of both adult and traditional learners across all employment levels reveals that 91% of successful cohort outcomes are from traditional students. Adult learners only comprise 9% of all successful cohort degree outcomes, of which 5% are working learners.

## Four Year Cohort Certificate Outcomes

This final cohort analysis compares the certificate completion rates of adult and traditional learners who: 1) have no EDD wage data, 2) work less than 20 hours per week (< half time), 3) work more than 20 hours per week (≥ half time). An analysis of certificate outcome is valuable because these programs are often promoted to adult learners as an opportunity to gain employability within a short period of time.

**Table 7**

*Four Year Cohort Certificate Outcomes*

| Four Year Cohort Certificate Outcomes | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Adult** | | | | | | | | |
| **Certificate** | **No wage data** | | **< Half time** | | **≥ Half Time** | | **Total** | **Percent Outcomes** |
| **No** | 73,718 | 97.7% | 6,184 | 94.2% | 33,070 | 94.7% | 112,972 | 97% |
| **Yes** | 1,769 | 2.3% | 383 | 5.8% | 1,851 | 5.3% | 4,003 | 3% |
| **Total** | 75,487 | 100.0% | 6,567 | 100.0% | 34,921 | 100.0% | 116,975 | 100% |
| **Traditional** | | | | | | | | |
| **Certificate** | **No wage data** | | **< Half time** | | **≥ Half Time** | | **Total** | **Percent Outcomes** |
| **No** | 101,302 | 93.1% | 36,874 | 91.6% | 153,097 | 92.7% | 291,273 | 93% |
| **Yes** | 7,559 | 6.9% | 3,390 | 8.4% | 12,134 | 7.3% | 23,083 | 7% |
| **Total** | 108,861 | 100.0% | 40,264 | 100.0% | 165,231 | 100.0% | 314,356 | 100% |
| **Total Non-Certificate (Adult and Traditional)** | | | | | | | 404,245 | 94% |
| **Total Certificates (Adult and Traditional)** | | | | | | | 27,086 | 6% |
| **Total Students (Adult and Traditional)** | | | | | | | 431,331 | 100% |

Table 7 shows that 97% of all adult learners in certificate programs did not complete a certificate within four years. Only 3% of adults completed a certificate within this time period. Non-wage adults represented the largest adult learner population but they also represent the lowest certificate completion rates, at 2.3% within four years. This is surprising as certificates are often promoted as a viable option for adults, particularly since many certificates have fewer unit requirements than transfer and associate degrees.

Among working adults, those working less than part-time and those working part-time or more generally had the same certificate outcomes, at 5.8% and 5.3% respectively. For adults who worked while enrolled in certificate programs, the vast majority, 84% (or 34,921), worked 20 hours or more per week. This is in contrast to 6,567 adults who work less than part-time.

The outcomes are for traditional students are also grim, with 93% not completing a certificate within four years. Among traditional learners, students working 20 hours or more per week represent the largest population at 153,097 of the total 291,273. Traditional learners working more than part-time had a completion rate of 7.3%. The highest completion rate was among traditional learners working less than part-time, at 8.4%; this is even higher than the four-year degree completion rates for traditional learners with non-wage data. Though adult learners are often seen as key beneficiaries of certificate programs, adults only comprise 15% of successful cohort certificate completions. Of those, 8% are working adults.

## Snapshot of Working Adult Learners Outcomes*

Millions of working-age Californians are competing in an economy tainted by a pandemic and a workplace where jobs and emerging industries increasingly require new skills and knowledge. This growing reality elevates the need for college degrees and credentials, especially for displaced workers and individuals with families. This study next explores a second view of success rates by looking at a snapshot of outcomes in three different academic years. The snapshot analysis differs from the previous cohort analysis in that it does not set time parameters around success rates. This analysis only looks at how working adult learners fared in any given year as compared to traditional students. Again, the success rates of working adult learners are

* All remaining analysis exclude enrolled students ages 60 and over.

compared to non-working adult students. Specifically, this next section looks at snapshot of the following outcome in 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20:

a) Transfer to a four-year institution,

b) Completion of degrees (AA/AS/ADT),

c) Certificates and Credentials.

**Transfer to a Four-Year Institution**

Community college reforms like Guided Pathways have centered on providing a more streamlined journey to success. Transfer, in particular, has been a key focus given the growing recognition that the path to a four-year institution was not designed with post-traditional students in mind. Table 8 illustrates that across all three samples years, students under 25 comprise a significant majority of successful transfers. Interestingly, in all three academic years, working learners were a larger share of successful transfer outcome. This may be due to the fact that such a large proportion of community college students work.

**Table 8**

*Snapshot of Transfer Outcomes*

| Successful Transfer | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Academic Year** | **No wage data** | **<Half time** | **≥ Half Time** | **Total** | **Percent Working** |
| **Adult (age ≥ 25)** | | | | | |
| 2017-2018 | 123,523 | 21,386 | 115,180 | 260,089 | 53% |
| 2018-2019 | 115,552 | 18,898 | 109,995 | 244,445 | 53% |
| 2019-2020 | 47,588 | 7,837 | 45,074 | 100,499 | 53% |
| **Traditional (age <25)** | | | | | |
| 2017-2018 | 739,560 | 371,911 | 1,003,885 | 2,115,356 | 65% |
| 2018-2019 | 682,221 | 332,066 | 996,418 | 2,010,705 | 66% |
| 2019-2020 | 269,554 | 121,275 | 416,143 | 806,972 | 67% |
| Average Across Sample Academic Years | | | | 1,846,022 | |
| Working Adult Learner Average Transfer | | | | 106,123 | |
| Percent of Working Adult Transfer | | | | 6% | |

On average, 53% of adult learner transfers are working adults. While transfer rates remain steady for working adult learners, they have gone up by one percentage point each year for traditional working learners. On average across the sample years, working adult learners represent 6% of total transfers. The table also demonstrates that traditional learners vastly outnumber adult learners in transfer.

**Completion of Degrees (AA/AS/ADT)**

For California Community Colleges, working adult learners can play an important role in advancing the equity and degree goals in the Vision for Success. Baseline information is valuable in determining opportunities for improvement. Table 9 shows that students under 25 account for the majority of degree completions, with most also being working learners. On average, 6,900 working adult learners completed a degree each academic year, representing about 52% of adult learners. Degree completion rates for working traditional learners was, on average, 19 percentage points higher than those of working adult learners. Table 9 show that even though degree completion rates rose slightly across the three years, working adults only comprised 5% of total degree completions.

**Table 9**

*Snapshot of Degree Outcomes*

| Successful Degree Completion | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Academic Year** | **No wage data** | **<Half time** | **≥ Half Time** | **Total** | **Percent Working** |
| **Adult (age ≥ 25)** | | | | | |
| 2017-2018 | 5,763 | 1,404 | 4,885 | 12,052 | 52% |
| 2018-2019 | 6,232 | 1,429 | 5,556 | 13,217 | 53% |
| 2019-2020 | 6,720 | 1,476 | 5,950 | 14,146 | 52% |
| **Traditional (age <25)** | | | | | |
| 2017-2018 | 33,005 | 15,746 | 64,883 | 113,634 | 71% |
| 2018-2019 | 38,542 | 17,930 | 78,063 | 134,535 | 71% |
| 2019-2020 | 42,343 | 19,649 | 80,030 | 142,022 | 70% |
| Average Across Sample Academic Years | | | | 143,202 | |
| Working Adult Learner Average Completion | | | | 6,900 | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Percent of Working Adult Degree Completions | 5% |

**Completion of Certificates**

Across the three samples years, working adult learners comprise 14%, on average, of all certificate completions. Table 10 illustrates that for both adult and traditional learners, a majority of successful certificate completion are from students working part-time or more per week. It illustrates that within the adult learners population only, on average, 58% of certificate completions are from working adult learners. Like transfer and degree completion, certificate data also shows that certificate outcomes are much higher for traditional learners than they are for adult learners.

**Table 10**

*Snapshot of Certificate Outcomes*

| Successful Certificate Completion | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Academic Year** | **No wage data** | **<Half time** | **≥ Half Time** | **Total** | **Percent Working** |
| **Adult (age ≥ 25)** | | | | | |
| 2017-2018 | 3569 | 1075 | 4069 | 8,713 | 59% |
| 2018-2019 | 4032 | 1060 | 4603 | 9,695 | 58% |
| 2019-2020 | 4151 | 1162 | 4492 | 9,805 | 58% |
| **Traditional (age <25)** | | | | | |
| 2017-2018 | 14932 | 7086 | 27919 | 49,937 | 70% |
| 2018-2019 | 17953 | 8732 | 36951 | 63,636 | 72% |
| 2019-2020 | 19701 | 9321 | 37591 | 66,613 | 70% |
| Average Across Sample Academic Years | | | | 69,466 | |
| Working Adult Learner Average | | | | 9,404 | |
| Percent of Working Adult Certificate Completions | | | | 14% | |

## Discussion and Summary

At 61%, working learners comprise a majority of student enrollments at California Community Colleges. Across all ages and programs, students are working many hours; 32% of all students work 20 hours or more per week. Surprisingly, adult learners, those 25 and older,

only comprise 27% of total enrollments, an average of 462,217 across the sample years. Students ages 50 and over comprise 40% of adult learner enrollment; a much larger proportion when compared to all other age groups, a sign that colleges may still view their role in serving adults through the lens of enrichment programs for older adults.

Working learners are a large share of the adult student population, comprising a total of 42%. However, when excluding students ages 60 and over, that percentage jumps to 48.5% of adults ages 25-59 who work while enrolled at a California Community College. Though career technical education programs are often seen as the go-to for adults, a majority of working adult learners, or 56%, are enrolled in credit programs. The vast majority, 83%, of working adult learners are employed half time or more. Fifty six percent of working adult students are female. At 35%, Hispanic/Latinx are the largest working adult learner population. Across all racial and ethnic groups, 80% to 86% of adults are working more than 20 hours per week.

Working adults illustrate several patterns of enrollment that prove challenging for transfer, degree, or certificate completion. For example, based on average unit completion, it would take an adult learner who works more than half-time two additional terms to complete a 60-unit degree.

Success rates across all measures (transfer, degree, and certificate) are disheartening for working adult learners. Only 8% of adult learners transfer within four years. Adults working less than part-time had a transfer rate of 15%, while adults working more than part-time, had a transfer rate of 11%. Only 4% of adult learners earn a degree within four years, with 5% of those working more than part-time earning a degree. And, only 3% of adults completed a certificate within this time period. This is surprising given that these shorter programs are often upheld as a promising option for adults. When looking at snapshot data, working adult learners represent 6%

of total transfers. Snapshot data also shows that working adults only comprised 5% of total degree completions, and 14%, on average, of all certificate completions.

To build a profile of the important yet largely overlooked working adult learner population, this study combined a unique data set to learn about their characteristics, enrollment patterns, and outcomes. Advancing equity and increasing transfer, degree, and certificate completion among working adult learners is key to improving outcomes statewide, though current data illustrates that much progress is still needed and will be difficult without an intentional focus on this population's success. A first step in this intentional focus is to regularly review working and adult learner data as a way of understanding the working adult student learning journey and outcomes. The findings in this chapter present one facet of a broader understanding of working adult learner experiences at California Community Colleges. In order to inform how colleges can better serve this large and diverse student population, understanding direct messaging and student-level experiences is key. The next two chapters provide valuable context for better serving working adult learners. Further analysis can also help glean individual and institutional factors (Tinto, 2006) influencing working adult learner outcomes and how institutions can better adapt to this important student population.

# CHAPTER SIX: RESEARCH QUESTION 2

*"Sometimes when I know that I really need to speak to somebody one-on-one I have to apply for a day off of at work so that I can fit into their schedule."*
-Female participant from Central California

## Qualitative Document Analysis: College Receptiveness of Working Adult Students

Colleges can expect adult learners to be an increasing share of total enrollment, as numbers of high school graduates in California begin to decline by 2024 and expected to continue through at least 2037.[3] Whether colleges notice this changing tide and are ready to act is yet to be determined. Through a qualitative document analysis, the next chapter in this study explores the question, *how do California Community Colleges communicate their receptiveness of working adult students*?

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic (Bowen, 2009). The data for this portion of the study was collected from a representative sample of California Community College websites. A total of 24 of the 116 California community college websites were reviewed. Websites are an institution's "virtual face" (Meyer & Jones, 2011). Colleges focus time and resources on developing and improving their websites in an attempt to convey a specific image to their students and community. For some community college students, websites are a primary source of advice (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018). At a glance, the home page should identify what the college does, who it does it for, and why the college is different or worthwhile. Accurate and easily navigable websites can go a long way toward helping students make optimal decisions (GAO, 2017). Burdman and Purnell (2020) argue that colleges have the responsibility to send effective signals, emphasizing that

[3] https://www.dof.ca.gov/Forecasting/Demographics/Projections/Public_K-12_Graded_Enrollment/

misconceptions can be especially damaging to students who already lack equitable access to educational opportunity.

College websites are essential to these institutions' marketing practices (Carnevale, 2005). Upwards of 84% of prospective students report using institutional websites to gather information on colleges, and they remain the most prevalent outlet for prospective student inquiries (NACAC, 2011). As a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and with community college campuses mostly closed, websites are an even more important source of information, as students have had reduced access to college instructors, advisors, and fellow students.

This document analysis reviews the explicit institutional supports available to working adult students by evaluating messaging, services, and programs of study highlighted on college websites. The purpose of this analysis is to understand the nature of information students receive via content accessible on a college's website. Further, to answer research question two, this document analysis explores whether a prospective working adult would find select college websites receptive by making key information, such as required time commitments and flexibility, conveyed clearly.

**Why Website Receptivity Matters**

A 2021 report by California Competes emphasizes that adult learners have the potential to narrow California's degree and credential gap but only if the conditions are suitable for them to enroll and eventually succeed. Extensive research (PPIC, 2014; Brooking Institute, 2018; Carnevale, 2005) stress that efforts to increase college attendance among recent high school graduates will not be sufficient to close a growing skilled workforce gap. Working-age Californians are competing in an economy tainted by a pandemic and a workplace where transformed jobs increasingly require new skills and credentials to acquire jobs with living

wages.[4] Further, as a result of lower immigration levels, a significant decline in births and an aging baby boomer community, California's population is growing at an annual rate of 0.47 percent, the lowest rate in the state's history (California Department of Finance, 2020). These conditions have contributed to widespread enrollment declines in community colleges, not just in California but across the nation (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). Importantly, colleges can expect adult learners to increase as a share of prospective enrollments, as numbers of high school graduates in California begin to decline and continue to do so through at least 2037 (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2020). Vassiliadis (2002) emphasizes that when prospective students visit a website, they are engaging in information-seeking behavior. California's community colleges have a distinct opportunity to ameliorate enrollment declines and bridge the state's workforce gap by focusing engagement, enrollment, and completion efforts at the population of adults ages 25 years and older – a population which includes an estimated 6.8 individuals without degrees or credentials (California Competes, 2021). Success or failure in providing the information this population seeks on community colleges websites could be the deciding factor in their enrollment.

## Sample

For this study, I selected and reviewed 24 California Community College websites. The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office organizes colleges into eight Guided Pathways and Strong Workforce regions[5] (CCCCO, 2020). In order to obtain a representative sample, districts were organized according to the eight regions. From there, I selected three colleges per identified region. To minimize bias in the selection process, I used data from the

[4] Only about 64 percent of Californians currently earn a living wage: https://californiacompetes.org/assets/general-files/CACompetes_P2P-Full-Report.pdf
[5] Eight regions: Bay Area; Central/Mother Lode; Inland Empire/Desert; Los Angeles; Orange County; North/Far North; San Diego/Imperial; and South Central Coast.

quantitative findings in this study (Chapter Five) to rank districts according to the percentage of adults 25 and older enrolled. From each region, I selected three districts who met the criteria of highest, median, and lowest enrollment of adults 25 and older (see Table 11). The final sample includes institutions of varied sizes and diverse student populations.

