



Building Social Capital for Adult Learners

Connections, Confidence, and Pathways to Opportunity.
A Collaborative White Paper from the Coalition on Adult
Basic Education (COABE) and WGU Labs

Executive Summary

Adult education has long been a pathway to greater opportunity—helping adults strengthen foundational skills, earn credentials, prepare for postsecondary education, and enter or advance in the workforce. Yet skills and credentials alone do not always provide equal access to opportunity. Professional relationships matter.

For adults entering a new career, returning to education, or attempting to advance economically, knowing how to build relationships—and having access to people who can help open doors—can be an important part of translating education into employment and advancement.

To explore this dimension of learner success, **WGU Labs** partnered with **COABE** to engage adult learners from COABE's network in a pilot of the WGU Labs Social Connections Course. COABE provided access to the adult learner population whose experiences and responses form the basis of the COABE pilot findings presented in this paper.

The pilot reached **400 adult learners** during May and June 2026. Thirty-eight learners completed the full survey-course-survey sequence. Six participated in follow-up interviews.

The results offer an important window into how adult learners think about professional connections, where they experience barriers, and how educational institutions, community organizations, technology, and trusted individuals can help learners build social capital.

Among the most significant findings:

- **60% of learners who began with low confidence increased their confidence** after completing the course.
- Learners **trying to break into a new career field** represented the strongest-fit population in the pilot; all seven gave the course top ratings and said they would recommend it.
- Learners valued **AI-generated feedback** during the learning process but overwhelmingly preferred **people and trusted organizations to make professional introductions**.
- Learner feedback identified important considerations involving **language and literacy accessibility, transparency around AI use, practical networking skills, trauma-informed course design, and correctional education**.
- The findings suggest a potentially powerful model in which **technology helps learners prepare and practice while trusted people and organizations help create meaningful connections to opportunity**.

Together, these findings reinforce an important principle: helping adults build economic mobility requires developing not only their **human capital—their knowledge and skills—but also their social capital—the relationships and networks that can help turn those skills into opportunity.**



1. Why Social Connections Matter

Adult learners bring significant assets to the workforce: life experience, persistence, resilience, occupational knowledge, community connections, and an eagerness to build new skills. Yet many adult learners are navigating transitions.

They may be entering an entirely new career field, learning English, earning a high school equivalency credential, pursuing postsecondary education or training, preparing to return to their communities following incarceration, or attempting to move from a job into a career with greater economic mobility.

In each of these circumstances, education and training are critical—but they may not be sufficient. Learners also need to understand how professional relationships are built, how to communicate their career goals, how to reach out to others, and where to find trusted people who can help them make connections.

The Social Connections Course pilot explored whether intentional instruction and reflection around these relationships could help adult learners recognize and expand the networks already available to them.

Importantly, the pilot also gave learners an opportunity to tell researchers what worked, what did not, and what should change.

2. The WGU Labs Pilot

WGU Labs developed the Social Connections Course around four potential barriers that can make it difficult for individuals to build professional connections:

Knowledge: Understanding how connections and networks work.

Psychological factors: Beliefs, confidence, and feelings about networking and asking others for help.

Skills: Knowing how to initiate conversations, reach out, follow up, and maintain professional relationships.

Access: Having access to people and organizations who can provide meaningful connections. COABE partnered with WGU Labs to bring the pilot to adult learners within COABE's adult education network.

The pilot reached approximately **400 learners**, with **38 completing the full survey + course + survey sequence** — 47.5% of those who started. Six learners subsequently participated in follow-up interviews. Participants gave the course an average satisfaction rating of **8.3 out of 10**, and 62% gave it a nine or ten and said they would recommend it.

The participating population also illustrated an important characteristic of adult education: learners arrive with very different starting points.

Fifty-one percent entered the pilot already feeling confident about building professional connections, while 15% reported feeling only slightly confident. Nearly three-quarters of the career interests represented were in education, healthcare, or helping professions.

That variation proved important when interpreting the results.



3. What Adult Learners Told Us

Finding 1: The Course Had the Greatest Impact on Learners Who Needed It Most

The overall change in confidence was modest, in part because approximately half of participating learners entered the pilot already feeling confident about building professional connections. The picture changed considerably when researchers looked specifically at learners who began with lower confidence.

Among those learners, **60% reported feeling more confident after completing the course.**

The findings therefore suggest that targeted recruitment may be more effective than offering the same intervention indiscriminately. Learners who already possess strong networking confidence have less room to grow, while those with lower confidence may benefit substantially more.

Implication for Adult Education

Programs should consider assessing learners' confidence and familiarity with professional networking before providing social-capital interventions. The goal is not simply to offer another course; it is to connect the right learners with the right intervention at the right point in their career journey.

