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THE RESOURCE FOR ADULT EDUCATION

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THE TALENT PIPELINE:

Adult Education's Role in Workforce Development

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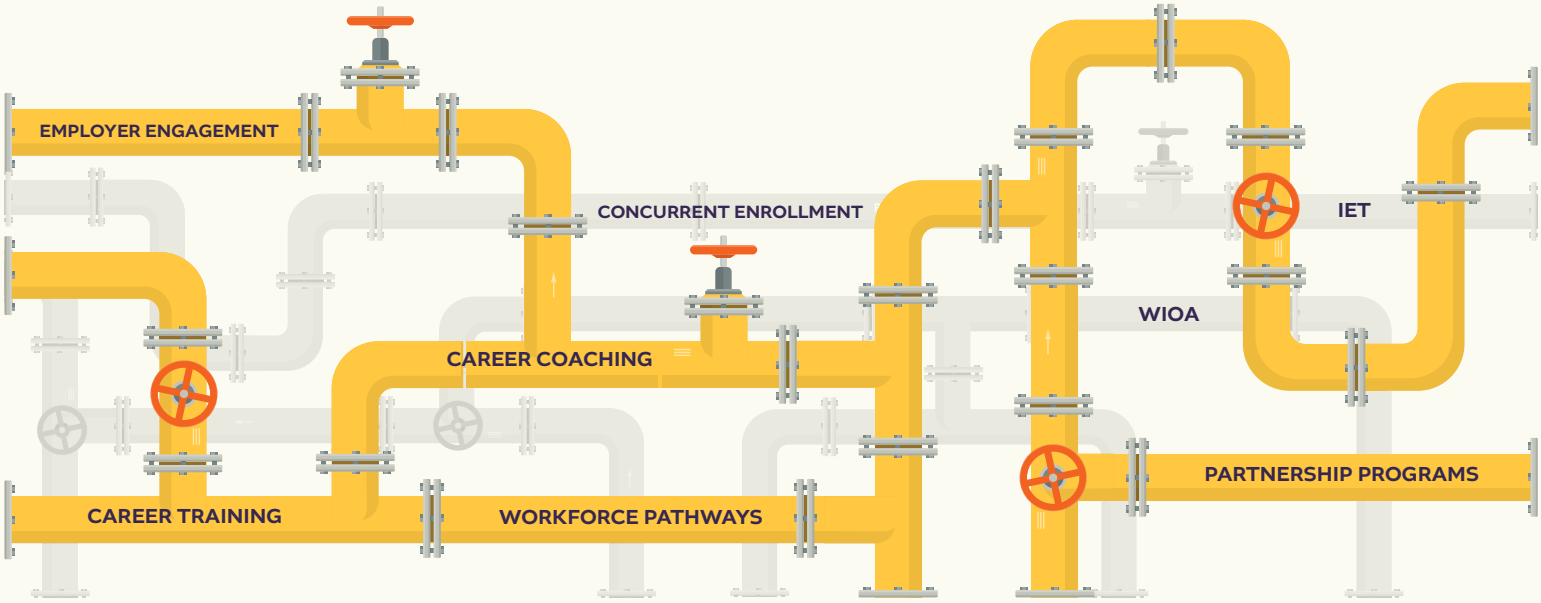

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WELCOME TO THE TALENT PIPELINE EDITION OF THE *COABE JOURNAL*

Dear Colleagues,

We are pleased to welcome you to this special **Talent Pipeline Edition of the *COABE Journal*,** presented through a collaboration between COABE, formerly the Coalition on Adult Basic Education, and Jobs for the Future (JFF). At a time when employers across the country are searching for skilled workers and millions of adults are seeking pathways to better jobs and greater economic mobility, we believe there has never been a more important moment to recognize adult education as an essential part of our nation's talent development strategy.

Too often, conversations about the workforce pipeline begin with postsecondary education or job training. But for millions of adults, the pathway begins earlier—with gaining foundational literacy and numeracy skills, learning English, earning a high school equivalency credential, developing digital fluency, or building the confidence and competencies necessary to enter training and advance in the workplace. Adult education is not simply a bridge to opportunity; it is a powerful workforce and economic development engine that helps individuals build family sustaining careers while helping employers access an often-overlooked pool of talent.

That is why the partnership between COABE and JFF is so timely. Our organizations share a commitment to building systems that recognize talent wherever it exists and create meaningful pathways between education, training, and employment. Together, we see tremendous opportunity to more intentionally connect adult education providers with employers, workforce systems, community colleges, industry partners, and other organizations working to strengthen local and regional economies.

Throughout this special edition, you will encounter ideas, research, promising practices, and examples that demonstrate what becomes possible when adult education is positioned as a central component of the talent pipeline. These contributions challenge us to think beyond traditional program boundaries and toward an ecosystem in which learners can move seamlessly from foundational education to credentials, further education, employment, and advancement.

The stakes are significant. When adults gain skills, the impact extends well beyond the individual learner. Families become more economically secure. Employers gain skilled and committed workers. Communities become stronger. Regional economies become more competitive. And children see new possibilities modeled by the adults in their lives.

We hope this edition sparks both conversation and action. We invite adult educators to deepen their connections with employers and workforce partners. We encourage employers to see adult education programs as valuable partners in recruiting, developing, and retaining talent. And we challenge policymakers, funders, and system leaders to build structures that make these partnerships easier to create, sustain, and scale.

Our nation does not have the luxury of leaving talent on the sidelines. Building a stronger workforce requires us to recognize the potential already present in our communities and create pathways that allow people to translate that potential into opportunity.

We are grateful to the authors, practitioners, researchers, employers, learners, and partners whose perspectives are represented in these pages. Most importantly, we are grateful to the adult educators and workforce leaders across the country who work every day to ensure that talent is not defined by where someone starts, but by where they have the opportunity to go.

We invite you to read, share, discuss—and then put these ideas into action.

With appreciation,

Maria Flynn

Maria Flynn
Chief Executive Officer
Jobs for the Future (JFF)

Sharon Bonney

Sharon Bonney
Chief Executive Officer
COABE

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THE TALENT PIPELINE: ADULT EDUCATION'S ROLE IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Don Finn, PhD
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Rachel Pleasants McDonnell
Jobs for the Future (JFF)

ABSTRACT

The U.S. labor market largely comprises middle-skill jobs (52%) that require more than a high school diploma but less than a 4-year degree, yet only 43% of workers are trained to fill them (Olugbemiga, 2020). Employers report that this gap is not only technical: One in three say their average employee lacks the literacy skills to do the job well, a shortfall estimated to cost $46 billion in lost revenue (Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network [ALL IN], 2024). Adult education sits at this intersection, equipping learners with the skills and competencies employers need while helping close persistent gaps in the workforce pipeline. Adult education programs must understand the scale of the talent pipeline problem, the federal policy architecture connecting adult education to workforce systems under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and the evidence behind program models. COABE and Jobs for the Future (JFF) have a vested interest in developing talent pipelines that bridge employer needs with adult learners' aspirations. Federal policy has created incentives for adult education providers to build career pathways, yet fewer than 10% of adult learners currently participate in integrated education and training (IET), the model designed to concurrently build foundational and occupational skills (Cronen et al., 2023). The article argues that closing the talent pipeline gap depends less on new policy than on building the practical capacity—staffing, training, and program models—for adult education to treat career pathway development as a core practice rather than a specialized add-on.

Keywords: adult education, talent pipeline, workforce readiness, stable employment, partnerships

FRAMING THE TALENT PIPELINE

The "talent pipeline" is the system through which individuals acquire the skills, training, and experience needed to meet employers' current and future workforce demands. Learners in adult education programs have often been overlooked as a source of talent for the workforce pipeline. In reality, adult education should be a core partner among employers, workforce agencies, and training providers in the collective effort to build and sustain a robust talent pipeline. The benefits of a strong talent pipeline extend beyond employers to adult learners, who gain access to higher wages, greater economic stability, and quality employment.
From this perspective, the talent pipeline is not only about filling employer vacancies; it is also about helping adult learners achieve real economic advancement through jobs that increasingly require higher levels of foundational skills than in years past. Building a strong talent pipeline requires more than occupation-specific training. Employers need workers with trade or occupation-specific technical skills, but they also need durable skills such as effective communication, problem-solving, and adaptability that transfer across jobs and hold up as those jobs change. Adult education programs are positioned to build both, and for most adult learners, workforce goals are inseparable from their educational goals, as they are often a primary reason a learner walks through the classroom door in the first place. This article asserts that adult education is a foundational, not peripheral, partner in workforce development, and examines the policy, evidence, and organizational partnerships that support that role.

The Scale and Shape of the Skills Gap

The skills gap is the difference between the skills, knowledge, and abilities employers need and those the available workforce possesses. The scale of the gap is easiest to see in the labor market's "middle." The National Skills Coalition (NSC) has tracked middle-skill jobs, those requiring postsecondary training short of a 4-year degree, for over a decade. Based on their analysis of the May 2018 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics by State, the NSC reports that 52% of U.S. jobs are considered middle-skill jobs, yet only 43% of workers are trained at this level (Olugbemiga, 2020). This gap leaves businesses and industries short of the talent they need to grow. Digital skills help to add to understanding the issue, as 92% of jobs require digital or likely digital skills, yet nearly a third of workers lack the opportunity to build them, and jobs requiring even one digital skill pay 23% more on average, roughly $8,000 a year (National Skills Coalition, 2023).

A national survey of 500 frontline employers conducted for the Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network (ALL IN) found that one in three employers believe their average employee lacks the literacy skills needed to do the job effectively, and two in five reported that low literacy is widespread in their company (ALL IN, 2025). Surveyed employers estimated this would cost them $46 billion in lost revenue over the following year, an estimate ALL IN describes as conservative, since employers tend to underrecognize the scale of low literacy in their own workforce (ALL IN, 2024). Notably, 99% of the employers surveyed said they want to do more to support employees' literacy skills, suggesting the issue is capacity and know-how rather than will (ALL IN, 2025).

Layered on top of these gaps is a genuine unknown regarding artificial intelligence and how it will reshape the skills employers seek and the skills adult learners will need. While adult education programs cannot yet know precisely what AI will demand of workers, the direction appears clear: Digital fluency and adaptability are becoming baseline expectations, not specialized ones, raising the floor for what "job ready" means for adults entering or reentering the workforce.

FEDERAL POLICY: WIOA TITLE II

Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), administered through the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), created requirements and incentives to strengthen the link between adult education and the broader workforce system (Cronen et al., 2023). The federal office that has long administered these funds, the Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE), is itself in transition: In 2025, the Departments of Education and Labor entered an interagency agreement transferring administration of AEFLA and the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act from OCTAE to the Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration (ETA), with FY24 and FY25 adult education grants reactivated through DOL's systems that September (U.S. Department of Labor, 2025). What this means for state adult education systems in practice is still unfolding, and providers should watch for further guidance as the transition continues.

WIOA's core strategy for linking adult education to employment is integrated education and training (IET), which concurrently provides adult basic education, workforce preparation, and occupational skills training so learners build foundational and job-specific skills at the same time rather than sequentially (Center for Law and Social Policy [CLASP], n.d.). A related provision, Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) under WIOA Section 243, extends this model to English learners, pairing language instruction with workforce preparation and training. While not every learner arrives ready for IET's pace and structure, contextualized instruction and career pathway "bridge" programs, which build foundational skills within an occupational context before a learner enters a full IET, are an important complement for learners who need that intermediate step. WIOA's performance accountability structure, measuring providers partly on credential attainment, employment, and wages, reinforces the incentive to build all these models (Cronen et al., 2023).

WHAT WORKS: PROGRAM MODELS CONNECTING EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT

Washington state's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program serves as an excellent example of the integrated education and training model in practice. Developed by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges and operating statewide since 2006–07, I-BEST uses a team-teaching approach that "pairs a basic skills instructor and an occupational instructor in the delivery of occupational training for at least 50 percent of class time" (Martinson et al., 2021, p. ix). The team-teaching model supports academic skill building and credential attainment. Earned credentials are vital to these programs because they mark individual achievement and create a pathway through stackable credentials that

lead to industry-recognized certifications, career progression, and, over time, higher wages. A 3-year impact report on the effectiveness of Washington state's program used a random-assignment evaluation and found that access to I-BEST increased completion of any college credential within 24 months by more than 32 percentage points, with 44% of the treatment group earning a credential in that window (p. x). Longer-term results are more mixed: A 3-year follow-up found no detectable difference in receipt of credentials requiring a year or more of study, and no significant impact on earnings by that point (Martinson et al., 2021). Taken together, I-BEST's record suggests concurrent models can meaningfully accelerate short-term credential completion, even as their longer-term economic payoff remains an open question worth continued study.

Community colleges play a similar bridging role nationally, offering the credit-bearing occupational training that IET and bridge programs feed into. Registered Apprenticeship is another proven pathway that leads to increased income while also directly benefiting the employers that invest in this model (Ladd, 2026); adult education can support preapprenticeship programs that connect directly to registered apprenticeship. Employer-led investments in foundational skill development are another promising strategy. As Jobs for the Future (JFF) has seen through its work with Good Jobs Challenge partnerships, aligning sector-based training with employer-led hiring while strengthening the regional workforce system can help more workers and learners access high-wage, high-growth careers (Cohen et al., 2026). JFF's related work with corporate HR teams on skills-first hiring, through its Talent of Tomorrow Fellowship, is aimed at the same goal: widening the pool of candidates whose skills, not just their credentials, determine whether they are hired and how far they advance (Gerwin, 2026).

Adult learners often face nonacademic challenges, including family, financial, and access-related challenges, that can interfere with educational attainment and credential completion (American Council on Education, n.d.). These challenges frequently stem from family responsibilities, financial challenges, transportation limitations, housing instability, or other access-related issues. Research suggests that programs offering wraparound supports or services can improve learner participation, persistence, and goal attainment by addressing these obstacles. Wraparound services may be provided directly or through community partnerships and can include childcare assistance, transportation support, case management, career coaching, and navigation services that complement academic instruction and credential-focused training. Providing academic, career, financial, and counseling services and support modeled on an individualized case management approach can help to support the whole learner (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT AND ONGOING GAPS

Despite this policy and program infrastructure, implementation has lagged. The Institute of Education Sciences' (IES) national evaluation of WIOA Title II found that as of 2018–19, only 21% of adult education providers offered IET in all their programs and that fewer than 10% of adult learners participated in IET. Another finding of the national evaluation was that developing or implementing IET was among the reforms local providers found most

challenging, cited by 39% of providers, largely due to staff time and expertise (Cronen et al., 2023). This unevenness is not confined to any one state or provider type; it reflects a broader capacity gap between what WIOA incentivizes and what most programs currently have the staffing and training to deliver. Closing that gap is likely to depend less on new policy and more on practical models, professional development, and partnerships that programs can adapt without building every component from scratch.

THE ROLES OF COABE AND JFF

COABE represents adult education and literacy practitioners in the United States, and its driving mission is to "connect educators, learners, and partners with the resources, research, and professional learning that strengthen adult education nationwide" (COABE, n.d.). COABE pursues that mission through leadership, professional development, and advocacy for adult education and literacy practitioners. COABE's interest in the talent pipeline follows directly from that mission: The practitioners it represents are, in large part, the people building the career pathways for the learners they serve, and COABE's role is to give them the professional development, research, and advocacy platform to do that work well.

Jobs for the Future (JFF) approaches the same problem from the employer and systems side. Founded in 1983, JFF "drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve economic advancement for all," with a public goal of helping 75 million people facing systemic barriers secure quality jobs by 2033 (JFF, n.d.). Achieving this goal requires investing in the systems and programs that support adults in the U.S. with lower levels of literacy—a population that, according to the 2023 Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), numbers nearly 60 million (Keiper & Rampey, 2024). While COABE's strength lies in the practitioner community delivering instruction, JFF's strength lies in its direct relationships with employers, educational institutions and systems, workforce development organizations, and policymakers. The two organizations' interests converge on the same population and the same goal, from different points in the pipeline.

Together, COABE and JFF are committed to the power of educational opportunity to drive economic advancement for all. We believe stronger collaboration across education and workforce system partners, including the adult education field, will yield the robust talent pipeline employers want and the career opportunity so many adult learners seek.

CONCLUSION

Adult education has invaluable potential as a key workforce-development partner to address numerous challenges that undermine the development and maintenance of a viable talent pipeline. Issues such as the persistent middle-skill gap, employer-reported literacy gaps, a widening digital divide, and a developing AI-driven shift in job requirements highlight the challenges of building an effective talent pipeline. WIOA Title II and the IET model give adult education a policy framework to meet this moment, and partnership programs, such as Washington state's I-BEST program that incorporate concurrent, contextualized instruction, can accomplish this, even as questions about long-term economic payoff remain

open. What the evidence consistently points to is a capacity gap, not a policy or evidence gap: Adult education programs and their partners, including COABE and JFF, now have the opportunity and the responsibility to close it, thus equipping adult learners not only to enter the workforce, but to advance within it toward the kind of economic advancement the talent pipeline is meant to provide. ⌘

Don Finn, PhD, is a professor of education at Regent University, COABE president emeritus (2019–2021), and editor of the COABE Journal. An educator for 35 years, he has taught Grades 6–12, adult high school students, and graduate and doctoral students. He has served in numerous state and national adult education leadership roles and organized and led adult-focused meetings and workshops nationally and internationally. He directs the doctoral and adult education programs at the Regent University School of Education, and his research interests include designing effective programs for adult learners at various levels and in both online and in-person contexts. Dr. Finn can be reached at drdonfinn@gmail.com.

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THE TALENT PIPELINE: Adult Education's Role in Workforce Development

RESEARCH

STRATEGIES FOR SERVING INTERNATIONALLY TRAINED PROFESSIONALS IN ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Adult multilingual learners often come to the adult education system to improve their English language proficiency and for support in successfully integrating into their communities and local workforce. A growing subset of multilingual learners are internationally trained professionals (ITPs) who bring international professional credentials and degrees and work experience to the United States. Despite their valuable qualifications and experience, many college-educated immigrants in the U.S. face underemployment due to difficulties transferring their foreign credentials, accessing professional networks, navigating the aligned U.S. industry sectors, and learning targeted industry-specific language and U.S. workplace norms. Adult education, as an essential component of the U.S. workforce development system, has a core role to play in supporting ITPs to attain individual and workforce goals, as well as helping to meet their broader immigrant integration needs. However, without broad understanding of effective practices for serving this population, support for ITPs in adult education remains inconsistent. Additionally, shifting immigration policies and an uncertain funding landscape implicates the delivery of essential English language and workforce instruction, directly impacting service delivery for all adult learners, including ITPs. This article reports on findings from a series of interviews with adult education providers and ITPs on effective practices for serving ITPs.

Keywords: internationally trained professionals, adult education, workforce integration, credential evaluation, career navigation

ABOUT INTERNATIONALLY TRAINED PROFESSIONALS

Adult education is an essential component of the U.S. workforce development system for serving internationally trained professionals. In the 2022–2023 Program Year, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA)–funded adult education system served nearly 163,000 individuals who had some postsecondary education or a degree from a foreign country, making up nearly 15% of all students served in the adult education system. This is an increase of nearly 29,000 ITPs from Program Year 2021–2022 (NRS, 2022, 2023).

The ITP population is tremendously diverse in terms of age, country of origin, race, education, and linguistic abilities; however, these individuals often share common assets—strong international credentials, multilingualism, and professional experience. Despite these valuable assets to the U.S. workforce, many experience difficulties applying their foreign credentials and experience to U.S. systems. As a result, many ITPs are employed in jobs that do not fully utilize their professional skills and experience. According to a 2021 study by the Migration Policy Institute, "Almost half of recent arrivals (i.e., immigrants who arrived in the United States in the past 5 years) have a bachelor's degree or higher," and 2 million college-educated immigrants are either unemployed or underemployed (Batalova & Fix, 2021). This skill underutilization is exemplified in the healthcare sector, in which 32.4% of immigrants with professional and doctorate degrees worked in occupations that did not require a medical doctorate or professional degree (American Immigration Council, 2023).

ITPs frequently face rigid licensing processes for regulated professions, and their professional backgrounds are not always recognized or maximized by higher education institutions and the workforce (Kormaz et al., 2024). These unique challenges highlight the critical need for specialized, targeted support within adult education programming to help ITPs successfully transfer their skills to the U.S. economy. Adult education programs can leverage these assets to help ITPs navigate their educational and career pathways in the United States more quickly.

RESEARCH METHODS

The authors conducted a landscape scan of available research and information. This initial review helped identify gaps in the literature, namely the lack of information available about how internationally trained professionals are served in adult education. The scan also identified organizations and adult education programs that provide programming designed to serve ITPs. From this scan the authors identified and interviewed:

- 12 AEFLA-funded adult education providers that deliver intentional programming and services for ITPs
- Several professional immigrant-serving organizations
- Nine ITPs as recommended by program providers
- Multiple state directors to capture firsthand experiences and map regional systemic responses

Programs were identified through recommendations from state staff when asked about programs offering such services and were seen as being at the forefront of serving ITPs in

their states; internet research that surfaced programs when querying using search terms (e.g., ITP + adult basic education, brain waste + ESL + training), and verifying programs met criteria (e.g., exploring program websites to ensure that ITP-specific opportunities were being offered); previous EARN interviews; and recommendations from other immigrant-serving organizations. These programs recommended ITPs to be interviewed.

The interviews focused on a mix of states with large and growing immigrant populations and states with established efforts in serving ITPs (see Table 1 for a summary of all entities and individuals interviewed to inform this findings report). Interviews were conducted between August and October 2023.

Thematic analysis was used for all data to identify relevant and recurring themes. Program-level practices that were confirmed as successful by ITPs and program providers were then pulled out. Five overarching strategies for serving ITPs and helping the ITPs to maximize their skills and experience for their own economic advancement and the betterment of their communities were identified. The following section describes themes and strategies that emerged.

Strategies for Serving ITPs

The strategies in this section are those that were identified as being effective and reflecting the pressing needs of internationally trained professionals. This section describes these strategies and offers ideas for how to enhance or add services to help ITPs more quickly meet their workforce goals and achieve economic integration.

Five major strategies emerged from the interviews and analysis:

- Enhance career advising and navigation services to address the unique needs of ITPs, including accessing basic needs supports.
- Adjust existing programming and services to help ITPs improve their English language proficiency.
- Provide ITP-specific classes.
- Assist ITPs with navigating foreign credential evaluation.
- Help ITPs transition to employment in good jobs that leverage their education and professional experience.

Enhancing Career Advising and Navigation

Navigators and advisors help multilingual learners and immigrants access services and resources that help them meet their linguistic, civic, and economic integration goals. Adult education providers can enhance existing career advising and navigation services for ITPs, helping them move more quickly toward their economic integration goals. Services can include one-on-one advising, coaching, career navigation, and case management models that begin with intake and continue after ITPs gain employment.

Advisors and navigators support ITPs with tasks and activities such as

- short- and long-term education and career planning,

- credential evaluation,
- understanding the U.S. workforce and job market, and
- identifying and addressing barriers through connections to relevant services and resources.

Advisors also provide occupation-specific licensing and credentialing information and connect ITPs to specific programming options, such as ELA and career-readiness classes, ITP- and occupation-specific classes, and mentoring and networking services.