**Table 11**

*Ranking for Website Sample Selection*

| Region | Percent Adults 25+ Enrolled by District | Selected Districts |
|---|---|---|
| Sacramento & Far North | District Name / Percent Adults<br>SISKIYOUS 52%<br>LASSEN 43%<br>LAKE TAHOE 35%<br>FEATHER RIVER 30%<br>MENDOCINO-LAKE 25%<br>REDWOODS 23%<br>LOS RIOS 18%<br>SHASTA-TEHAMA-TRINITY 16%<br>BUTTE 14%<br>SIERRA 13%<br>YUBA 13% | High: College of the Siskiyous<br><br>Median: College of the Redwoods<br><br>Low: Yuba CCD |
| Bay Area | District Name / Percent Adults<br>SAN FRANCISCO 46%<br>MARIN 34%<br>WEST VALLEY-MISSION 30%<br>HARTNELL 29%<br>SONOMA 28%<br>MONTEREY 23%<br>PERALTA 22%<br>GAVILAN 21%<br>CABRILLO 20%<br>SAN JOSE-EVERGREEN 18%<br>NAPA VALLEY 18%<br>FOOTHILL-DEANZA 18%<br>CHABOT-LAS POSITAS 16%<br>SAN MATEO 16%<br>OHLONE 16%<br>CONTRA COSTA 14% | High: City College of San Francisco<br><br>Median: Cabrillo College<br><br>Low: Contra Costa CCD |
| Central | District Name / Percent Adults<br>WEST KERN 27%<br>MERCED 17%<br>YOSEMITE 16%<br>KERN 13%<br>WEST HILLS 12%<br>SEQUOIAS 11%<br>SAN JOAQUIN DELTA 11%<br>STATE CENTER 10% | High: West Kern CCD<br><br>Median: Kern CCD<br><br>Low: State Center CCD |

<table>
<tr><td>South Central</td><td><table><tr><th>District Name</th><th>Percent Adults</th></tr><tr><td>ALLAN HANCOCK</td><td>23%</td></tr><tr><td>SANTA CLARITA</td><td>21%</td></tr><tr><td>SAN LUIS OBISPO</td><td>17%</td></tr><tr><td>SANTA BARBARA</td><td>16%</td></tr><tr><td>ANTELOPE VALLEY</td><td>15%</td></tr><tr><td>VENTURA</td><td>9%</td></tr></table></td><td>High: Allan Hancock College<br><br>Median: Santa Barbara City College<br><br>Low: Ventura CCD</td></tr>
<tr><td>San Diego/Imperial</td><td><table><tr><th>District Name</th><th>Percent Adults</th></tr><tr><td>SAN DIEGO</td><td>33%</td></tr><tr><td>MIRA COSTA</td><td>23%</td></tr><tr><td>IMPERIAL</td><td>17%</td></tr><tr><td>SOUTHWESTERN</td><td>17%</td></tr><tr><td>GROSSMONT-CUYAMACA</td><td>17%</td></tr><tr><td>PALOMAR</td><td>16%</td></tr></table></td><td>High: San Diego CCD<br><br>Median: Imperial Valley College<br><br>Low: Palomar College</td></tr>
<tr><td>Inland Empire/Desert</td><td><table><tr><th>District Name</th><th>Percent Adults</th></tr><tr><td>PALO VERDE</td><td>57%</td></tr><tr><td>BARSTOW</td><td>22%</td></tr><tr><td>MT. SAN JACINTO</td><td>21%</td></tr><tr><td>COPPER MOUNTAIN</td><td>21%</td></tr><tr><td>DESERT</td><td>20%</td></tr><tr><td>SAN BERNARDINO</td><td>14%</td></tr><tr><td>VICTOR VALLEY</td><td>13%</td></tr><tr><td>CHAFFEY</td><td>12%</td></tr><tr><td>RIVERSIDE</td><td>11%</td></tr></table></td><td>High: Palo Verde College<br><br>Median: College of the Desert<br><br>Low: Riverside CCD</td></tr>
<tr><td>Los Angeles</td><td><table><tr><th>District Name</th><th>Percent Adults</th></tr><tr><td>GLENDALE</td><td>36%</td></tr><tr><td>LOS ANGELES</td><td>24%</td></tr><tr><td>SANTA MONICA</td><td>22%</td></tr><tr><td>RIO HONDO</td><td>19%</td></tr><tr><td>CERRITOS</td><td>19%</td></tr><tr><td>MT. SAN ANTONIO</td><td>18%</td></tr><tr><td>PASADENA</td><td>18%</td></tr><tr><td>LONG BEACH</td><td>14%</td></tr><tr><td>COMPTON</td><td>11%</td></tr><tr><td>EL CAMINO</td><td>10%</td></tr><tr><td>CITRUS</td><td>9%</td></tr></table></td><td>High: Glendale Community College<br><br>Median: Mt. San Antonio College<br><br>Low: Citrus College</td></tr>
<tr><td>Orange County</td><td><table><tr><th>District Name</th><th>Percent Adults</th></tr><tr><td>RANCHO SANTIAGO</td><td>34%</td></tr><tr><td>SOUTH ORANGE</td><td>31%</td></tr><tr><td>NORTH ORANGE</td><td>28%</td></tr><tr><td>COAST</td><td>18%</td></tr></table></td><td>High: Rancho Santiago CCD<br><br>Median: North Orange County CCD<br><br>Low: Coast CCD</td></tr>
</table>

## Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process consisted of a review and compilation of sample artifacts available on 24 selected California Community Colleges websites during the months of February through April 2021. During these months, California was still in a state of emergency[6] due to the pandemic and colleges were primarily operating online. Data collected from sample websites included text excerpts, images, messages, services, programs, or policies on community college websites that could appeal to a working adult, either current or prospective enrollee. I also explored the ease of navigation for each of the sample websites. Specifically, I reviewed each site for constructs and information presented in Table 12, Crosswalk of Constructs and Review Areas/Topics.

[6] On March 4, 2020, Governor Newsom declared a State of Emergency in light of rising COVID-19 cases. https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/03/04/governor-newsom-declares-state-of-emergency-to-help-state-prepare-for-broader-spread-of-covid-19/

**Table 12**

*Crosswalk of Constructs and Review Areas/Topics*

| Construct | Review Area/Topic | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **College Homepage** | **Key Word Search: 1) Short-term, 2) Flexibility/ Flexible, 3) Adults** | **Ease of Navigation** |
| **Receptiveness of Working Adults.** This construct considers how welcoming working adult students may find colleges based on direct (content, text, information) and indirect (images, formatting, ease of navigation) messaging on colleges websites. Further, this construct considers who the target audience is for the college website. | Analysis of content, images, and messages, highlighted or promoted information. Considers first impressions working adults may get from the homepage. | This component considers whether college websites address some of the basic questions a prospective working adult student might have about time commitment, available degree pathways, and requirements to complete a degree or credential. The key word "adults" is applicable to this construct. | Review whether a prospective student could easily find information such as the application, degree programs, class schedule, financial aid, etc. Also explores functionality (including design and structure) of the website and clarity of content for working adults. |
| **Flexibility of Programs and Services.** Flexibility of programs and services describes colleges' willingness to adapt to the needs of working adults and post-traditional learners. | This analysis considers whether working adults will find flexible programs or services (including those offered at nontraditional hours) on the homepage. Evaluates whether it's a message that colleges lead with. | The key words "short-term" and "flexibility" or "flexible" are applicable to this construct. Examples may information describing allowing credits to be earned by life experience/prior learning assessment, if credits can be earned via examination, or if accelerated or short-term programs are available. | Reviews whether a prospective working students can easily find information (such as the amount of time needed to complete a degree), whether they can find support online or afterhours, and the clarity of content. |
| **Services Available for Adult Students.** This construct consists of analyzing whether there are services, support groups, or programs distinctly targeting adult working students. | Considers the information advertised by the college. Reviews whether colleges offer services adult students would most likely to use, such as financial aid counseling, on-campus daycare, | The key words applicable to this construct are "adults" and "flexibility" or "flexible." Examples include if weekend and/or evening classes are offered, if academic support is available | Reviews the availability of dedicated or directed programs or services for working adults, how easily they found them on the site, and whether content was clear. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | counseling services, job placement services, or veterans' services, among others. | during nontraditional hours, or if academic supports are available on evening and weekends. | |

To explore how California's community colleges communicate their receptiveness of working adult students, the collected data are analyzed to identify patterns of communication and messaging to enrolled and prospective adult and working students. The purpose is to gain an understanding of how receptive working adults might perceive colleges to be. I analyze specific aspects of each college webpage. An analysis of homepages focuses on how online messaging and guidance can support or detract working adults during the onboarding process. Anctil (2008), Hossler (1999), and Poock & Lefond (2001), explain that prospective students use websites to differentiate among what is a crowded higher education marketplace. Therefore, the intention behind the keyword search analysis is to understand the experience of students searching for and consuming information based on their characteristics and needs.

The document analysis is conducted utilizing a qualitative approach. Merriam (2009) notes that a distinguishing feature of qualitative research is, "the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (p. 15). The document analysis summarizes how readily working adults might find the information they need to support their academic success. Each of the 24 webpages was reviewed through the lens of a working adult. To do this, I make several assumptions: a prospective student would be 25 or older, working 25-40 hours per week, low income, and limited on time. A range of 20 to 30 minutes was provided for the dedicated exploration of each of the 24 sample websites.

I organized the data collected from college websites into a table with a row per college and a column for the homepage, each key word, ease of navigation, and receptivity. I summarized my findings and observations in tables and descriptive narratives of colleges' forms

of communication on website to the adult student population. Following the initial exploration, a secondary review was conducted to document key information and snapshots. Specifically, the data collected from college websites was coded using open coding to tag significant phrases specific to the study's research questions and theoretical framework. Codes were derived from theoretical considerations and from the literature. Coded data was organized according to the defined constructs in Table 12, above, and used to derive findings.

## Qualitative Results

For a majority of students, the first interaction they have with a community college is online through its website. Websites touch all 2.1 million California community college students, yet their design tends to prioritize institutional need over the student experience (Schultz, 2015). The content and images that appear on these sites provide many prospective students with their first and only impression of the institution. As a result, the messages websites convey are exceedingly important. Without helping prospective students feel a sense of connection and acceptance in an unfamiliar environment, these online experiences can contribute to feelings of confusion, frustration, and disconnect at a time when students need to feel most welcome. This study identifies and defines the term *working learner receptivity* as an institution that is welcoming of working adult students by providing services and supports which recognize the complexities of their lives, the limits on their time, the need for clear and direct guidance, and one which creates conducive environments for post-traditional learners. This definition guides the development of the Working Learner Receptivity Scale.

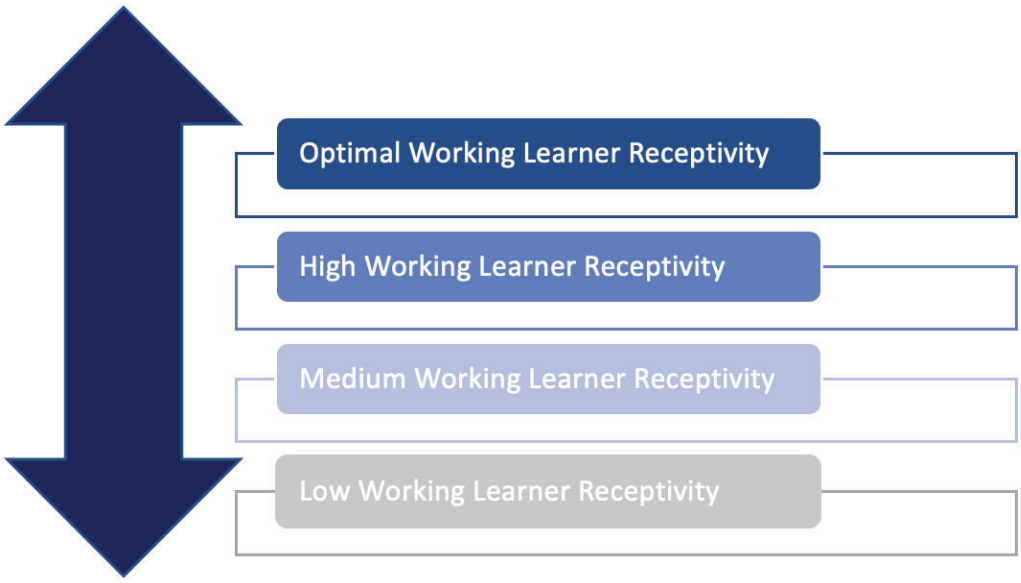
### Working Learner Receptivity Scale

The data collected from 24 college websites are measured according to the Working Learner Receptivity Scale. Specifically, the 24 websites were categorized by how welcoming

they were to working adult students. Considerations for their position on the scale include featured services and supports which recognize family responsibilities, time limitations, and the need for clear and direct guidance. Each website is placed into the Working Learner Receptivity Scale based on coded data. The Working Learner Receptivity Scale consists of four levels as illustrated in Figure 16: low, medium, high, and optimal working learner receptivity.

**Figure 16**

*Working Learner Receptivity Scale*




Each receptivity level is defined as follows:

- **Low working learner receptivity**: Specific resources for adults are missing or absent. Searches for short-term programs or flexible schedules produce few or unrelated results. Images or messages for working adults are limited.
- **Medium working learner receptivity**: Some resources for adults are available, though limited. Searches for short-term programs or flexible schedules produce some results. Images of adults are present but only in certain contexts. Though resources or programs

are available for adults, options and tracks are limited. Services, including hours of operation, are targeted for traditional students.

- **High working learner receptivity**: Several options are available that could appeal to working adults, including short-term programs, flexible schedules, or accelerated programs. Key word searches produce relevant results. Images of adults are present throughout. Services and supports recognize the wide-range of needs of post-traditional learners, including online options. However, limitations still exist around direct guidance and clear communication of time commitment or costs. On boarding process presents opportunities to streamline.
- **Optimal working learner receptivity**: Targeted messaging for working and adult learners is available. Options include short-term programs, flexible schedules, online, or accelerated programs. Key word searches produce degree programs and services for working adults. Images of adults are present throughout and not just for certain types of programs. Supports are tailored to post-traditional learners which promote evening and weekend hours, online or telephone options. On boarding is easy. Degree options are easy to understand and the time commitment to completion is clearly communicated.

It is important to note that the findings and placement within the Working Learner Receptivity Scale are subjective interpretations based on information available on the college's website. Across each of these 24 colleges, the actual on-the-ground services for, or experiences of, working adults may look differently in either direction. For example, institutions that appear low on the receptivity scale may actually provide more resources and supports in practice and those that place higher on the receptivity scale may have other unobserved obstacles for working

adults. Nevertheless, the messages that are sent to students from websites may have an important influence on adult students' decision-making about where and how to approach their degree objectives.

**Findings Among Low Receptivity Websites**

Colleges with Low Working Learner Receptivity illustrated the following patterns: absence of degree program information, limited student services, technical glitches, and websites tailored to non-student audiences. Among the sample of 24 community colleges' websites, four were categorized into the Low Working Learner Receptivity tier. For working adult learners, degree pathway information is important as a key factor in decision-making. A prominent finding among websites in this category was the absence or difficulty in locating details about academic programs and degree pathways, often because they were buried deep within the site. In some instances, academic planning and degree program pages were very text heavy and difficult to navigate. Another common finding was the absence of details about the length of academic programs and the time commitment needed to complete a degree or certificate. Related challenges included the lack clear resources for course and degree planning. Weekend and evening classes were often not available or very limited in the course catalog. In several instances, the challenge stemmed from the inability to filter course catalogs by weekend or evening classes. For college websites within this level of the scale, features that were also missing include short-term and flexible programs.

Many sites with Low Working Learner Receptivity had issues that could be easily addressed. These include the existence of outdated information on central pages, hyperlinks that were broken, or course search platforms with glitches. Often, key information was buried which would mean a busy working learner would have to dedicate significant time finding answers to

their questions. For example, across many sites in this category, once a user navigated beyond the homepage other landing pages were outdated or difficult to navigate.

Other patterns among this group were gaps related to supports for working learners. Colleges within this level advertised limited advising hours which were either geared towards traditional learners or were inconsistent, such as shorter hours for Fridays. Across many of these pages, student services beyond financial aid were not featured. Several sites with Low Working Learner Receptivity also featured few student images on their pages. A related challenge was pages that were very text heavy. Among this group, another common issue was lack of clarity around the website's intended or target audience. Some instead excluded working learners in their target audiences. Common audiences included athletes, international students, and concurrently enrolled students. Lastly, several Low Working Learner Receptivity sites appeared to more prominently gear their information towards donors, employees, press, or boards.

**Findings Among Medium Receptivity Websites**

The majority of the 24 websites reviewed, a total of 12, had Medium Working Learner Receptivity. Colleges with Medium Receptivity illustrated patterns of services and information dissemination that were more favorable to working adults, though gaps still existed. Colleges ranked within this level had websites with easy to navigate homepages, a feature that is helpful for prospective learners exploring sites with limited time or on mobile devices. Based on the search results, it is possible that there are more services or supports available to working adult students. At best there are more services and supports for working adults but they are not prominently featured in a way that a busy working adult learner could easily find them. At worst, there are no existing efforts to address the needs of this unique population. A common finding among this group was too much information on a single page with limited structure. The

multitude of options, often disconnected, could be overwhelming for a busy prospective student. Another common pattern was difficulty in finding details about a full degree programs, including which classes a prospective working learner would take, which days of week, and how long. Though course search options were available for all sites in this level, many were in PDF formats and did not allow students to explore class options according to their time and day availability.

Programs and services for adults were present among Medium Receptivity college websites. However, messages targeting or featuring adults generally promoted personal enrichment programs rather than degree programs. Across these websites, programs for adults were described or advertised only in the context of basic skills and noncredit. A prospective student would have to be familiar enough with the terms noncredit or basic skills, and the definition of those type of courses, to understand that they are not transferable and may not lead to an associate degree. Like Low Receptivity sites, Medium Working Learner receptivity pages also had a greater focus on athletics, recent high school graduates, or international students.

**Findings Among High Receptivity Websites**

Colleges with High Receptivity illustrated many patterns of services, messaging, and content organization that would be welcoming and appealing to working adults. Among the sample of 24 community colleges websites, eight were categorized into the High Working Learner Receptivity tier. Websites in this group were very easy to use and well-organized across all pages, not just the homepage. Student images were featured throughout. Information was structured and featured options were focused and targeted around topics which would be most useful to current and prospective students. These sites were enjoyable to explore, not overwhelming. Several colleges in this category had very attractive webpages with innovative uses of video to feature their students and faculty and the programs offered at the institution.

High Working Learner Receptivity websites had a greater focus on the core information post-traditional populations need. Among these sites, the course scheduling pages and tools were user-friendly and allowed busy adults to filter courses by degree program and classes by day of the week, such as evening and weekends. Additionally, the course search filtering process was interactive across these sites and not just in PDF formats. There were options to explore academic opportunities and support services, but exploration was guided so that the many choices were not overwhelming. Additionally, these websites featured diverse images of students, including age diversity, and such images were portrayed throughout all pages. Several pages featured innovative approaches to student services that made such supports more accessible for individuals who might not have the opportunity to go in-person to the campus. One example was a website which had easy-to-use and accessible student services Zoom Rooms. This approach provided a flexible alternative to phone calls or office visits. High Receptivity sites organized degree programs by career categories or interest areas. Several well excecated sited included hyperlinks with clear one-pagers describing the requirement to complete that area of study.