Finding 2: The Four Barriers to Building Connections Were Confirmed

The pilot provided support for the four-barrier framework underlying the course.

Learners demonstrated challenges involving what they knew about networking, how they felt about it, whether they possessed the necessary skills, and whether they had access to appropriate people.

The psychological and knowledge components appeared to be addressed effectively by the course. The weakest area was the **skills barrier**—specifically, knowing how to actually reach out to another person. Practical outreach skills were also notably absent from learners' descriptions of what they found most useful.

Implication for Adult Education

Awareness alone is insufficient. Learners need opportunities to practice the mechanics of professional relationship-building: starting a conversation, writing an introductory message, asking for information or assistance appropriately, and following up.

Finding 3: Career Changers May Have the Most to Gain

One of the strongest findings involved learners who were trying to break into a new field. Every learner in this subgroup gave the course a top rating and said they would recommend it. After completing the course, 71% reported feeling very confident, while 71% expressed strong interest in receiving a trusted introduction to someone working in their desired field.

Implication for Adult Education

This finding has particular relevance for workforce development.

Adult education programs frequently serve individuals preparing for occupational transitions. Social-capital development could become an intentional component of career pathways, integrated education and training, apprenticeship preparation, and other workforce initiatives.

Teaching someone the skills required for a new occupation is essential. Helping that individual become connected to people already working within the occupation could further strengthen the pathway from classroom to career.

4. Technology Can Help—But Learners Still Trust People

Perhaps one of the most consequential findings concerns the emerging relationship between **artificial intelligence and human connection**.

Learners valued AI when it was used as a learning tool.

In follow-up interviews, multiple learners specifically identified AI-generated feedback as one of the most valuable components of the course. Rather than simply receiving an evaluation at the end of an activity, learners appreciated receiving feedback while constructing their responses. This finding was also observed in WGU Labs' separate user testing.

But learners drew a clear distinction between **AI helping them prepare for a professional connection and AI actually making that connection**.

When asked whom they would trust to introduce them professionally, learners selected:

- 61%** — their school or training program
- 61%** — a friend or family member
- 58%** — someone they had met in person
- 55%** — a community organization such as COABE
- 11%** — an AI tool

Among learners who were just starting out, AI was selected for professional introductions **zero out of twelve times**.

This distinction may offer an important blueprint for the future.

Implication for Adult Education

AI can help learners prepare. People can help learners connect.

Technology can help someone practice a conversation, improve a message, identify questions to ask, or build confidence. But the trusted introduction itself may be most powerful when it comes from a teacher, program, employer, community organization, peer, or another person.

For adult education, the future does not necessarily require choosing between technology and human relationships. The more promising approach may be intentionally combining the strengths of both.

5. Adult Learners as Co-Designers

One of the most valuable aspects of the pilot was not simply learning whether participants liked the course.

Learners helped identify how it could become better.

Their feedback demonstrates why adult learners should be involved in designing educational products and interventions from the beginning.

Trauma-Informed Language Matters

A prompt asking learners to connect with someone from their “past” created an unintended negative reaction for one participant, who associated the wording with experiences she had deliberately left behind.

Importantly, the learner herself proposed a solution: rather than asking broadly about someone from the learner's past, ask the learner to identify someone who had a positive impact on their life. This is a small wording change with a significant lesson behind it.

Adult learners bring their entire life experiences into the learning environment. Effective instructional design must recognize that reality.



AI Use Must Be Transparent

Another participant encountered the AI component while using a government work computer. Because she worked in a correctional facility, the unexpected appearance of AI immediately raised concerns about data security and compliance.

The pilot therefore identified an important design principle: **learners should know before an activity begins that AI will be used, what it will do, and what information will be involved.**

For adult education systems operating within government agencies, correctional institutions, and workforce programs, transparency around AI is more than a matter of user preference. Local policies and compliance requirements may also affect implementation.

6. Accessibility Must Be Designed In

The pilot also surfaced challenges related to reading level and language access.

Several participants were navigating the course in English as a second or third language. One relied on translation tools throughout the experience, while another reported that learning professional English vocabulary became a major takeaway.

The course, however, was not specifically designed as an English-language learning intervention. Its reading and written-response requirements therefore created barriers for some participants.

Implication for Adult Education

Accessibility cannot simply be added after a learning experience has been developed. For tools intended to serve adult learners, designers should consider reading level, English language proficiency, digital literacy, response format, and accessibility from the outset.

These considerations do not diminish rigor. They help ensure that the intended learning objective—rather than an unintended language, literacy, or technology barrier—is what determines whether a learner can succeed.