Since many ITPs experience a significant shift in their professional identity once in the United States, advisors can also support ITPs in understanding and navigating this new identity, such as by connecting them with other ITPs. Additional enhancements to advising for ITPs are described in Table 1. These components could be added to existing advising programs to support ITPs or combined to create a new advising program specifically for ITPs.

Table 1

Components of Enhanced Advising

Component	Description	Implementation Tip
Comprehensive intake	Use the intake process and initial meetings with new students to collect information about ITPs' educational and professional backgrounds, as well as their education and career goals within the United States.	Revise intake forms to collect **additional information** from ITPs, such as: • earned degrees • credentials • work experience • short-term needs • language-learning needs • short- and long-term career goals • obligations • financial needs
Referrals and warm handoffs	Advisors play a key role in connecting ITPs to the external and internal services they need to pursue their goals. Advisors use warm handoffs to connect ITPs to community services and collaborate closely to refer ITPs to programming and classes that meet their education and career goals.	Create and maintain lists of community resources, organizations, and individuals who provide the **key services** ITPs may need. Contact lists can include: • legal services • postsecondary admissions • housing/transportation/childcare/ immigration services • additional wraparound services as needed

Component	Description	Implementation Tip
Connections to networks and mentors	Advisors and adult education program staff can connect ITPs to professional networks and mentors, including networking events and mentorship opportunities, by engaging a network of volunteer professionals in diverse sectors and setting up informational interviews.	To develop a network of professionals and mentors, • tap into **existing professional networks and associations** • connect with **volunteer professional networks,** • and create **ITP alumni networks**.
Shared resources	Advisors can connect ITPs with individualized and occupation- or sector-specific support through (1) virtual learning platforms for occupation-specific language support, (2) resources on industry-specific training and credentialing information, and/or (3) state-specific licensure information for regulated professions.	As licensing, regulatory, and career pathway information is gathered for specific occupations (in response to ITP interest and need), **create folders that can be shared** with other ITPs interested in the same occupation or sector. Resources can be shared as cloud-based, collaborative **platforms**, or can be organized and shared in a **learning management system**.
Case management model	Advisors can use a sustained case management approach to coordinate services, including wraparound services, referrals to appropriate classes and programs, and connections to employers or further education and training next steps.	Create **goal-setting, education, and planning templates for ITPs**, and develop a system to **store and share ITP information** with other advisors and instructors. **Create a set schedule to check in** with ITPs at various points throughout their enrollment to check in on education and career planning progress and make referrals to community organizations, resources, and professional mentors as needed.

Adjusting Programming and Services to Help ITPs Improve Their English Language Proficiency

ELA classes, career-readiness classes, and self-paced occupationally specific instruction can be enhanced to better meet internationally trained professionals' linguistic needs and employment goals.

English Language Acquisition Classes

ELA classes, which may also be referred to as English as a second language (ESL) or English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), focus on navigating daily life and integrating into the local community. These classes can be helpful to internationally trained professionals in the same way that they are helpful for all multilingual learners as they learn to carry out their day-to-day activities, such as shopping, going to the doctor, working with their child's school, and seeking other social services. ITPs' level of English proficiency should be assessed during intake and used to place learners in the appropriate level of coursework.

ITPs may have specific language needs related to navigating the workforce, reentering postsecondary education, and accessing education and training programs to help them move more quickly into careers that reflect their education and skills. Programs can support ITPs with these needs through ELA classes by including the following opportunities:

- Individualized learning opportunities in existing ELA classes so ITPs can build vocabulary, fluency, and confidence. For example, ITPs could present on a topic related to their professional experience (e.g., an ITP with an accounting background could talk about their experience during a financial literacy unit).
- Activities that orient ITPs to their community, such as identifying local organizations and agencies that provide relevant services.
- Opportunities to engage with native speakers to support fluency and confidence.
- Experiential activities, such as volunteering or site visits, that are focused on ITPs' professional experiences or interests.
- Activities that support job-related activities, such as exploring careers and employment sites, communicating with coworkers, and interviewing.
- Digital literacy instruction focused on navigating informational and social services websites, writing emails, and exploring job sites.

ITPs can also benefit from programming that helps to meaningfully build specific language skills for reentering their chosen field, such as through contextualized English language instruction.

Career Exploration/Readiness Classes

Career exploration/readiness classes may meet a wide range of multilingual learners' backgrounds and interests while also supporting the need to learn about, prepare for, and find employment in their field of interest. These classes help internationally trained professionals gain a stronger understanding of U.S. workforce expectations, culture, and opportunities. Activities can be differentiated and contextualized to the specific goals and interests of individual ITPs. For example, instructors can work with ITPs one-on-one or in small group sessions that focus on ITPs' specific interests and goals. Career exploration or readiness courses typically address topics such as

- Developing a career pathway
- Building a resume
- Preparing for and developing interview skills
- Conducting a job search
- Completing job applications
- Strengthening employability skills for the U.S. workplace

If there is sufficient interest to offer a sector-specific career-readiness class, the class can focus on understanding the occupations, requirements, and vocabulary within that sector.

Targeted, Self-Paced, Occupationally Specific Instruction

Targeted and contextualized content for internationally trained professionals may be delivered using virtual language-learning platforms, whether as part of a class or for independent learning. Virtual platforms that include career or sector components are particularly useful in offering diversified sector-based content specific to ITPs' professional and educational goals. They also offer opportunities for additional practice and on-demand learning, and provide support for ITPs whose employment goals may not be met through other programming or course offerings. A drawback for some programs is that these virtual learning platforms may be proprietary, require a paid subscription or license, or have limited "seats," which impacts how many ITPs can be served.

Providing Internationally Trained Professionals–Specific Classes

Classes just for internationally trained professionals provide targeted content and language instruction through cohort-based learning opportunities that foster peer connection and support. ITP–specific classes include professional English classes, generalized career exploration and planning for professionals, and occupational or sector-specific preparatory classes that match ITPs' backgrounds or areas of interest. These classes allow ITPs to support and learn from each other, grow their social and professional networks, recreate their professional identity, and acclimate to their new community. Some providers have found that there is enough interest in sectors such as healthcare and education to create ITP–specific classes in these sectors to help ITPs reenter the workforce. Others offer more general courses to address ITPs' diverse employment backgrounds and goals.

Assisting ITPs With Foreign Credential Evaluation

Many U.S. employers, licensing boards, and institutions of higher education only accept foreign credentials from certain countries. Employers, licensing boards, and institutions often require a translation and/or evaluation of foreign credentials to determine their alignment with U.S. degrees and credentials. The National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES) is a trade association whose members provide credential evaluation services.

Advisors play a key role in helping internationally trained professionals navigate the credential evaluation process, including understanding whether an evaluation is needed, choosing a company to complete the evaluation, and, in some cases, accessing funding to support the process. Advisors can increase their own understanding of the complexity of licensing in regulated professions and the evaluation process in order to help ITPs achieve their unique goals. The steps described in Table 2 can help advisors guide ITPs through the evaluation process.

Table 2
Steps for Evaluation

Step	Questions to Ask or Research	Why Is This Step Important?
1. Determine the purpose of the evaluation.	Ask the ITP: • Why do you want to have your degree(s) or credential(s) evaluated?	The answer will help to determine whether an evaluation is needed, and if it is, how you will go about the evaluation process. Some internationally trained professionals may need to complete the evaluation for their selected career pathway, but it may not be required for all ITPs. For example, if the ITP is being asked to show high school completion for employment, a translated foreign high school diploma may suffice, though it varies by employer. Others may want to complete an evaluation for admissions to an education program. Knowing the purpose of the evaluation will inform Step 2.
2. Determine the type of evaluation needed.	Ask the ITP: • Is there a specific employer, postsecondary institution, or regulating agency requesting an evaluation? • Who should receive the evaluation reports?	Find out which evaluation company the requester will accept, and whether they need a specific type of evaluation (e.g., course-by-course or equivalency). Find out whether the requester needs to receive the report in a specific way. If needed, include the employer's information as an additional recipient of the report so that they receive it directly.
3. Choose the evaluation company.	Research with the ITP: • How will the employer or postsecondary institution accept documents? • Do they need original documents? • Do they require the credential-issuing institution to send documents directly? • How long will the evaluation report be valid?	In some cases, employers or postsecondary institutions will require the use of a specific evaluation company. If not, select from an NACES-accredited evaluation company (NACES.org). If the employer or postsecondary institution does not require the use of a specific translation service, default to a certified translator. Some translators have a certification from the American Translators Association (www.atanet.org). For ITPs who may not have their documents due to adverse circumstances in their country of education, the WES Gateway Program may be an option (https:// www.wes.org/social-impact/programming/wes-gateway-program/).

Step	Questions to ask or research	Why is this step important?
4. Determine the timeline for completing the evaluation.	Research with the ITP: • When is the credential evaluation needed? • How recent does the report need to be? • Is translation needed?	The timeline for completing an evaluation will depend on the answers to Steps 1–3. For example, some evaluation requesters (like admissions offices) may require that the evaluation reports be completed close to the time of admissions. In other cases, ITPs may want the evaluation report by a certain time and will need to plan out the completion of the translations prior to completing the evaluation.
5. Discuss or provide funding for the evaluation.	Ask the evaluation company: • What is the cost of the translation and/or evaluation? Ask the ITP: • Does the ITP need assistance in paying for the translation and/or evaluation?	Credential translations and evaluations have a range of associated costs depending on the number of pages, evaluation type, etc. Determine whether the program or other funding sources can support these costs if needed. For example, if the ITP is enrolled in an IET program and the credential is relevant to the IET, programs may use WIOA funds, in accordance with state policy, to support the credential evaluation. Other programs may write the costs of credential translation and/or evaluation into grants.

Adult education programs can explore a variety of funding sources to support these translations and evaluations. Developing partnerships with employers, workforce entities, and community organizations could widen access to funding for credential evaluations. The following funding sources may also cover the cost of evaluations:

- Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) (WIOA 243) funds to support credential evaluation for students in IET/IELCE programs related to their past degree or credentials*
- Money generated from student fees to support credential evaluation (if allowable in your state)
- Community/city funds
- Philanthropic grants
- Refugee services grants
- WIOA Title I

Helping Internationally Trained Professionals Transition to Employment

To help internationally trained professionals transition to meaningful employment, adult education providers should build trusted relationships with employers, provide opportunities for ITPs to build social capital, develop programming that helps ITPs reenter a career field, and intentionally hire ITPs.

Building Trusted Partnerships With Employers

Building stable relationships with employers can help ITPs enter good, well-paying jobs. Strategies and implementation examples for developing employer partnerships are provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Strategies and Examples for Building Trusted Relationships With Employers

Strategy	Description	Example
Engage employers early in the design of ITP-focused programming.	Engaging employers early ensures that the program will meet employer needs and helps to build buy-in from the employer about the program and the prospective of hiring internationally trained professionals after completion.	Involves employers in the planning stages of new workforce-training programs for ITPs to ensure that employers' hiring needs are met by program completion.
Refer ITPs to employers.	Providers—especially those with occupationally specific programs—often develop close ties to employers in that sector and refer qualified candidates for employment.	Work with employers to understand their needs before referring any individual ITPs to them. In the early stages of building a relationship with an employer, it is important to refer highly qualified candidates to establish trust in candidate quality.
Create "low-pressure" opportunities for employers to meet ITPs.	Opportunities in which the employer can informally meet with ITPs include inviting employers in as guest speakers during classes, providing worksite tours, or conducting informational interviews.	Use "low-pressure" opportunities to build buy-in among employers about the benefits of hiring ITPs.

Providing Opportunities for Internationally Trained Professionals to Build Social Capital

Social capital, which can be defined as "social confidence, social integration, and social participation" (Tonkaboni et al., 2013) increases immigrants' likelihood of successfully integrating into their new communities (Bergson-Shilcock & Witte, 2015). Research continuously shows that most jobs are obtained through social capital (Andersson, 2021; Hellerstein & Neumark, 2020) and particularly through acquaintances in an individual's social networks that may not be part of their regular social circles (Tonkaboni et al., 2013). As ITPs increase social capital, they also build crucial language skills and learn about job opportunities.

Table 4 showcases strategies and examples of how adult education providers have provided opportunities for ITPs to build social capital.

Table 4
Examples of Opportunities for ITPs to Build Social Capital

Strategy	Description	Example
Peer networks	• Convening peer support groups • Helping connect ITPs to alumni from their country or in their occupational sector	Host career-specific support group, which provides peer support and helps ITPs progress in their careers and adjust their professional identities.
Mentorship	• Matching ITPs with mentors in their field	Mentors meet with ITPs to discuss their goals and the industry, offer suggestions for resumes, and advise about technical certifications in the United States that may help ITPs reenter the industry sector.
Connections with industry	• Connecting to professional associations • Setting up mock interviews or site visits with employers	Offer a networking class in which students practice their personal elevator pitches, perform mock interviews, and connect to others in their field.

Developing Integrated Education and Training Programs

Internationally trained professionals provide contextualized opportunities for ITPs to improve English language skills relevant to a career sector or profession and acquire workforce preparation skills that may be specific to the United States.

IETs offer benefits for ITPs because the programs can be completed quickly; can orient ITPs to sector-specific vocabulary and structures; and can support ITPs' understanding of the pathway and the associated next steps, time commitment, and costs associated with pursuing their current or new career. For example, an ITP with a medical background could enroll in a certified nursing assistant course to orient them to the terminology, occupations, and structure of the medical field in the U.S. context. These short-term trainings can also be leveraged as on-ramps to career opportunities.

Hiring Internationally Trained Professionals

Some adult education providers have focused on hiring ITPs as instructors and other critical frontline staff. Adult education providers can help ITPs look for employment opportunities not only in adult education positions but also in other areas or departments of the organization. For example, ITPs with financial backgrounds could find employment in administration offices or departments.

If hiring ITPs is not possible, programs can look for other ways to engage them, including as volunteers, mentors, and/or participants in peer-networking opportunities to build social networks and social capital.

CONCLUSION

Large numbers of ITPs are currently being served within the AEFLA system. ITPs, and those who serve them, understand the benefits they can bring to the local workforce and communities due to their advanced degrees, sector-based certificates, and/or experience. However, there are challenges in moving ITPs into relevant positions based on their qualifications. In response, some programs offer targeted services and resources to respond to ITPs' unique assets and needs. As illustrated through the research-informed strategies and real-world examples described in this article, these include services to help improve English language proficiency, support obtaining a foreign credential evaluation, and supports to navigate U.S. systems such as higher education, licensing bodies, and the workforce. Services also include providing dedicated advising, developing opportunities for ITPs to learn sector-specific terminology and vocabulary, learning together as a cohort, building social capital, and moving quickly into employment that utilizes ITPs' education and experience. Using these strategies to enhance existing services can help build the capacity of adult education providers to meet the needs of ITPs, with the goal of helping ITPs move more quickly toward their economic integration goals. ⌘

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THE TALENT PIPELINE: Adult Education's Role in Workforce Development

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATIONS

BENEFITS TO HEALTHCARE EMPLOYERS OF PARTNERING WITH ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Highly effective partnerships between employers and training providers are critical right now because traditional hiring pipelines are no longer keeping pace with unprecedented workforce shortages. The healthcare sector is facing significant staffing vacancies and projected shortfalls of more than 3.2 million entry-level workers. Highly coordinated and strategic collaboration between employers and training providers has the promise to close the gap. The nation's first adult-serving charter school, the Carlos Rosario School, is located in Washington, DC, and serves over 2,500 adult learners annually through its three-pronged model of foundational skills, career certification training, and comprehensive student support services. The school offers a highly effective nurse aide training as part of its career and technical education (CTE) programming. As the largest private, not-for-profit hospital in the nation's capital, MedStar Washington Hospital Center has earned a national reputation for clinical excellence while serving as a critical healthcare resource for the Washington, DC, region. The 912-bed academic medical center has prioritized investments in local educational partnerships and internal career-advancement opportunities that expand access to healthcare careers in the community while strengthening the organization's long-term staffing pipeline. The thriving collaboration between MedStar Washington Hospital Center and Carlos Rosario

School demonstrates that partnerships between training providers and employers can be intentional and robust. To replicate this successful model, the hospital and school recommend two key strategies: (1) intentionally investing in relationships and community at the organization and individual levels and (2) systematizing collaboration through a cadence of feedback and codesign cycles.

Keywords: adult education, career and technical education (CTE), nurse aide training, workforce pipelines, career pathways, clinical education partnerships, competency-based education

INTRODUCTION

The healthcare sector is facing unprecedented workforce shortages, with projected shortfalls of more than 3.2 million entry-level workers nationwide. Traditional hiring pipelines cannot keep pace with these significant staffing vacancies, making highly coordinated, strategic collaboration between adult-learning programs and employers more critical than ever. In the nation's capital, a robust partnership between MedStar Washington Hospital Center—a 912-bed academic medical center—and the Carlos Rosario School, the nation's first adult-serving charter school, is directly addressing this challenge. By combining the school's comprehensive nurse aide training program with MedStar's investments in talent development, this partnership is expanding adult learner access to high-demand healthcare careers while strengthening the hospital's long-term staffing pipeline. This article provides an overview of the context, nature, and outcomes of the partnership, as well as replicable strategies.

WASHINGTON, DC: CONTEXT

The Washington, DC, metropolitan area, home to more than 6.4 million people, is a vibrant hub of cultural diversity. The area has one of the most highly educated populations in the United States, with transient professionals moving in and out for federal jobs, national politics, contracting, and diplomacy. Roughly one-third of residents age 5 and older in the greater DC metropolitan area speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026). The most commonly spoken are Spanish, Amharic, French, Vietnamese, and Chinese. The hypercompetitive market creates a disadvantage for capable, nondegreed individuals and nonnative English speakers seeking careers with a pathway to the middle class and beyond. English language learners find themselves at a unique disadvantage, since standard hiring processes often do not account for linguistic and cultural capabilities.

NATIONAL HEALTH CARE WORKER SHORTAGE

The healthcare field faces a sustained staffing crisis on a national level. More than 65% of U.S. hospitals and health systems report having to operate at less than full capacity due to lack of staff to safely manage open beds (Kaufman, Hall & Associates, 2023). This deficit in workers is seen at the entry point and along the career pathway, with a projected shortfall of more than 3.2 million entry-level healthcare workers and a shortage of 263,000 registered nurse positions by 2026 (American Hospital Association, 2021).

The healthcare industry is the largest source of employment in the United States, recently overtaking retail and manufacturing (Gottlieb et al., 2026). This underscores the importance of strategically addressing the obstacles facing talent recruitment and development in the healthcare industry.

MedStar Washington Hospital Center

As the largest private, not-for-profit teaching hospital in the nation's capital, MedStar Washington Hospital Center (MedStar Washington) has earned a national reputation for its highly specialized care and nursing excellence, as evidenced by consistent *U.S. News & World Report* rankings (n.d.) and dual Magnet Recognition Program® and Pathway to Excellence® designations from the American Nurses Credentialing Center.

For nearly 70 years, the 912-bed academic medical center has served as both a regional referral center and one of the nation's most culturally and linguistically diverse urban populations. To best serve its community, the hospital prioritizes investments in local educational partnerships and internal career-advancement opportunities. These strengthen the organization's long-term staffing pipeline and expand community access to healthcare careers.

This approach has contributed to national recognition beyond traditional quality measures. The Lown Institute (n.d.) has repeatedly recognized MedStar Washington as the most socially responsible hospital in DC and among the nation's highest performing hospitals for health equity, value of care, and patient outcomes. The hospital has also been named an LGBTQ+ Health Care Equality Leader by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation and received the Gage Award for Population Health for its *D.C. Safe Babies Safe Moms* initiative, which addresses disparities in maternal health.

Within this broader organizational strategy, MedStar Washington has developed a longstanding partnership with the Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School (Carlos Rosario School) to strengthen the pipeline of patient-care technicians, drawn from adult learners from the surrounding community.

Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School

The Carlos Rosario School was founded more than 50 years ago in Washington, DC, as an English instruction program, and it has evolved into a premier comprehensive model for adult education. Formally recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a national model in holistic adult education in 1988, the school transitioned into the nation's first adult public charter school in 1998. As the city's largest and oldest program, it occupies a central role in the sector of nine adult public charter schools. Nationally, there are approximately 100 adult-serving charter institutions.

The Carlos Rosario School's diverse student body comprises more than 2,500 adult learners annually, representing more than 70 countries of origin. Prospective students must demonstrate DC residency and meet at least one of three criteria: lacking a college degree, lacking employable workforce skills, or being a nonnative English speaker, according to D.C. Official Code § 38–2901.

The school's foundational structure relies on an award-winning, three-pronged model engineered to eliminate systemic barriers for nontraditional students by integrating foundational skills (such as English fluency, digital literacy, and high school equivalency exam preparation) with career and technical education and comprehensive student support services. Over 4 decades, the school has refined its implementation and systematized a career-training model that intentionally targets four high-growth and high-demand career pathways: information technology, culinary arts and hospitality, bilingual education, and healthcare. To optimize economic mobility, the institution is highly selective, focusing exclusively on sectors that offer viable pathways to earning living wages that can sustain families. The school collaborates with industry experts in each sector to backward-map the curriculum and program design, ensuring that school graduates are equipped to not only enter their chosen field but also to advance and thrive. These programmatic alignments yield strong outcomes: Industry certification pass rates consistently average 90% and higher, and longitudinal data show that more than 93% of students exiting from programs across the school successfully retain employment or transition into higher education.

The American Institutes for Research (2025) emphasizes the following promising practices at the Carlos Rosario School: (a) digital literacy integration, (b) goal setting and tracking, (c) differentiated and individualized instruction, (d) personalized multilingual tutoring, (e) student academic support, (f) postsecondary transition supports, (g) mental health services, and (h) student government and leadership.

The school intentionally engages employers both to maintain alignment with employer hiring needs and support learners to develop their networking and interviewing skills. Employers participate in guest panel discussions, job fairs, and school-based professional networking events. Employer advisory committees undertake crucial thought partnership with the school on updates to the school's curriculum and program design to keep pace with emerging industry trends and opportunities.

Nurse Aide Training Program

A prime example of the Carlos Rosario School's model is its specialized Nurse Aide Training program, founded in 1998. Rather than focusing solely on basic clinical certification, the curriculum intentionally integrates soft skills and workforce competencies that regional healthcare employers value most. It specifically targets long-term job retention and rapid career promotion. Graduates are equipped with clear, structured clinical pathways and consistently encouraged to elevate their medical careers. This allows them to advance into high-demand roles as patient-care technicians or to matriculate into postsecondary nursing institutions to become registered nurses. In fact, 60% of Carlos Rosario School students, once employed, aspire to continue their education to become registered nurses.

An emphasis on contextualized instruction and language scaffolding is another key strength of the program. Many students enter Carlos Rosario School as English language learners, and the program is designed to integrate English language development with healthcare education. As the students learn English, they also learn healthcare terminology, communication skills, charting language, patient interaction, and clinical concepts within the context of

real healthcare scenarios. This approach allows students to simultaneously build language proficiency and clinical confidence, preparing them to communicate effectively with patients, families, and healthcare teams.

Strong wraparound services for learners enrolled in the Nurse Aide Training program also contribute significantly to student persistence and completion. Students receive guidance and support throughout, including assistance with onboarding requirements, vaccinations, drug screenings, hospital compliance modules, academic advising, career coaching, and transitioning to employment. Faculty members, coordinators, and clinical instructors provide mentorship, encouragement, and individualized coaching to help students overcome challenges and remain focused on their goals.