Still some limitations exist across websites in this level. For example, though key word searches uncovered programs for adults or working learners, across several websites in this category, specialized initiatives for working adults were not prominently featured. Through key word searches, accelerated and compressed classes were found but it was often unclear whether such classes were one-offs or part of a degree program that is structured and organized to help busy or working adults complete in a short period of time. And though these sites had more appealing structures for working adults, when searching for the key word “adults” content for this population only surfaced in the context of noncredit programs. For many with impressive

degree pathways pages, including one example which featured earning potential and employability statistics that could be appealing to an adult looking to earn higher wages, the site did not provide defined and structured degree program for prospective students to take, nor did they feature information about how long the program or degree would take to complete. These patterns limited these sites' ability to be categorized as having Optimal Working Learner Receptivity.

**Optimal Working Learner Receptivity**

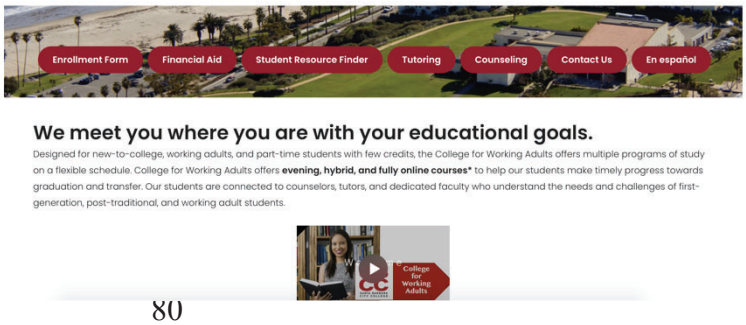
Among the 24 college websites reviewed, several demonstrated effective or promising practices for working adults. However, none of the websites in this study's sample had Optimal Working Learner Receptivity. Noting the *Vision for Success* commitment to "Always design and decide with the student in mind," this study identified website practices that, combined with other student-centered improvements, could lead to Optimal Working Learner Receptivity. The study identified four existing exemplary practices across community college websites that align with elements Optimal Working Learner Receptivity. These four practices are listed and described in great detail below:

- Dedicated Programs or Colleges for Working Adults,
- Pathways and Course Mapping,
- Flexible and Accelerated Courses, and
- Effective Course Scheduling Platforms.

*Dedicated Programs or Colleges for Working Adults*

Within the study's sample, two community colleges had dedicated programs and initiatives for working adults, Santa Barbara City College and Fresno City College. Specifically, Santa Barbara City College has an entire college dedicated to working adult learners. Santa Barbara City College's College for Working Adults promotes the key message: "We meet you where you are with your educational goals." The website explains the College for Working Adults is specifically designed for post-traditional student and describes offering multiple degree programs on a flexible schedule, including evening, hybrid, and fully online courses to help our students make timely progress towards graduation and transfer. The College for Working Adults has dedicated advisors, tutors, and faculty meant to understand the needs and challenges of first-generation, post-traditional, and working adult students. College for Working Adults' target prospective students are students are post-traditional students such as parenting students, students returning to college after some time away, or those who are working adults attending college part-time. The College for Working Adults offers several defined supports such as free textbooks through a library ending program, access to advising and support services on evenings and weekends, space in the courses they need for their degree programs, tutors, and schedule flexibility. Enrolled students can complete one of two Associates degrees or complete the IGETC transfer requirements. However, though the College for Working Adults at Santa Barbara City College meet the criteria for Optimal Working Learner Receptivity, information about this college was difficult to find

**Figure 17** *Santa Barbara City College. College of Working Adults Webpage*



within the Santa Barbara City College website. Further, working adults were not listed as a student population in the primary "apply" page which may be a missed opportunity given the existence of the exemplary and rare program.

One other college within this study's sample had a program tailored to working learner needs. The 25 Month Business Administration Degree Program at Fresno City College specifically highlighted working learners as its primary target by promoting a defined program that could be completed by attending on evenings and weekends. The program offers prospective students the opportunity to earn an associate degree in business administration while meeting the requirements to transfer to California State University Fresno or Fresno Pacific. The program features a cohort model and was one of few colleges that answered the core question: "how long will it take me to earn a degree?" The defined timeline for completion and the targeted working learner audience, make this program exemplary. However, like Santa Barbara City College, Fresno City College also did not prominently feature the 25 Month Business Administration Degree Program on its website. The program is discoverable through the key word search term "adults" but direct link to the program were not available on

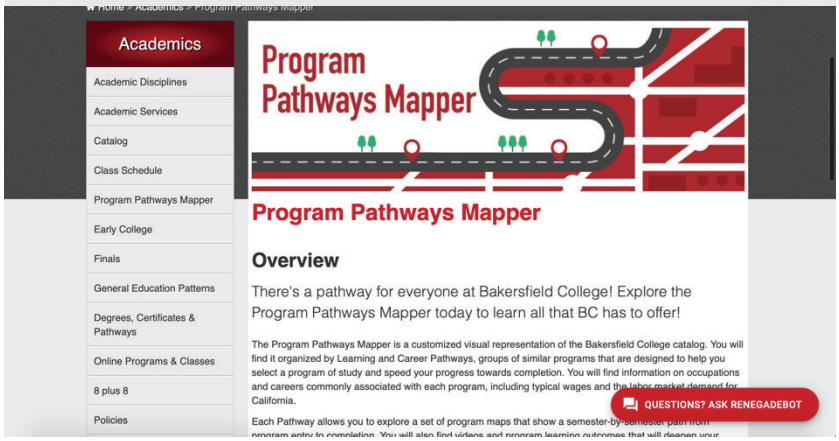
**Figure 18** *Fresno City College. Webpage for 25 Month Business Administration Degree*

the homepage or "pathways to degrees" landing page. This is a missed opportunity to engage and enroll an underserved and critical population of students.

*Pathways and Course Mapping*

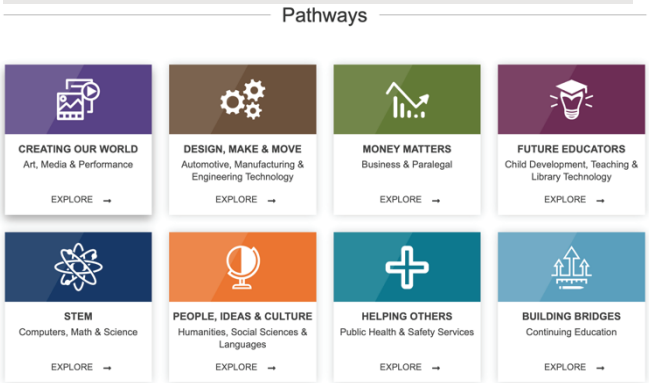
Three college websites within this study's sample are identified for promising practices in degree pathway information and course mapping tools: Bakersfield College, Santa Ana College, and Allan Hancock College. The Bakersfield College *Program Pathways Mapper* featured an interactive, pathway-based visualization of the traditional course catalog paired with brief videos illustrating the nature of the program, descriptions of programs' learning outcomes, and easy-to-understand career data. The value of the pathways mapper is that it can facilitate a student's deeper understanding of available college program options. For post-traditional students like working adults, it can translate disconnected curse information into a clear map to degree completion.

**Figure 19** *Bakersfield College Program Pathways Mapper*



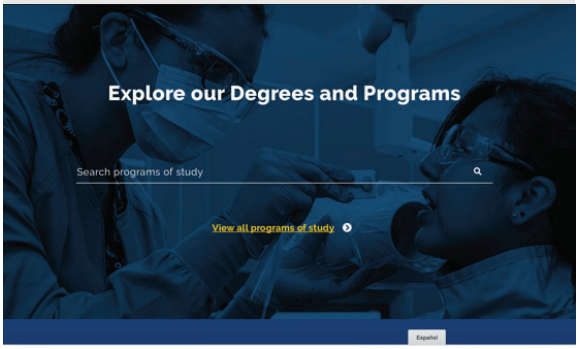

The Santa Ana College website organizes academic programs into eight clear and relatable pathways. With categories like Future Educators, Money Matters, and Helping Others, prospective students can explore degree programs

**Figure 20** *Santa Ana College Pathways Webpage*



based on their overaching interests. This approach deemphaizes the title an institution my give a major and instead focuses on a students's career end-goal to help their exploration. Another exemplar in this area was the Allan Hancock College degree and program exploration tool. The website features a highligh functional word-search driven tool that allows prospective students to type in term that relate to their degree interests. This approach allows students, not the institution, to define the key terminology that describes their career fields of interest. By leveraging a Google-search style navigation model, prospective students have an intuitive and familiar interface. Several colleges had similar tools though these two examples stand out for their ease-of-use and relatability to prospetive working learners.

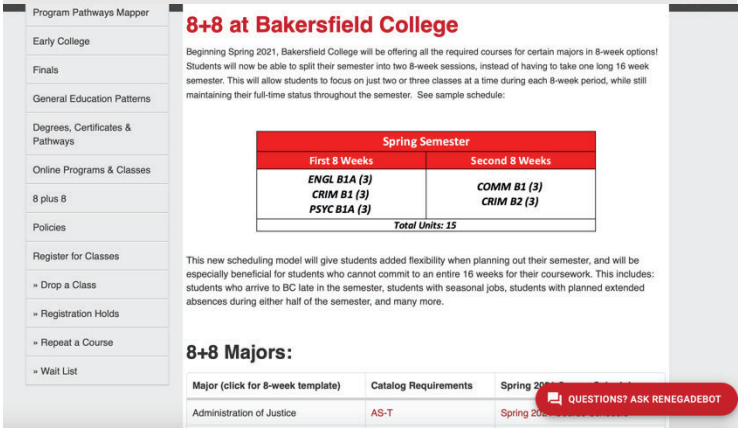
**Figure 21** *Allan Hancock College Degree and Program Exploration Tool*




*Short-Term and Accelerated Courses*

Though several colleges featured short-term and accelerated courses, three college websites stood out, Bakersfield College, San Diego City College, and Palomar College, for prominently messaging these courses for busy prospective adult learners. One college, Bakersfield, also effectively offered short-term and accelerated courses as part of a broader program of study, not just as one-off courses. The college's 8+8 program offers lower division

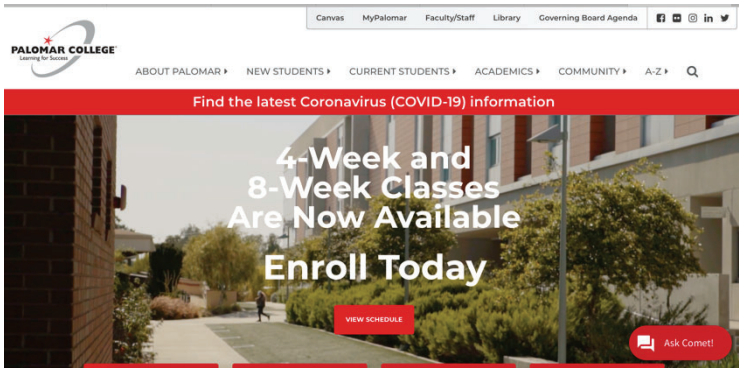
**Figure 22** *Bakersfield College 8+8 Program Webpage*



requirements for certain majors in eight-week increments. This allows a student to split their semester into two sessions. A student completes 15 degree-applicable units within one semester. The college website clearly describes which majors offer this flexible structure and provides examples of type of students this model benefits, including working learners.

San Diego City College and Palomar College both prominently feature their flexible schedules and courses on the website's home page. San Diego's messaging is clear and effective for a working learner audience, emphasizing that classes start each month. One potential challenge for prospective learners could be the traditional hours of assistance from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. which could be limiting for working individuals. Similarly, Palomar College features the availability of 4-week and 8-week classes on the institution's home page, an offering that can be appealing for adults with busy schedules. Visual messages are also effective as the course scheduling page features adults throughout. The course scheduling page is intuitive and highlights online and evening classes. One opportunity for improvement would be to package these accelerated classes as part of a complete degree program structured for busy working adults. The value of these accelerated and flexible classes may be otherwise limited if they are only offered as one-off options.

**Figure 23** *San Diego City College Flexible Schedule Website Banner*



*Effective Course Scheduling Platform*

Course scheduling platforms ranged widely in structure, ease of navigation, and available filters across the 24 sample websites in this study. Eight of the 24 sample sites have course catalog platforms that allow students to search for classes based on filtered options selected by the end-user. Fresno City College and Allan Hancock College are highlighted as exemplars for having search tools which are easy to find within their website, for including many evening and weekend options, and for filtering options that are intuitive and streamlined. Fresno City College had an easy to navigate interface with "Day of Week" prominently featured as a filter option. Allan Hancock College make it easy for prospective students to search for classes by featuring the platform as one of four key options on its website homepage. The class search platform included several filtering options valuable to working adults, such as evening and weekend classes. In addition, the platform allows end-users to filter by type of modality, such as online and distance learning. Course search platforms seemed to be one of the areas that illustrated the greatest potential. Many already had platforms embedded within their sites. Updated such as placement of the class search feature or expansion of the filtering option to include modality, time of day, or day of week are all achievable modification that can enable

**Figure 24** *Fresno City College Course Scheduling Platform*

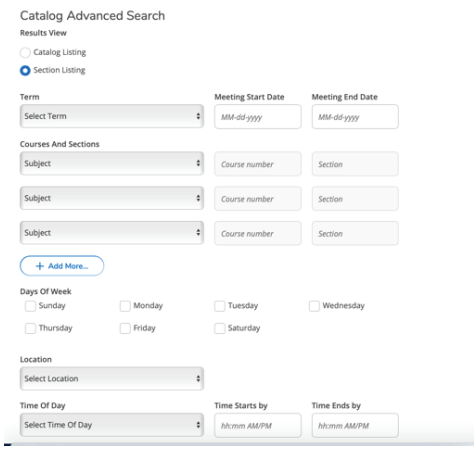
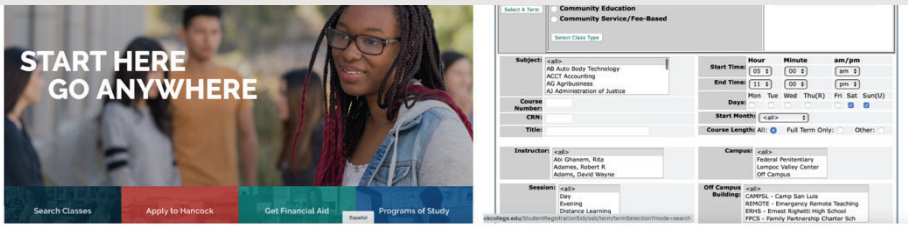



**Figure 25** *Allan Hancock Homepage and Scheduling Platform*



more websites to be receptive to working learners. A more advanced modification would be time allow prospective learners to search by length of program.

## Discussion and Themes

Community colleges increasingly use information tools along each step of a student's educational journey. However, disparate information, guidance, and pathways within technological tools, such as websites, contribute to unintentional institutional barriers to student success before enrollment, particularly for working adult learners. College websites play an important yet underappreciated role in attracting, engaging, and supporting prospective learners in the critical onboarding stage of their educational journey. This study's review of 24 California Community College websites data revealed that institutions utilize and leverage this key tool in a range of ways with varying success. Three prominent themes emerged from the data collected across the 24 sample websites.

### Basic Questions Unaddressed

Schultz (2014) argues that college websites must achieve 10 important things[7], including accomplishing specific goals, appealing to the most important visitors, and paving a clear path for action. For busy working adults, many of the analyzed websites in this study did not achieve these important criteria. One prominent finding was that basic questions, such as "how long will it take me to complete?" were not fully answered by many of the analyzed sites. Because working adult learners have life experiences and responsibilities beyond those typically expected of a college student, they are also looking for more direct information from college websites. A

[7] Schultz, 2014. *Ten Things Your College Website Must Accomplish*: 1) Accomplish Specific Program Goals, 2) Appeal to Your Most Important Visitors First, 3) Pave a Clear Path for Action, 4) Convince the Prospective Student that Your Program Delivers Results, 5) Make Students Fall in Love With You, 6) Ensure a Flawless Tablet and Mobile Experience, 7) Dominate Search Engine Results, 8) Track Everything That Matters, 9) Follow Up With Every Prospect, 10) Engage Prospects Via Social Media.

key theme across this analysis was that many websites did not provide clear and direct information about time commitment. With limited availability, working adult learners must know in advance what they are committing to, when, and for how long. This information allows working adult learners to arrange their job schedules, plan their budgets, or coordinate daycare if they have dependent children. Without answers to these core questions, adults may be hesitant to enroll and commit to an educational program. Though obvious in concept, college sites must deliver the information their target audience wants to find. If adults are the target, then many websites are not providing the information needed to attract this population.

**Adult Learners Viewed Through a Narrow Lens**

Because adult students have inaccurately been deemed "non-traditional," many colleges believe they are predominantly interested in enrolling in noncredit pathways and the California Adult Education Program. This had led to community college websites' tendency to promote programs for adults in the context of adult basic education and not degree programs or transfer pathways. Though noncredit and basic skills programs are invaluable options for adults, they are not the only pathway adults seek. However, across many of the analyzed websites, working adult learner needs are not reflected or portrayed in the context of degrees or transfer options. Most search results for the term "adult" inevitably produced links to noncredit or personal enrichment programs. In some instances, academic program pages were divided into two sections: degrees/certificates and adult education. This practice could be confusing to a prospective adult learner that is unfamiliar with higher education vernacular and therefore not realize that adult education does not include degree and transfer programs. Expanding website messaging to view adult and working adult learner needs beyond the lens of basic skills, noncredit, and personal

enrichment can lead to college website that are more welcoming to this critical prospective learner population.

**Patterns of Outreach to the Traditional K-12 to College Pipeline**

For decades, the steady source of enrollments for community colleges has been high school students who apply directly after graduation. The concept of linear pathways from high school to colleges remain strongholds in website communications and outreach. Over half of the analyzed websites focused their messaging on traditional student populations, including recent high school graduates, athletes, and international students. Adult learners have many of the same learning needs as traditional students, yet also face particular challenges. Among those challenges is limited time and potential stigma of begin "older." Sites that only display images of traditional-age students, offer customary Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. supports, and have few flexible course programs of study can quickly send direct and indirect messages that adult learners do not belong at the institution. By building in adults, specifically working adults, into its core audience, college website can next focus on compelling them to stay and take action by way of enrollment.