7. A Promising Application for Correctional Education

The pilot also surfaced an unexpected potential application: **correctional education**.

A teacher evaluating the course for incarcerated learners identified the network-mapping component as potentially powerful for students preparing for reentry.

The visual demonstrates that an individual's network can extend well beyond the small number of people they initially identify. For people who may perceive limited opportunities following release, recognizing a larger network of potential relationships could provide both practical value and hope. The participant characterized the concept as positive and hopeful for learners who often see “dead ends,” while also making clear that the course structure would require adaptation for a correctional environment.

This deserves further exploration.

Social capital may be particularly important for individuals whose previous networks have been disrupted by incarceration and who must develop new pathways to employment, education, community engagement, and stability.



8. From Learner Feedback to Design Priorities

One of the strengths of the COABE pilot is that the findings lead to concrete next steps. The recommendations emerging from the research fall into three categories.

Fix First

The course should revise the prompt referencing a learner's “past” to focus instead on someone who had a positive impact; disclose AI use before an AI activity begins; and provide learners with a clear indication that the course has been completed and their responses recorded.

Redesign

Future development should add practical outreach skills, including how to begin a conversation, draft a message, and follow up. The course could also better differentiate between lower-confidence learners and learners who already possess significant networking confidence.

The personal/work/school categories used in the network map warrant reconsideration because they do not reflect every learner's life circumstances. Reading-level and response requirements should also be reviewed for adults with lower literacy and adults learning English.

Plan for the Next Phase

Future pilots should recruit more intentionally among learners with slightly or moderately developed networking confidence and particularly among individuals attempting to enter new career fields.

The findings also support exploring a model in which **AI prepares the learner while a trusted person or organization facilitates the introduction**, as well as developing a version specifically adapted for correctional education.

9. Building Human Capital—and Social Capital

Adult education has traditionally and appropriately focused on developing human capital. We help adults build literacy, numeracy, English language proficiency, digital skills, occupational skills, credentials, and other competencies necessary to succeed in education, employment, and life.

The WGU Labs pilot raises an important additional question:

What happens after the learner develops those skills?

A credential has tremendous value. But someone must know the job exists.

A learner can acquire occupational skills. But someone may still need to introduce that learner to an employer.

A person can prepare for a new career. But that person must also understand how to enter the professional community surrounding that career.

This is where social capital becomes particularly relevant.

Adult education programs occupy a unique position within communities. They are connected to learners, employers, workforce systems, community colleges, training providers, community organizations, and other institutions.

That means adult education can potentially serve not only as a **provider of education**, but also as a **connector to opportunity**.

10. A Larger Opportunity for Adult Education

The implications of this pilot extend beyond one course.

They invite the adult education and workforce development fields to consider social capital as an intentional part of career preparation.

What would happen if adult learners were routinely taught how to identify their existing networks? What if career-pathway programs explicitly taught learners how to reach out to professionals in their desired occupations?

What if employers, alumni, educators, workforce professionals, and community organizations became part of intentional networks of trusted connectors?

And what if AI helped learners prepare for those interactions—without replacing the human relationships that learners themselves say they trust?

These questions represent promising areas for continued research and experimentation.

Most importantly, future work should continue to place adult learners at the center of that process.

Conclusion: Listen to Learners

The COABE–WGU Labs Social Connections Course pilot demonstrates the value of designing with adult learners rather than simply for them.

Learners told us what increased their confidence.

They told us where the course fell short.

They told us where language created unintended barriers.

They told us how AI could help them—and where they preferred a person.

They identified opportunities for career changers, multilingual learners, and justice-impacted individuals.

And they helped identify concrete improvements for the next generation of the course.

That is precisely why adult learner voice matters.

As adult education continues to evolve alongside rapid changes in technology and the workforce, our challenge is not simply to prepare adults with the skills employers need today. It is to build pathways through which adults can translate those skills into meaningful opportunities for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Education builds skills. Confidence helps learners act on those skills. Connections can open doors.

Together, they can create pathways to economic mobility.

About the Collaboration

COABE, formerly the Coalition on Adult Basic Education

COABE represents the field of adult education and works to lead, equip, and empower adult educators and learners through professional development, research, resources, partnerships, and opportunities designed to strengthen adult education and expand economic mobility.

WGU Labs

WGU Labs conducts research, develops and tests educational solutions, and works to identify approaches that can improve learner experiences and outcomes.

Research Note

This white paper presents findings from the **COABE pilot of the WGU Labs Social Connections Course conducted during May–June 2026**. COABE provided access to the adult learner population participating in this pilot. Findings and recommendations reported here are based on the pilot data summarized by WGU Labs. Where the original research identifies findings from separate WGU user testing, that distinction has been maintained.