The program has shown strong results. The American Institutes for Research (2026) found that 82.5% of enrolled students completed the program. Among those, 72.8% attempted the National Nurse Aide Assessment Program certification exam, and 90.9% passed.

In the 2026 DC Department of Health evaluation, evaluator Tamara Freeman verbally commended the school's Nurse Aide Training program for its high-quality, exceptional records accuracy, internal compliance systems, and programmatic structure.

Collaboration With MedStar Washington

The seeds of the partnership between the Carlos Rosario School and MedStar Washington were planted in 2008. A registered nurse with a master's degree in education, then employed by the hospital, responded to a job posting at the school for a nurse instructor and program coordinator for the Nurse Aide Training program. When the school hired the nurse on a part-time basis, she continued working full time as a nurse at the hospital. She later assumed a leadership position at the hospital, and over the next decade, MedStar Washington became a primary employer for program graduates.

The partnership deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. MedStar Washington was the only site that opened its doors to Carlos Rosario School students to complete the clinical practicum required for nurse aide certification. The vice president of nursing operations gave the approval, noting the strong track record of hires from the Nurse Aide Training program. Since then, more than 300 school trainees have gained experience in patient care in different wards across the hospital.

What began as an informal employment pipeline nearly 20 years ago has evolved into a long-term training and talent development collaboration that benefits both organizations and the community they serve. Hundreds of Carlos Rosario School graduates have secured employment in local hospitals and long-term care facilities, and MedStar Washington is the largest single employer of those graduates, currently employing approximately 100.

Carlos Rosario School and MedStar Washington work together to prepare compassionate, skilled, and workforce-ready nursing assistants. During Nurses Week in May 2026, four Nurse Aide Training program graduates received the 2026 MedStar Nurse's Choice Awards, recognized by their peers for excellence in professional collaboration, clinical skill, patient care, and teamwork.

The Carlos Rosario School has built a strong team of nurse aide instructors who are registered nurses employed by MedStar Washington. Their expertise helps ensure a smooth transition from classroom instruction to hands-on practice. One of the last stages of the instruction is the clinical practicum, which consists of a 40-hour rotation on a medical-surgical unit at the hospital. There is a maximum 6:1 student-to-clinical instructor ratio. Instructors remain with students throughout the full 8-hour clinical day and provide them a formal performance evaluation at the end of the week. Before each rotation, the school verifies that students have successfully demonstrated the required skills and competencies to participate safely and effectively in the clinical setting.

Once Carlos Rosario School graduates obtain their nursing assistant certification, they can be employed as patient-care technicians and receive more training by the education department of MedStar Washington. Many continue their studies and earn associate degrees or a bachelor of science in nursing, with tuition support from the hospital, and, where needed, scholarship funding from the school. Currently, 11 graduates work as registered nurses at MedStar Washington. In one hospital unit, seven graduates once were employed as patient-care technicians and now are working as registered nurses.

At the administrative level, a member of the talent acquisition team of MedStar Washington sits on the Carlos Rosario School's voluntary employer advisory committee. The hospital representative advises the school on curriculum and program design and helps ensure that graduates meet the latest requirements for landing a job and progressing in their careers at local employers, including the hospital. The cooperation goes both ways. The hospital is undergoing a process of community engagement to inform a 3-year community health plan, and it invited Carlos Rosario School's CEO to serve on its advisory task force, supporting the hospital's aims of gaining greater community input from the region's nonnative English speakers. Carlos Rosario School graduates employed at the hospital are highly diverse, with Amharic, English, Spanish, French, and Thai as their primary languages.

Student Success Story: Madaly M.

Madaly M.'s journey is an example of the transformative power of education. Originally from El Salvador, Madaly enrolled at the Carlos Rosario School at the beginner English level. After progressing through all the levels, she enrolled in and completed the Nurse Aide Training program. After graduation, Madaly interviewed for a patient-care technician role at MedStar Washington. Initially, the hospital human resources team thought that her English was not strong enough. Doris Medina, Madaly's instructor at the Carlos Rosario School, personally advocated on her behalf because she had witnessed Madaly's capabilities in class. The hospital hired Madaly in 2017 as a patient-care technician, and during her 5 years in that role, she became known for her strong work ethic, compassion, and dedication to patient care. The hospital gave Madaly tuition support to pursue a nursing degree at the University of the District of Columbia while she continued to work full time. In 2023, she stepped into the role of registered nurse in one of the hospital's medicine units, the same environment where she had worked as a patient-care technician.

Today, Madaly goes beyond her standard nursing duties. She participates in the hospital's Wound and Hand Hygiene Committees, conducting monthly audits for patients with wounds.

In addition, she performs weekly hand hygiene audits to ensure caregivers are properly washing their hands before entering and after exiting patient rooms. Madaly's patients frequently compliment her. A recent letter shared with the hospital said:

> I would like to commend you, Madaly, for the outstanding care you provided to my mother during her treatment. Your professionalism, compassion, and attention to detail were truly exceptional.
>
> … As a Spanish-speaking nurse, she went above and beyond to ensure that my mother felt understood, comfortable, and respected at all times. Her care made a tremendous difference not only in my mother's care but also in our family's peace of mind. (From a former patient's family member, March 2026.)

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE DC HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

The DC government is addressing the shortage of healthcare professionals through a series of initiatives. The DC Department of Health awarded funding in 2025 and 2026 to the Carlos Rosario School through its new High-Need Healthcare Career Scholarships Program, whose goal is to eliminate economic barriers for DC residents who commit to working in high-demand healthcare fields within the district for 2 years. The Carlos Rosario School has leveraged this assistance to expand the number of learners served, add an accelerated track to its nurse aide training program, and cover student fees, immunizations, and clinical costs. The school's program has increased in annual enrollment, from 80 students to more than 100, in part with support from the High-Needs Healthcare Career Scholarships Program grant.

Furthermore, there is increased demand for the Nurse Aide Training program from both prospective learners and employers. The school is expanding its career-training facilities to include two practice labs and additional instructional space to accommodate further growth. MedStar Washington has donated three hospital beds to equip the school's expansion. These efforts have boosted the pipeline of workers to MedStar Washington, with approximately 40% of graduates landing jobs at the hospital.

STRATEGIES AND REPLICABLE PRACTICES

The thriving collaboration between MedStar Washington and Carlos Rosario School demonstrates that partnerships between training providers and employers can be intentional and robust. Specifically, healthcare organizations and community-based educational institutions can align workforce development with long-term staffing needs, employee retention, and high-quality patient care. To replicate this successful model, the hospital and school recommend two crucial strategies:

1. **Invest in relationships and community.** Strong partnerships are built on trust, open communication, shared goals, and a genuine commitment to student and employee success. When educational institutions and employers work together to create clear pathways from training to employment, they not only strengthen their workforce pipeline but also create life-changing opportunities for individuals and positive

outcomes for the communities they serve. A grounding sense of human connection, a place to call home, and community make an immeasurable impact on student learning, persistence, and ultimately, academic success. For example, training program graduates who are newly hired benefit tremendously from on-site mentorship, encouragement, and moral support as they learn the ropes and advance through the career pathway. Employers and training providers also benefit from breaking bread together at each other's sites. It's essential to view the employer-training provider relationship as a long-term investment rather than a transactional arrangement.

2. **Systematize the collaboration between career training providers and employer partners.** Regularly communicate about workforce needs, curriculum alignment, student performance, and employment opportunities to ensure that graduates are prepared to meet the evolving demands of healthcare. Training providers can ask questions such as, "How is your industry changing? What skills are you most valuing now? What challenges are you encountering, and is there a way we can address them together? How are our graduates doing on the job?" Employers can ask questions including: "What postprogram resources or community forums do you provide to help employees continue to grow professionally? What is your process for our managers to provide feedback on curriculum relevance, and how quickly can updates be made?" ⌘

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FROM HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY TO HIGH-DEMAND CAREERS: HOW ADULT EDUCATION CAN BUILD A REGIONAL WORKFORCE TALENT PIPELINE

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ABSTRACT

Adult education programs have traditionally focused on literacy development and high school equivalency (HSE) attainment. While these outcomes remain essential, workforce shortages and increasing demand for skilled workers have expanded opportunities for adult education programs to support workforce development. This article describes the development, implementation, and outcomes of the Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework at River Parishes Community College (RPCC) Adult Education. Grounded in career pathways, integrated education and training (IET), workforce preparation, and postsecondary transition support, the framework connects adult learners to industry-recognized credentials, workforce training, and continued education. The framework includes five components: (1) labor market alignment, (2) employer engagement, (3) integrated education and training pathways, (4) credential attainment, and (5) postsecondary transition support. Following implementation, the program experienced increases in HSE attainment (41 to 81 completers), industry-based credentials (6 to 78), postsecondary transitions (39 to 54), and measurable skill gains (36.90% to 39.29%). A student case study further illustrates the model's impact on learner persistence and advancement. The findings suggest that workforce-focused adult education models can strengthen educational outcomes while creating clear pathways to employment and economic mobility.

Keywords: adult education, workforce development, integrated education and training, career pathways, industry-recognized credentials, postsecondary transition, economic mobility, learner persistence

INTRODUCTION

Adult education has traditionally focused on literacy development, English language acquisition, and high school equivalency (HSE) attainment. However, workforce shortages and evolving federal priorities have expanded expectations for adult education programs to include workforce preparation, integrated education and training (IET), credential attainment, career pathways, and postsecondary transition (WIOA, 2014). As a result, adult education programs are increasingly challenged to support both educational achievement and economic mobility.

Many adult learners pursue education to improve employment opportunities, increase earnings, and advance their careers (Broek, 2023; Koller, 2025). Community colleges are

uniquely positioned to support these goals by connecting learners to workforce training, employer partnerships, industry-recognized credentials, and postsecondary education.

In response, River Parishes Community College (RPCC) Adult Education developed the Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework, which positions adult education as an entry point to workforce training, credential attainment, postsecondary education, and career advancement. The framework integrates labor market alignment, employer engagement, workforce-focused instructional pathways, industry-recognized credentials, and transition supports to help learners achieve both educational and workforce goals.

This article describes the development, implementation, and outcomes of the RPCC Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework and examines how workforce-focused adult education can support learner success while addressing regional workforce needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adult Education as Workforce Development

Adult education has traditionally focused on literacy development, English language acquisition, and high school equivalency (HSE) attainment. However, WIOA expanded the role of adult education by emphasizing career pathways, workforce preparation, integrated education and training (IET), credential attainment, and employment outcomes (WIOA, 2014). This shift reflects growing recognition that educational achievement and economic mobility are closely connected.

Recent research highlights the increasing alignment between adult education and workforce development. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2025) reported that technological change and evolving labor market demands have increased the need for lifelong learning, while Koller (2025) found that many adults pursue education to improve employment prospects, earnings, and career advancement. Community colleges are particularly well positioned to support these goals by connecting learners to workforce training, employer partnerships, postsecondary education, and career opportunities. As a result, adult education programs that integrate workforce development principles may be better equipped to address both learner aspirations and regional workforce needs.

Integrated Education and Training as a Career Pathway Strategy

Integrated education and training (IET) is a widely recognized strategy for connecting adult education and workforce development. WIOA defines IET as the concurrent delivery of adult education, workforce preparation, and occupational training within a specific career pathway (WIOA, 2014). By integrating academic and occupational skill development, IET enables learners to progress more efficiently toward educational and workforce goals.

Research supports the effectiveness of integrated models. Jenkins et al. (2009) found that participants in Washington state's I-BEST program earned more credits, credentials, and educational gains than comparable students. More recently, the ADVANCE IET initiative identified employer engagement, workforce alignment, stackable credentials, career pathway integration, and contextualized instruction as key components of high-quality programs

(American Institutes for Research, 2025). Contextualized instruction increases learner engagement by connecting academic content to occupational goals (Perin, 2011), while career pathways help learners understand how credentials, training, and education contribute to long-term career advancement.

Adult Learner Motivation and Persistence

Understanding adult learner motivation is essential for designing workforce-focused programs. Because adult learners often balance education with work, family, and financial responsibilities, persistence is influenced by the perceived relevance of educational activities to personal and professional goals.

Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory suggests that learners are more likely to persist when they experience success, see progress, and understand how current efforts connect to future outcomes. Consistent with this perspective, Koller (2025) found that employment advancement, credential attainment, and economic mobility are primary motivators for adult learners, while OECD (2025) reported higher engagement when learning is connected to practical workforce outcomes.

Industry-recognized credentials and career pathway mapping can further support persistence by providing visible milestones and helping learners connect educational participation to long-term career goals. Together, these strategies reinforce self-efficacy, workforce readiness, and continued engagement.

Postsecondary Transition and Economic Mobility

Although HSE attainment remains an important achievement, adult education research increasingly emphasizes postsecondary transition as a pathway to economic mobility. Karp (2011) highlighted the importance of nonacademic supports that help learners navigate institutional processes and persist in postsecondary education. Similarly, Lumina Foundation (2025) reported that adult learners often encounter barriers related to financial aid, advising, enrollment, and program navigation, underscoring the need for comprehensive transition support.

Research also suggests that postsecondary participation contributes to long-term workforce and economic outcomes. Miller et al. (2024) found positive labor market outcomes among individuals participating in adult education and workforce training programs. As a result, adult education programs are increasingly encouraged to view HSE attainment as a milestone rather than an endpoint by connecting learners to workforce training, postsecondary education, and career advancement opportunities.

THE RPCC WORKFORCE TALENT PIPELINE FRAMEWORK

River Parishes Community College (RPCC) Adult Education developed the Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework to address regional workforce shortages and the growing interest among adult learners in employment, workforce training, industry-recognized credentials, and postsecondary education. Consistent with WIOA's emphasis on career pathways and workforce preparation (WIOA, 2014), the framework positions adult education as an entry

point to workforce training, credential attainment, postsecondary education, and career advancement.

The framework consists of five interconnected components: (1) labor market alignment, (2) employer engagement, (3) integrated education and training pathways, (4) industry-recognized credentials, and (5) postsecondary transition supports. Together, these components create a structured pathway from educational participation to workforce and educational advancement.

Labor Market Alignment

Labor market alignment is the first component of the framework. Workforce pathway development is guided by regional labor market data, employer feedback, workforce board priorities, and community college training trends, consistent with recommendations for high-quality IET implementation (AIR, 2025). Analysis of regional workforce needs identified demand in healthcare, transportation and logistics, construction, hospitality, and customer service. By aligning programming with these workforce priorities, RPCC seeks to ensure that learners develop skills and credentials valued by regional employers.

Employer Engagement

Employer engagement is the second component of the framework. Research suggests that workforce programs are most effective when employers actively contribute to program design and implementation (AIR, 2025). RPCC engages employers and workforce partners to identify workforce needs, desired credentials, employability skills, and hiring trends, ensuring that instructional content remains aligned with labor market demand.

Employer partnerships also provide learners with workplace exposure, guest speakers, career presentations, and connections to employment opportunities. These experiences help learners understand the relationship between educational participation and career advancement, reinforcing motivation and persistence (Broek, 2023; Koller, 2025).

Integrated Education and Training Pathways

Integrated education and training (IET) serves as the operational foundation of the Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework. Consistent with WIOA requirements, RPCC combines adult education, workforce preparation, and occupational training within a unified instructional model (WIOA, 2014). To address regional workforce needs, the program developed pathways in construction, healthcare, transportation, hospitality, facilities maintenance, and customer service, each incorporating contextualized instruction that connects academic skills to workplace applications.

These pathways reflect Perin's (2011) recommendation that academic instruction be delivered within meaningful occupational contexts. By integrating workforce preparation and academic instruction, learners simultaneously develop foundational skills, occupational competencies, and industry-recognized credentials, increasing instructional relevance and supporting workforce readiness.

Industry-Recognized Credentials

The fourth component of the framework focuses on attaining industry-recognized credentials. Research indicates that short-term credentials can serve as important milestones, reinforcing learner confidence and demonstrating workforce readiness (OECD, 2025). For adult learners balancing multiple responsibilities, visible indicators of progress may be particularly important for maintaining motivation and persistence.

RPCC intentionally incorporates credential opportunities throughout workforce pathways. Credentials such as OSHA 10 Construction, Basic Orientation Plus, Basic Life Support, customer service certifications, digital literacy certifications, and workforce readiness credentials provide learners with tangible evidence of achievement. These credentials also strengthen learners' employment prospects by validating workforce competencies that employers recognize.

The emphasis on credential attainment supports the broader goal of creating stackable career pathways. Rather than relying on a single educational milestone, learners accumulate credentials that contribute to long-term educational and career advancement. This strategy aligns with national workforce development efforts promoting stackable credentials and career pathway progression (AIR, 2025).

Postsecondary Transition Supports

The final component of the Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework involves intentional postsecondary transition planning. Consistent with Karp's (2011) findings regarding the importance of navigation and support services, RPCC provides learners with guidance designed to facilitate continued educational participation beyond adult education.

Transition activities include career exploration, academic advising, workforce training referrals, financial aid guidance, workforce pathway mapping, and postsecondary planning. Learners are encouraged to identify educational and career goals early in their participation and to revisit them throughout their educational journey.

Adult education instructors, transition staff, and program leadership emphasize that HSE attainment should be viewed as a milestone rather than a destination. Learners are introduced to community college certificates, technical diplomas, workforce training programs, and degree opportunities that align with their interests and career aspirations. This approach supports the broader objective of economic mobility by helping learners continue progressing beyond foundational education.

Learner pathways are not always linear. Some learners may enter employment before completing postsecondary education, while others may pursue additional credentials before seeking employment. Regardless of the specific route, the model provides a structured system that connects adult learners with educational, workforce, and economic opportunities.

By integrating labor market alignment, employer engagement, workforce pathways, credential attainment, and transition supports, RPCC created a workforce talent pipeline that extends beyond traditional adult education outcomes. The framework positions adult education as a critical workforce development partner while maintaining a commitment to learner success and educational advancement.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

The primary goal of the RPCC Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework was to create stronger connections between adult education participation, workforce preparation, credential attainment, and postsecondary advancement. While the framework was designed to address workforce development needs, implementation also resulted in improvements across several traditional adult education performance indicators.

Consistent with recommendations from workforce outcomes research, program evaluation included both educational and workforce-related outcomes to provide a more comprehensive understanding of learner advancement (Miller et al., 2024). Educational indicators included high school equivalency (HSE) attainment, measurable skill gains (MSGs), and postsecondary transitions. Workforce-related indicators focused primarily on industry-based credential attainment because employment and wage data were not consistently available at the program level.

Implementation of the Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework was associated with improvements in several key program outcomes. High school equivalency attainment increased from 41 completers to 81 completers, while industry-recognized credential attainment increased from 6 credentials to 78 credentials. Postsecondary transitions also increased from 39 participants to 54 participants. In addition, the overall measurable skill gain rate improved from 36.90% to 39.29%. Although multiple factors likely contributed to these outcomes, the increases coincided with the implementation of workforce-focused pathways, the expansion of integrated education and training opportunities, strengthened employer partnerships, and intentional postsecondary transition supports. Collectively, these results suggest that aligning adult education services with workforce development strategies may support both educational achievement and learner progression toward employment and continued education.

The most substantial increase occurred in industry-based credential attainment. Credentials increased from 6 to 78, representing a 13-fold increase in credential completion. This growth coincided with the expansion of workforce pathways and increased availability of industry-recognized credentials embedded within instructional programming. The increase supports previous findings that short-term credential opportunities may increase learner engagement by providing tangible milestones connected to employment and career advancement (OECD, 2025).

High school equivalency attainment also improved significantly during implementation. HSE completers increased from 41 to 81, nearly doubling within the reporting period. Although the workforce pipeline framework was not designed solely to improve HSE attainment, the results suggest that workforce-focused programming may positively influence learner persistence and goal completion. These findings are consistent with research indicating that adult learners are more likely to persist when educational activities are connected to meaningful career and economic goals (Broek, 2023; Koller, 2025). Postsecondary transitions increased from 39 to 54 participants. This improvement reflects the framework's emphasis on viewing HSE attainment as a milestone rather than a final outcome. Through intentional transition planning, career exploration, workforce pathway mapping, and advising, learners were encouraged to continue their educational journeys through workforce training programs,

technical diplomas, certificates, and degree pathways. The increase in postsecondary participation aligns with research emphasizing the importance of transition support services and educational navigation assistance (Karp, 2011; Lumina Foundation, 2025).

The program also experienced modest improvement in measurable skill gains, increasing from 36.90% to 39.29%. While measurable skill gains are influenced by multiple factors, the increase suggests that workforce-integrated instructional approaches can support both workforce and educational outcomes simultaneously. This finding supports Perin's (2011) argument that contextualized instruction can enhance learner engagement and academic achievement by connecting foundational skills to meaningful applications.

Beyond quantitative outcomes, program staff observed several qualitative changes among participants. Learners demonstrated increased engagement during career-focused instructional activities, frequently expressed greater awareness of workforce opportunities, and more readily identified educational goals beyond HSE attainment. Career pathway maps, credential opportunities, and workforce presentations appeared to help learners connect educational participation with future opportunities.

Student Success Spotlight

Program outcomes are best understood when viewed through the experiences of individual learners. "Dorothy," age 28, who completed 10th grade, exemplifies the intended impact of the Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework. Dorothy entered the program seeking a high school equivalency credential after previously discontinuing her formal education. Like many adult learners, she initially viewed the HSE credential as the primary goal of participation.

Through involvement in the College Readiness Pathway, Dorothy began exploring educational opportunities beyond HSE attainment. Exposure to postsecondary options, career-planning activities, and transition supports helped her develop a broader vision for her future. Through career-planning activities and pathway mapping, Dorothy began to view her HSE credential as a stepping stone rather than an endpoint. Exposure to postsecondary opportunities helped her establish a long-term educational plan and increased her confidence in pursuing continued education. As she progressed through the program, her goals shifted from simply earning a credential to pursuing continued education and long-term career advancement.

After earning her HSE credential, Dorothy planned to enroll in a community college transfer degree program. Her experience reflects the broader purpose of the Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework. Rather than viewing educational attainment as an endpoint, Dorothy used the credential as a launching point for continued learning and personal growth.

Although Dorothy's experience represents a single learner, it illustrates an important principle reflected throughout the program: Learners who can identify clear connections among educational participation, workforce opportunities, and future aspirations may be more likely to persist and advance beyond initial program goals.

Interpreting the Results

Several factors likely contributed to the positive outcomes observed during implementation. First, workforce alignment increased instructional relevance by connecting academic skills to

real-world occupational applications. Second, industry-recognized credentials provided short-term milestones that reinforced learner confidence and motivation. Third, career pathway mapping and transition planning encouraged learners to establish long-term educational and career goals. Finally, integration within a community college environment provided learners with direct access to workforce training and postsecondary opportunities. While the findings are promising, several limitations should be acknowledged.

Limitations

The outcomes are from a single adult education program and may not generalize to all settings. Additionally, employment placement and wage data were not consistently available for analysis. Future research examining workforce outcomes beyond credential attainment would provide additional insight into the long-term impact of workforce-focused adult education models.