## Summary

Effective website design, content organization, and messaging can be a low-cost strategy to attract and enroll more working adult learners at California's community colleges. The Working Learner Receptivity Scale allows one to consider how welcoming working adults may perceive colleges based on direct and indirect communication through college websites. Exemplary websites across California Community Colleges feature targeted programs for working adults, clear pathway and course mapping tools, short-term and accelerated classes or programs, and effective class scheduling platforms. Three key themes emerged from the 24

websites in this document analysis: 1) basic questions are unaddressed, 2) adult learners are viewed through a narrow lens, and 3) patterns of outreach to the traditional K-12 to college pipeline are prominent across websites. Evaluating college websites through the Working Learner Receptivity Scale can improve how welcome working adults feel when they first encounter community college websites. Such efforts can support increased engagement and enrollment of this critical population.

# CHAPTER SEVEN: RESEARCH QUESTION 3

*"As I see it, that schedule that they put up, I think it's good for people who don't work long hours. So for somebody who comes home at 6pm or 7pm, you missed everything already."*
- Male participant from Coastal California

## Qualitative Focus Groups: Understanding the Experiences and Interactions of Working Adult Students at California Community Colleges

Through student focus groups and interviews, this study addresses the question: *In what ways do institutional structures, experiences, and interactions with the institutions, influence working adult student experiences, persistence and educational goal attainment?* Specifically, focus groups are a valuable qualitative research tool used "not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, and not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people in the groups perceive a situation" (Krueger & Casey, 2014, p. 66). Focus groups are a form of group interview that capitalizes on communication between research participants in order to generate data (Merriam, 2016). This research method allows the researcher to collect data from several people simultaneously. Focus groups explicitly use group interaction as part of the method (Kitzinger, 1995; Merriam, p. 113-5, 2016). As a way to understand the institutions working students attend, I chose semi-structured interview questions (Creswell, 2012). The focus groups and interviews provide valuable insight about the interactions and experiences of working adult students while also gaining insight into available academic supports and student services.

## Data Collection

This research was conducted amidst a global pandemic. The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time (World Health Organization, 2020). To

adapt to this complex emergency, this study utilizes a unique yet emerging approach to qualitative research. As the pandemic prevented face-to-face research, researchers moved to online platforms to conduct live focus groups. This approach has surfaced multiple benefits including the ability to include people who may have previously been hard-to-reach and the capacity to seamlessly collect data. Online focus groups are live sessions that are meticulously planned in advance by researchers. Participants are recruited and invited to log on to a live online session at a specified time. Researchers can ask a series of structured and unstructured questions.

This study used the Zoom video conference platform which offers multiple features that enable the effective collection of data and a variety of tools for audience engagement. The following Zoom features were utilized:

- Require Registration: Participants were required to register in advance with name and email. Further, participants were asked to respond to four preliminary questions[8]. This approach provided a layer of security.
- In-session Chat: This feature allowed participants to share comments, questions, or resources with the moderator.
- Polling: Throughout the focus group, participants were asked four questions. The data was captured in real-time and provided for comparative data across discussions.
- Raise Hand: This feature helped maintain order during the focus group and ensured all participants got a chance to speak.
- Reactions: This feature enabled nonverbal feedback throughout the session.

[8] Registration questions: 1) How many years have you been in college? 2) Is this your first time attending a California Community Colleges? 3) How many hours do you work each week while attending college? 4) Do you have any biological, adopted, step or foster children who live in your household? See appendix 1.

- Recording: This study used the Zoom recording feature and only students who provided written permission participated.

This study's focus group and interview questions were designed utilizing Tinto's Institutional Action Model with the goal of understanding whether institutional structures work (or don't work) to meet working adult student's educational goals. The focus group and interview questions were semi-structured therefore flexible enough to ask questions based on emerging themes from the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 1998). The questions (see Appendix 1) solicit information around several areas, including students' external responsibilities, home-work-school schedules, students' educational goals; drivers of enrollment decisions, personal motivation, and their perception of the colleges' receptiveness and responsiveness to their needs. To increase participant engagement and ensure each individual answers posed questions, I asked four polling questions. Polling questions provide individual data in real time and allow for comparison across participants. Focus groups and interviews ranged between 45 to 75 minutes. All study participants were interviewed by me. Focus groups and interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed by a professional transcription service. At the beginning of the focus group and interview process, participants were notified that the discussion was being recorded and that their responses were confidential and only for my use in conducting the study. All data were stored in password-protected files on a password-protected network drive.

## Sample

The participants in the study were eight working learners between the ages of 25-45 currently enrolled at a California Community College. These students were identified because they fit the demographic profile and working criteria the study sought to understand, specifically

adult learners ages 25 and over attending a California Community College while also working more than 20 hours per week. Participants were identified using a convenience sampling approach through targeted outreach across five California community colleges. The sample of colleges represents small- to mid-sized institutions. The demographic composition of each college also varies in order to hear the perspectives of diverse groups of students. I worked with selected college to conduct recruitment of students ages 25 and older who work 20 hours or more per week (See Appendix 3 for recruitment flyer). Potential participants either responded based on their exposure to social media posts[9] by the college or based on an email from the college's student services department. Prospective participants were offered a $20 Amazon gift card for participating in the focus group.

Targeted convenience sampling allowed for efficiently identifying study participants, but had the potential of a self-select sample that may not be representative of targeted characteristics. As a result, this study attempted to confirm the sample population met the desired enrollment, age, and working characteristics by asking potential participants to respond to four registration questions.[10] A total of seventeen students completed the registration questions. Of the seventeen, nine confirmed availability to one of four date and time focus group options. The final sample includes eight participants as one canceled on the day-of due to a work conflict. The eight participants were currently enrolled at five different colleges in northern, southern, central, inland, and coastal California. Prior to participation, students agreed to being recorded. Permission was provided by the students as part of the Study Protocols Form (see Appendix 5) [11].

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[9] See Appendix 3 for copies of the recruitment flyer and social media post.
[10] See Appendix 4. Registration questions: 1) How many years have you been in college? 2) Is this your first time attending a California Community Colleges? 3) How many hours do you work each week while attending college? 4) Do you have any biological, adopted, step or foster children who live in your household?
[11] Prior to starting the data collection process, the study's research plan was approved by the University of California, Davis Institution Review Board (IRB).

One of the earliest, most consistent and most universal characteristics of focus group research (e.g., Tang & Davis, 1995) has been the parameter concerning the size of the groups themselves. Focus groups were small, comprised of three participants. Although the original design for this research question was entirely through focus groups, two of the students were unable to participate in a focus group due to scheduling conflicts. I opted to not lose their desire to participate and held individual interviews with each of these participants instead. The accommodation was provided in recognition of their busy school and work schedules. The final study consisted of two focus groups and two interviews, representing eight total participants. All participants were screened for age (25+) and employment (work 20 hours or more), and asked the same registration, polling, and interview questions.

## Profiles of Working Adult Learners

*Profile of Focus Group and Interview Participants*

The students in this study represent the rich diversity within the California Community Colleges. They are men and women ranging between the ages of 25-45, some parents and others caring for parents. They include veterans, formerly incarcerated individuals, immigrants, and others looking for a path out of poverty. As post-traditional learners, they all shared three common characteristics which were confirmed through a registration questionnaire – all participants work more than 20 hours per week, are 25 and older, and are currently enrolled at a California Community College. Some attended a college in northern California, others in southern California, one in the Bay Area, another in the Central Valley, and one in the Central Coast. Six of the eight participants are students of color. Of the eight participants, three identify as female and five as male.

To build a more complete profile of focus group attendees, prospective participants were asked questions about the typical hours they work, how long they've been in college, whether this was their first time at a California Community College, and if they had dependent children. As shown in Table 13, on average, participants worked 30 hours per week. Most participants had been attending community college for over a year, with the average participant attending for 3.6 years. The longest period of attendance was 7 years from a participant who worked 30 hours or more per week and had enrolled in community college two times prior. Over a third of the participants had attended and attempted community college before. Half of the participants had dependent children.

**Table 13**

*Matrix of Focus Group Participant Registration Survey Responses*

| Participants | How many hours do you work each week while attending college? | How many years have you been in college? | Is this your first time attending a California Community College? | Do you have any biological, adopted, step or foster children who live in your household? | Gender Identity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant **1** | 20 | 4 | Yes | Yes | Female |
| Participant **2** | 35 | 1 | Yes | Yes | Female |
| Participant **3** | 20 | 5 | Yes | No | Male |
| Participant **4** | 36 | 2 | Yes | No | Male |
| Participant **5** | 25 | 3 | Yes | No | Male |
| Participant **6** | 30-50 | 3 | No | Yes | Male |
| Participant **7** | 40 | 4 | No | Yes | Male |
| Participant **8** | 30 | 7 | No | No | Female |

## Data Analysis

To answer research question three, I analyze participants' perceptions, ideas, opinions, and thoughts about their experiences and interactions as working adult students at California Community Colleges. Creswell & Creswell (2018) describe qualitative data analysis as a process of, "segmenting and taking apart data" (p. 154) and reconstructing it to find collective meaning.

Students will be assigned a pseudonym. Interviews were coded and organized into small units (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Strauss, 1987). The first round of coding utilized open in vivo coding which tagged significant phrases from the interviews. The second round of coding used focused coding to identifying student responses specific to the study's research questions and theoretical framework. Finally, codes were organized and categorized into overarching themes using analytical coding procedures focused on building interpretation and meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). In my analysis, I looked for emergent themes across each interview. Further, I analyze data from all focus groups and interviews to assess if the themes that emerged in one group also emerged in other groups. This approach is sometimes referred as emergent-systematic focus group design (Onwuegbuzi, 2009). Table 14 describes the identified code, their definitions, and emergent themes. Highlighting by themes and then sub-themes allowed me to find connections and patterns between statewide data, the document analysis, and interviews. Further, because each participant completed registration questions and answered polling questions, the final analysis incorporates findings across quantitative and qualitative data. Both the registration and polling responses provided consistent metrics by which to analyze themes across each focus group and interview.

**Table 14**

*Coding, Definitions, and Emergent Themes*

| **Codes** | **Definition/Examples** |
|---|---|
| **Theme: Balancing Necessity with Educational Aspirations** | |
| Necessity and Family Responsibilities | This sub-theme includes codes for Necessity (29) and Family Responsibilities (12). The operational definition reflects on the reasons students indicate for working, including a responsibility to families and dependent children. |
| Necessity and Affordability | This sub-theme includes codes for Necessity (29) and Affordability (14). The operational definition reflects on the reasons students indicate for working, including basic |

| | |
|---|---|
| | needs, housing, food, book and other living and costs of college. |
| School and Work Balance | This sub-theme includes School and Work Balance (28). The operational definition is based on how students describe the ways they balance their academic and employment responsibilities. The codes also describe how students use their time. |
| Recognizing Post-Traditional Student Needs & Aspirations | This sub-theme includes Post-Traditional Learners Needs and Aspirations (22) and New Opportunities/A Better Life (6). The operational definition is based on student description of their characteristics, needs, unique circumstances as adults, and purpose for pursuing higher education. |
| **Theme: Institutional Structures that Work Against Working Adult Learners** | |
| Scheduling Challenges | This includes participant reflections about Scheduling Challenges (39). The code is based on student comments around the ability to schedule classes or access services at desired or needed times. |
| Accessible and Inaccessible Campus Supports and Services | This includes the codes: Campus Supports/Or Lack of Supports (30) and Accessibility of Services (27). The sub-theme highlights descriptions of services or supports available and students' perspective about the relative ease of access. |
| Poor Guidance | This includes reflections on Poor Guidance (19). The code describes students' experiences around academic guidance and their perspective on the quality of the guidance. |
| **Theme: Opportunities for An Intentional Focus on Working Learners** | |
| Flexible Learning and Academic Supports | This includes the codes: Flexible Learning (22) and Staff/Faculty Interactions (22). Both are combined to illustrate student perspective on academic supports that have been effective, and areas where added flexibility has helped working adult learners. |
| Intentional Program Connection | This identifies instances where students were connected to specific programs or clubs on campus designed to help post-traditional learner, adults, or working students. This code includes reflections on Program Connections (11). |
| Campus Culture that Recognizes Work and Opportunities for Student Focused Leadership | The sub-theme was used to highlight student perspective and opinions about the current culture of the campus they attend and how supportive that culture is of working adult students. This includes the original codes: Campus Culture that Recognizes Work (21) and the Need for a Student Focused Leadership (6). |

Broadly, focus group data explored both individual characteristics of working adult students at California Community Colleges and how they perceive or discuss the institutional factors that support or hinder their success (see Table 15). Tinto's Institutional Action Model inspires a review of both individual and institutional factors. The Institutional Action Model recognizes that understanding student characteristics is important in redesigning institutional inputs that influence students' persistence and completion. During the coding process a formal codebook was developed. Finally, my positionality statement outlines my role within the organization, as well as personal connections to the study population.

**Table 15**

*Types of Factors*

| Individual Factors | Institutional Factors |
|---|---|
| Socio-economic status | Program type enrolled |
| Gender of working adult learner | College region attending |
| Age of working adult learner | Eligible financial aid |
| Race and Ethnicity of working adult learner | Support services for working adults |
| Dependent children | Receptiveness |

## Qualitative Results and Emergent Themes

This section presents the findings through emergent themes based on working adult learner responses. An analysis of student focus groups/interviews revealed three emergent themes which describe the institutional structures and experiences that influence working adult learner persistence and educational goal attainment. The first theme – balancing necessity with educational aspirations – delves into the experiences of working adult learners with a particular focus on the life realities they manage while attending college. The second theme – institutional structures that work against working adults – examines the myriad of challenges and barriers working adult learners face in adapting to their institutions. Finally, the third theme –

opportunities for an intentional focus on working learners – describes examples shared by students of opportunities to recognize the needs and to support the success of working learners.

## Theme 1: Balancing Necessity with Educational Aspirations

One of the initial questions posed to students was to elaborate on their reasons for working while also attending college. Throughout all focus groups and interviews, students seemed puzzled this was even a question, adding "Yeah, the reason I'm working is because I have to put a roof over my head and food in my stomach." The question seemed so rudimentary to participants, as if everyone should know the answer was grounded in necessity. "I have to work. There's no way that I can get around that. I don't work, I don't live underneath a roof, pretty much" added one of the students. For the participating working adult learners, their experience seemed in no way rare or unique. All eight participants shared a similar sentiment: "Basically, 'cause I wouldn't be able to do it without working. Now, it would be way easier and I'd take more classes."

This is consistent with research which emphasizes that students who work have unmet financial need and decisions to work are primarily motivated by financial need rather than by gaining career experience (Carnevale, 2018; Beer & Bray, 2019). Students had various motivations for working, such as needing to pay for living expenses not covered by financial aid and providing financial support to their family. Less frequently did they share working to gain career experience as most participants were not employed in their desired career field.

### Necessity and Family Responsibilities

After gaining an understanding of the necessity requiring students to work while attending colleges, the study next focused on exploring why students enrolled in community college and what their education goals were. Two of the four interwoven polling questions

address this point. Specifically, these two initial polling questions align with the "individual factors" described in Tinto's Institutional Action Model. As shown in Table 16, the majority of working adult learners interviewed attend college to obtain an associate degree. Only one participant described attending to explore their options, adding that without a degree, they had no opportunity for career advancement, "I'd be stuck."

**Table 16**

*Matrix of Participant Polling Responses, Part 1*

| Participant | I am attending a community college to: | Which is a higher priority: |
|---|---|---|
| Participant **1** | Obtain an associate degree | School |
| Participant **2** | Obtain an associate degree | School |
| Participant **3** | Obtain an associate degree | School |
| Participant **4** | Obtain an associate degree | School |
| Participant **5** | Obtain an associate degree | School |
| Participant **6** | Explore my options | Work |
| Participant **7** | Obtain an associate degree | Work |
| Participant **8** | Obtain an associate degree | Work |

Participants' rationale for attending and prioritizing college were rooted in their many non-academic responsibilities. Students cited their efforts to obtain a degree while working as a responsibility to their families and loved ones. Several students, particularly those with dependent children, framed the necessity to work as an absence of a 'luxury' to just be students.

> "So I work and just keep [trying] in school; I'm not a little baby now like I was 20 years ago or 30 years ago, I am a women who has other people behind me, depending on me, so I work... To me, it's very important otherwise, if I won't do it for my kids or for my mom, we're gonna be homeless, and I don't think if I can afford that. I have to give it all just for them and for myself."

Despite the pressure and necessity for working, participants saw their academic journey through a social and cultural capital lens (Yosso, 2005), which could build multi-generational opportunities for upward mobility, not only for them but for their children. "It's like giving them

an inspiration. They are asking me, 'mom you are working, you're taking care of us, but still, you are attending the school, wow mom you're amazing.'" A common sentiment among participants was that their efforts and tribulations were for someone who depended on them. This motivation seemed to provide drive and greater aspiration in the most trying times faced by these working adult learners.

**Necessity and Affordability**

Table 16 above also illustrates that of the eight participants, just over half shared that school was a higher priority. However, several expressed being torn by the premise of the question; a premise founded in making a choice between one or the other:

> "To me, for my future, school is the highest priority. But in the moment, if I did make school the highest priority, I don't think I could continue school, because work would take a hit and then who knows if I'd still have my job. So right now, I need my job in order to go to school, so I have to make work the priority, in order to be able to do school."

Others made similar statements, illustrating how the decision around which to prioritize was also influenced by broader college affordability challenges and the many unaddressed expenses that comprise the total cost of college attendance.