Despite these limitations, the results suggest that workforce talent pipeline frameworks may strengthen both educational and workforce-related outcomes. The combination of increased HSE attainment, credential completion, postsecondary transitions, and measurable skill gains indicates that workforce-focused programming can simultaneously support multiple dimensions of learner success.

LESSONS LEARNED AND REPLICATING THE MODEL

The implementation of the RPCC Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework provided valuable insights into the relationship between adult education, workforce development, and learner success. While each community possesses unique workforce demands and institutional resources, several lessons emerged that may be applicable across a variety of adult education settings. The following lessons and recommendations are intended to assist other programs interested in developing workforce-focused models that support both educational and economic mobility.

Begin With Workforce Demand, Not Program Offerings

One of the most important lessons learned was the need to begin with workforce demand rather than existing program offerings. At RPCC, pathway development was guided by labor market data, workforce board priorities, employer feedback, and workforce training trends to ensure alignment with regional employment opportunities. Programs seeking to replicate this model should regularly review labor market information and engage workforce partners when selecting credentials and occupational pathways. Resources from workforce boards, chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, and community college workforce divisions can help inform this process.

Engage Employers Early and Often

Employer engagement emerged as another critical lesson. Workforce pathways are most effective when employers serve as active partners in program planning and implementation. At RPCC, employer input helped identify workforce shortages, desired credentials, workplace expectations, and hiring trends while creating opportunities for career exploration and industry engagement. Programs seeking to replicate this model should involve employers

from high-demand industries early in the planning process to ensure that credentials, training opportunities, and instructional content remain aligned with workforce needs.

Integrate Workforce Preparation Into Existing Instruction

Another important lesson was that workforce preparation can be integrated into existing instruction through contextualization rather than requiring separate courses. At RPCC, reading, mathematics, and digital literacy activities were connected to workplace applications, making instruction more relevant and meaningful. This approach aligns with Perin's (2011) findings on contextualized instruction and demonstrates how programs can increase workforce relevance while leveraging existing instructional structures.

Provide Opportunities for Early Credential Attainment

A significant outcome of the Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework was increased attainment of industry-recognized credentials, highlighting the value of offering credentials early in learners' educational journeys. Short-term credentials provide visible milestones, reinforce confidence, and demonstrate workforce readiness while learners continue their education. Programs seeking to replicate this strategy should identify entry-level, industry-recognized credentials that align with local workforce demand and can be integrated into existing programming.

Create Clear Career Pathways

Career pathway visibility also supported learner engagement and persistence. At RPCC, pathway maps helped learners visualize progression from adult education to credential attainment, workforce training, postsecondary education, and employment. Because learners are more likely to remain engaged when they understand how current activities connect to future opportunities (Broek, 2023; Koller, 2025), programs should consider using simple pathway maps to illustrate local education and career options.

Strengthen Postsecondary Transition Supports

Transition support services also proved essential to learner persistence and postsecondary success (Karp, 2011; Lumina Foundation, 2025). At RPCC, career exploration, academic advising, financial aid guidance, workforce training referrals, and pathway planning helped learners view HSE attainment as a milestone within a larger educational and career journey. Programs can strengthen learner transitions by leveraging existing partnerships with workforce training divisions, student services departments, financial aid offices, and academic advisors.

Measure More Than Educational Outcomes

Perhaps the most significant lesson learned was the importance of expanding the definition of program success. Traditional adult education performance measures remain important, however, they do not fully capture workforce-related outcomes associated with modern adult education programming.

The RPCC Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework tracked HSE attainment, measurable skill gains, credential attainment, and postsecondary transitions. This broader perspective provided a more comprehensive understanding of learner advancement and program effectiveness.

Programs seeking to replicate this model should consider tracking workforce-related outcomes in addition to traditional educational measures. Credential attainment, workforce-training participation, postsecondary enrollment, and career advancement indicators can provide valuable information regarding program impact.

A Replicable Framework for Workforce-Focused Adult Education

Although workforce conditions vary across communities, the core components of the RPCC Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework can be adapted by other adult education programs. Below is a simplified implementation model.

Step 1: Analyze Labor Market Demand

Step 2: Engage Employers and Workforce Partners

Step 3: Identify Industry-Recognized Credentials

Step 4: Develop Workforce-Aligned Instruction and IET Pathways

Step 5: Integrate Workforce Preparation Activities

Step 6: Support Postsecondary and Workforce Transitions

Step 7: Monitor Educational and Workforce Outcomes

The framework does not require extensive financial resources or large staff structures. Instead, its effectiveness stems from intentional alignment among adult education services, workforce needs, employer expectations, and learner goals. Programs can begin with a single workforce pathway and gradually expand as partnerships and capacity develop.

Ultimately, the most important lesson learned is that adult education can serve as far more than a pathway to a high school equivalency credential. When workforce development principles are integrated into program design, adult education becomes a catalyst for continued learning, credential attainment, postsecondary participation, career advancement, and economic mobility.

CONCLUSION

The future of adult education extends far beyond literacy instruction and high school equivalency attainment. While these outcomes remain foundational to the mission of adult education, the evolving needs of learners, employers, and communities require programs to assume a broader role within workforce development systems. Adult education programs are uniquely positioned to serve as gateways to economic mobility by connecting learners to industry-recognized credentials, workforce training, postsecondary education, and sustainable career opportunities.

The RPCC Workforce Talent Pipeline Framework demonstrates how workforce development principles can be intentionally integrated into adult education programming without abandoning traditional educational objectives. By aligning instruction with labor market

demand, engaging employers as partners, embedding workforce preparation into instructional activities, expanding credential opportunities, and supporting postsecondary transitions, the program created a system that promoted both educational advancement and workforce readiness. Improvements in high school equivalency attainment, industry-based credential completion, postsecondary transitions, and measurable skill gains suggest that workforce-focused programming can strengthen multiple dimensions of learner success simultaneously.

The findings presented in this article also reinforce existing research regarding the importance of contextualized instruction, integrated education and training, learner self-efficacy, and transition support services (Bandura, 1977; Karp, 2011; Perin, 2011). Adult learners are more likely to persist when educational experiences are relevant to their goals, when progress is visible through meaningful milestones, and when pathways to future opportunities are clearly defined. Workforce talent pipeline models provide a practical framework for translating these principles into daily practice.

Perhaps the most important lesson learned is that high school equivalency attainment should not be viewed as the finish line. For many learners, it represents the beginning of a new educational and professional journey. Dorothy's experience illustrates this transformation. What began as a goal to earn an HSE credential evolved into a vision for continued education and long-term career advancement. Her story reflects the broader potential of adult education when programs intentionally connect educational achievement to future opportunity.

As workforce shortages continue across healthcare, construction, transportation, hospitality, manufacturing, and other critical industries, adult education programs have an unprecedented opportunity to contribute to regional workforce development efforts. The question is no longer whether adult education should participate in workforce development. The question is how intentionally programs will position themselves to meet this challenge.

Adult education has long transformed lives and now has the opportunity to strengthen workforce systems and local economies. When adult education programs serve as workforce talent pipelines, they do more than help learners earn credentials. They help individuals build futures, employers build workforces, and communities build prosperity. That opportunity represents not a departure from the mission of adult education, but an expansion of its impact. ⌘

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REIMAGINING ADULT EDUCATION AS THE GATEWAY TO THE TALENT PIPELINE

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ABSTRACT

Adult education is still too often treated as a second-chance system rather than one of the strongest entry points into the talent pipeline. In Ohio and across the nation, employers are looking for workers with foundational skills, digital fluency, recognized credentials, and the ability to keep learning in a changing economy. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of adults remain disconnected from these opportunities, not because they lack potential, but because systems are rarely designed around their realities. This article argues that adult education should be repositioned as a core workforce strategy and an economic imperative. Examples from the Academy for Urban Scholars (AUS) Adult Workforce Education program show how flexible access, high school credential pathways, employability instruction, digital literacy, and clear connections to training can move adult education from the margins to the center of regional talent development. The field must advocate more boldly for policy, funding, and employer partnerships that reflect the true value of adult learners. If communities want stronger talent pipelines, adult education cannot remain an afterthought. It must be funded, designed, and valued as the gateway it already is.

Keywords: talent pipeline, workforce readiness, adult workforce education, career pathways, employer partnerships

ADULT EDUCATION IS NOT THE BACK DOOR TO THE ECONOMY

Adult education has carried the burden of low expectations for far too long. It is often described as a safety net, a remedial service, or a last resort for people who somehow missed the “mainstream” path. That language is not only outdated; it is harmful. It diminishes the expertise of the field, undervalues the aspirations of adult learners, and allows policymakers and employers to overlook one of the largest sources of untapped talent in countless communities.

If economic mobility and employer demand are to be taken seriously, it must be clearly understood that adult education is not a side service. It is a workforce infrastructure. It is where adults rebuild academic confidence, gain digital and professional skills, earn secondary credentials, and reconnect to postsecondary education, occupational training, and jobs. In many communities, it is the most accessible and most trusted doorway back into opportunity.

Ohio’s adult education system already points to this broader role. The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce describes Aspire programs and Ohio Technical Centers as vital to the economic advancement of the state and its citizens. These programs serve adults who

left high school early, adults who need additional skills before entering college, working adults pursuing postsecondary credentials, and communities seeking stronger pathways into opportunity. State guidance also emphasizes seamless career pathways, transition services, and collaboration with other workforce partners (Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, 2026).

Those phrases matter because they move adult education out of a narrow academic frame and place it inside the talent pipeline. A pipeline is not built only by graduating high school seniors or college students. It is also built by adults returning to learning after years away; by parents who want a better future for their children and themselves; by workers displaced by industry change; by justice-involved adults rebuilding their lives; and by English language learners seeking a fair chance to contribute their skills in a new country. If those adults are excluded from workforce strategy, then the strategy is incomplete.

The data make the urgency impossible to ignore. Ohio's 2025 Adult Education Program Fact Sheet (Educate and Elevate, 2025) reported 25,016 adults enrolled in adult education services, 1,603 high school credentials earned through the National Reporting System, and 12,408 measurable skill gains during the reporting period. Yet the same fact sheet estimated that 590,645 working-age adults in Ohio lacked a high school credential and that 35,091 working-age adults without a diploma were unemployed (Educate and Elevate, 2025). The scale of unmet need is enormous, as is the scale of untapped ability.

Adult education is where that untapped ability becomes visible. It is where adults walk in carrying unfinished education, interrupted opportunities, family responsibilities, transportation barriers, trauma, or a long history of being underestimated and begin to rewrite their story. Discussing the talent shortage without naming adult education as part of the solution is to ignore one of the clearest answers sitting right in front of us.

THE TALENT PIPELINE WILL REMAIN BROKEN IF ADULT LEARNERS STAY INVISIBLE

Across the country, employers are sounding alarms about hiring challenges, missing middle skills, retention, and the need for adaptable workers. At the same time, public systems still too often divide education and workforce into separate conversations. Adult education gets discussed in one room. Economic development gets discussed in another. Employers are invited in later, if at all. That fragmentation makes no sense for adults whose goals do not fit into neat institutional categories.

A learner who needs a diploma, stronger reading and math skills, improved digital literacy, transportation support, résumé help, and an on-ramp to a healthcare or information technology credential does not experience those needs as separate systems. They experience them as one life. Adult education programs understand that reality better than many institutions because adult educators work with learners at the intersection of academics, survival, work, family, and aspiration.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) reflects this broader vision more than public narratives often do. Ohio's current plan identifies adult education and literacy

activities as including workforce preparation activities, English language acquisition, and integrated education and training (IET). The definition of IET is especially important because it explicitly combines adult education and literacy, workforce preparation, and workforce training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster for the purpose of educational and career advancement (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). That definition should change how the field talks about itself. Adult education is not just a place to improve test scores and then hope learners find their way elsewhere. At its best, it is a launching system. It helps adults stabilize, persist, and move. It prepares them to take the next step while already showing them what that next step is. It contextualizes instruction around the realities of work and advancement. It treats literacy, digital fluency, professionalism, and credential attainment as mutually reinforcing pieces of a pathway.

This is not a theoretical argument. It is a practical one. When adults cannot see the relevance of what they are learning, persistence suffers. When the pathway beyond the classroom is unclear, motivation weakens. When employers are disconnected from program design, learning can miss the mark. And when funding formulas value only narrow academic milestones, programs are forced to understate the transformational workforce role they are already playing.

Ohio Excels has emphasized that lifelong learning is essential in a labor market shaped by technological change and that the state must design flexible, inclusive systems for adult learners while centering both worker and employer needs (Ohio Excels, 2026). That principle should be embraced fully by the adult education field. Adult education is not an appendix to talent strategy. It is where many talent journeys begin, especially for people who have been overlooked by more traditional pathways.

THE ACADEMY FOR URBAN SCHOLARS MODEL

The Academy for Urban Scholars (AUS) Adult Workforce Education program offers a concrete example of what it looks like when adult education is designed as a gateway rather than a holding place. AUS describes its adult education work as part of Ohio's Aspire system and notes that it provides free services through classes at flexible locations on different days and at various times to meet diverse needs. Adult learners begin with an orientation and assessment process to determine educational needs and goals. The program is offered in person and online and includes high school equivalency preparation classes, life skills, employability skills, computer literacy, distance education, and job training and certification preparation classes (Academy for Urban Scholars, n.d.-a).

Taken together, those services reflect a clear philosophy. Adults should not have to choose between education and employability. They should be able to build both at the same time. A learner who comes in for academic reasons also needs confidence with technology, familiarity with workplace norms, and a visible connection to what comes after the credential. AUS's model recognizes that adult learners are not simply trying to finish school; they are trying to move their lives forward.

The flexible structure matters. Adult learners are balancing childcare, work schedules, transportation limitations, possible court obligations, health issues, and family caregiving.

Rigid enrollment windows and inflexible class times can quietly exclude the very adults a community most needs to reconnect. Flexibility is often described as a convenience, but in adult workforce education it is better understood as an equity strategy and a persistence strategy. If access is not designed around adult realities, then opportunity remains theoretical.

The inclusion of employability skills and computer literacy is equally important. Employers consistently need workers who can communicate clearly, navigate digital platforms, solve problems, and continue learning on the job. Those abilities do not emerge automatically once a diploma is earned. They must be taught, practiced, and reinforced. By building these elements into the adult education experience, AUS aligns itself with the actual demands of the labor market rather than a narrow academic model.

AUS's broader institutional context strengthens this gateway approach. Public descriptions of the academy's work emphasize preparing learners to be work and college ready, while highlighting program areas such as healthcare, information technology, and construction (Academy for Urban Scholars, n.d.-b; National Center for Urban Solutions, n.d.). Even when adult learners are not enrolled directly in every one of these pathways, the messaging matters. It communicates that education is connected to a future, not just to completion for completion's sake.

One of the most powerful public examples of AUS's community impact is the story of a 74-year-old graduate who completed the Academy for Urban Scholars through the 22+ Adult High School Diploma Program. In reporting on that milestone, WKYC also noted that more than 40 adults graduated from AUS alongside 181 scholars in 2024. AUS leadership described the 22+ pathway as part of a strategy to break generational poverty through wellness and education (Fitzgerald, 2024).

That story should stop us in our tracks. A 74-year-old graduate is not a novelty; she is evidence that adult education reopens doors that many people assumed were permanently closed. She is evidence that the timeline of human potential does not end because formal schooling was interrupted. She is evidence that credentials still matter, even later in life, and that adult learners often pursue them not only for themselves but for their families and communities. Her next goal was to earn a certificate that would allow her to serve others through addiction counseling (Fitzgerald, 2024). The diploma was not her finish line. It was her gateway.

This is what adult education advocates must keep saying. Completion matters because transition matters. A credential should open something. A class should lead somewhere. A program should invite adults into a larger ecosystem of opportunity. AUS's combination of orientation, assessment, flexible delivery, employability skills, digital literacy, and preparation for training reflects the anatomy of a gateway model.

ADULT EDUCATION AS A STRATEGIC PARTNER

Adult education cannot be reimagined as a gateway to the talent pipeline if employers continue to see it as distant from their immediate needs. Employers do not need to become adult education experts, but they do need to understand that the field is already helping

to develop the foundational and durable skills they value. Adult education often serves individuals who are highly motivated to work and advance but need a recognized credential, stronger digital fluency, or clearer access to opportunity.

The Ohio Department of Higher Education describes adult education as part of a broader workforce system and notes that local programs collaborate with partners who want to strengthen educational and career pathways for adults (Ohio Department of Higher Education, n.d.). That should be a call to action. Adult education is not charity. It is talent strategy. Partners who work with adult education programs can help strengthen instruction, support learner persistence, and expand access to a broader and more diverse talent pool.

AUS's public description of employer collaboration reflects exactly the kind of partnership the field needs more of (Academy for Urban Scholars, n.d.-a). The most effective employer relationships are not transactional. They do not begin and end with a job fair or a one-time guest speaker. They involve shared problem solving around several important questions. What entry-level skills are missing? How can contextualized curriculum reflect industry language and expectations? What schedule would make it realistic for working adults to participate? What commitments can partners make around hiring, advancement, interviews, work-based learning, or exposure to career ladders?

Employers also have a role in changing narratives. Too many hiring systems still filter out talented adults because of credential gaps without considering how quickly those gaps can be addressed through adult education and short-term training. When employers work with programs early, they help create pathways instead of waiting for a perfect applicant pool to appear. That matters especially in industries facing chronic vacancies, high turnover, or geographic disparities in labor supply.

Adult education also brings something employers urgently need at this moment: a culture of persistence. Adults who return to education while balancing work, family, hardship, and uncertainty are already demonstrating resilience, goal commitment, and adaptability. Those traits are not incidental; they are workplace assets. When programs help adults translate those strengths into recognized credentials and professional language, employers gain access to workers who are ready not only to fill a role, but to grow.

WHAT POLICYMAKERS AND FUNDERS MUST CHANGE

Advocacy without policy change will only take us so far. If adult education is truly a gateway to the talent pipeline, then public investment should reflect that reality. Yet adult education remains one of the most underrecognized and underfunded parts of the education-workforce continuum. Ohio's 2025 Adult Education Program Fact Sheet (Educate and Elevate, 2025) reported approximately $744.23 in federal funds per adult learner and explicitly noted that adult learners often have the greatest barriers to employment and literacy despite limited funding compared with the far higher per-pupil funding in elementary education (Educate and Elevate, 2025).

That statistic should concern anyone serious about labor force participation and equitable growth. High-impact workforce outcomes can not result from systems that are funded as

afterthoughts. Adult learners require skilled instructors, advising, digital access, assessment, wraparound supports, career navigation, and pathways into training. Programs need staffing and the infrastructure to build employer partnerships, track transitions, and sustain flexible delivery models. None of that happens at scale through goodwill alone.

Policy should also reward the full range of outcomes adult education produces. Skill gains and secondary credentials remain critical, but they are not the whole story. For programs to function as gateways, performance measures and funding strategies should also value transition to postsecondary education, entry into workforce training, industry credential attainment, employment, wage progression, and persistence across steps in a pathway. Otherwise, programs are pushed to emphasize what is countable over what is transformational.

The field should also advocate for stronger alignment with short-term credential policies, workforce Pell implementation, and employer-centered learning strategies. Ohio Excels has called for public investments that prioritize quality and measurable outcomes, as well as expanded opportunities for adults to upskill through short-term credentials and degree programs tied to career goals (Ohio Excels, 2026). Adult education leaders should be at those tables, not waiting to be invited after decisions are made. Adult educators know the learners and the barriers, as well as where the pipeline leaks. Their expertise is necessary for any credible policy solution.

Finally, policymakers should understand that adult education creates both economic and social returns. When adults earn credentials and move into better jobs, employers benefit. Families benefit. Children witness educational attainment in their homes. Communities see improved civic participation and reduced long-term disconnection. The public narrative should not force a false choice between economic development and human development; adult education advances both at the same time.

A CALL TO THE FIELD: ADVOCATE AS BOLDLY AS YOU SERVE

Adult educators are accustomed to doing extraordinary work with limited resources. They celebrate learner persistence, improvise solutions, and keep doors open even when systems are fragmented. That commitment is one of the field's defining strengths. But dedication alone is not enough. Adult educators also must be stronger advocates for the role adult education plays in the talent pipeline and for the respect learners deserve.

That advocacy starts with language. Educators should stop describing adult education as a back-end intervention and start naming it as an engine of talent development, economic participation, and community renewal. They should tell stories not only of recovery and resilience, but also of expertise, ambition, and contribution. Adult learners are not waiting to be saved. They are ready to build, lead, work, and grow when systems recognize their value.

Programs can take concrete steps right now. Educators can make career pathways visible from intake forward and integrate digital literacy and employability into every level of instruction. They can strengthen partnerships with employers, workforce boards, community colleges,

technical centers, and community organizations. Educators can collect and communicate data that show not only who completed, but who transitioned. They can ensure that adults see the next step while they are still taking the current one.

Educators can also be more direct with employers and policymakers. A stronger talent pipeline requires investment where talent is still being overlooked: in adult learners who are parents, workers, returning citizens, English language learners, caregivers, and residents whose promise has never been fully cultivated; in programs like the Academy for Urban Scholars that pair access with expectation and flexibility with purpose; and in systems that do not ask adults to solve institutional fragmentation on their own.

The future of adult education should not be defined by scarcity thinking. It should be defined by strategic expansion, stronger partnerships, and a public understanding that adult learning is central to workforce strength. In every region, there are adults ready for a second start, a first credential, a new field, a higher wage, or a chance to finally be seen for what they can do. Adult education is often the place where that possibility becomes real.

Adult educators should say it with confidence: Adult education is not a side door. It is one of the strongest front doors to the talent pipeline that this country has. The sooner that policies, investments, and employer practices reflect that truth, the stronger communities will be. ⌘

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PROJECT ELEVATE AND CODESIGNING THE TALENT PIPELINE: THE ROLE OF MICROCREDENTIALS IN ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

As workforce demands continue to evolve, adult education programs play a critical role in developing the talent pipeline by preparing learners for entry into career pathways. However, many adult learners face barriers that prevent immediate access to traditional training programs. Microcredentialing offers a flexible and scalable solution, but its effectiveness depends on intentional design and alignment with industry needs. This article examines the development of microcredentials through Project ELEVATE, a regional initiative funded by the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity. Central to this work is a cross-sector design process involving adult education and training providers, workforce development agencies, and employer-led industry councils to ensure that credentials reflect real-world skill demands. Drawing from this collaborative model, the article highlights key design principles, including local industry council validation, stackability, and contextualized instruction. Findings suggest that when microcredentials are codesigned with community and industry partners, they serve as effective on-ramps into the talent pipeline, particularly for adult learners in adult basic education (ABE) and English as a second language (ESL) programs.

Keywords: microcredential, state initiatives, career pathways, stackable credentials, designing curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, employers continue to face workforce shortages while many adults remain disconnected from career pathways that lead to family sustaining wages. Adult education programs serve learners who possess valuable skills, experience, and aspirations but often encounter obstacles to employment and postsecondary training. These obstacles may include limited literacy or English language proficiency, gaps in formal education, financial constraints, transportation challenges, or a lack of awareness of available career

pathways. As states and regions seek strategies to strengthen their talent pipelines, adult education is increasingly recognized as a critical partner in workforce development.

For adult learners who face obstacles that make participating in traditional postsecondary or extensive training difficult, shorter term and more accessible pathways can serve as important entry points into education, training, and employment (Galindo et al., 2024). Microcredentials have emerged as one promising strategy for addressing this need, providing learners with attainable milestones that build confidence, demonstrate employability, and create momentum toward additional education and training. When aligned with employer demand and embedded within broader career pathways, microcredentials can serve as on-ramps to industry-recognized credentials, postsecondary education, and quality employment (Galindo et al., 2024).

This article examines Project ELEVATE (Empowering Learners for Employment Via Accessibility, Training, and Education), a regional initiative in West Michigan funded through the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity's Section 107a Adult Education Innovation Grant. Project ELEVATE brought together adult education and training providers, the local workforce-development agency, a local community college, industry councils, and community partners to design and implement workforce-aligned microcredentials for adult learners. While microcredentials are increasingly recognized as a strategy for workforce development, their effectiveness depends on more than the credentials themselves (Galindo et al., 2024). This case study demonstrates how cross-sector collaboration can create accessible, industry-validated pathways that strengthen regional talent pipelines while expanding educational and employment opportunities for adult learners.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Federal policy, particularly the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), has historically strengthened the connection between adult education and workforce development by encouraging the development of career pathways and greater alignment among education, training, and employment systems (Alamprese, 2016). Building on this policy foundation, Michigan has made several recent investments designed to encourage innovation in adult education (Bergson-Shilcock, 2019). Initiatives such as the Integrated Education and Training (IET) Planning Grant and Implementation Grant provided opportunities for providers to explore new approaches to workforce preparation and career-pathways development. Building on this momentum, the state established the Section 107a Adult Education Innovation Grant, a $15 million funding stream created through advocacy efforts led by adult education stakeholders (TalentFirst, 2024). The purpose of the fund was to support innovative practices that were not typically allowable under traditional Section 107 funding and to encourage collaboration among adult education and training providers, community-based organizations, workforce development partners, and other stakeholders.

In Michigan Prosperity Region 4, a 13-county economic region spanning West Michigan, adult education providers elected to apply for Section 107a funding as a consortium. The Kent Intermediate School District's adult education program served as the fiduciary organization,

while a collection of adult education and training providers from across the region collaborated to develop a shared vision for how innovation funds could expand opportunities for adult learners. Existing relationships through the Adult Learning Partners of West Michigan provided a strong foundation for this work. Years of professional development and partnership building allowed organizations to quickly mobilize, identify common priorities, and develop an ambitious proposal centered on workforce advancement and educational access.

Through regional planning conversations, consortium members identified a persistent challenge: While many adult learners were interested in pursuing career advancement, they were not always ready to enroll in longer term workforce training programs. Traditional IET programs often require a significant instructional commitment and are designed around larger credential pathways. As a result, learners who needed a shorter, more accessible entry point frequently had limited options for exploring careers, building foundational skills, or preparing for future training opportunities.

To address this gap, the consortium proposed developing workforce-focused microcredentials. Microcredentials have emerged as an innovative approach to learning that offers flexible, affordable, and accessible opportunities for learners to develop and demonstrate skills outside of traditional educational pathways (Galindo et al., 2024). Unlike many traditional credentials, microcredentials can recognize learners' gains through instruction, work experiences, and other forms of skill development while requiring a smaller investment of time and resources.

Galindo et al. (2024) describe microcredentials as a disruptive force in education because they challenge traditional assumptions about where, how, and when learning occurs. By reducing obstacles related to time, cost, and access, microcredentials can create new opportunities for learners who have historically faced challenges to successful participation in postsecondary education and workforce training. As learners increasingly seek shorter, more flexible pathways to skill development and career advancement, microcredentials offer a mechanism for supporting progression along broader educational and career pathways.

For the consortium, microcredentials represented an opportunity to create meaningful next steps for learners who were not yet prepared for longer term training programs but were ready to begin building industry-specific knowledge and skills. Rather than serving as a replacement for IET programs or traditional credentials, the microcredentials were designed as accessible entry points that could lead to additional education, training, and employment opportunities. This approach aligned with the consortium's broader goal of expanding access to career pathways while creating curricula that could be shared and replicated by adult education and training providers across Michigan.

DESIGNING MICROCREDENTIALS: A COLLABORATIVE MODEL

The development of microcredentials through Project ELEVATE followed a phased, collaborative approach designed to ensure alignment with workforce needs, accessibility for adult learners, and scalability across regional programs. The structured process established intentional design, piloting, and continuous improvement, positioning microcredentials as a viable strategy for strengthening the adult education talent pipeline.

Phase I: Structuring Curriculum Development

The initial phase focused on establishing the foundational structure for microcredential development through strategic planning and collaboration. A cross-functional team was assembled, including program leaders, curriculum specialists, adult educators, and subject matter experts, to guide the design and implementation process. This team included staff from Grand Rapids Community College, the Literacy Center of West Michigan, Ottawa Area Intermediate School District/Thompson M-TEC, Read Muskegon, West Michigan Works!, and Zeeland Adult Education.

To anchor the work in regional workforce realities, the project partnered with a local workforce-development agency, West Michigan Works! (WMW), and local industry representatives to analyze labor market data and identify high-demand skill areas suitable for short-term credentialing. This process surfaced priority certification areas recognized across multiple entry-level occupations commonly pursued by the populations served by participating programs.

With priority areas identified, the team made key structural decisions about how microcredentials would integrate with existing adult basic education (ABE), English as a second language (ESL), General Education Development (GED®), and High School Completion (HSE) programming. Rather than treating microcredentials as standalone offerings, the team determined that foundational skills instruction, such as literacy, numeracy, and workplace communication, should be intentionally embedded within career-focused pathways. Decisions were also made at this stage regarding instructional delivery formats, including in-person, hybrid, and self-paced options, to maximize accessibility for adult learners with varying schedules and life responsibilities. To further support experiential learning, the project also included virtual training tools that simulated real-world job environments, providing hands-on skills development in a low-risk, interactive setting.

Phase I, in short, established the strategic and structural scaffolding upon which all subsequent curriculum development would be built.

Curriculum Development: A Collaborative Regional Process

With the strategic framework established, Project ELEVATE moved into the intensive work of curriculum design and development. This phase was grounded in a collaborative, cross-sector model that brought together expertise from adult education, workforce development, and industry partners, organized into developmental teams aligned to each identified microcredential focus area.

To ensure consistency and quality across all offerings, Project ELEVATE established a standardized development template requiring each team to define the target learner population, credential description, learning objectives, workforce relevance, delivery format, instructional materials, assessment strategies, and pathway alignment. This structured approach ensured that all microcredentials met a common quality standard while remaining responsive to the unique demands of their respective focus areas.

Teams grounded their curriculum work in labor market information, employer feedback, and industry trends to identify the foundational competencies most critical for entry-level

employment within each focus area. Particular attention was given to designing accessible learning experiences for adult learners, balancing workforce preparation with adult learning principles through contextualized instruction, practical application, and career exploration activities.

Upon completion of the initial course outlines, each proposed microcredential underwent an external validation process with the Industry Council of West Michigan. Industry councils bring employers together and, along with community partners, educators, and economic developers, address talent shortages and build a pipeline of talent for the future (West Michigan Works!, n.d.). Curriculum frameworks, learning outcomes, and course content were reviewed for relevance, scope, rigor, and industry alignment. The resulting feedback was incorporated into the final curriculum design, ensuring that the courses reflected current workforce expectations and offered learners meaningful opportunities for skill development.

With validation complete, teams transitioned from conceptual design to the construction of comprehensive instructional packages. Each microcredential was developed to include lesson plans, facilitator notes, presentation materials, learner activities, assessments, instructional scripts, and supporting resources, designed so that instructors with varying degrees of content familiarity could deliver high-quality instruction while maintaining consistency across the region.

The developmental process reflected both the strengths and challenges of regional collaboration. Team members balanced curriculum-development responsibilities alongside full-time instructional, administrative, and workforce-development roles, convening through virtual meetings, small gatherings across the region, and in sessions woven around existing conferences and workshops. Rather than adhering to rigid roles, teams leveraged individual strengths; some members gravitated toward labor market research and workforce alignment, others toward design, instructional sequencing, or content development. This collaborative approach fostered a robust development process that strengthened the overall project.

Equally important was the project's commitment to long-term sustainability. Teams intentionally sought instructional resources that would not create future financial obstacles for programs or learners, developing content internally or sourcing openly available educational resources wherever possible. This approach preserved instructional quality while keeping implementation costs low.

Through this iterative and collaborative process, Project ELEVATE produced a series of workforce-focused microcredentials that bridge adult education and employment readiness, providing learners with foundational occupational knowledge, workplace competencies, and clear pathways toward further training, industry-recognized credentials, and employment.

Phase II: Piloting and Evaluation

With curriculum development and Industry Council approval complete, Project ELEVATE transitioned from design to implementation. The initial pilot offerings focused on the Customer Service Foundations and Technology Foundations microcredentials, providing the first opportunity to test both curriculum and delivery model with adult learners across the region.

Pilot cohorts represented a range of learner backgrounds, including individuals seeking employment, incumbent workers looking to enhance their skills, and adults exploring new career pathways. This diversity reflected the varied populations adult education programs routinely serve and allowed the team to assess how well the microcredential format met learners at different points in their educational and professional journeys.

Throughout implementation, instructors and project partners systematically gathered feedback from participants on course content, pacing, delivery methods, and overall learner experience. That feedback surfaced both strengths and gaps, informing targeted adjustments to instructional materials, learner supports, technology requirements, and delivery logistics before broader rollout. The case studies that follow document specific findings and curriculum refinements from each pilot in greater detail.

Across all pilots, the flexible, short-term format demonstrated strong learner engagement and regional scalability, early evidence that the microcredential model could effectively serve adult learners while meeting the workforce preparation goals Project ELEVATE was designed to address.

Phase III: Implementing Regional and Statewide Dissemination

Project ELEVATE's third phase shifts focus to regional expansion, sustainability, and capacity building. A regional training team has been established to support participating adult education providers as they implement the initiative's various components, traveling across the region to provide hands-on training and technical assistance tailored to each program's selected areas of participation. Support spans four primary areas: HyFlex classroom setup and instructional strategies; implementation of the workforce-contextualized GED® curriculum; utilization of the Career Navigator model; and the rollout and delivery of Project ELEVATE microcredentials. This approach reflects the project's commitment to ensuring that innovative practices are not only developed, but also successfully adopted and sustained across diverse program settings.

A significant component of this phase involves expanding learner access through regional course sharing. HyFlex classrooms combine interactive smartboard technology, high-definition conferencing systems, integrated audiovisual systems, and cloud-based collaboration platforms to support simultaneous face-to-face and remote participation while maintaining instructional fidelity across multiple sites. Using HyFlex classrooms established across multiple providers with support from Section 107a Innovation funding, participating programs are now positioned to offer and receive instruction across program boundaries, giving learners access to a broader catalog of workforce-focused microcredentials regardless of their location or their local program's staffing capacity. As this shared instructional network grows, it is anticipated to strengthen collaboration among providers and create a more responsive, connected adult education system across the region.

PILOT CASE STUDIES AND PROJECT OUTCOMES

Case Study: Microcredentialing Into the Digital World

Digital literacy and technology proficiency have become foundational workforce skills across nearly every industry sector. Employers increasingly expect workers to possess a baseline understanding of technology applications used for communication, organization, data

management, and decision making. Among these skills, spreadsheet competency has emerged as one of the most commonly requested workplace technology proficiencies, spanning fields as diverse as manufacturing, healthcare, customer service, logistics, administration, and skilled trades. Recognizing both this workforce demand and the obstacles many adult learners face in accessing technology training, Project ELEVATE developed the Technology Foundations: Essential Spreadsheets microcredential as an introductory pathway into workplace technology competency.

The pilot was conducted by consortium members Thompson M-TEC and Zeeland Adult Education, serving a diverse adult education learner population enrolled in GED® preparation, ABE, and advanced English language learners. Rather than relying on open enrollment, a career navigator visited adult education classrooms to discuss learner goals, career interests, technology experience, and workplace readiness. This personalized advising process ensured participants understood the commitment required while establishing a sense of support before instruction began. Two cohorts were offered, enrolling a combined 16 learners, 15 of whom completed the microcredential.

Instruction was delivered in a face-to-face classroom environment, with the instructor refining delivery elements based on learner feedback and observations. Learners engaged directly with technology throughout the course, applying skills in real time through hands-on activities and guided practice. This approach allowed learners to immediately connect concepts to practical applications, reinforcing both skill development and confidence.

One of the most significant findings was the extent to which learners connected spreadsheet skills to their daily lives. While many initially viewed spreadsheets as a workplace-specific tool, they quickly recognized applications in personal budgeting, household organization, scheduling, and financial planning. This connection between workforce preparation and everyday utility increased engagement and highlighted the value of contextualized instruction that bridges employment and real-life skills. The pilot also highlighted the value of bilingual instructional support; a Spanish-speaking classroom assistant proved particularly valuable during more advanced lessons, providing vocabulary support and targeted clarification that reduced frustration and increased confidence among the ESL participants.

Implications for Practice/Outcomes

Strong attendance and completion rates across both cohorts confirmed the high receptivity of adult learners to hands-on technology instruction when provided with appropriate scaffolding and personalized support. Learners routinely arrived early, remained engaged throughout sessions, and frequently described ways they were already applying new skills outside the classroom. The career navigator recruitment model proved essential in ensuring participants were well positioned before instruction began, a transferable practice for any microcredential implementation. Programs serving multilingual populations should similarly consider the impact of bilingual instructional support, which, in this pilot, proved critical to learners' confidence and success.

More broadly, this pilot reinforced a core project assumption: Short-term, workforce-aligned learning can build both practical skills and learner confidence. Lessons learned through

implementation informed subsequent curriculum refinements and provided a replicable model for future technology-focused offerings across the region.

Case Study: A Multisector Approach to Customer Service Credentialing

Customer service skills are among the most in-demand employability skills across today's workforce. Whether in healthcare, manufacturing, retail, or skilled trades, employees are expected to communicate professionally, solve problems effectively, and navigate customer interactions with confidence. To address this need, Project ELEVATE developed the Customer Service microcredential to provide adult learners with foundational workplace communication and interpersonal skills applicable across a wide range of career pathways.

Two distinct cohorts were piloted through Zeeland Adult Education in partnership with Thompson M-TEC. The first was offered as a face-to-face course enrolling seven learners, six of whom successfully completed the program. Participants represented a mix of GED® preparation learners and ESL learners, ranging from upper NRS Level 4 through Level 6, recruited through the career navigator model, using classroom visits and individual meetings to identify interest and readiness.

Feedback from the first cohort revealed that while the content proved meaningful and engaging for higher level learners, portions were less accessible for those with emerging English proficiency. This led to significant curriculum enhancements, including differentiated instructional materials, expanded visual supports, vocabulary scaffolds, and additional extension activities. The resulting curriculum evolved into a more flexible, multilevel model better suited to the diverse populations typically served in adult education. Experiential learning strategies also proved effective; role-playing activities simulating real workplace scenarios generated high levels of engagement and visibly increased learner confidence and participation.

Building on these lessons, a second pilot was launched using the HyFlex classroom technology provided through Project ELEVATE, simultaneously serving learners in person and virtually from participating adult education providers across the region. With 17 learners enrolled at the time of this writing, this pilot is offering early insight into delivering workforce-focused microcredentials across geographically dispersed populations.

Implications for Practice/Outcomes

The Customer Service pilot offers two particularly transferable lessons. First, microcredential curriculum should be designed from the outset for the full range of learners adult education programs serve, by building in learner-centered design, differentiated instruction, and experiential learning rather than retrofitting it after initial implementation. Second, experiential learning strategies that allow learners to practice skills in authentic contexts before entering the workplace produce measurable gains in both confidence and engagement. The ongoing HyFlex cohort adds a third consideration: Regional collaboration and innovative instructional technology can broaden access to workforce preparation while preserving meaningful learner engagement without requiring every program to independently develop and staff each credential. This is an especially important opportunity for regions with limited instructional capacity.

Case Study: Recovery Coaching as an Emerging Workforce Pathway

West Michigan continues to experience a growing need for recovery support services as communities respond to substance use disorders and mental health challenges. At the same time, healthcare providers, community mental health agencies, recovery organizations, and treatment programs face ongoing workforce shortages. Recovery coaches help address this need by providing peer-based support, mentorship, advocacy, and resource navigation to individuals pursuing recovery. Because recovery coaches draw on their own lived experiences, the profession represents a unique workforce pathway for individuals seeking to transform personal experiences into meaningful careers.

The Introduction to Recovery Coaching microcredential emerged through Read Muskegon, a community-based adult education program that identified a strong connection between literacy development, recovery, and employment opportunities. Conversations with learners, community partners, and recovery organizations confirmed both the growing demand for recovery support professionals and the relevance of this pathway for adult learners who may face obstacles related to prior justice involvement, educational attainment, or employment history. Adult educators partnered with a certified peer recovery coach trainer and recovery-focused organizations to develop a microcredential introducing learners to recovery coaching principles, professional expectations, and career opportunities, with curriculum designed for flexible delivery across multiple settings, including correctional facilities.

Instructional materials incorporated vocabulary development, professional communication skills, and scenario-based activities, alongside an introduction to pathways leading to formal peer recovery coach certification and beyond. Pilot implementation provided opportunities to refine these materials, with adjustments that strengthened learner engagement and ensured content was trauma-informed and appropriate for diverse learner populations.

Implications for Practice/Outcomes

Participant feedback indicated strong interest in recovery coaching as an attainable and meaningful career pathway, with learners reporting an increased awareness of educational and employment opportunities within the recovery support field. The program also strengthened connections between learners and community-based resources, creating additional opportunities for ongoing support and engagement beyond the classroom. This case illustrates a broader opportunity for adult education programs: Fields where lived experience is a professional asset represent underutilized workforce pathways that microcredentials are uniquely positioned to open. Two lessons from implementation are particularly transferable: Microcredentials are most effective when they connect learners' personal experience to employment opportunities, and curriculum addressing sensitive topics must be intentionally trauma informed. Additionally, the project demonstrated the value of engaging industry experts during curriculum development to ensure that training content reflects current workforce expectations while remaining accessible to adult learners. Together, these findings suggest that microcredentials can serve as effective entry points into emerging workforce pathways while supporting learner confidence, engagement, and career exploration.

BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REPLICATION

Innovation in Fostering Regional Partnerships

One of the most significant lessons from Project ELEVATE has been the value of regional collaboration in designing workforce-aligned microcredentials. Rather than developing training programs in isolation, adult education providers were able to connect with a broader network that contributed to and bolstered the design process. This collaborative approach ensured that training content reflected both learner needs and the current workforce demands.

The project demonstrated that partnership should extend beyond implementation and begin during the earliest stages of program design. Industry representatives helped identify workforce needs and validate competencies, while adult educators and content experts contributed expertise in instructional design, accessibility, and wraparound learner support. This shared ownership strengthened both the quality and relevance of the resulting microcredential.

For states and regions looking to replicate this work, establishing a cross-sector planning team early in the process can help ensure that workforce pathways are responsive to local labor market needs while remaining accessible to diverse learner populations.

Inclusion of Workforce-Development Agencies

The local workforce-development agency played an important role in Project ELEVATE by serving as a connector between adult education providers, employers, and industry councils. Their labor market expertise helped identify emerging workforce needs, ensuring that microcredentials were aligned with regional economic priorities.

Equally important was their role in validating credentials through industry council review. By engaging employers and industry leaders in the approval process, Project ELEVATE established greater credibility and relevance for the credentials being developed. This process helped ensure that learners were gaining skills recognized and valued by employers.

The project suggests that workforce-development agencies should be viewed not simply as referral partners but as essential collaborators in program design, validation, and continuous improvement. Their involvement creates strong alignment between educational programming and workforce demand, ultimately benefiting both learners and employers.

Workforce-Development Agencies as Neutral Conveners

Project ELEVATE demonstrated the value of workforce-development agencies serving as neutral conveners between employers, educators, and community partners. Because workforce shortages are regional challenges that extend beyond any single employer or organization, workforce-development agencies are uniquely positioned to facilitate collaboration, share labor market intelligence, and align workforce priorities across sectors. Their involvement helped ensure that Project ELEVATE's microcredentials reflected employer demand while maintaining accessibility for adult learners. Regions seeking to replicate this model should consider engaging workforce-development agencies early in the planning process to support credential selection, industry validation, and pathways development.

Call for State Investment in Adult Education

Project ELEVATE was made possible through Michigan's investment in adult education through supplemental Section 107a funding. This investment presented adult education providers with the opportunity to design, pilot, evaluate, and refine new approaches to workforce preparation that might not have been possible through traditional funding streams alone.

The project's early outcomes suggest that targeted innovation funding can serve as a catalyst for regional collaboration, curriculum development, and workforce pathway expansions. Additionally, these investments support adult learners who may not yet be ready to enter traditional postsecondary programs but can benefit from shorter term, stackable credentials that build confidence, skills, and momentum toward further education and employment.

As workforce needs continue to evolve, sustained investment in adult education innovation will be crucial. States have an opportunity to leverage adult education as a key workforce-development strategy by supporting programs that connect foundational skills instruction with industry-recognized credentials, career pathways, and employer engagement. Investments in innovation go beyond just benefiting adult learners. They contribute to regional talent development and economic growth.

CONCLUSION

Adult education has long played an important role in helping individuals develop the foundational skills necessary for personal, educational, and economic success. As workforce demands evolve, adult education is increasingly positioned as a critical partner in developing regional talent pipelines. Project ELEVATE demonstrated how microcredentials can serve as accessible entry points into workforce pathways, providing adult learners with opportunities to develop in-demand skills, explore career options, and build momentum toward further education and employment.

The project's success was not the result of curriculum development alone. Rather, it emerged through intentional collaboration among adult education and training providers, workforce-development agencies, industry councils, and community partners. Together, these stakeholders designed workforce-aligned microcredentials that reflected local labor market needs while remaining accessible to adult learners with diverse backgrounds and goals.

As states seek innovative approaches to address workforce shortages and expand economic opportunity, the lessons from Project ELEVATE offer a promising model. By investing in cross-sector partnerships, engaging workforce-development agencies as strategic collaborators, and supporting innovation through targeted funding, adult education can play an increasingly significant role in strengthening talent pipelines and preparing learners for meaningful participation in the future workforce. ⌘

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EMBEDDING WORKFORCE READINESS IN ADULT EDUCATION: A FLORIDA CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Adult education programs play a critical role in preparing learners with the skills necessary for workforce success. However, many employers report persistent gaps in essential employability skills such as communication, teamwork, and professionalism. This case study examines how Brevard Adult and Community Education (BACE) in Florida has addressed these challenges by integrating Florida Ready to Work, a statewide career-readiness initiative. The program is embedded across all adult education offerings, including preapprenticeship and integrated education and training programs, using a blended instructional model that combines online coursework with instructor-led activities. This approach ensures that students develop and apply workforce competencies in real-world contexts. Findings indicate that integrating Florida Ready to Work enhances student preparedness, supports instructional consistency, and strengthens alignment with employer expectations. Student outcomes include increased confidence, improved workplace behaviors, and successful application of skills in employment settings. In addition, the use of standardized credentials provides employers with a reliable measure of candidate readiness. This case illustrates how intentionally integrating employability skills into adult education programming can improve learner outcomes and contribute to a stronger workforce pipeline.