> "Yeah, to me it's really not a choice, it is a must, like I have to work. There's no way around it, I can't choose, "Oh yes, let me work this time, and not work in the future." No, it's not like that. I have to work to be able to... Even the cost of textbooks, that's a huge burden on a lot of students. So having to pay for a $200 textbook for a certain class, you don't just come up with $200, especially if you're not getting financial aid."

Issues of necessity were heightened by affordability challenges. These affordability issues often were centered around their positionality as a working adult learner. Unfortunately, state and federal financial aid are designed primarily with traditional-aged students in mind, limiting financial aid options for adults returning to college due to eligibility and availability restrictions. As alluded by the above participant, even the Federal Pell Grant, which has no expiration, can be limiting for adult and post-traditional learners since it's only available for up to 12 semesters over one's lifetime (U.S. Department of Education). One participant added, "I couldn't get financial aid, because of all these things, my age, my working. I made just over a certain amount of money, so apparently I didn't have as much need, so I'm working right now to supply for my house, my food, my transportation."

**School and Work Balance**

"Everyone is working" said one participant as they looked straight into the camera while emphasizing a reality that is apparent to them, but less so to college leaders who make the day-to-day decisions affecting their experiences. The concept of school and work balance raised varying emotions ranging from coping and resignation to frustration. "It is hard to balance. But I have to make it manageable" stated one participant. Students discussed the compromises they make in order to fit in school and work. For example, when describing his course taking pattern, one participant shared the need to stop and start as a way of balancing time and costs:

> "I have learned that it was easier to do school when I wasn't working, so there were times where I would leave the community college system for about a year or two and just work as much as I could and save up to be able to come back and go back to school for about a semester or two and just kind of live off my savings."

The student described how this affected their time to degree completion, adding that they'd been in the community college system for 6 years as a result. This testament aligns with findings in the report, Time is the Enemy (2011) by Complete College America, which shows that that longer it takes students, particularly post-traditional students, the less likely they will ultimately complete. Another participant expressed frustration with a culture that expects self-sufficiency and students to figure it out on their own.

> "And, I think also they have this hypothesis saying that if you knew, you can't do it, then why did you apply and [enroll], so, you have to figure out by yourself."

Another participant describes a similar experience, where students are the ones expected to make the accommodations, whether those accommodation are with their families…

> "When I come from work I make sure the kids are taken care of, when they're ready to go to bed that's my time to come, sit and start doing the assignments."

Or with their employers…

> "But as far as balance, I say that I've noticed that you have to make sacrifices, sometimes even when the school or your job doesn't, and even if that means talking to your employer."

For students interviewed, the idea of true school and work balance seem distant or nonexistent. Among all the demands that fill up their lives, these working adult learners all shared that they are doing their best to make sure college and their long-term aspirations don't get left behind.

**Recognizing Post-Traditional Student Needs & Aspirations**

Post-traditional learners are students who must balance life, work, and their education. Working adult learners comprise a large proportion of post-traditional learners but the groups are

not a monolith. For example, among the participating working adult learners, two had previously served in the military, another was formerly incarcerated, and others were trying to provide a better life for their children. Additional interview questions focus on better understanding the experiences of the diverse working adult learner population by gaining insight into their lives outside of college. For one participant, their unique trajectory meant needing assistance to adapt to a completely new academic environment.

> "And being formerly incarcerated, I spent 13 years in prison, technology was strange to me. I didn't know how to use it. I have post-traumatic stress disorder from the violence I've been in. And some of the resources on campus have helped me tremendously, like the learning assistant program and things like that, but they're still lacking, I don't know, I would say maybe empathy, or they have no idea what the struggles we go through."

A common sub-theme shared by many participants was around their representation in comparison to other students. This finding is consistent with countless research that indicates this population of students have been ignored and often struggle to feel that that belong at a college (Chartrand, 1990; Daloz, 1999;  Hagedorn, 2005; Markle, 2015; Chen, 2017). Students described how common students like them were in a system that labeled them as uncommon.

> "I used to say that I was a non-traditional student. But now it's really, I am the traditional student, it's the students that are coming out of high school that are really non-traditional, because there's so many more of us that are coming back into the system."

One participant shared a powerful observation about limited access to higher education for working adult learners outside of the community colleges but acknowledgement that greater access for these students didn't necessarily come with greater attention or support.

> "But yeah, I think the unfortunate or the fortunate thing, I don't know – however you look at it, community college is kind of... there for a lot of people that don't have options, so it's a second chance for a lot of us, but I think that they have to be better equipped to meet those needs because if they're not really providing you then nobody is."

As open access institutions with no admissions criteria, California Community Colleges truly are one of few places where working adult learners can turn to, but given the size and importance of their population, these working students wanted a more intentional focus on meeting their needs.

### Theme 2: Institutional Structures that Work Against Working Adult Learners

Misperceptions about older and working students in California Community Colleges may affect program design in ways that marginalize working adult learners. As previously illustrated, students emphasized the common theme of working for necessity while attending college, therefore, the next set of interview questions explored whether colleges recognize this shared student reality and what, if anything, they are doing about it. The remaining two polling questions integrated into each focus group and interview, shown in Table 17, align with the "institutional factors" described in Tinto's Institutional Action Model.

**Table 17**

*Matrix of Participant Polling Responses, Part 2*

| Participant | My work schedule determines my class schedule each semester: | My college offers courses at a time of day that is conducive to my work schedule: |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | Often true | Always true |
| **2** | Always true | Sometimes true |
| **3** | Sometimes true | Sometimes true |
| **4** | Often true | Sometimes true |
| **5** | Sometimes true | Often true |
| **6** | Often true | Never true |
| **7** | Always true | Sometimes true |
| **8** | Always true | Never true |

**Scheduling Challenges**

Across all focus groups and interviews, the discussion of scheduling was the most vigorous. Participants were passionate about sharing detailed stories about the struggles they had experienced with scheduling. “So most of my hours are in the middle of the day, which is usually when most of the classes are being offered,” described one participant. With working hours ranging from 20 to 35 hours per week, participants explain needing predictable blocks of time to either work or take classes, but with courses predominantly offered on weekdays mid-day, neither a full morning block nor afternoon block was available to accommodate this approach. “The schedule isn’t even conducive to other classes, let alone working…” exclaimed a focus group participant. Notwithstanding complicated work schedules, students shared that they found the task of cobbling together a schedule that met needed degree requirements challenging on its own. They elaborated that needed or required classes often conflicted with each other, forcing a student to choose one over the other which also hoping the forgot class would be offered the next term. “Bad scheduling. Not only are the classes not available, but they don’t really have a sense of, ‘We’re gonna hold classes in a sort of logical order if you’re on a particular track.’”
The same sentiment was shared in a separate interview. This working adult learner shared the inability to maximize their time as either an employ or a student. They were perplexed as to why courses were offered in this disjointed manner. The student had clearly spent a lot of time think about better ways to offer classes to accommodate working schedules…

> “For 12 semester hours, it’s four classes, you should be able to go do that in two days. There is no reason that you have to go five days to get 12 semester hours. None at all. And yet, I continuously have to deal with that.”

The concept of block scheduling is not new, extensive research (Bailey, 2015; Glanzer, 2020; Choitz & Prince, 2008) describes the value of this course structure model as beneficial not only to working adult students, but other groups, including first generation students. Flexibility, predictability, and maximization are the cornerstones of this approach though few colleges offer it at a wide scale. Blocked scheduling allows students who are juggling jobs, families, and school to know with certainty when they can go to work each day throughout the academic year.

For many of the working adult learners interviewed, scheduling challenges also delayed their degree trajectory, often adding semesters or entire years to their time to completion. One participant described the need to wait entire terms to have access to the pre-requisite course needed for their major and the inability to move forward without that one class.

> "It's frustrating, 'cause if you don't get that 2A by summer or fall, you're waiting a whole 'nother semester of not taking it and possibly not being able to transfer, unless you do the fourth series."

Students detailed the mental gymnastics of organizing a schedule that met all of their needs. Many described regularly making compromises that often led to unnecessary credit accumulation or added time to their degree completion. This approach assumes students have indefinite time to wait for the right combination of time and courses to line up. The greatest risk for these working adult learners is that life get in the way and they never get to take those last classes they've been waiting for.

The scheduling challenges the participants described weren't exclusive to the day or time they were offered, their frustration also stemmed from course sequencing issues. One participant described in great detail their irritation and how perplexed they were by this reality.

> "They know what classes we have to take. They're the ones who made it [the degree track]. Why cannot they just schedule them so that... Maybe not everyone's going to everyday because they're on different waves, but they should be stacked in a two-year plan. You say, "Hey, if you follow this plan, we'll make sure that you get the classes and you'll be done in two years, and you will only have to come two days a week and you'll be done in two years." I think that's completely reasonable, and yet, they're... It's like one hand doesn't talk to the other, even though they work in the same room."

Participants wanted a plan they could follow that aligned with their degree requirements, was predictable, and gave them a time-based guarantee. One student, in particular, is describing how they feel it's the institution's responsibility to offer predictable and guaranteed track, since after all the institution had set the academic degree requirements. Over and over, students recounted how the inability to logically sequences their courses added time and delayed their goals.

> "Well, they only offered this last class one semester, which means I had to go three semesters in order to finish that last requirement, and they kept canceling the class. They canceled it three times. So for three semesters, I didn't have one credit."

While frustration and dismay about scheduling was abound, participants described glimmers of hope resulting from an unexpected turn of events. The novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) led to the sudden shift of in-person classes to online leaning modalities. While the transition was complicated and required extensive adapting, for many participants it was a welcome shift from the unaccommodating mid-day schedules.

> "I would have to try and find a 7:30 in the morning class or a night class, and those classes really aren't offered all that often, especially for some of the bigger classes that you need. So, with the transition to online learning, that definitely helped."

**Accessible and Inaccessible Campus Supports and Services**

Participants were also asked about campus supports and services. Some aspects of the discussion around scheduling challenges continued, but this time in the context of other student services and supports, not just academic courses. “The counseling things are there, it is available. But the problem is, in my schedule” said one participant. Similar perspectives were shared by other working adult learners, with one interviewee describing how scheduling issues made core campus supports inaccessible to students like them.

> “Yeah, so it’s just really challenging to have any kind of [help] even financial aid, registration, everything closes at 5 o’clock, and so if you’re working or if you have things to do in the day it’s not really conducive to anybody that’s in the evenings on campus, or... Or I try to stack my classes during the day because I work weekend nights and so... But I pretty much don’t have a lot of time... Anything after 5:00 PM is kind of a ghost town. So I think that’s the major challenge with financial aid, [it] was like open 8:00-4:00, so after 4 o’clock, you can’t find anybody.”

Like academic courses, many essential student services and supports are offered during prime working hours and follow traditional 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. schedules. For students who are either working or attending classes during these times, accessing campus supports seemed to be tricky or nearly impossible.

One participant illustrated what this meant for the many students like him who were juggling employment and school. “For working learners, so there’s not too much that you can utilize. Before we switched to online modality, a lot of these services only operated during your work hours, they were 8:00 to 4:00 or something along those lines, and if you’re working, you’re

out of luck." He recounted that limited service hours often meant that he had to forgo assistance altogether.

Another focus group participant from a different college shared a similar experience, but instead described how she was the one who had to make the accommodations by reorganizing her work and school schedule for the day: "I know that it is difficult, so sometimes when I know that I really need to speak to somebody one-on-one I have to apply for a day off of work so that I can fit into their schedule." In this student's instance, however, these accommodations were made only when a critical issue needed to be addressed. Seemingly inconsequential needs like speaking to a counselor or seeking tutoring were not addressed in this manner because it would require requesting more time away from work. Unfortunately for working adult learners, forgoing guidance, financial aid, or tutoring often impacts course planning or academic persistence. And, in both examples, the institution had not yet adapted to the needs of the students it serves (Tinto, 2006).

> "Just nothing... Definitely nothing on weekends, but even like... Even like the library hours being open later, none of them are available. So I feel like that is an issue. The library closes at 1:00PM on Fridays. Why is it not open till midnight on Fridays? And why is it not open all day on Saturdays? This is pre-COVID, too. COVID, obviously, I understand. They're very much more interested in, "Hey, we need to go home early, because Friday," instead of "Whoa. Students usually have a lot more time on Friday to go do stuff. We should be open." And so it's like the priorities…They're for the people that work there, which I get they want to have nice working conditions and everything, but they're only there because we're coming there to learn. And I think a lot of them have forgotten."

Asked about specific supports for working or adult learners, participants shared that targeted services were not available: “So I wish those things would be more readily available in terms of support services.” One participant detailed the work-around approaches that are developed by students who have unmet needs and have limited access to them on campus, “A lot of us have formed smaller groups to help one another, because the lack of accessibility that a lot of these different departments at the colleges have right now.”

Another interviewee shared that even for students who work on campus and don’t have the added burden of the time it takes to commute to their job, finding an opportunity to take advantage of the support services offered by the college was difficult.

> “I work, so tutoring is hard, ‘cause I go to school in the morning, I am a student worker in the afternoon. And getting a tutor for night to fit in my schedule is hard. And I do understand that these resources aren’t there really for students. There needs to be more direct services for students.”

Many of the participants reflected on the past 12 months and shared some of the silver linings of the pandemic. These reflections described institutions that offered services at flexible times by leveraging technology and finally deviating from traditional schedules.

> “Thankfully, schools are starting to branch out and get more creative [about] offering different hours. I’ve been able to reach financial aid outside of the normal 8:00 to 4:00, just because of the fact that they’re online. But yeah, I’m hoping that colleges continue with that after going back to in-person instruction.”

Community colleges have been discussing existential disruptions in the face of technological advances for several years now, but few had made the shift to leverage technology to increase student support services. The unprecedented disruption brought about by the pandemic required

districts to act quickly and re-think structures and operations, allowing for the opportunity to design with students in mind.

In addition to reflecting on the gaps and difficulties in accessing student supports, several participants also shared the many services which they value and regularly rely upon. A working mother in one focus group explained how valuable it was to have access to the college's food pantry, "Another thing is support with food, I think we go once a month, even if it is a little for other people – they think there's so little but to me it helps a lot." Others shared this same sentiment, describing recent shifts in service modality or a greater focus on basic needs that was making an important difference in helping support working adult learners like them:

> "I mean, really the best support services right now are our basic needs support centers, so like food pantry is huge. Tutorial services can help also. I know that sometimes, especially with the switch to online modality, the fact that I'm not in a classroom, to be able to utilize tutoring services is huge."

Both the state and colleges invest extensively, both through fiscal and human resources, in student services and supports. Unfortunately, for a large part of the student population who works, these services are all but inaccessible. The pandemic shines light on the critical nature of technology and technical services to our colleges. Leveraging the urgency and lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic creates a unique opportunity to more equitably address the needs of and offer supports for working adult learners.

**Poor Guidance**

Interviewed working adult students described being overwhelmed by too many choices and limited course structures which often left them wandering and wasting semesters and years.

> "And I think that because I was a working student, there were certain classes that I was forced to take just because they fit into my work schedule, whereas... And there wasn't really much guidance as to the necessary classes to take to streamline the process to get out of there."

In all conversations, students painfully recalled accounts of limited or lacking guidance that could help keep them on an efficient and effective track to degree completion. Participants describe the varying approaches they took; going at it alone, relying on other students' experiences, or taking classes because they simply fit with their work schedule.

> "I did a lot of it on my own because of the fact that I couldn't really see counselors during the day, I looked and said, "Oh, this falls into a certain category and maybe I need to take this class," but I have probably at least 10 to 12 classes on my transcripts that didn't ever need to be there."

The unifying thread in these stories was the fact that each of these students felt they had no access to academic guidance for a number of reasons either because the hours did not accommodate their work schedule, their counselor provided conflicting information, or because their options where too broad and disconnected. Taking the self-guided tour in their academic journey, to them, felt like their only option, albeit leading to a variety of less than ideal consequences down the line.

One student described taking classes that seemed to logically align with their degree major only to later realize that many of the courses they had taken were unnecessary or not transferable.

> "I didn't really receive much guidance. You had your whole SEP, and that was the modality that you used to be able to construct your courses and get out. Guided Pathways

> wasn't there at first when I was there, and so it was more, I kinda knew what I needed to take, and I would add classes here and there because I thought, "Oh, if I'm gonna be a Math major, I might need to take trigonometry or something along those lines. And then all of these classes didn't end up falling into my majors. That's why I was telling you I have amassed 120 units."

Another participant shared a similar sentiment, sharing how they'd taken many units that were ultimately not transferable. "When I first came there, I started with the robotics degree. I didn't know it was not transfer, because my counselor did not really care about talking with me, he'd try to get me in and out" added the participant and attributing their accrual of unneeded courses to lack of time or patience by counseling staff to work through their questions or unique circumstance.

Other students describe the time limitation policies that exist for working adult students. "I didn't utilize too many of the services though, that were available to me, because they in all essence weren't available to me because I am 30 years old, I've reached 100 units," the participant shared. These restrictive policies, some state and others federal, are often exclusionary of students that have already been victims of other practices that excluded them from guidance or supports. Age restrictions, particularly within the Cal Grant program, serve as a catch 22 – limiting aid for adults, which leads to more hours working and less availability available on campus, which leads to the adult learner taking unnecessary units, which then bars them from certain services, and ultimately results in a longer time to degree.

For participating working adult learners who had been in and out of the community college system, many were acutely aware of the evolution and progress colleges had made.

> "When I first heard of Guided Pathways, I think it was like two years ago, I was like, 'Where was this five years ago?' Because I wouldn't be here anymore. I would have definitely have been streamlined and then got out of here. So yeah, I just, it's been rough… I've been in and out of the community college system for almost five, six years. So the fact that Guided Pathways is here to be able to help students like that, that's, I think that's huge."

Major reforms like Guided Pathways are intended to address the challenge these working adult learners describe. The intended transformation includes intensive and continual academic advising, early career exploration, structured academic and career-focused communities, and clear paths to completion (Bailey, 2015). The reform recognizes the current self-guided model, which is the experience of many students, leads many to excess or out-of-sequence credit or to stop-out altogether. For California's community colleges, a continued commitment and authentic implementation of the Guided Pathways tenets could mean the emergence of a system that more effectively supports its over 1.4 million working learners.