Keywords: adult education, workforce readiness, employability skills, Florida Ready to Work, career pathways

INTRODUCTION

Adult education programs across the United States are increasingly tasked with preparing learners not only for academic success, but also for meaningful employment in a rapidly evolving workforce. Brevard County, Florida—located in the heart of the Space Coast—is no exception. Employers consistently report that foundational skills, particularly communication, teamwork, and professionalism, are often lacking among new hires. In response to this need, Brevard Adult and Community Education, part of Brevard County Public Schools in Florida, has implemented Florida Ready to Work as a core component of its curriculum to ensure graduates are prepared for the workforce. Every graduate of Brevard Adult and Community Education earns at least one Florida Ready to Work credential. This case study highlights how Brevard Adult and Community Education integrates Florida Ready to Work into each of its programs and demonstrates why the initiative has become a valued and effective tool for advancing career readiness.

PROGRAM CONTEXT AND WORKFORCE ALIGNMENT

Brevard Adult and Community Education serves adult learners beginning at age 16. The organization has an enrollment of approximately 1,500 students per year. The organization serves the entire Brevard community through three campuses and additional satellite locations designed to meet individuals where they are. Brevard Adult and Community Education offers a range of workforce development programs that focus on integrated education and training. Many of these programs include a preapprenticeship model. Currently, the career pathways are logistics, construction, cybersecurity, heavy truck driver, advanced manufacturing, and telecommunications. These programs vary in duration and intensity, typically ranging from 144 to 185 instructional hours. Designed to meet regional workforce demands, these offerings emphasize both technical skill acquisition and career pathway development.

Florida Ready to Work is a research-based career-readiness program created by Florida law (F.S. 445.06). The program focuses on developing a work-ready talent pipeline with the essential employability skills required for individual, business, and whole community economic well-being and growth. Florida Ready to Work is funded by the state of Florida and the online training and assessments are provided to schools and adult education programs at no direct cost to the district. The program is administered by the Florida Department of Commerce (2025) in partnership with WIN Learning (n.d.), a national career-readiness solutions company.

Like many adult education providers, Brevard Adult and Community Education identified a persistent challenge: Students entering or completing training programs often lacked the soft skills required for workplace success. Feedback from local employers and industry partners repeatedly emphasized the importance of communication, reliability, teamwork, and problem solving. These competencies, though essential, are not always effectively addressed through traditional technical instruction alone.

To bridge this gap, Brevard Adult and Community Education adopted Florida Ready to Work, the statewide program that delivers online training and credentialing in three key areas: soft skills, digital skills, and academic employability skills (Win Learning, n.d.). The integration of Florida Ready to Work allows Brevard Adult and Community Education to align its programming more closely with employer expectations while also meeting state workforce and education standards.

Implementation Model: Embedding Workforce Readiness

One of the defining features of Brevard Adult and Community Education's use of Florida Ready to Work is its intentional integration across programs. Rather than treating employability skills as a standalone or optional module, Florida Ready to Work is embedded into the structure of all the adult education offerings, including all IET programs and the preapprenticeship model. This approach ensures that every student has access to consistent, high-quality training in foundational workplace competencies.

Florida Ready to Work is delivered through a blended instructional model. Students engage with self-paced online modules that feature real-world scenarios and include interactive

lessons and check-your-knowledge interactions. At the same time, instructors incorporate these concepts into classroom instruction. This includes facilitating discussions, guiding reflection, and conducting role-play activities that reinforce workplace behaviors.

This dual approach enhances learning outcomes. While the online platform provides standardized, research-based content, the classroom environment allows students to practice and contextualize those skills. For example, learners may complete a module on conflict resolution and then participate in instructor-led simulations that mirror workplace interactions. This combination of independent learning and guided application ensures that students move beyond theoretical understanding to practical competence.

Instructors at Brevard Adult and Community Education are trained in and proficient with the Florida Ready to Work platform and recognize its value in helping students immediately apply employability skills in real-world settings.

When complete, students sit for the proctored assessments provided through Florida Ready to Work. These assessments validate mastery of skills in each of the three foundational employability skills areas: digital skills, soft skills, and academic employability skills. Students who pass these assessments earn the Florida Ready to Work credentials, which are endorsed by the National Work Readiness Council.

Addressing Soft Skills Gaps

Brevard Adult and Community Education's experience underscores a critical reality in workforce development: Soft skills are often the most significant barrier to employment success. Employers consistently emphasize that technical skills can be taught on the job, but behavioral competencies—such as communication, professionalism, and emotional intelligence—are more difficult to instill.

Florida Ready to Work has assisted Brevard Adult and Community Education in directly addressing this challenge. Through structured coursework and credentialing, Florida Ready to Work provides a measurable and standardized way to teach, assess, and validate these skills. For Brevard Adult and Community Education, this has been transformative. Faculty report that the soft skills component of Florida Ready to Work is the most valuable aspect of the program and resonates strongly with both students and employers.

Notably, Florida Ready to Work also supports instructors in teaching these competencies. Technical instructors may excel in their industry expertise but lack formal training in teaching employability skills. By providing a ready-made curriculum, Florida Ready to Work fills this instructional gap and ensures students receive consistent, comprehensive training.

Enhancing Student Outcomes

The impact of Florida Ready to Work at Brevard Adult and Community Education is evident in student outcomes. Learners not only gain technical knowledge, but also develop the confidence and professionalism needed to succeed in the workplace. Instructors report that students frequently share real-life examples of how they have applied Florida Ready to Work concepts on the job.

One notable example involved a student in a construction preapprenticeship IET program who encountered a conflict with a coworker. Drawing on the communication and conflict-resolution strategies learned through Florida Ready to Work, the student deescalated the situation and maintained professionalism. As a result, the student retained employment and avoided disciplinary action, while the coworker who did not demonstrate those skills faced consequences. This example illustrates the immediate and practical value of Florida Ready to Work training.

A meaningful example of program impact is reflected in the experience of the author's niece, a graduate of Brevard Adult and Community Education. She entered the program in January 2025 with one course remaining toward completion of her adult high school diploma and met all program expectations, including earning the Florida Ready to Work credential. Through contextualized, scenario-based learning, she was able to draw on prior work experiences and successfully obtain an administrative secretary position with a local law enforcement agency. This outcome illustrates a significant positive impact, as she moved beyond employment to a defined and sustainable career pathway.

Additionally, Brevard Adult and Community Education uses Florida Ready to Work to assess student readiness for more advanced programming. In areas such as cybersecurity, the digital skills component serves as an early indicator of whether students are prepared to succeed in technical coursework. This allows instructors to provide targeted support and ensures that students enter advanced pathways with the necessary foundational skills.

Brevard Adult and Community Education also uses the academic employability skills solution of Florida Ready to Work to help students prepare for the GED® exam, ensuring students are able to apply math, reading, and data analysis into workplace contexts.

Since embedding Florida Ready to Work into each adult education program in fall 2023, students graduating from Brevard Adult and Community Education have earned 739 Florida Ready to Work credentials, including 259 Florida Ready to Work Soft Skills credentials, 169 Florida Ready to Work Digital Skills credentials, and 311 Florida Ready to Work Academic Employability Skills credentials.

BENEFITS FOR EMPLOYERS AND THE WORKFORCE SYSTEM

The success of Brevard Adult and Community Education's implementation extends beyond the classroom to the broader workforce system. By equipping students with validated employability skills, Florida Ready to Work helps create a stronger, more reliable talent pipeline for local employers. Graduates are better prepared to meet workplace expectations, reducing the need for additional training and improving retention rates.

Employers also benefit from the standardized nature of Florida Ready to Work credentials. Because the program is state recognized, it provides a common framework for evaluating candidate readiness. This consistency enhances trust and confidence in the hiring process.

Local employers report that program graduates demonstrate stronger communication skills and greater reliability compared to previous hires. Feedback gathered through professional

committees that bring together industry and education partners indicates that employers value the organization's consistent and clearly defined approach to employability skills delivered through a unified model.

Furthermore, the state's investment in Florida Ready to Work, making it available to students, educators, and employers, removes financial barriers to participation and allows for broad implementation. For Brevard Adult and Community Education, this has made it possible to scale the program across multiple offerings without incurring additional cost burdens.

CONCLUSION

Brevard Adult and Community Education's integration of Florida Ready to Work represents a compelling example of how adult education programs can align instruction with workforce needs. By embedding Florida Ready to Work into all adult education programs, Brevard Adult and Community Education has created a model that prioritizes both technical skill development and employability competencies.

The success of this approach highlights several key lessons for the field of adult education. First, soft skills must be intentionally taught and assessed, not assumed. Second, blended instructional models that combine online learning with classroom application are highly effective. Finally, partnerships between education providers and workforce initiatives are essential for building strong career pathways.

As adult education continues to evolve, programs like Florida Ready to Work offer a scalable, impactful solution for preparing learners for success in both work and life. Brevard Adult and Community Education's experience demonstrates that when foundational skills are prioritized, students are better equipped to achieve their goals and employers gain the skilled, reliable workforce they need. ⌘

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DON'T SELL. SOLVE PROBLEMS. A VALUE TRANSLATION FRAMEWORK FOR ADULT EDUCATION AND EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Adult education programs often approach employer engagement as a sales challenge: how to better describe programs, learners, and outcomes so that employers will hire. This article argues that the sales frame is the problem. Employers are not deciding whether to support adult education. They are deciding how to solve operational problems that cost them money every quarter, including turnover, time to productivity, supervisor pipeline gaps, and unfilled frontline roles. Practitioners who walk in prepared to sell bring the wrong tool. Practitioners who walk in prepared to solve a documented employer problem bring the right one. The article presents a Value Translation Framework, developed over more than 2 decades of workforce and adult education consulting work and field tested with practitioners in three states. The framework moves practitioners through three steps: (1) diagnose the employer's operational problem, (2) translate program activities into the language of operations, and (3) construct a problem-solution statement that positions candidates as the answer. The article reviews the workforce evidence base; walks through each step with examples in healthcare, hospitality, and manufacturing; and discusses implications for practice under the new Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Effectiveness in Serving Employers' Performance Indicators.

Keywords: adult education, employer engagement, talent pipeline, value proposition, workforce development, integrated education and training

DON'T SELL. SOLVE PROBLEMS. A VALUE TRANSLATION FRAMEWORK FOR ADULT EDUCATION AND EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

A program director sits across from a manufacturing plant manager. She opens with the program: Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title II; adult basic education; English language services; integrated education and training (IET); a partnership with the local workforce board. The plant manager listens. He asks one question about whether the program is free and thanks her for her time. Six weeks later, his three production lines are still understaffed, the contract operator is still costing him overtime, and the program's graduates are still earning certificates and looking for employers to hire them.

Nothing in that meeting was wrong. The program is real, the funding is real, the partnership is real, and the people who completed it are real. What failed was the approach. The director walked in to sell something. The plant manager was sitting on a problem. The two are not the same conversation, and they rarely end the same way.

The premise is simple: Adult education's employer engagement work is held back, more than by any other single factor, by the instinct to sell. Practitioners try to sell programs. They try to sell learners. They try to sell partnerships, IET cohorts, wraparound services, and the field itself. Employers are not in the market for any of those things. Employers are in the market for solutions to problems that are costing them money every quarter. The work in front of the field is not to become better salespeople. It is to stop selling. The pivot is to diagnose the employer's problem, then translate what adult education actually does into the employer's operational language for describing that problem. When done well, the resulting value proposition does not feel like a pitch. It feels like an answer.

This article presents a Value Translation Framework developed over more than 2 decades of workforce and adult education consulting work and field tested through a national webinar with the Association of Adult Literacy Professional Developers, a hybrid cohort series for Connecticut adult education program administrators, and a workshop for Michigan adult education professionals. The article proceeds in three parts. The first part establishes why the sales frame fails and why the problem-solving frame works, drawing on current workforce evidence and the recent change to the WIOA Effectiveness in Serving Employers performance indicator. The second part presents the Value Translation Framework in three steps. The third part offers examples across healthcare, hospitality, and manufacturing, followed by implications for practice.

WHY THE SALES FRAME FAILS

Employers Are Solving Problems, Not Buying Services

The structural shortages in the sectors where adult education programs most often build candidate pools are well documented and unlikely to ease soon. Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute (2024) projected that the United States will need 3.8 million additional manufacturing workers between 2024 and 2033, with as many as 1.9 million of those positions remaining unfilled if workforce challenges are not addressed. In the National Association of Manufacturers' quarterly outlook surveys, attracting and retaining talent has been the top business challenge cited by manufacturers since the fourth quarter of 2017 (Manufacturing Institute, 2024). The U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2025) reported that healthcare openings continue to outpace supply, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2026) projecting an average of approximately 193,100 annual openings for registered nurses through 2032 against a projected supply that does not cover even a single year of demand. Hospitality presents a similarly persistent challenge: Leisure and hospitality turnover has been documented at approximately 79% annually, the highest of any sector, while restaurant operators report a national average turnover of approximately 75% with average tenure of 110 days (Escoffier, 2024; Homebase, 2025). The National Restaurant Association has reported that 70% of operators are struggling to fill positions (Sculpture Hospitality, 2025). Direct-care worker turnover in long-term care is acute as well, with recent state-level data showing certified nursing assistant (CNA) turnover above 42% annually (EA Workforce, 2025).

Employers facing these conditions are not entertaining sales pitches. They are running short-staffed operations, paying premiums for temporary labor, paying overtime to retained staff,

and absorbing the productivity loss while roles sit open. A practitioner who arrives with a program to sell adds one more item to a calendar already full of vendor calls. A practitioner who arrives with a candidate pipeline aligned to the employer's documented turnover or hiring gap is, in operational terms, a partner the employer was already looking for. The frame the practitioner brings determines whether the meeting becomes a sales call to be declined or a working session to be scheduled.

The Pool of Candidates Is Already Large

The candidate supply problem the sales frame implies is misleading. The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act program enrolled 1,288,367 participants in program year 2023-2024, a 15% increase over the prior year and the largest consecutive enrollment growth of any WIOA core program (Minnesota Association of Workforce Boards, 2025). The OECD Survey of Adult Skills places approximately 28% of working-age U.S. adults at Level 1 or below in literacy and 34% at Level 1 or below in numeracy (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). The adults represented in those figures are the same adults filling the rosters of adult education programs and the same adults employers say they cannot find. What is missing is not candidates. What is missing is the conversation that connects them to the operational problem the employer is trying to solve.

Turnover Cost Has Quantified the Employer's Problem

The economic case has matured to the point where employers can put hard numbers on the problem they need solved. The Society for Human Resource Management estimates that the total cost of replacing an employee ranges from 50% to 200% of that employee's annual salary, with technical and skilled positions typically falling in the 100% to 150% range (15Five, 2025). In hospitality and food service, the average direct cost of replacing one employee has been estimated at $5,864, with training costs alone accounting for approximately $821 per replacement (Homebase, 2025). For frontline roles across sectors, the visible costs of recruiting, screening, onboarding, and training are compounded by the cost of the vacancy itself, the ramp-up period before a new hire reaches full output, and the operational burden absorbed by the team during both. Work Institute research has consistently found that a substantial share of voluntary turnover, often estimated above 75%, is preventable through factors the employer controls (Crestcom, 2024).

Practitioners who understand this math arrive at the meeting with a different orientation. A candidate who arrives credentialed, screened, and prepared for the specific demands of the role is a saved replacement cost. A candidate who stays past the 90-day mark is a returned investment on the employer's training budget. A practitioner who can name those operational outcomes in the employer's own terms is not selling. The practitioner is solving.

WIOA Now Measures Retention With the Same Employer

Regulatory change has reinforced the case. On February 23, 2024, the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education published a joint final rule defining the long-pending WIOA Effectiveness in Serving Employers performance indicator as Retention with the Same Employer, measured in the second and fourth quarters after a participant's exit (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Effectiveness in Serving Employers Performance Indicator,

2024). The rule took effect on March 25, 2024, and applies as a shared indicator across all six WIOA core programs, including the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act program.

This is a rare alignment. The federal performance metric and the employer's primary operational concern now point at the same outcome. Retention with the same employer is not a compliance exercise tucked at the end of a program year report. It is the business problem the employer is already paying consultants to solve. A practitioner who describes candidate retention in operational terms is speaking, simultaneously, to the federal reporting framework and to the employer across the table. The vocabulary is doing two jobs at once. The frame that makes both jobs possible is problem solving, not selling.

THE VALUE TRANSLATION FRAMEWORK

The Value Translation Framework operationalizes the shift from selling to solving. It moves practitioners through three steps: (1) diagnose the employer's operational problem, (2) translate program activities into the language of operations, and (3) construct a problem-solution statement that positions candidates as the answer. The framework is sequential but iterative. Each step refines the next, and the problem-solution statement that emerges from Step 3 should be revisited as the employer relationship deepens and as program outcome data accumulate.

One word choice in the framework deserves explicit attention. Throughout the steps below and in the examples that follow, the people adult education programs serve are referred to as candidates rather than as learners, students, or participants. The internal vocabulary of the field is correct and worth keeping inside the field. The external vocabulary of employer engagement is not the place to defend it. An employer reading the word "candidate" hears someone who could be hired tomorrow. An employer reading the word "learner" hears someone who is still in school. The activities under the surface are identical. The frame is not. The shift to candidate language is the first move from selling adult education to solving an employer's hiring problem.

Step 1: Diagnose the Employer's Operational Problem

The first step is research, not outreach. Before any meeting, message, or proposal, the practitioner gathers what is publicly observable about the employer's situation. Useful signals are largely free. Roles posted for 6 or more weeks across multiple platforms signal that the employer cannot fill them through normal channels. Repeated postings for the same role across a 12-month period signal elevated turnover. Recent operational changes such as facility expansions, contract wins, funding announcements, or wage increases signal a hiring need that has shifted in scale or urgency, with the 3-to-6-month window after such an announcement representing a productive outreach period. Public news coverage, employer review sites, and chamber of commerce announcements all contribute to a working picture of where the employer's pain is concentrated.

The practitioner is not aiming for a complete diagnosis. The goal is to enter the first conversation with one specific, observable claim about the employer's situation. The difference between "We would like to discuss a partnership" and "I noticed your distribution

center has had openings posted for forklift operators across three shifts for the past 2 months" is the difference between an unread email and a scheduled meeting. The first signals that the practitioner is asking for the employer's time. The second signals that the practitioner has already invested in understanding the employer's problem.

The most useful diagnosis is rarely the headline shortage. It is the second-order operational consequence the shortage produces. A health system does not just need more CNAs. It needs CNAs who will stay through the first 6 months, because the first 6 months is where turnover cost concentrates. A restaurant operator does not just need more line cooks. It needs line cooks who reach full station competence within the first month and stay through the high-volume season. A manufacturer does not just need more production workers. It needs production workers whose ramp from new hire to full output is shorter, because every week of incomplete productivity is a measurable cost to the operation. Identifying the second-order consequence is what shifts the practitioner from someone with a program to sell to someone with a problem to solve.

Step 2: Translate Program Activities Into the Language of Operations

Once the operational problem is diagnosed, the practitioner reviews the language they use to describe their work and rebuilds it around the outcomes employers care about. The pattern is consistent and worth naming directly. Program language describes what adult education does. Operations language describes what candidates produce for the employer: same activity, different frame. The frame determines which department in the employer organization will champion the partnership, and that determines whether the partnership ever gets traction.

Table 1 presents five reframings that recur often enough to function as a starter set. Practitioners are encouraged to build their own translations for the sectors they serve most often.

Two principles run through Table 1. The first is that the subject of every operations-language sentence is the candidate. The program is not the subject. The funding stream is not the subject. The WIOA Title II authorization is not the subject. The candidate is. The second is that every operations-language sentence ends in a measurable consequence the employer recognizes from their own experience. Reduced onboarding time, reduced 90-day turnover, supervisor pipeline depth, and screening efficiency are not adult education concepts. They are operations concepts. A program that delivers all of the underlying activities can describe its work in either vocabulary. The choice is not about what the program does. It is about who in the employer organization will pick up the call.

This is also the step where the phrase "adult education" itself often comes off the first-contact email. Not because the field is something to hide. The phrase activates the wrong frame in the listener. A community relations director hears "adult education" and routes the email to the sponsorship team. An operations director hears "workforce pipeline" or "candidate pipeline" and routes the email to the hiring department. The activities underneath are identical. The door the message opens is not.

Table 1
Translating Adult Education Program Language Into Employer Operations Language

Program Language (What Adult Education Says)	Operations Language (What the Employer Hears as a Solution)
"We help individuals earn their high school equivalency."	"Our candidates arrive with the academic credentials your entry-level roles require, which removes a screening step from your hiring process."
"We offer digital literacy classes."	"Our candidates arrive digitally ready, which reduces the technology onboarding time your supervisors currently absorb."
"We serve English language learners."	"Our candidates include the bilingual supervisor pipeline your growing Spanish-speaking workforce already needs."
"Our participants receive wraparound services through partner providers."	"Our candidates arrive with the life-stability supports that prevent the first-90-day turnover your operations team feels every quarter."
"We provide career-readiness instruction."	"Our candidates arrive with demonstrated attendance, communication, and follow-through, which are the specific behaviors your supervisors most often report as the difference between a hire who stays and a hire who does not."

Note: Each row presents an illustrative reframing. The activities described in the left and right columns are identical. The frame, and therefore the department in the employer organization most likely to receive the message, is not.

Step 3: Construct the Problem-Solution Statement

The third step combines the diagnosed operational problem and the translated language into a problem-solution statement. The framework uses a four-part structure adapted from standard business value proposition design. The structure is intentionally constraining. A practitioner who can complete the four parts truthfully and specifically has a statement an employer can act on. A practitioner who finds any of the four parts difficult to complete has surfaced a gap that needs attention before the outreach begins.

The four parts are as follows: First, the employer type, named with enough specificity that the employer recognizes themselves in the description. Second, the specific operational problem the employer is experiencing, stated in the employer's own terms. Third, the specific solution the program provides, with candidates at the center rather than the program structure. Fourth, the measurable outcome the partnership is designed to produce, anchored where possible in the program's own documented data or in published research on comparable interventions.

The four parts assemble into a single sentence: “We help [employer type] solve [specific operational problem] by providing [candidates with specific preparation], which results in [measurable outcome].” A representative example from a healthcare context reads as follows: “We help regional health systems address certified nursing assistant retention challenges by providing candidates who complete a 12-week training program with embedded workplace-readiness instruction, which is designed to support stronger first-6-month retention than conventional hiring channels typically produce.”

Two design choices in that example are worth naming. The first is the deliberate framing of the outcome as “designed to support” rather than “guaranteed to produce.” Practitioners are urged to anchor outcome claims in evidence: their own program’s documented data, where it exists; published research on comparable IET interventions, where it does not; and clearly labeled design targets, where neither is yet available. Specificity is credibility. Inflated outcome claims the employer cannot reconcile with their own experience are the fastest route to a closed door. The second choice is the absence of program acronyms and funding sources. Neither WIOA nor Title II appears in the example. The candidate appears. The cohort structure appears. The retention outcome appears. The employer hears a problem-solution statement, not a program description, because what the employer hears is what determines whether a meeting becomes a partnership.