## Theme 3: Opportunities for An Intentional Focus on Working Learners

Despite the complexities working adult learners describe facing in their pursuit of a college degree, student services and supports at community colleges often are structured to attend to the needs of traditional-age rather than adult and working learners (Chen, 2017). "So those are two usually the biggest barriers for me in the community college system, is my age and my time in community college…" exclaimed one student as they described their journey.

### Flexible Learning and Academic Supports

Conversations with the participating working adult students surfaced many bright spots and opportunities to better accommodate their busy schedules and external responsibilities.

Oddly, the pandemic in this regard was for many one of the bright spots. The sudden transition to distance education and online services meant that colleges had to deviate from the normal and design from scratch. This meant turning to technology to fill the absence of online, breaking from the confines of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. scheduling, leveraging asynchronous teaching and flipped classroom models, and doing all that was possible to accommodate students during trying times.

> "Luckily, I would say the pandemic has been a blessing in many ways, because I'm at home and I'm able to, during the week, do all of those things and... And basically, not really change your sleep pattern, but also be able to just go to class online and then study. Not waste time driving, finding parking and stuff, so I think that model has worked really well and for people that work and has made it accessible."

But what if colleges acted with this same urgency all the time? What if they adapted when necessary or when students found their supports and services inaccessible? What if colleges embraced a culture of innovation and student-centered design? The pandemic disruption proved it possible and highlighted practices that students have been asking for. Like this participant who was finally able to take a full-time course schedule thanks to limited commuting

> "I really didn't get to go to school full-time before the pandemic. Well, I did for like two months, but I could tell you that was really, really challenging to just try to sleep in my car... Or sometimes I had Friday class so it was just really hard to... My work is also about an hour away."

Others found the course modality provided greater flexibility and accommodated their work schedule in ways not experienced before.

> "I know most of the professors, they do Zoom meetings, I know for [some classes]...I can't be there because I need to work, but they allow people who are not able to be there live to watch it afterward, so that works in my favor"

Several other students described the academic benefits of this flexible approach and how it helped support overall course success:

> "But now, since everything is online and the campus is closed, you have all the recording of this session lectures, whether the lecture is twice a week or once a week, so you have the recording for the whole semester."

Another student added by sharing how the approach, particularly recorded lectures, helped her understand course content that otherwise may have been difficult: "It's really helps, you can watch it many times, if you don't get it, especially for math classes, you can watch it twice or three times until you solve your problem."

But the idea of simply going back to previously used methods of course and service delivery, "going back to normal," had several students wary.

> "So I think that if they want to have... And I know a lot of students who want to go back in person, which is nice and great, but some of us just don't have that luxury, so I think it would be to continue this hybrid model."

Hybrid models include a mix of online and face-to-face instruction (Crawford, 2014). Though hybrid classes do utilize some campus facilities, they offer a more flexible alternative to traditional face-to-face classes. Post-pandemic, some colleges are also considering *Hyflex* courses. HyFlex combines the terms "hybrid" and "flexible." The Columbia University Center for Teaching and Learning (2021) explains that hybrid learning integrates complementary face-to-face (synchronous) and online learning (asynchronous) experiences to help students master

the course content and learning objectives. These flexible teaching models may allow California Community Colleges to maintain the innovations that helped working learners excel during the pandemic. Another participant shared this sentiment adding that having the option was beneficial for students also balancing a job:

> "'Cause not all classes are offered online, right? Some of them... It's gonna be difficult with labs and things like that, that might have to be in a hybrid modality, but at least trying to offer at least one class online so students can utilize that, would be beneficial. Especially for the working student."

Many participants were grateful for the responsiveness and understanding of their faculty during this difficult period. One student in particular detailed a compelling shift where faulty were more empathetic to the life circumstances students face.

> "I think because of the pandemic, a lot more professors have been a lot more flexible, because they've learned that not everybody's situation is in a perfect world setting anymore. There's so many different curveballs life is throwing at people that you have to be a little bit more accommodating. But beforehand, when it was in person, it wasn't as accommodating."

For working adult learners, though the pandemic exacerbated many challenges, their trials were far from new. One key difference was the fact that in this period, those difficulties where ubiquitous, and for once weren't only felt by working and adult learners.

**Intentional Program Connection**

Among the eight focus group and interview participants, three were either directly or tangentially connected to a specific student support program. One participant was part of their college's CalWORKs program. The term is an acronym for California Work Opportunity and

Responsibility to Kids. The CalWORKs program can help students on public assistance get access to services such as work study, job placement, childcare, curriculum development, skills training, and prepare them for permanent jobs in their chosen profession (CCCCO, 2021). Another participant was involved in their college's Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) program The MESA program assists educationally disadvantaged community college students succeed in math, science, and engineering (STEM) so they can transfer to four-year colleges or universities and attain a degree in STEM. The third student had used the services at the college's Veteran's Resource Center at one point in their college trajectory. Each described a different experience and level of support.

In particular, the student connected to the CalWORKs program described a very positive experience though acknowledge that her level of services we different than most students.

> "In CalWORKs department, we have counselors, we have advisors, when we were in campus we had the tutors and they would support us with the book vouchers."

She added that the program specifically focused on post-traditional students who in many instances needed additional supports and guidance. "The counselors are giving you advice and they know that you are working and that you have kids and that you are not a student that's coming from high school," she shared. CalWORKs eligibility criteria limit the number of students each college serves to the low hundreds. An eligible CalWORKs student must be a TANF recipient who is receiving cash aid for themselves and any dependent children and students have a 48-month lifetime limit program eligibility (CCCCO, 2021). Due to these limitations, the program is not accessible to the broader working adult learner population.

The second student connected to a college program was involved in MESA. As a biochemistry major, he aspired to transfer to a four-year university to obtain a bachelor's degree

in that subject. Though he generally acknowledged the value of the services the program offers, he shared that one of the limiting factors was the inaccessibility of MESA's supports. "I think programs that build community like MESA things are important, but I also think that they should be accessible beyond the 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. time," he exclaimed. Instead, he reflected on the types of programs and services he felt would help him most:

> "I say for one, it really would be nice to have more versatile programs at your school that can give you a little bit of skill for the majors that you have. Like if we had something that was more of a small group for biochem majors, something that can kinda prepare us for the upper division classes, maybe groups or maybe even doing some type of specific volunteer work for that or we get paid for doing it, that would be nice."

The third student expressed having sought out advice from the Veteran's Resources Center, specifically guidance around accessing the GI Bill. He describes receiving important clarifying information that helped him realize the time limits around aid available to him:

> "Well for me, going to work, I feel like I have to because for one, the GI Bill, I was told only lasts for about 36 months. And that's 36 months apparently of whenever you decide to use it. So I have to be able to maintain my bills."

These three students, in many ways describe both the benefits and limits of specialized campus programs. Some are small and too limited to serve larger groups of students who meet many but not all of the eligibility criteria. Other have valuable services but still are not available at a time when working adult learners who still fall in the economically disadvantaged criteria might need them. And other programs many fill a void and answer the questions that other departments are not addressing. A unifying observation is that these services and the people that

know how to deliver them are on campuses, but perhaps not structured in a manner that can scale to serve more students or deliver supports and services at a time or day when they seek them.

**Campus Culture that Recognizes Work and Opportunities for Student Focused Leadership**

Each of the focus groups and interview closed with an opportunity for students to further reflect on their experiences and to describe ways they believed their college could help them achieve their educational goals. The participants' ideas and enthusiasm illustrated what was possible when colleges deviated from the traditional patterns of services, operations, or structures. "But I think that the community colleges have to reflect the community that they're in and the people that they're serving," added one student as he described what he believed was the college's imperative.

Some interviewees continued to draw upon reflections of operations under the pandemic and highlighted approaches that were either rare or never done before at their college, describing positively how these changes helped them. "In the online environment, it's been a lot easier, so I think that's why there's been a call for much more online or hybrid classes," shared one student as they emphasized the unexpected benefits of the shift to distance education. Another participant added to this observation by describing the value these changes could bring for post-traditional and working adult learners with busy schedule and limited flexibility:

> "I think the offering of services online is huge, and non-traditional hours is definitely key also, some students work full-time or close to full-time job Monday through Friday, some colleges are now offering services on Saturday. That's huge. After hours, huge."

The emphasis here is on a college operational structure that breaks away from limited weekday hours which leave working adult learners unable to access the supports they need to successfully

persist and complete their education. A few of the interviewed students were attune to promising opportunities that could support working adult learners, particularly those struggling to obtain the sequence of classes they need to complete their degrees:

> "Yes, California Virtual Campus is huge, getting that up and running, so you can be able to utilize taking classes from other campuses, even though you're not there, just to be able to make sure that you're... If I had to wait for that spring class for another year, that's just gonna stall my education even longer. And then students sometimes, I got comfortable in work when I left sometimes, so it took me longer to get back into the system."

Other students called for greater leadership, a culture shift, and a greater focus on students like them. In particular, one moving student observation described the role of administrators and faculty to do things differently to adapt to the changing nature and needs of the students they serve:

> "And I think that we need to start breaking out and doing things differently because the students that we reach are continually changing. Whereas the faculty and the administration haven't been changing as much. They're tenured, they've been here, they've been doing things a certain way and it's comfortable for them. So, it's trying to break that, to be able to adapt to our students that are constantly changing."… "It's hard to change that when the students are the variables here, right?"

Without a change in college culture to lead with the needs of its current students in mind, institution will simply perpetuate the practices and structures they've always followed and risk losing the thousands of students that from the margins are pleading for change:

"Because I feel like that is the progression of a community college student. Struggled, struggled, struggled."

## Summary

Through focus groups and interviews, working adult learners described the ways in which institutional structures and interactions with the colleges they attend influence their experiences, persistence and goal attainment. Three overarching themes emerged: 1) balancing necessity with educational aspirations, 2) institutional structures that work against working adults, and 3) opportunities for an intentional focus on working learners. Participating students cited necessity as the driving factor for working while attending college. They emphasized that working was the norm for most of their peers, yet added that critical academic and students supports are not offered with this reality as a consideration. Many participants cited lack of time and poor guidance as their as their primary obstacles to completion. Working adult students are juggling multiple responsibilities and need flexible course options. The pandemic has provided increased flexibility and unexpected benefits by way of online classes and asynchronous learning. Finally, students described opportunities for greater leadership, a culture shift, and an intentional focus on the large population of working students.

# CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

*"So I do this for them, to show my daughter I can do it."*
- Female participant from Northern California

## Overview

The notion that working adult learners are "non-traditional" is out of touch with reality and California Community Colleges should take action to better serve this important student population. Working adult students are often left behind in the system, lacking flexible programs and services, effective guidance, and financial aid that meets their needs. By tailoring campus practices to this important and diverse population, California's community colleges can attract a largely ignored population, increase statewide completion rates, and close workforce gaps. At the state-level, California's policy and administrative leadership can prioritize policy changes that better support working adult learners. To help develop a better understanding of working adult learners and their needs, this study explored three research questions through a sequential mixed methodology study. The questions: 1) What are the characteristics of working adult students at California Community Colleges?, 2) How do California Community Colleges communicate their receptiveness of working adult students?, and 3) In what ways do institutional structures, experiences, and interactions with institutions, influence working adult student experiences, persistence and educational goal attainment?, view this population of students through three distinct viewpoints to build a more complete profile and knowledge of institutional gaps.

## Key Findings for Research Question 1

A comprehensive dataset reveals that working learners are the new mainstay at California Community Colleges. A majority of all students enrolled, 61%, are juggling school and work. Working learners are also a large share of the 25-59 adult student population, comprising 48.5%.

The vast majority, 83%, of working adult learners are employed half time or more. A majority of working adult learners, or 56%, are enrolled in credit programs. Still, in serving adult learners, most colleges do so in noncredit and enrichment programs with students ages 50 and over comprise 40% of adult learner enrollment.

Though success rates across all measures of transfer, degree, and certificate are low, they are especially dismal for working adult learners. Only 8% of adult learners transfer within four years, and only 4% of adult learners earn a degree within four years. Certificate programs, often promoted as the go-to solution for busy working adults have even lower four-year completion rates at 3%. Point-in-time data for academic years 2017-18 through 2019-20 reveal that working adult learners represent 6% of total transfers. These data also show that working adults only comprised 5% of total degree completions, and 14%, on average, of all certificate completions.

## Key Findings for Research Question 2

In an era where consumers have come to expect information instantly at their fingertips, the messages students receive via content on a college's website has never played a more important role. The Working Learner Receptivity Scale allows college to consider how welcoming working adults may perceive colleges to be based on direct and indirect communication on college websites. Exemplary websites across California Community Colleges feature targeted programs for working adults, clear pathways and course mapping tools, short-term and accelerated classes or programs, and effective class scheduling platforms. Three key themes emerged from the 24 websites in this document analysis: 1) basic questions adult learners may seek are unaddressed, 2) adult learners are viewed through a narrow lens, and 3) patterns of outreach privilege the traditional K-12 to college pipeline across websites. Evaluating college websites through the Working Learner Receptivity Scale can improve how welcome working

adults feel when they first encounter community college websites. Such efforts can support increased engagement and enrollment of this critical population.

## Key Findings for Research Question 3

Working adult students are juggling multiple responsibilities and life complexities. The complexities of navigating community college institutions further exacerbate their challenges. More than anything, working adult learners highlighted the need for flexible course options and better guidance. Through focus groups and interviews, working adult learners described the ways in which institutional structures and interactions with the colleges they attend influence their experiences, persistence and goal attainment. Three overarching themes emerged: 1) balancing necessity with educational aspirations, 2) institutional structures that work against working adults, and 3) opportunities for an intentional focus on working learners. Participating students cited necessity as the driving factor for working while attending college. They emphasized that working was the norm for most of their peers, yet added that critical academic and students supports are not offered with this reality as a consideration. The pandemic has provided increased flexibility and unexpected benefits by way of online classes and asynchronous learning. With greater leadership and a culture shift which recognizes work as ubiquitous, colleges can build on this momentum and develop an intentional focus on this large, overlooked population of working students who desperately needed tailored supports.

## Crosscutting Themes

### Work is A Necessity

Adult learners experience greater affordability challenges as they are more likely to have dependent children, higher living expenses, and lost opportunity costs of being away from work to focus on their education. Currently, both state and federal financial aid do not cover the full

cost of community college attendance. Further, the already limited state financial aid program, the Cal Grant, incorporates rationing mechanisms that consequentially serve to predominantly exclude adult students[12]. And though the California State Legislature expanded eligibility criteria for community college students in the 2021 Budget Act (Senate Bill 129), remaining requirements to verify an individual's grade point average (GPA) continue to exclude adult learners who have long been out of high school. Moreover, these policies limit working adult learner access and success and further reinforce the sentiment shared by interviewed students that work is a necessity. The notion of work as a necessity is particularly salient for low-income, first-generation college students, and adult students. This large and growing population of students do not have financial safety nets to rely upon. As a result, time is money for this student group. Yet, despite comprising a majority of students, few initiatives or supports exist for working learners. Colleges and their leaders need to recognize employment as a student necessity and subsequently design academic programs and student supports with this non-negotiable obligation in mind. As students emphasized throughout this study, adult learners are not afforded the luxury of not working.

**Time is a Non-Negotiable**

The notion that students have an abundance of time to embark on journeys of academic exploration is arcane and strife with privilege and socio-economic inequality. The policies and practices of community colleges continue to favor traditional, financially dependent, younger students who enroll full-time. This leaves working adult learners forced to adapt to a system that was not designed for them. Working adult learners juggling multiple responsibilities need

[12] At the time of writing this, the California Governor and Legislature were considering reforms to the state financial aid program, the Cal Grant, which would remove two exclusionary qualification requirements (age and time out of high school limitations), and therefore potentially allow more adult learners access to aid.

flexible course and student support options. Working adult students cite lack of time as an obstacle to succeeding in college. However, as seen in both the document analysis and focus groups in this study, colleges do not make balancing school and work easy. Working adult learners need course offerings outside of the traditional 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. timeframe, and state leaders need to consider how to compel or incentivize such practices. For working learners who have no discretion over their employment schedule, they are limited to courses that fall outside of work hours. Students shared that options are often limited or do not align with degree pathway requirements. This results in already stretched working learners taking unnecessary and unaligned units in order to maintain enrollment momentum, lengthening time to degree and further delays their earning potential. Institutional action is needed to more adequately reflect student scheduling demand.

**Working Adult Learner Receptivity Needs Improvement**

Colleges and students alike increasingly use technology to communicate and engage. With little to no in-person access, the pandemic reinforced the importance of effective college websites that address students' questions. Unfortunately, many websites omit the core information students need, especially working adults seeking details about required time commitment. Institutions that offer shorter, predictable programs have the potential to attract working adult learners, but such programs are not effectively communicated. Further, acknowledgment of adult and working learners was often absent from college websites, sending unwelcoming signals to this large population of current and prospective students. To feel a sense of belonging, working adult learners require visible supports and signs that they are accepted and welcomed at a college. Examples of how to address this need include images of adult students on

websites, clear information about the time commitment needed to compete a program, expanded student support hours, the availability of childcare centers, or public benefit resource centers.

**Adult Learners Are Not Just Enrolled in Noncredit Programs**

While noncredit programs have been upheld as a promising way to expand educational access to adult learners, it is not the only pathway available to them. With 56% of working adult learners are enrolled in credit programs (transfer and associate degree), greater demand for credit pathways exists among this group. Colleges can learn from the founding tenets of noncredit programs and apply them into credit pathways to provide flexibility in course schedules and delivery modality. Further, as colleges communicate and tailor messages to working adults, it's important to recognize that noncredit courses may not be the only vehicle by which adult learners access higher education, advance their career and upgrade their working skills. Meeting the needs of working adults in all program types – noncredit, credit, CTE, etc. – is important to improve low completion rates among this population.

## Assumptions and Limitations

Throughout the design of this sequential mixed method study, I have made several key assumptions. This study relies on different samples of data and during a specific period of time. Though some characteristics about the California colleges in the study may not be applicable to other institutions, it is noteworthy that the state's system is by far the largest community college system in the country (one in every five community college students in the U.S. is a California Community College student). An assumption inherent within the quantitative descriptive data is that selected metrics most effectively build a profile of working adult students at California Community Colleges. The constructs being measured here also have some important limitations. For example, EDD data cannot match students without social security numbers, a limitation that

possibly excludes over 70,000 students. Moreover, I only capture students with reported earnings, many adult learners have a host of other compensated and uncompensated work responsibilities that are not accounted for through the EDD data.

Through the document analysis I posit that working adult students use websites as a primary source of information in developing their educational plans. Based on the limited research focused on working adult students, I identify the need for flexibility, a clear understanding of required time commitment, and access to services as top priorities. O'Leary (2019) also introduces two major issues to consider in a document analysis. The first is the issue of bias, both in the creator of the document and the researcher (2019). The researcher must consider the personal biases they may be bringing to the research. The researcher must evaluate the original purpose of the document, such as the target audience (O'Leary, 2019). I aim to mitigate for this by exploring multiple aspects of college websites, and importantly, by acknowledging my own positionality and biases in doing this type of document analysis. Further, the study diminishes selection bias by using quantitative data gathered in Chapter 5 to select the 24 college websites to analyze.

The focus group design makes assumptions about the representative nature of a small sampling of working adult students within a limited sample of colleges. Assumptions include that selected participants can broadly reflect the perspectives of working adult students at California Community Colleges. I am also assuming that participants will develop enough rapport with the moderator and fellow participants while using the Zoom platform. Given known time limitations for working adult students, this study assumes a self-selected sampling will provide a wide-ranging group of working learners. The constructs being measured in this study have some important limitations. Since this study only conducts focus groups and interviews

with a limited number of participants, limitations exist in sample representation, though generalizability was not a goal for this qualitative component. Limitations also exist in selecting only 24 colleges for a document analysis based on high, median, and low adult enrollment rather than reviewing all 116 college websites. This limitation is addressed through regional selection of varying size colleges. Importantly, a qualitative and quantitative study provides for triangulation of data to explore the research questions while gaining insights to support working adult student success.

Throughout each data methodology, my positionality and purpose for engaging is this study includes a drive to understand what colleges are doing to adapt or support the working student population (Merriam, 2016). Within this study, I bring my role of higher education stakeholder, policy leader, community college professional for over 12 years, and researcher.

## Implications for Policy & Practice

California policy leaders are grappling with complex societal issues related to vast income inequality and a high cost of living. Growing trends indicate the availability of living wage paying jobs for workers without a college degree are shifting from traditional blue-collar industries to skilled-services industries tending to require some postsecondary education (Carnevale & Rose, 2015). By 2030, the state faces a 1.1 million degree gap of individuals prepared to assume new jobs created by a changing economy (PPIC, 2017). Moreover, as income inequality across the nation and state continues to grow, adults with no degree and dependent children are at the greatest risk of being priced out of California (Chetty, et al., 2016). As California attempts to close this projected gap, policymakers must consider working adults to be a critical part of the solution. There is much for colleges to gain from a better understanding of working adults' perspectives on education and the needs of adults potentially interested in a

college education. This is especially true as the juxtaposed issues of shifting enrollment rates and demographics at community colleges and the rising demand for an educated workforce come to a head in California. A focus on working adult learners can address a workforce imbalance in California. Demographers highlight that the state has become top-heavy in its ratio of people over 65 compared to those of working age (Mayer, 2013). Myers (2013) also states that California had a steady rate of about 21 seniors for every 100 working age people. When the first baby boomer turned 65 in 2011 the ratio began rising and is now almost double.

State and national leaders are asking community colleges to examine ways to meet the needs of local economies through workforce development strategies that recognize students simultaneously pursue an education while working (ACCT, 2019). Further, according to an annual survey of college presidents, as colleges grapple with declining enrollment and explore strategies to recruit new students, 75 percent say their college is adding new programs in response to the declines over the past several years (Inside Higher Ed, 2019). Data and perspectives around the needs of the growing population of working adult students may serve useful to colleges as they design new programs. Regularly reviewed data and interviews can inform colleges about the challenges and opportunities working adult students face.

Moreover, as the world continues to grapple with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the uneven impact and inequities of the economic recession have been become grossly apparent. The letter “K” has become a popular descriptor for the country’s economic outlook, noting two separate paths where the rich become richer and the poor are left further behind (Clark, 2020; Dembicki, 2020). To avoid continuing in a K-shaped recovery, public community colleges have the responsibility to consider who is being left behind, not only by the economy but by their institutions. According to the Census Pulse Survey (2020), a greater share of adults

aged 25-39 and adults aged 40-54 say that all plans to take classes this fall have been cancelled (33% and 32% respectively) versus only 19% of adults 18-24 say that all plans to take classes this fall have been cancelled. The weight of external responsibilities should not limit an individuals' prospects for a higher education. Understanding what the growing population of working learners needs to stay enrolled and make progress on their educational goals has implications for the social and fiscal health of our state and country.

Using Tinto's theoretical framework, redesigning opportunities for working adult students requires dismantling the traditional "architecture" of the institution (Burdman, 2018). This study aims to help policymakers at the state and local levels in taking actions and leverage institutional resources to support working adult student through greater outcomes. Through my professional and personal observations of community colleges, I have seen a limited focus on working students. As a policy issue, the lack of focus on working adults is a missed opportunity to expand the state's skilled workforce. Beyond policy, this is an equity issue as many of the students most likely to struggle balancing school and work are low-income individuals of color. Colleges typically outreach to "traditional" students who enter college immediately after high school. Additionally, many course structures and schedules are designed for more traditional students. The goal of this study's findings to encourage institutional action, be it the development of additional resources for struggling working adult students or adoption of policies that remove structural barriers to effectively serving working adult learners. Information from this study can help advance innovative solutions tailored specifically for working adult students. The following seven recommendation include areas with important intersections and implications for policy and practice.

## Recommendations

With over 60% of all California Community Colleges students working while enrolled, it's time for institutions to recognize this population as the new normal and to serve them with the intentionality they deserve. Ignoring the needs of working learners is not only a social injustice but an operational mistake for colleges that want to remain relevant. And though not all student who work are adults ages 25+, many share similar responsibilities, obligations, and challenges as working adult learners. Centering the working adult learner experience in policies and practices – including data, scheduling, course sequencing, and funding – and designing with the student in mind can help prioritize their needs across California Community Colleges, particularly as it relates to advancing student equity and success efforts. The findings within this sequential mixed methodology study inspire the following key recommendations to more intentionally and effectively support working adult learners at California Community Colleges.

I offer the following recommendations first and foremost as a researcher. These recommendations are a compilation of close empirical work following the privilege of engaging closely in the subject. I also approach these recommendations with a deep desire to improve the system in a way that yields greater success for hard-working individuals who enter community colleges with educational goals and aspirations that are often never fulfilled. Drawing upon my professional and personal experiences, I highlight policies and strategies that are meaningful, yet practical. As such, these recommendations don't call for a full dismantling of the system but instead present substantive changes that do more than tinker around the edges.

### Regularly Examine Data Focused on Working Adult Learners

Data about working adult learners at college districts should not be a mystery. The California Community Colleges should evaluate steps to make these data available to local

districts so that they can understand the size and demographic characteristics of the working adult student population. Locally, colleges can also ensure the data they collect and analyze reflects working adult learner outcomes and their experiences with programs and services. In collecting data, college can remove non-inclusive requirements on applications, such as high school GPA or high school transcripts, which often discourage adult students if they do not have such information available. Further, districts should hear and empower the voices of working adult students to better understand their academic and student service needs. Both quantitative and qualitative data centering working adults can serve as a powerful tool for colleges to more effectively understand and support this important population of students.

**Improve Pathways for Working Adult Learners**

Working adult learners don't have the luxury of time. They need shorter, predictable, and faster pathways to transfer, degrees, and certificates. Design of degree pathways should take into consideration adult learners who are weaving between school and work. Pathways should also recognize the attributes working adults bring when they enroll in the college by helping students connect skills from employment through practices like credit for prior learning. Aligned with quantitative and qualitative data in this study and the literature reviewed, below are specific strategies colleges can implement to provide clearer and more attainable learning pathways, and supports to increase working adults' overall success.

- Streamline the course registration process by enrolling students only once – in a clear, predictable, and aligned program – rather than making them sign up every term for individual, unconnected courses.
- Allow students to proceed toward degrees or certificates at a faster pace, with shorter academic terms, less time off between terms, and year-round scheduling.

- Use block schedules, with fixed and predictable course times so that working adult students who are juggling jobs, families, and school can know with certainty when they can go to work each day.
- Use online technology to reduce the amount of time students must be in class and offer flexible, innovative teaching modalities that allow students to advance once they demonstrate certain competencies.
- Crosswalk competencies and skills earned by working learners from prior employment with the learning outcomes of existing pathways and courses.
- Ensure academic counseling is offered during non-traditional hours, such as evenings and weekends, or online, so that working adult learners do not miss out on the benefits of advising tailored to their needs.

**Incentivize Shorter-Term and Market Responsive Courses**

Financial structures for community colleges are designed to favor courses and terms that are 17-weeks long. This traditional structure often limits entry-points for working adults or discourages such students that seek accelerated programs. The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, with support of state legislative leaders, can explore financial structures that allow colleges to receive funding for shorter courses aligned to clearly defined learning outcomes. For career education courses, alignment to learning outcomes would importantly mean alignment to market and workforce demands. Well-structured policies and incentives can enable the development of shorter courses and course pathways that are aligned to outcomes.

**Redesign Scheduling and Course Flexibility**

Interviews and focus groups detailed in Chapter 7 illustrate that students need flexible course modalities that allow them to make progress towards their educational goals while still

meeting ever important responsibilities outside of education, such as jobs and dependent care. The COVID-19 pandemic required all colleges to reimagine how to facilitate quality learning through different modalities. Lessons can be drawn from emergency measures put into place during this period which benefit working adult learners. Specifically, opportunities exist for greater alignment with working adult scheduling needs. First, leveraging technology or data (such as survey data) to collect information that can help institutions better serve adult learners, such as analytics or student surveys about preferred time and modality for courses. Second, increase course flexibility and predictability. Take for example block-scheduling arrangements in which a student takes one course at a time during a three- to four-week period. Colleges can also scale or replicate innovative programs that compress schedules or provide consistent and predictable scheduling, such as the Accelerated College Education Program[13] at Shasta College that enables students to work and attend full-time. Lastly, continue to expand the California Virtual Campus-Online Education Initiative (CVC-OEI), an existing initiative which has the potential be a valuable repository of flexible course options for working adult learners. Approaches and models like these are critical to advancing equity and more effectively serve working adult learners.

**Tailor More Messages for Working Adult Learners**

Truly recognizing that working learners are a majority of enrollments entails designing communications that speaks to their needs. Tailoring communications to working adults is not only paramount to enrollment growth but more importantly to student retention. During focus groups, participants revealed they need to see themselves reflected in systemwide and campus services, programs, messaging and marketing materials. This means that key information, such

[13] https://www.shastacollege.edu/academics/accelerated-college-program/

as the length of time needed to complete a program, should not be buried or excluded. Colleges should leverage the important role their websites play in demonstrating their receptivity toward working adults. Leading with messages that clarify pathways, time requirements, financial assistance, or support services is critical. To improve working adult learner receptivity and success, colleges can utilize data to guide outreach strategies and align to course their scheduling needs. Colleges should also seek out feedback of working adult students as they redesign their websites to have optimal working learner receptivity. As "secret shoppers," working students can describe their personal experience in navigating college websites and provide constructive feedback on the types of information students like them seek and need in a college website.

**Expand Academic Programs for Adults Beyond Noncredit**

Noncredit programs are important entry points for adult learners who may continue into credit pathways that lead to credentials and degrees. Colleges should ensure Guided Pathways maps include noncredit certificates and that they illustrate how they can lead towards degrees. Further, colleges can evaluate whether working students could instead be served in a credit course with co-requisite supports based on their end goal.[14] Additionally, regularly reviewing success data, particularly for working adults, can inform where program improvements or enhanced supports are necessary. Lastly, future research can further examine all regulatory, funding, organizational structures, local practices, or other barriers that perpetuate silos between noncredit and credit and determine how to streamline transitions or remove barriers between the course and program types.

[14] Sixty-one percent of students in non-credit are people of color (Fall 2019 enrollment, Datamart). Eighty percent of students in CAEP are people of color (2018-19 Launchboard). Retrieved from https://www.calpassplus.org/Launchboard/Adult-Education-Pipeline.aspx.

**Streamline Core Supports through a Guided Pathways Model**

In California, rather than adding layers of support to help adults navigate institutional complexity, colleges can learn from the Guided Pathways framework and leverage existing investments and technology to simplify student supports. In February 2021, the Governor's Recovery with Equity Taskforce released a set of actionable recommendations defining strategies, policies, and practices to help California's post-secondary institutions emerge from the pandemic stronger and better poised to serve all students. The Recovery with Equity Report includes 11 recommendations of which three center on *Simplifying Supports for Student Stability* with a specific goal: "By 2030, learners will receive support to meet basic needs through a simplified, integrated system that enables qualified college students to access California's social services, subsidized internet and technology, and increased financial aid."

The concept and theory behind this goal is simple yet profound – redesign structures and leverage existing information to holistically support all students in their daily lives without the need to constantly ask students to prove they are poor. Specifically, recommendation # 9 asked for integrated services for students.

> "California should build an integrated platform that allows learners to apply all at once for the full spectrum of state services they qualify to receive (e.g., financial aid, CalFresh, housing programs, health/mental healthcare, subsidized childcare, transportation, internet/technology support, etc.). The system also would provide all students, families, and advisors with a simplified, low-burden approach to completing the FAFSA and the California Dream Act Application (CADAA) prior to high school graduation and return timely information to support their next steps. When combined with a unified college

application process, this system can become a powerful one-stop shop for post-secondary learners, families, and advisors."

This recommendation aligns with prominent research, which calls on colleges to re-think and redesign financial aid offices to have an expanded scope and mission to meet students' basic needs and ensure that data submitted by students for waiver and financial aid applications is used to help connect them to all campus and government services available to them. Such an approach can expand the Guided Pathways model into student support services. Guided Pathways is a movement that seeks to streamline a student's journey through college by providing structured choice, revamped support, and clear learning outcomes—ultimately helping more students achieve their college completion goals. This framework can also help streamline supports for students in a comfortable and easy to navigate environments. Taken a step further, such a framework should be coupled with practices that offer campus support services under expanded evening and weekend schedules.

**Advocate for State and Federal Financial Aid Reform**

State and federal eligibility requirements to allow post-traditional students, like working adults, to apply for support programs should be evaluated and reformed. At the state level, college leaders should support efforts currently underway to reform the Cal Grant program and eliminate barriers that limit adult learners' access such as GPA verification. While the 2021 Budget Act (Senate Bill 129) expanded eligibility criteria for community college students, remaining verification requirements and limited award numbers and amounts still pose barriers. At the federal level, partner with system leaders and among coalitions of students and colleges to advocate to double the Pell Grant, extend its lifetime eligibility limits, and allow eligibility for participants in short-term job programs. Federal efforts should also include advancing policy to

simplifying the FAFSA, specifically by removing duplicative questions and integrating other key government programs into the application, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and CalFresh food benefits. State leaders can reform and invest in a number of areas that better support working adult learners. Local campus efforts that complement such reforms include resources to support students in applying for public benefit programs and basic needs resources. Overall, state leaders play a critical deciding role in making financial aid significant enough to enable students to transition to full-time status.

## Conclusion and Future Research

This study provides a valuable overview of working adult learner characteristics, how colleges communicate receptivity of working adults, and the experiences of this population within California Community Colleges, the state's only public open access option. It lays compelling quantitative and qualitative evidence which reinforces the urgency to intentionally focus on working adult learners. California's community colleges can improve working adult learner success by recognizing and designing around this population's unique needs, which are especially pronounced in the areas of course scheduling, program length, student supports, academic guidance, and affordability. Additional, in-depth analysis of local-level data can further enlighten working learner needs and provide evidence of effective practices that should be scaled for this population of students. Statewide, several policy changes can create the conditions where the success of working adult learners is not left to chance. With 49% of adults ages 25-60 employed, the population of working adult learners at California Community Colleges is too large and too important to continue to go unnoticed and underserved.

## Synthesis of Learning Snapshot

*I Am/ Yo Soy*

I am complex and hard-working

I wonder about the lives education is overlooking

I hear all the reasons change can't become

I see an educational system where all succeed, regardless of race and income

I want ideas and inspiration but don't always know where I should be looking

I am complex and hard-working

Yo soy complicada y trabajadora

Yo pretendo que todo esta bajo control, hora tras hora

Yo me preocupo por mi mama y hermanas

Yo lloro cuando los demas dudan de mis ganas

Yo siento el apoyo de una familia que me adora

Yo soy complicada y trabajadora

I understand politics, its strengths and its flaws

I say equity and equal protection of the laws

I dream of being caught up with school and work

I try to be straight laced but have quirks

I hope my efforts amount to more students with a diploma

I am – Yo soy complex and chingona

*Lizette Navarette*
*written for Diversity & Educational Leadership*

## Appendix 1: MIS Sample

In order to tailor the data-run to meet the study's objectives, a clear set of definitions was established. Table 3 describes the definitions used for a precise MIS data filter. Using Student Characteristics Derived Data Element (STD) 7, the resulting information indicated whether the student was a credit or noncredit student as of term-end; this element was used to derive students by minimum enrollment, program type, and cohort outcomes (Management Information System Data Element Dictionary, 2019). To derive students outcomes, Student Program Awards Data Record (SP) 02 was used. To provide parameters for the MIS-EDD data match, several definitions and parameters were set (Management Information System Data Element Dictionary, 2019). Specifically, "worked more than half time" is defined as having a quarterly income of more than $12 per hour at 20 hours per week for three months, or minimum wages of $2880 for the quarter. The student sample based on the definitions in Table 3 covering academic years 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20 includes a total of 5,093,187.