A practitioner who has worked through the three steps is no longer selling. The diagnosis was the employer’s. The translation respects how the employer makes decisions. The problem-solution statement positions candidates as the answer to a question the employer was already asking. The conversation that follows is, structurally, a working session between two parties trying to solve the same problem, not a vendor call. The practitioner did not change what the program does. The practitioner changed what the meeting is focused on.

WORKED EXAMPLES ACROSS THREE SECTORS

The three steps adapt to the structure of any sector. The examples below illustrate how the framework produces different problem-solution statements in healthcare, hospitality, and manufacturing, while the underlying discipline remains constant.

Healthcare

The operational problem in healthcare partnerships is most often retention of direct-care workers in long-term care and postacute settings, where CNA turnover above 40% annually has become a normalized cost (EA Workforce, 2025). The translated solution centers on candidates who arrive certified, screened, and prepared for the specific demands of the care setting, with workplace-readiness instruction embedded in the IET cohort to address the behavioral predictors of first-6-month retention. The decision-making contact is the director of nursing or the chief nursing officer rather than a corporate human resources contact, because the director of nursing feels the turnover directly and controls the hiring slots the partnership requires. A representative problem-solution statement reads: “We help regional health systems address CNA retention challenges by providing candidates who complete a 12-week training program with embedded workplace-readiness and contextualized clinical

instruction, which is designed to support stronger first-6-month retention than conventional hiring channels typically produce."

Hospitality and Food Service

The operational problem in hospitality and food service is the highest sustained turnover of any major sector, with leisure and hospitality turnover documented at approximately 79% annually and restaurant operators reporting tenure averaging 110 days (Escoffier, 2024; Homebase, 2025). The translated solution centers on candidates who arrive prepared for the specific demands of a high-volume service environment: punctuality, customer interaction, basic food safety, point-of-sale and kitchen display system literacy, and the communication skills that supervisors most often name as the difference between a hire who completes the first month and one who does not. The decision-making contact is the general manager or the director of operations for a multiunit operator, rather than corporate human resources, because operations leadership controls hiring slots and feels the cost of turnover every week. A representative problem-solution statement reads: "We help regional restaurant and food service operators address line-staff turnover during the first 90 days by providing candidates who complete a training with embedded customer communication, basic food safety, and point-of-sale instruction, which is designed to support stronger first-90-day retention than conventional walk-in hiring typically produces."

Manufacturing

The operational problem in manufacturing is the structural shortage documented by Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute (2024), compounded by the time-to-productivity cost of every new hire. The translated solution centers on candidates who arrive with workplace numeracy, blueprint reading, shop-floor communication, and digital literacy already in place, which shortens the ramp from new hire to full output. The decision-making contact is the plant manager or production manager, because these leaders feel the productivity gap every shift. A representative problem-solution statement reads: "We help regional manufacturers address their skilled production worker shortage by providing candidates who complete a sector-specific training with embedded numeracy, blueprint reading, and shop-floor communication, which is designed to shorten the ramp from new hire to full output and reduce the cost of incomplete productivity during onboarding."

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Three implications follow directly from the framework. The first concerns where employer engagement competency is built. Most adult educators were prepared as instructors, curriculum designers, or program managers. Few were prepared to diagnose an employer's operational problem, translate program activities into the language of operations, or sit across the table from a plant manager and lead a working conversation. The shift from selling to solving is a teachable practice, not a personality trait. State professional development systems, regional adult education leadership networks, and national organizations can build the practitioner pipeline that the field's employer engagement work depends on, in the same way the field has built instructional pipelines for decades.

The second implication concerns measurement. The WIOA Effectiveness in Serving Employers indicator gives programs both a discipline and a vocabulary for the conversation. Programs are encouraged to begin tracking retention with the same employer at the cohort and partnership level well before the data appear in formal state performance reports, and to share preliminary findings with employer partners as part of the ongoing relationship. Demonstration is not a single event. It is a recurring rhythm of small, credible data points that build the trust on which sustainable partnerships are built. A practitioner who can return to an employer 6 months after the first cohort with retention data in hand has shifted the conversation from a speculative solution to a documented one.

The third implication concerns the language adult education uses about itself, including in the field's own publications and conferences. Adult education has long described itself in the vocabulary of access, equity, and second chances. Those values are central to the field's identity and worth defending. They are not, however, the values that move an employer to commit hiring slots, integrate cohorts, or invest in codesigned curriculums. The talent pipeline issue of this journal is, in part, an invitation to add a second register to the field's voice. Adult education is the gateway to economic opportunity for the adults it serves. Adult education is also the most cost-effective candidate pipeline available to the employers solving the most expensive operational problems of the decade. Both statements are true, and neither cancels the other. Programs that learn to move between both registers, with the same conviction in each, are the ones that will shape the next decade of workforce development.

CONCLUSION

The opening scene of this article ends with an unfilled production line and a candidate pool still looking for hiring partners. Let's return to that scene now and imagine a different version. The director of the program walks into the same plant manager's office. She does not open with WIOA, Title II, or the program. She opens with a sentence: "I noticed your three production lines have had openings posted for 2 months across two shifts, and I work with candidates in this community who complete a 16-week sector-specific training with workplace numeracy and shop-floor communication built in." The plant manager looks up. He asks how soon she can put graduates in front of him. That conversation is not a different meeting. It is the same meeting, with one variable changed. The change is the frame. She is not selling. She is solving. The candidates are already there. The employers are already looking. The work in front of the field is the translation that connects them. ⌘

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WE HAVE A DREAM: A COMMUNITY ADULT LEARNING SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

This four-part article opens with recommendations that adult foundational education (AFE) advocates have made about improvements needed in current AFE services in the United States. Improvements would strengthen AFE's relevance to learner and community needs, reach (i.e., numbers and breadth of learners and other community stakeholders served), resources, and requirements (i.e., what funders allow programs to do). Part 2 profiles four current AFE programs that work with community partners to respond to multiple learner and community interests (i.e., both workforce preparation and other needs) by using participatory learning and collaborative program management strategies and relying on diverse sources of financial and in-kind support. The third part identifies actions that AFE stakeholders can take at local, state, and national levels to create "Community Adult Learning Services" that use community-oriented practices similar to those developed by the four programs profiled. Actions include learning from existing program models and advocacy strategies and forming task forces to identify needed improvements in AFE and strategies (e.g., demonstration projects) to make those improvements. Part 4's brief "Parting Words" encourages those undertaking the difficult work of systems reform. Throughout, readers are referred to two recent multivolume series containing resources that elaborate on arguments and information presented in the article.

Keywords: adult foundational education, literacy, reform, participatory, community-oriented, collaborative, partners

A DIFFERENT WAY OF THINKING ABOUT WORKERS AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Since the advent of the Workforce Investment Act (1998) and then the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (2014), much of the discourse, funding, and programming in the United States' adult foundational education (AFE) field has focused heavily on preparing low-wage or unemployed workers for jobs in their local economies. From the late 1990s to now, AFE advocates have identified positive results and strategies generated by employment-focused initiatives, but also raised concerns about the limited relevance, reach, resources, and requirements of many such AFE efforts (Jurmo, 2023a). They have called for an AFE model that acknowledges the importance of helping learners who want to gain and perform family sustaining jobs but is based on a more comprehensive, better informed understanding of what workers need to attain such a goal. As summarized in Jurmo (2023b, 2025e), advocates argue for a multipurpose AFE model that focuses on multiple, interwoven learner and community needs; uses evidence-based practices for participatory learning and collaborative

management; and is supported by collaborations with relevant stakeholders at local, state, and national levels. This "community-oriented" approach would build on the strengths of current and past AFE models developed to respond to workforce preparation and other needs and require new strategies for funding and evaluation. This would be accomplished through intentional, systematic, and sustained AFE systems reform initiatives and be done for these reasons:

- Improve relevance of services to learner and community needs: While carrying out particular technical and social tasks in workplaces is important, workers also need to be able to manage other tasks to succeed in most workplaces. For example, they need to protect their own health and that of their coworkers and families if they want to be able to attain, persist and advance in, and benefit from employment. They need to manage the salaries and benefits that their employers provide. They need to protect the environment (and adhere to environmental regulations) by using environmentally friendly procedures. They need to understand their own legal rights and responsibilities and those of others they work with. They must ensure that their children and elders are properly cared for and that housing and transportation issues are taken care of, if they are to successfully attain and hold a job. In sum, adult learners need to be problem solvers, able to manage opportunities and challenges they face inside and outside the workplace.

  At the same time, in order to attract political, financial, and in-kind supports from their communities, AFE services need to demonstrate that they are willing and able to work with and benefit other important community stakeholders.
- Increase learner practice of what they learn while also benefitting their families and wider communities: Workers can apply skills and knowledge related to workplace operations, health, money management, environmental sustainability, and legal issues to their lives both at work and in their family and civic lives. Helping learners to develop skills that they can apply in multiple life contexts allows them to get in the "time on task" needed to strengthen those skills. This could also produce a spillover effect, helping learners to contribute to stronger, better functioning families and communities. Such positive impacts on the community can also increase other stakeholders' understanding of how they can benefit from working with and supporting local AFE services.
- Empower AFE providers to plan more relevant and effective services: Such a model can give AFE providers permission and resources to customize multipurpose, client-centered services to the needs of a wider range of learners and their communities.
- Increase learner participation and community support: When potential learners hear how AFE can help them deal with issues they face in their lives, they are more likely to enroll in AFE. Similarly, when other community stakeholders (e.g., employers, labor unions, and providers of services related to health, family well-being, legal and financial issues, public safety, disabilities, libraries, digital access, housing, transportation, and other learner and community needs) see how AFE can benefit them by generating better equipped employees, customers, parents, and citizens, they

are more likely to support and work with AFE providers. In particular, employers, labor unions, and workforce and economic development agencies are more likely to collaborate with AFE providers if those providers can demonstrate that they can provide high-quality services that help both job seekers and incumbent workers to perform technical and social tasks required in local workplaces.

What would such a multipurpose, participatory, collaborative model, henceforth referred to here as "community-oriented" AFE, look like in practice? We can learn from the many past and current AFE programs and initiatives that integrate work-related, health, family, financial, legal, and other themes into their curricula and collaborate with other community stakeholders.

EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY-ORIENTED AFE AT LOCAL LEVELS

Shown below are profiles of four current programs that in various ways use participatory instructional practices and collaborations with diverse stakeholders to respond to employment, incarceration, family, health, financial, citizenship, and other needs of diverse learner populations (immigrants and refugees, incarcerated individuals, incumbent workers) and their communities.

A Collaborative Support System to Help Immigrants and Refugees Prepare for Life and Work in a New Land

Roanoke, Virginia, has developed an extensive service system that supports immigrant and refugee integration and inclusion and thereby prepares them for work, family, and civic roles they will play in their new communities. English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) education is an important component, and Blue Ridge Literacy (BRL) plays a central role in these efforts. A community-based, nonprofit adult literacy organization in the Blue Ridge Mountains, BRL has evolved since its founding in 1985 to now focus especially on Roanoke's growing English language-learner populations. BRL's mission is to help adults achieve their life goals and navigate everyday interactions and contexts through functional literacy education. These interactions shape and inform long-term choices and decisions that adult learners make for themselves and their families. This helps fill learners' information gaps related to employment, health, finances, and K–12 schools that result from moving from one culture to another. BRL's two-person full-time staff is supplemented by volunteers and a modest but growing number of part-time instructors, some of whom teach ESOL for employees of local businesses.

BRL has steadily built cross-sector partnerships with diverse stakeholders in Roanoke, a refugee resettlement city. Partners include Roanoke's Department of Social Services (DSS), Commonwealth Catholic Charities (CCC), Virginia's Office of New Americans, and other agencies. BRL provides work-readiness classes to DSS-referred refugees. With CCC, BRL brings a Department of Justice–accredited legal counselor into BRL's citizenship classes, hosts a mental health workshop in its English and Health program, provides room in its ESOL classes for CCC-referred learners, and runs a small ESOL program for Afghan refugees.

BRL also trains volunteer tutors for clients of the Roanoke Refugee Partnership (RRP) to help them prepare for BRL's Citizenship Prep classes and the U.S. naturalization exam. RRP in

turn provides learners with financial aid for legal fees and travel costs related to steps (e.g., biometrics intake, naturalization test and interview, oath ceremony) in the naturalization process.

BRL actively participates in Roanoke's quarterly Virginia Regional Community Consultations meetings led by CCC. As a new federal administration was being assembled in November 2024, BRL also helped organize monthly Capacity Initiative meetings of local refugee services "to share news and updates, understand the shifting landscape, create referral pathways, and discuss implications of these shifts," according to BRL's Executive Director Ahoo Salem (personal communication, Aug. 31, 2026). These partnerships now "form the foundation for networks that can respond effectively during rapid change . . . to share critical information based on urgency and relevance . . . (to allow partners to) connect learners with trusted and accurate resources while maintaining boundaries . . . We (at BRL) are providers of adult literacy and not case workers . . . But we know learners need to be able to handle multiple types of factors that impact their lives so they can come to class. We try to connect them to those who have the resources and skills" to help them (Salem, A., personal communication, Aug. 31, 2026).

Within the above-described multipartner network, BRL uses several strategies to help learners prepare for and connect with the workforce, including workforce-readiness instruction, direct connections with employers, connections to career training, and opportunities to learn about local employment opportunities. Strategies include the following:

- Daily classes for learners referred by the Department of Social Services are part of a workforce-readiness program, providing the foundational literacy skills needed for self-sufficiency and transition into the labor market. This is part of the Virginia Initiative for Education and Work, a state program that helps public benefits recipients build job skills, gain work experience, and move toward financial independence.
- Building on existing partnerships, BRL has developed a direct relationship with recruiters at Carilion Clinic, a nonprofit hospital and the largest employer in Roanoke. A Carilion representative regularly visits BRL's advanced- and postadvanced-level classes to share information with learners about Patient Tech jobs, connect with interested candidates, refer them to appropriate recruiters, and help them prepare for interviews. BRL then remains involved in the learners' English learning journey after employment and provides additional tutoring services if needed.
- As part of its English and Health Literacy program, BRL offers an annual Health Careers Fair, providing information about workforce certificate and credit courses offered by the local community college, with direct connections to the local job market. These fairs are complemented by additional information and guest visits about the community college's full range of programs.
- For the past several years, as part of Welcoming Week in September, BRL has worked with the city of Roanoke to offer a City Jobs Fair at the Main Library building, where BRL's classes take place. The jobs fair is open to the public as well as to BRL learners,

> but primarily serves as an opportunity for learners to become familiar with city departments and workforce opportunities within them. At the same time, it allows municipal departments to interact directly with potential employees, who, in addition to other skills, are bilingual.

These workforce-related activities help BRL staff to better understand the skills and other assets that employers are looking for and build trusting, efficient communications between BRL and employer and workforce-development partners. Employers and workforce agencies, in turn, look to BRL for guidance on changes in governmental immigration policies that can impact their ability to hire immigrants and refugees.

For AFE providers without a formal network, BRL recommends they consider the stakeholders their learners and staff already communicate and work with. These stakeholders might be invited to a meeting or respond to a survey in which they clarify whether, why, and how a more formalized network might be created.

Workplace Education That Benefits Employers, Employees, and Communities

Grand Rapids, Michigan, is home to the Literacy Center of West Michigan (LCWM). Launched in 1986 as a one-to-one volunteer tutoring organization, it has grown to be the largest community-based AFE provider in Michigan and one of the largest in the U.S., serving over 1,300 learners annually. Services include one-to-one literacy coaching and ESOL contextualized to the needs of the county's large nonnative English-speaking population (community integration, family literacy at schools, health literacy at clinics, citizenship preparation, and legal support). Curricula are contextualized, and services are provided in community settings where learners need to use the skills taught. LCWM (2026) presents its mission and approach:

> Our work is grounded in the understanding that our region will thrive only when the assets of all . . . community members can be fully realized. Recognizing that many traditional modes of adult education do not meet adults where they are in their lives, we design highly relevant programs whose content and location are tailored to learner needs and community priorities.
>
> Our community and employer partnerships make this possible. (As) a key player in workforce development, (LCWM) offers context-specific programs for businesses and job seekers. In addition to employers and training partners, we collaborate with school districts, libraries, and health care systems, providing parents, patrons, and patients the learning they need to not only navigate but effect positive change within these systems. . . At no cost to the adult learner . . . we meet learners where they are—both within the community and along their language journey—and focus on the areas of life most important to them: family, work, and community.

The Center describes its Customized Workplace English program for incumbent workers:

> We deliver English as a second language (ESL) classes tailored to employers' needs—onsite or virtual—so employees can improve communication in the

context of their job. These classes raise productivity, safety, and employee engagement by embedding language instruction directly into workplace tasks.

In addition to supporting worker technical efficiency and productivity, LCWM believes such classes can help create mentally healthy workplaces as defined by the U.S. Surgeon General's Office. Such workplaces protect workers from harm, foster connection and community, support work-life harmony, promote "mattering" at work, and provide opportunities for growth (U.S. Public Health Service, 2022).

LCWM uses a development process found in other collaborative models of workplace education (Jurmo, 2025c). The Center's Senior Director of Programs, Marcus Little, summarized the steps of that process as follows: "Connect with a Business," by networking with company representatives and the local Workforce Development Board and community college; conduct a "Needs Assessment" through site visits and testing; "Determine Logistics" of a facility and schedule; "Develop Curriculum" emphasizing communication, social, cultural, and problem-solving skills contextualized to each setting; adapting existing modules on workplace oral and written communications, safety, scheduling, quality control, and benefits; "Deliver Class" using part-time, paid instructors; and "Evaluate" by reporting attendance, posttest results, learner-reported impacts on their confidence to use English, and a summary of the curriculum provided (Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy, 2026).

With such classes, employers can learn how to use adult education as a strategy for recruiting and retaining employees and achieving company long-term goals, while also offering another benefit to employees: Employees can become more confident in using the diverse abilities they bring to their workplace, integrate into the workplace's social fabric, and use their voice to advocate for themselves. Workplace services also help LCWM to expand its funding sources to include employer fees, WIOA Title II, braided public and private funds, other grant funding such as through the United Way, and state workplace-development funds.

LCWM's "Better Communication Across Languages" workshop helps company managers understand how to work with employees having diverse language and cultural backgrounds. Managers can also take introductory Spanish-language courses (including one teaching construction-industry vocabulary) to better communicate with Spanish-speaking employees.

From their experience in local workplaces, LCWM identifies these "lessons learned":

- cohesion of learner cohort skill levels and understanding details of learners' jobs are important;
- learner retention and attendance are stronger if classes are scheduled during work hours when learners are paid;
- classes need to be customized to workers and the workplace;
- AFE providers need to adapt to schedules and needs of employers and employees to ensure ongoing engagement;
- learner/employee interviews and feedback are central to program/curriculum development;

- and "upskilling," including recognition that many learners have advanced training and degrees from their home countries, is a goal and a key feature of all LCWM workplace activities (Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy, 2026).

For more about LCWM's work with healthcare providers, see the "Language Meets Healthcare" video in the "Mutually Inclusive Stories that Connect Us" (WGVU Public Media, 2023).

Education for a Strong and Growing Healthcare Workforce

The 1199SEIU Training and Employment Funds (TEF) is a collaboration of the 1199SEIU labor union and healthcare providers in New York City. TEF provides extensive education and training opportunities, including foundational education programs in ESOL, digital skills, Spanish, and academic readiness for college and career courses, as well as high school equivalency and citizenship exams and job-related basic skills education. Such skills are valuable for careers in the fast-growing home care industry for unionized healthcare workers in New York City. As Maria Luisa Castañeda, assistant director of TEF's Education Department, stated, collaborative problem solving is a guiding principle in how the union and employers interact. It also guides collaborative classroom activities like role-plays in which learners practice dealing with challenges they might face in their jobs (Castañeda, M. L., personal communication, Feb. 28, 2026). Staff and instructors also collaborate to make decisions about course content and other issues. Through a comprehensive collection of contextualized and participatory occupational, foundational, academic, and leadership education courses, union members are empowered to work in teams, solve problems, and advocate for themselves and their patients, inside and outside work. Staff are also encouraged to develop and use equivalent skills in their own interactions with learners and coworkers, "practicing what we preach." Participating workers are primarily women, middle-aged, immigrant, and minority, with 88% of participants from low-income communities. They are provided with education as well as childcare, mentoring, tutoring, and other supports to help them deal with barriers that adult learners often face. The result is an 83% program completion rate, with many participants moving to the next rung on career ladders. For more details about TEF, see their report from their 2009 strategic planning process (1199SEIU Training and Employment Funds, 2012).

One important recent example of collaborative problem-solving to better serve learners emerged when COVID-19 hit New York, the healthcare industry, and the nation in early 2020. TEF stopped in-person classes on March 10, 2020, and quickly developed new ways for learners to continue their learning with their former classmates or on their own via the free Edmondo online learning system and WhatsApp. By fall 2020, TEF was trying to figure out how to help their learners who might have some experience and access to the internet and computer equipment, as well as others who had nothing more than a cell phone. TEF administrators were themselves also facing their own challenges, having to suddenly work from home, without easy access to technologies and administrative forms that they normally used in their offices to manage their education programs. "We needed to reinvent ourselves as a program ready for the challenges a pandemic had thrown everyone's way, and that would require critical thinking and creative problem solving along with training and support" (LeBaron, 2021, p. 3).

Staff embarked on a rapid planning process in summer 2020 to decide how to (a) recruit, assess, and correctly place students; (b) serve those who had access only to a cell phone; (c) structure engaging remote-learning activities; and (d) acquire new technologies learners and staff would need and how to train staff in their use. Staff collaborated to get new classes started in late September, continually assessing progress and planning next steps. Early anxieties were lessened as activities fell into place, step by step, with technology-oriented staff taking new leadership roles. Those staff included individuals who had already been using educational technologies in their classrooms and others who were now having to learn how to manage the distance-learning supports being introduced by their children's schools. LeBaron (2021) provides further details about TEF's collaborative transition to new learning systems.

Fast forward to 2026: Maria Luisa Castañeda reports that TEF has, over the last 5 years, continued to see remote learning as a highly valuable tool for reaching more learners whose busy work and family schedules make attending in-person classes difficult. TEF wants to ensure that remote curricula not only make learning more accessible but also provide high-quality, interactive learning and community-building opportunities for both learners and their teachers. Curriculum developers, for example, are incorporating warm-up activities, chats, breakout rooms, polls, and links to relevant videos into both online and in-person courses. Some learners still see in-person courses as opportunities to interact with friends and coworkers and get a break from family and work responsibilities. Today, 95% of TEF classes are online, and learners are offered opportunities to learn both online and in person. COVID-19 presented tremendous challenges to TEF staff and students, but it also created opportunities and incentives to learn and build confidence in new ways of using technology for learning and other purposes.

Developing Learner Leaders for Civic and Workforce Engagement

Muskegon, Michigan, and surrounding Muskegon County are served by nonprofit Read Muskegon (RM), founded in 2005. RM has evolved to provide adult basic education, ESOL, prisoner reentry, K–12 student tutoring, and Two-Generation (family)-learning services. In 2018–2019, the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL) provided technical assistance to help RM work with other funders and community stakeholders to found the Read Muskegon Literacy Collaborative (RMLC). Members include libraries, municipalities, correctional agencies, faith-based groups, public schools, the county's community foundation, United Way, Goodwill, healthcare organizations, and Rotary.