*Table 18*

*MIS Data Definitions*

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| Adult students | All students who are or turned 25 years old in their first term of enrollment, with any minimal enrollment in the academic year in question. |
| Traditional students | All other students who were <25 years old during their first term, including dual or concurrent enrollment, with any minimal enrollment in the academic year in question |
| Minimum enrollment | STD7 in (A,B,C, or F) - essentially any one with at least a .5 credits or noncredit contact hours equivalent |
| Working more than half time (effectively) | Because EDD income data only has quarter records, for a given academic year, if a student worked more than half time for more than 2 quarters, then they are defined as working more than half time for the entire academic year; "Worked more than half time" is defined as having a quarterly income of more than $12/hour * 20 hour/week *4 week *3 months = $2880. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Working less than half time (effectively) | Any students below the average half time wages for whom wage data is available in at least one of the quarters covered by the academic year |
| No wage data | Any students not having wage data |
| Program type (duplicated within type, unduplicated within year) | Credit: Any student with a minimum credit enrollment (STD7 = A, B, C) |
| | CTE: Any student with a minimum credit enrollment in a course with a CTE top code as defined in industry sectors with a * here: https://www.calpassplus.org/LaunchBoard/Community-College-Pipeline-MDD#_Toc48118793 |
| | Noncredit - total students with any noncredit enrollment (STD7 = F) |
| Units accrued | Average units successfully completed (C or better) within the specified term (Fall or Spring) within the year - no intersessions, no winter quarter, no summer terms |
| Cohort outcomes (duplicated) | Cohort of students who begin in 2014-2015 with minimal enrollment (STD7 = A,B,C or F) |
| | Track through 18-19 for degrees/certificates |
| | Track through 19-20 for transfer |
| Snapshot outcomes (duplicated) | Transfer - any adult student enrolled from current or previous year with a transfer to any CSU, UC or any private or public instate of out of state four year institution within the indicated academic year. |
| | Degree - any adult student who earned an associate degree (SP02 in (A, S)) within the indicated academic year. |
| | Certificate - any adult student who earned a CO approved certificate (SP02 in (B, L, T, F, N, M)) within the indicated academic year. |

## Appendix 2: Numbers of Working Adult Students by California Community College District

**Excluding population 60+**

| District Name | 2017-2018 | 2018-2019 | 2019-2020 |
|---|---|---|---|
| ALLAN HANCOCK | 3920 | 3167 | 2831 |
| ANTELOPE VALLEY | 2661 | 2512 | 2535 |
| BARSTOW | 905 | 930 | 886 |
| BUTTE | 1963 | 1742 | 1287 |
| CABRILLO | 2523 | 2314 | 2279 |
| CERRITOS | 4513 | 4548 | 4425 |
| CHABOT-LAS POSITAS | 4831 | 4811 | 4674 |
| CHAFFEY | 3532 | 3502 | 3461 |
| CITRUS | 1669 | 1619 | 1600 |
| COAST | 10271 | 10357 | 9918 |
| COMPTON | 1273 | 1118 | 929 |
| CONTRA COSTA | 6566 | 6626 | 6282 |
| COPPER MOUNTAIN | 553 | 497 | 491 |
| DESERT | 3199 | 3084 | 2843 |
| EL CAMINO | 3293 | 3156 | 3049 |
| FEATHER RIVER | 881 | 935 | 713 |
| FOOTHILL-DEANZA | 9518 | 8913 | 7990 |
| GAVILAN | 1967 | 2028 | 1490 |
| GLENDALE | 7980 | 7516 | 6806 |
| GROSSMONT-CUYAMACA | 5940 | 5613 | 5343 |
| HARTNELL | 4791 | 5064 | 4389 |
| IMPERIAL | 1812 | 1653 | 1787 |
| KERN | 5994 | 6370 | 6201 |
| LAKE TAHOE | 1636 | 1769 | 1738 |
| LASSEN | 1622 | 1822 | 1621 |
| LONG BEACH | 4482 | 4466 | 3935 |
| LOS ANGELES | 47806 | 48774 | 46967 |
| LOS RIOS | 17782 | 17742 | 17106 |
| MARIN | 2583 | 2462 | 2428 |
| MENDOCINO-LAKE | 1199 | 1235 | 1134 |
| MERCED | 2405 | 2552 | 2101 |
| MIRA COSTA | 4297 | 4036 | 3654 |
| MONTEREY | 2323 | 2021 | 1826 |
| MT. SAN ANTONIO | 7984 | 7909 | 7644 |
| MT. SAN JACINTO | 4404 | 4316 | 4202 |
| NAPA VALLEY | 1081 | 1001 | 908 |
| NORTH ORANGE | 12422 | 11466 | 9721 |
| OHLONE | 2310 | 2439 | 2366 |
| PALO VERDE | 3702 | 3080 | 3260 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PALOMAR | 5621 | 5323 | 4236 |
| PASADENA | 6835 | 6442 | 6175 |
| PERALTA | 9797 | 9698 | 9459 |
| RANCHO SANTIAGO | 28499 | 26139 | 21132 |
| REDWOODS | 1524 | 1609 | 1349 |
| RIO HONDO | 5456 | 5657 | 4501 |
| RIVERSIDE | 5456 | 5586 | 5648 |
| SAN BERNARDINO | 3691 | 3754 | 3592 |
| SAN DIEGO | 28248 | 26848 | 22710 |
| SAN FRANCISCO | 23921 | 22462 | 18694 |
| SAN JOAQUIN DELTA | 2450 | 2326 | 2410 |
| SAN JOSE-EVERGREEN | 4905 | 5062 | 4528 |
| SAN LUIS OBISPO | 1936 | 2005 | 2097 |
| SAN MATEO | 5575 | 5211 | 4884 |
| SANTA BARBARA | 3334 | 3149 | 2645 |
| SANTA CLARITA | 6101 | 7543 | 6194 |
| SANTA MONICA | 6310 | 6025 | 5684 |
| SEQUOIAS | 1833 | 1739 | 1751 |
| SHASTA-TEHAMA-TRINITY | 1853 | 1845 | 1759 |
| SIERRA | 2958 | 2811 | 2655 |
| SISKIYOUS | 2980 | 2201 | 1686 |
| SOLANO | 1907 | 1841 | 1764 |
| SONOMA | 6847 | 6316 | 5661 |
| SOUTH ORANGE | 10349 | 10285 | 10102 |
| SOUTHWESTERN | 3884 | 3842 | 3810 |
| STATE CENTER | 6404 | 6496 | 6325 |
| VENTURA | 4347 | 4206 | 3965 |
| VICTOR VALLEY | 2012 | 1965 | 1934 |
| WEST HILLS | 1278 | 1480 | 1486 |
| WEST KERN | 2468 | 2386 | 1883 |
| WEST VALLEY-MISSION | 4674 | 4732 | 4441 |
| YOSEMITE | 4023 | 4097 | 3900 |
| YUBA | 1986 | 1912 | 1785 |

**Including population 60+**

| District Name | 2017-2018 | 2018-2019 | 2019-2020 |
|---|---|---|---|
| ALLAN HANCOCK | 5313 | 4487 | 4002 |
| ANTELOPE VALLEY | 2865 | 2701 | 2720 |
| BARSTOW | 955 | 985 | 936 |
| BUTTE | 2185 | 2127 | 1736 |
| CABRILLO | 3360 | 3198 | 3221 |
| CERRITOS | 5803 | 5906 | 5804 |
| CHABOT-LAS POSITAS | 5177 | 5211 | 5186 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| CHAFFEY | 3670 | 3663 | 3639 |
| CITRUS | 1789 | 1744 | 1723 |
| COAST | 11615 | 11914 | 11701 |
| COMPTON | 1343 | 1189 | 1001 |
| CONTRA COSTA | 7392 | 7484 | 7053 |
| COPPER MOUNTAIN | 588 | 535 | 526 |
| DESERT | 3443 | 3313 | 3068 |
| EL CAMINO | 3645 | 3525 | 3418 |
| FEATHER RIVER | 1009 | 1050 | 785 |
| FOOTHILL-DEANZA | 11214 | 10648 | 9580 |
| GAVILAN | 2207 | 2321 | 1714 |
| GLENDALE | 9522 | 8994 | 8232 |
| GROSSMONT-CUYAMACA | 6503 | 6193 | 5931 |
| HARTNELL | 5267 | 5681 | 4923 |
| IMPERIAL | 1985 | 1803 | 2007 |
| KERN | 6279 | 6667 | 6504 |
| LAKE TAHOE | 2277 | 2552 | 2587 |
| LASSEN | 1728 | 1921 | 1735 |
| LONG BEACH | 4960 | 4945 | 4392 |
| LOS ANGELES | 54346 | 55535 | 53853 |
| LOS RIOS | 19415 | 19349 | 18610 |
| MARIN | 3377 | 3212 | 3242 |
| MENDOCINO-LAKE | 1689 | 1757 | 1571 |
| MERCED | 2778 | 2954 | 2460 |
| MIRA COSTA | 5475 | 5200 | 4773 |
| MONTEREY | 3234 | 2887 | 2676 |
| MT. SAN ANTONIO | 12504 | 12440 | 12041 |
| MT. SAN JACINTO | 5005 | 4899 | 4711 |
| NAPA VALLEY | 1582 | 1515 | 1381 |
| NORTH ORANGE | 22056 | 21347 | 18050 |
| OHLONE | 2452 | 2602 | 2528 |
| PALO VERDE | 3974 | 3359 | 3517 |
| PALOMAR | 6331 | 6047 | 4926 |
| PASADENA | 7711 | 7296 | 7002 |
| PERALTA | 11245 | 11202 | 11012 |
| RANCHO SANTIAGO | 32267 | 30201 | 24612 |
| REDWOODS | 1658 | 1772 | 1481 |
| RIO HONDO | 6137 | 6312 | 5096 |
| RIVERSIDE | 6350 | 6508 | 6506 |
| SAN BERNARDINO | 3914 | 3976 | 3831 |
| SAN DIEGO | 38106 | 37002 | 31919 |
| SAN FRANCISCO | 31906 | 29865 | 24324 |
| SAN JOAQUIN DELTA | 2718 | 2557 | 2609 |
| SAN JOSE-EVERGREEN | 5376 | 5578 | 5047 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| SAN LUIS OBISPO | 2834 | 3016 | 2980 |
| SAN MATEO | 6371 | 6019 | 5644 |
| SANTA BARBARA | 3842 | 3737 | 3054 |
| SANTA CLARITA | 6381 | 7944 | 6540 |
| SANTA MONICA | 9769 | 9509 | 9168 |
| SEQUOIAS | 1939 | 1851 | 1846 |
| SHASTA-TEHAMA-TRINITY | 2175 | 2183 | 2049 |
| SIERRA | 3621 | 3490 | 3259 |
| SISKIYOUS | 3488 | 2774 | 2289 |
| SOLANO | 2154 | 2079 | 2011 |
| SONOMA | 10833 | 10287 | 9283 |
| SOUTH ORANGE | 18930 | 18985 | 18627 |
| SOUTHWESTERN | 4748 | 4757 | 4765 |
| STATE CENTER | 6842 | 6963 | 6708 |
| VENTURA | 4726 | 4618 | 4375 |
| VICTOR VALLEY | 2220 | 2229 | 2231 |
| WEST HILLS | 1330 | 1572 | 1566 |
| WEST KERN | 2633 | 2534 | 2008 |
| WEST VALLEY-MISSION | 8224 | 8588 | 7942 |
| YOSEMITE | 4626 | 4723 | 4446 |
| YUBA | 2108 | 2028 | 1906 |

## Appendix 3: Focus Group Recruitment

**INTERESTED?**
**EMAIL: LNAVARETTE@UCDAVIS.EDU**

Recruiting 4-6 focus group participants, who are currently enrolled at a California Community Colleges, are ages 25 years or older, and work an average of 20 hours per week or more. Information shared during the focus group will help create recommendations for policy and practice to improve programs, services, and resources for working learners at California Community Colleges.

## Appendix 4: Focus Group Questions

### Focus Group Questions

**Registration Questions:**

1. How many years have you been in college?
2. Is this your first time attending a California Community Colleges?
    a. Yes
    b. No

3. How many hours do you work each week while attending college (include all your jobs)?

4. Do you have any biological, adopted, step or foster children who live in your household?

5. College region.

**Polling Questions:**

1. I am attending a community college to:
    a. Obtain an associate degree
    b. Obtain a certificate
    c. Obtain a credential
    d. Learn a specific skill or trait
    e. Explore my options

2. My work schedule determines my class schedule each semester:
    a. Always true
    b. Often true
    c. Sometimes true
    d. Never true

3. Which is a higher priority:
    a. School
    b. Work

4. My college offers courses at a time of day that is conducive to my work schedule:
    a. Always true
    b. Often true
    c. Sometimes true
    d. Never true

**Group Discussion Questions:**

1. Elaborate on your reasons for working while also attending college. Were you already working when you started college?

2. What are the support services offered at your college for working students?

3. Describe the academic and student services you have used. Are there any services that are difficult to access? If so, why?

4. In what ways are you able, or unable, to balance school and work?

5. Describe your interactions with college staff and professors. Do you feel they understand your school and work demands?

6. Tell me about the guidance or direction you receive to achieve your educational goals.

7. Why does work matter?

8. As a working adult student, what can the college do to help you complete your degree, credential, or certificate?

## Appendix 5: Example Protocols

DATE

Dear Participant,

I am writing to inform you that I am currently working on my doctorate in education at the University of California, Davis. As part of my study, I am conducting a series of focus group with working learners at California Community Colleges. The purpose of my study is to identify the academic and student support working learners need to succeed. I will moderate the focus group and engage participants in a one-hour discussion. To capture the discussion in its entirety, I will record audio and video. The videos will be for purposes of my learning and will not be shared outside of my dissertation committee.

Ground Rules:

- Confidentiality – As per the non-disclosure form, please respect the confidentiality of your peers. The moderator will only be sharing the information anonymously with relevant staff members.
- One Speaker at a Time – Only one person should speak at a time in order to make sure that we can all hear what everyone is saying.
- Use Respectful Language – In order to facilitate an open discussion, please avoid any statements or words that may be offensive to other members of the group.
- Open Discussion – This is a time for everyone to feel free to express their opinions and viewpoints. You will not be asked to reach consensus on the topics discussed. There will be no right or wrong answers.
- Participation is Important – It is important that everyone's voice is shared and heard in order to make this the most productive focus group possible. Please speak up if you have something to add to the conversation!

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or comments.

Sincerely,

Name
Contact information

Name: _____ College: _____

_____ I give permission to be recorded.

_____ _____
Signature Date

## Appendix 6: Pilot Document Analysis

| College | District | Website | Description of Home Page | Term Search: Short-term | Term Search: Flexibility | Term Search: Adults |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Allan Hancock College | Allan Hancock Joint CCD | www.hancockcollege.edu | Opens with: Search Classes, Apply, get Financial Aid, and Program of Study. Allows students to search by program of study using key words. No specific resources targeted towards working adults/students by easy to navigate. Possible resources include the Q&A question bar, information in different languages, and short-term classes online. | Short-Term Classes: Image of a student on a running track. "Stay on track to achieve your goals and take a short-term fall class at Allan Hancock College" Noncredit, Student Success And Support Program, Community Education Programs | Law Enforcement Training, Noncredit Equivalency Certification | Community Education Programs, Older Adult Programs |
| American River College | Los Rios CCD | www.arc.losrios.edu | Easy to follow "Steps to Success" that guide student through enrollment, orientation, financial aid, etc., may be helpful to working adult students. "Explore Areas of Interest" may help as well. Second most prominent is feature on College Promise Program primarily focused on financial aid. | Spring 2020 Academic Calendar Public Safety Training Center Enroll at ARC STATway | Coronavirus Update. Reading Across the Disciplines (RAD) | One result: Accelerated College Education program. The Accelerated College Education (ACE) program was designed to put working adults on the fast track toward a bachelor's degree. https://arc.losrios.edu/ace |
| Barstow College | Barstow CCD | www.barstow.edu | Opens with CTE exploration workshop. Second focus is accreditation updates. Student information includes: - Getting Started Now - Military Education Opportunities | One result. Human Resources: HR Operational Procedures HROP #1 HROP #2 Job Descriptions Management | No results | No results. |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | - Barstow College Promise | | | |
| College of the Siskiyous | Siskiyou Joint CCD | www.siskiyous.edu | Focus on "Apply" and "Enroll Now". "Get Started" button is prominent and categorizes students by type: First-Time Student, Transfer Student, Returning Student, Dual Enrollment Student, International Student. Feature registration, beauty of campus location, and online classes. No specific resources targeted towards working adults/students. | Short-Term Emergency Loan or Grant Program - Student Services Short-term & Substitute Employees Short-Term OR Substitute Salary Schedule | Medical Examination Report, Guided Pathways Steering Committee Agenda | Noncredit Fall Course Offerings, Noncredit Classes - Summer Session 2019, Lifelong Learning - Continuing Education |
| Columbia College | Yosemite CCD | www.gocolumbia.edu | Open to "Career Path at Columbia". Online Learning, Get Started, and Student Services are the three primary portals on the page. Feature registration and 8 links to forms and PDF updates. No specific resources targeted towards working adults/students. | Short-Term and Summer Course Scheduling Columbia College Scheduling Details and Deadlines | | |

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