Recognizing the complexity of the literacy problem, RM considered how they, as a nonprofit, could take leadership to effect system change within the county. Staff identified several activities to help RM and local partners better serve adult learners. Activities would include advocacy, public awareness, preparation of a Language Access Plan, and Literacy Ally Training. "Civic literacy" was seen as a common thread across RM's diverse AFE and systems-change efforts that included workforce preparation, family literacy, community health, correctional education, and other services.

With additional NCFL guidance and community funding, RM created Families in Action, a family service-learning project. Families identified, researched, and carried out multiple

projects in which learners responded to community needs through resource fairs and community cleanups. The projects also helped learners develop transferable basic skills in research and completing paperwork. After 12 weeks, learners were provided $300 stipends, a gas card, and dinner.

With NCFL funding, Read Muskegon also developed a civic literacy curriculum emphasizing listening to students' voices as a way to help learners develop leadership skills, something that ALL IN's National Action Plan for Adult Literacy was coincidentally also calling for (Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, 2021). RM incorporated ALL IN's "learners as movement leaders" terminology in its public messaging, stating it wanted to "engage learners as movement leaders to build community capacity to identify and lead change in addressing systemic issues that lead to education inequity" (Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy, 2025).

At NCFL's urging, RM recognized the importance of covering costs of learner leadership development. RM did so by making it a component of all the work they did, using various funding sources. Sources included WIOA Title II, which funded RM's programs in the county jail and their adult basic education and ESOL programs, as well as the community foundation, which had supported the RMLC's creation and understood learner leadership's benefits. The foundation's grant was consistent with its support for a community health initiative that dealt with social determinants of health, which include healthy diet and health care access, as well as the basic skills of community members.

Learners helped create a culture within Read Muskegon and the Read Muskegon Literacy Collaborative in which learners became actively involved in shaping and implementing activities within and outside the classroom. Learners thereby developed transferable leadership-related basic skills like public speaking, research, and using PowerPoint and email, viewed as assets for problem-solving in work, family, and civic roles.

Learners saw they could identify and discuss issues and develop those skills while also learning about how policies are made, who makes them, and who controls the purse strings. RMLC prepared a white paper describing learner-identified and researched issues and presented it to candidates for public office prior to RMLC–organized candidate forums. This helped candidates to better understand learners' concerns and respond accordingly during the forums. Leadership activities also have produced the benefits of connecting learners to their communities, recruiting learners and tutors for RM, creating a language access plan for immigrants and refugees, and providing community advocacy training for other county partners.

One learner leader, Anna May Lathrop, described how she first connected to RM in 2022 when she was a student in RM's New Beginnings class in the county jail, led by an RM instructor and a specialist from the local women's center. Her tutor helped her understand what "literacy" meant for her as someone who could already read. After learning how to give public presentations, she gave her first one to RMLC members in which she advocated for improved public transportation. "I was so nervous . . . That's where it started, and then it grew from there." She realized that one might have an opinion about something but not know how to advocate for oneself. "I rode the bus for hours, and I collected stories [about the

transportation system and its users] . . . to gather information" for her presentation. She could now use PowerPoint to speak in a candidates' forum, explaining how transportation barriers impacted all community members. From this, RM partnered with Livability Lab to sponsor a transportation project. Anna May explained how this project helped her develop real-world skills, knowledge, and a new can-do outlook that she could apply to moving into a meaningful, productive career path and better life:

> I also worked with my tutor and went from a 9th-grade education level to now, when I'm a certified recovery coach. I can now email, fax, and research, and know how to find adequate resources. These are things I never knew the first thing about. I've now talked with (Michigan) House Representatives several times here in Muskegon and at the state capitol.
>
> I just want everyone to know how literacy literally transformed my entire life . . . Now I work with people who have the same barriers. I have a job in a doctor's office as a certified recovery coach, and I'm able to give back to my community in the same way they were able to give to me. I [learned] the connection of literacy to the judicial system [and recidivism rates] and the [substance abuse] recovery system . . . Since then, I've been able to help connect RM with other partners that never worked together before, because . . . I am now able to put together the pieces . . . I've seen [patients] struggle as people who can't read or understand forms, use technology, sign in on the computer, or understand how to put together what needs to be done. We're thinking of having a volunteer to come in to a drop-in center [so] people can get help with their paperwork to fill out a job application or get an ID or create a resume or fill out simple paperwork for going to the doctor or getting insurance. (Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy, 2025)

RM's Executive Director Melissa Moore added:

> We invested in one person—(adult learner) Anna May—and look now at how many people she has impacted. . . at a minimum, we are beginning to establish safe relationships with adults who might need our help. None of that would have happened if it hadn't been for Anna May . . . I just urge others to make this a piece of the work you do. (Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy, 2025)

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO TRANSITION AFE TO A "COMMUNITY ADULT LEARNING SERVICE" MODEL?

A community-oriented approach to AFE would build on AFE's above-described strengths while mitigating, avoiding, or eliminating its limitations. Rather than completely jettisoning the current model that focuses primarily on preparing unemployed individuals for employment, a multipurpose model would include workforce preparation as an important purpose, but also serve other learner and community needs, such as public health and safety and children's academic success, that indirectly or directly relate to workforce and economic development. This proposed expanded and strengthened model would have a wider range of purposes, users, and partners; emphasize using effective, evidence-informed practices for learning and

program management such as the significant but too-often-ignored strategies developed by previous national, state, and local initiatives in workplace learning, family literacy, health literacy, and civic education; and be guided by carefully conceived principles.

Below are actions that various stakeholders can take to help AFE transition to what we will here refer to as a "Community Adult Learning Service" model shaped by the above-described criteria. In such a model, local-level Community Adult Learning Service Centers would work with partners to provide AFE and other supports tailored to that locality's adult learners and other stakeholders. The centers would in turn rely on financial and in-kind assistance from a mix of governmental and nongovernmental sources.

Laying the Groundwork for Systems Reform

Transitioning AFE to a Community Adult Learning Service model will require a willingness to think and act differently; an understanding of research and other evidence to support such systems reform; and sustained collaboration among AFE advocates, policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders who see the potential of this approach to expand and strengthen AFE.

Reform can and should be carried out at all levels (national, state, local, and program), within all "slices" of the field (service providers, learners, policymakers, funders, professional developers, researchers), and with other stakeholders who can play important roles in AFE. Reform can "look different" from locality to locality, state to state, and across various stakeholder groups.

Significant work has already been done to support such reform. That work should be continuously learned from and built on at all levels, possibly with the help of a new national research and development system that could borrow from previous models like the National Institute for Literacy, National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, state and local adult literacy resource centers, and the National Workplace Literacy Program. Though space limitations do not permit discussing the many details that reform efforts would require (Jurmo, 2023d), here is a framework of actions and resources that advocates and leaders might use to transition AFE in the direction proposed above. This work might be done within existing planning/advisory bodies and/or by new ones.

Actions

- Become familiar with previous AFE improvement initiatives such as those carried out by the above-described programs and the National Institute for Literacy's Equipped for the Future initiative (Jurmo, 2025e); federal policy task forces (Jurmo, 2025b); state planning initiatives (Jurmo, 2025d); federal, state, industry, and labor union workplace literacy initiatives (Jurmo, 2025c); and urban AFE networks (Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy, 2026).
- Assemble AFE renewal task forces at national, state, local, and program levels, especially at lower levels where the need and potential for reform might be more strongly felt, and within segments of the field such as ESOL and health, family, workplace, and correctional AFE. Members should demonstrate active interest in improving current AFE and be able to contribute skills, contacts, and possibly financial and in-kind resources to the task forces.

- Assess AFE's current and longer term strengths and limitations within geographic locations and segments of the field that the task forces are concerned with (Jurmo, 2023a).
- Develop a relevant vision of AFE services that better serve more individuals and communities for the target area(s) (Jurmo, 2023c).
- Identify actions that stakeholders would take to transition to that vision of AFE, such as a multiphase, multiyear process of planning, funding, implementing, and evaluating demonstration projects and field testing ways to use high-quality practices to better serve particular learner populations and stakeholder groups. Projects would involve collaborations among multiple stakeholders and respond to a wider range of learner and community needs, while building the human and material infrastructure required for longer term systems improvement (Jurmo, 2023d).
- Secure necessary financial and in-kind supports, including revised public policies and performance measures and investments by a wider range of stakeholders from both familiar and less-common sources. One option is to introduce new federal and/or state legislation titled something like "The Workforce, Family, and Community Development Act" (Jurmo, 2023d, 2025a, 2025b; Sarmiento & Shurman).

PARTING WORDS

Even with a well-organized effort, systems reform is not easy. To keep us together and on target, we might heed these words from Forrest Chisman (2002):

> Any case for adult education and literacy—any rationale for why it matters and why the federal government, the states, and ordinary citizens should care about it—must be based squarely on mainstream American principles and the American experience. (p. 1)
>
> Adequate education is essential to the economic prospects, social standing, civic participation, personal safety, and self-esteem of every person. Central to American democratic values is the equal worth of each and every man and woman. To deprive these Americans adequate education is to diminish their worth—in their own eyes, and in very practical ways, in the eyes of the nation. This would be a grave violation of one of this country's most important founding principles. (p. 11)
>
> The need for adult education and literacy challenges us to act on those values—to rise above personal interest, partisanship, or ideology so that every individual in this nation can share in and help shape the American dream. (p. 13) ⌘

Paul Jurmo, EdD, is an experienced educator supporting basic skills for democratic, family-supporting, and environmentally sustainable development in the U.S. and developing countries. He has played multiple roles (researcher, evaluator, administrator, curriculum and professional developer, and advocate) developing systems that use evidence-informed practices to integrate adult foundational (basic) education (AFE) with workforce and community development, public health, environmental sustainability, prisoner reentry, democratization, and other forms of social and economic development. Recent projects include writing documents supporting AFE reform, creation of COABE's Archive of Special Collections, and providing leadership for the Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy. For more information, visit pauljurmo.info. Paul may be contacted at pauljurmo@gmail.com.

Author's Note: *Adult foundational education* (AFE) is used here as an umbrella term encompassing the mix of services sometimes called "adult literacy," "adult basic education," "adult secondary education" (or "GED/HSE preparation"), "ESL/ESOL," and contextualized education for work-related education, college preparation, citizenship preparation, family literacy, financial literacy, and other applied uses of basic skills. This term helps distinguish our field from for-credit higher education and other activities that might fall under the heading of "adult education." However, those who prefer other terms for our field should feel free to use them.

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THE TALENT PIPELINE: Adult Education's Role in Workforce Development

MORE THAN A GED®: BUILDING SCALABLE HEALTHCARE PIPELINES THROUGH CONCURRENT ENROLLMENT AND STACKED CREDENTIALS

Jessie Comden
Kent Intermediate School District Adult Education

ABSTRACT

West Michigan faces a critical shortage of entry-level clinical staff, and adult education programs are uniquely positioned to help fill this gap. By combining strong community partnerships with a framework designed to overcome barriers, adult learners at Kent ISD are set up for immediate success. The adult education phlebotomy and certified nursing assistant CTE programs allow students to earn their GED® while simultaneously training for high-value technical certificates, specifically certified nursing assistant (CNA) and phlebotomy technician tracks. To ensure workforce readiness, the program utilizes data-driven academic filters and a mandatory behavioral contract that holds students accountable. Furthermore, students stack microcredentials—such as CPR, basic life support (BLS), and OSHA bloodborne pathogens certifications—to maximize their résumé strength. By focusing on accountability, employability, clinical skills, and GED® completion, this model connects students directly to high-wage, high-demand healthcare positions upon graduation. Beyond immediate employment, this framework serves as a strategic stepping stone for students who choose to pursue higher education, helping Michigan achieve Governor Gretchen Whitmer's Sixty by 30 postsecondary attainment goals.

Keywords: GED®, talent pipeline, healthcare, vocational, career training, credentials

THE HEALTHCARE STAFFING CRISIS

According to the Michigan Center for Data and Analytics (2026), the largest generation, Baby Boomers, will begin to join the 85+ age group in 2031. This growth will continue through 2050. The potential increase of this age group is up to 150% by 2050. While most would prefer to age at home, this is not always possible, or they will need assistance with daily activities. Therefore, the need for certified nurse assistants in long-term care facilities shows no sign of slowing.

The state of Michigan was divided into Prosperity Regions in 2014 with the intention of coordinating economic, workforce, and development at the community level. Kent ISD is in Michigan's Prosperity Region 4. According to the Michigan Center for Data and Analytics (2024b), home health aides are listed as having one of the highest outlooks for career growth through 2032 in Prosperity Region 4. While home health aides do not require a certification, CNAs would also qualify for these positions.

Along with CNAs, all other healthcare positions show a high growth outlook in the next decade. Included in this are phlebotomists. According to the state of Michigan's Hot 50 Outlook list (2024a) and O*NET OnLine data (National Center for O*NET Development, 2026), the phlebotomy field is projected to grow by at least 6% through 2034. In the Grand Rapids, Michigan, area, there seems to be even more demand due to the high concentration of hospitals and labs.

Deploying "Workhorse" Certifications

To fill this gap, Kent ISD Adult Education programs use practical "workhorse" certifications. In this instance, a workhorse program is an entry-level job training track that offers:

- Fast completion rates
- Low barriers to entry
- Short training timelines
- Direct access to stable, family sustaining wages

The Power of Concurrent Enrollment

Kent ISD uses a concurrent enrollment system in which adult high school equivalency classes remain the focus, while simultaneously providing technical skills training. Guidelines for the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (2014) show that adult learners are more likely to stay in school, complete courses, and pass exams when their basic academic lessons tie directly to tangible career goals. In other words, when they can see the "why" of a lesson, they buy in.

While GED® attainment does not necessarily fall within the realm of integrated education and training under WIOA, the tenet still stands. According to the National Skills Coalition (2021), "To meet our economy's skill needs, we must ensure that adults with limited skills have access to high-quality education and workforce programs that can help them build their abilities and attain industry-recognized postsecondary credentials" ("Context" section, para. 3).

According to Bergson-Shilcock (2019), "Stakeholders in each of the adult education and CTE systems possess relationships and expertise that would be costly and time-consuming for the other partner to acquire" (p. 4).

The technical skills training that is offered through partnerships with business and industry bolsters the GED® program by creating a sense of urgency for GED® attainment. Doing this fills in some of the foundational skills gaps by allowing students to apply math and reading skills directly to a trade. This gives students increased motivation to complete their GED® in order to qualify for exams such as the certified phlebotomy technician (CPT) exam.

SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE

While rapid workforce entry is critical during an active regional labor shortage, routing nontraditional adult learners solely into rapid, easily attained certificate courses without a secondary academic foundation creates an issue. Short-term credentials taken in isolation may secure immediate employment, but they often doom the worker to stagnant wages and limited vertical mobility if the individual permanently lacks a high school diploma or equivalent. Without a secondary credential, frontline clinical workers often face a "full-stop" career ceiling; they remain ineligible for admission to nursing school, clinical leadership roles, or other advancements. By establishing the secondary credential as the "nonnegotiable" of long-term progression, Kent ISD's approach ensures that short-term professional training acts as a stepping stone or a rung in a ladder rather than a permanent destination.

Importantly, earning a GED® is not merely a localized institutional preference: It is a rigid regulatory mandate. Under the formal guidelines of the National Healthcareer Association (NHA, 2024), candidates are completely ineligible to sit for the certified phlebotomy technician (CPT) examination unless they can provide documented proof of a high school diploma or equivalency. A student can master every complex venipuncture technique in the clinical laboratory, but without a secondary credential, they cannot cross the threshold into national certification or formal employment. Rather than allowing students to finish clinical training only to hit a wall at the testing center, Kent ISD strives to synchronize the timelines of training and GED® attainment.

Selection Criteria

To maintain program viability and maximize a student's chances of success, Kent ISD implements a vetting approval process. Rather than operating on an open-enrollment basis that invites high attrition, candidate selection relies on objective academic benchmarks tailored to the demands of each specific medical track:

Phlebotomy Track: Candidates must pass a minimum of two of the four GED® tests and show consistent academic progress in their secondary coursework prior to admission. This baseline helps to ensure the student has already developed the study habits to complete the program and increases the likelihood of completing the GED® before the end of the phlebotomy training. To reiterate, a student cannot sit for the NHA CPT exam if they have not earned their GED® or HSE.

CNA Track: Candidates must achieve a minimum score of 225 on the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) Reading Assessment, as this benchmark score places a learner at a fifth-grade reading level. This level does not guarantee the comprehension required to navigate medical terminology, dosage calculations, and state regulatory guidelines, but it is a starting point.

Because standardized test scores do not fully capture an adult learner's potential readiness, the final tier of the vetting process uses a wider lens. This face-to-face evaluation assesses crucial nonacademic indicators that predict success or failure more accurately than scores on a paper. The evaluation process concentrates on three core areas:

- **Reliable Transportation:** Verifying transportation plans to ensure uninterrupted attendance at both GED® and CTE programs, including off-site clinical rotations. Kent ISD provides paid bus cards to students who need public transportation.
- **Uniform and Professional Attire:** Students must wear the designated clinical uniform (clean scrubs, closed-toe clinical shoes, and appropriate identification badges) at all times during technical training (scrubs and badges are provided by Kent ISD).
- **Effective Communication:** Language, tone, and digital communication (emails, text messages to staff, and phone calls) must adhere to professional healthcare workplace expectations. Outbursts, insubordination, or failure to communicate absences ahead of time trigger disciplinary actions (i.e., verbal warning, written warning, dismissal).

To help reinforce the importance of attendance, professional behavior, professional appearance, and other expectations, students receive a "Classroom Expectations and Acknowledgment Contract."

High-Stakes Motivation

This structure motivates individuals to build academic stamina and, arguably more importantly, professional self-regulation. Adult learners often juggle complex systemic barriers, but the immediate financial and professional value of the CNA and phlebotomy credentials serves as a powerful motivator to keep them anchored. This structure transforms the GED® from an abstract academic barrier into an active, employment-linked professional duty, driving high self-regulation and retention.

By using these criteria to vet students before enrollment in a technical program, Kent ISD is able to create a program that feels like a goal to achieve, rather than just something to do for free. It actually becomes sought-after, reducing the amount of time that needs to be put into recruiting.

VALUE ADDITION: STACKED CREDENTIALS AND EMPLOYER INTEGRATION

While a primary state registry (CNA) or a national certification (NHA Phlebotomy) forms the bedrock of clinical entry, a well-built résumé can help a student get the job. Also, providing students with many opportunities to earn additional certification builds their confidence. Kent ISD embeds valuable, stackable microcredentials directly into the CTE programs. Prior to stepping into a clinical placement, every adult learner in the pipeline has had the opportunity to earn basic life support (BLS) CPR/AED certification and OSHA bloodborne pathogens certification. By stacking these secondary credentials into the training timeline, the program helps the graduate become a more marketable potential employee. An additional benefit to adding these microcredentials is that not every student will achieve the larger certification/credential that he or she is aiming for. Being able to offer some smaller, more attainable certifications gives them something to be proud of.

Two Different Partners: Two Different Layouts

Kent ISD Adult Education offers several CTE programs to adult education students

concurrently with their GED® education. Phlebotomy and CNA programs have begun to develop strong relationships with healthcare partners in the community.

Phlebotomy: Kent ISD has developed a system of interviews and externships with Quest/Corewell Health. Students complete 100 hours of instruction that includes job-ready preparation. During the instruction, the students have opportunities for "live pokes." This is the beginning of getting their 30 successful venipunctures, which is a requirement before students are eligible to take the NHA CPT exam. Towards the end of the program, the students have mock interviews with West Michigan Works, a workforce development agency in West Michigan that provides workforce solutions. After the students have this experience, representatives from Quest/Corewell conduct interviews with them. In addition, the navigator initiates the paperwork to make sure a contract is in place so that students can work in the Quest/Corewell facilities.

To protect institutional relationships with healthcare systems, instructor recommendations are required for clinical placement. Instructors take into consideration both technical skill mastery and affective professional behaviors.

The students then have the opportunity to participate in an externship with Quest/Corewell where their "pokes" are recorded. Once they have their 30 successful venipunctures and have graduated with their GED®, they are eligible to take the NHA CPT exam.

Several students have then been hired by Quest/Corewell. It is a win-win scenario for students, Kent ISD, and Quest/Corewell.

Certified Nursing Assistant: The 2025–26 school year was Kent ISD's first year offering CNA in this manner. We have partnered with the Center for Medical Training (CMT). CMT offers this training to the public in a 2-week format. The usual layout is one week online and one week in person. Kent ISD students are simultaneously working on their GED® and traditionally have barriers. Therefore, CMT agreed to extend the time to 2 weeks online and one week in person. This spreads out the workload and makes it more manageable for the adult students.

Throughout this year, there have been slight adjustments to the process, and these adjustments seem to be benefiting students and their success rates. Kent ISD pays the tuition at the Center for Medical Training for the students. The students are expected to meet with the navigator at Kent ISD twice a week for 2 hours during the online portion of the program. The navigator monitors their progress, encourages them to meet deadlines, and handles technical questions.

The most effective change that has been implemented is that if the student does not pass the knowledge exam on the first try, they are asked to send a screenshot of the results to the navigator. The screenshot is then sent to CMT. The instructors there take the time to create a personalized study guide for the student before they retake the exam. Only then will Kent ISD pay for the exam to be retaken. This change in the process was initiated by CMT and shows promise with students having more success the second time they take the exam.

The Sixty-by-30 Metric and the Short-Term Credential

Michigan's current workforce development landscape seems to have a slight disconnect with adult education. To satisfy the metrics of Governor Gretchen Whitmer's Sixty by 30 initiative—which aims to increase the percentage of working-age adults with a postsecondary credential to 60%—the state relies heavily on data tracked by the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP). Under these tracking guidelines, an eligible postsecondary certificate must span a minimum of 24 semester credits or 30 weeks of instructional time, frequently requiring that the certification/training be eligible for Pell Grant funding.

Consequently, standalone quick-turnaround "workhorse" certifications—such as a 3-week certified nursing assistant (CNA) class or a fast-track phlebotomy training program—do not qualify as meeting that Sixty by 30 benchmark. While these certifications result in immediate state or national licensure and provide an immediate talent pipeline for desperate healthcare employers, they possess insufficient "credit mass" to officially count towards the state's postsecondary attainment goal.

The Launchpad Effect: Building a Long-Term Medical Pipeline

Rather than viewing the short-term nature of these certifications as a limitation, the Kent ISD concurrent enrollment model sees them as a launchpad for lifelong learning. For an adult student who has experienced barriers such as poverty, housing instability, or prior academic failure, entering into a time-consuming associate or Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program is a high-risk, logistically impossible proposition. Expecting a student who lacks a high school equivalency, stable transportation, or professional soft skills to enroll directly into a rigorous program is a recipe for failure. Without the stabilizing rungs beneath them, the distance is too great, and the risk of falling is too high.

The Kent ISD concurrent enrollment model treats upward mobility as a deliberate, structural climb. Picture a ladder where each rung provides the solid footing and academic leverage required to step safely onto the next:

The Ground Level: The journey begins with the underemployed or unemployed adult learner, often trapped in low-wage survival jobs due to the lack of secondary credentials.

Rung 1 (The Academic Baseline): The first step is establishing an academic foundation. By targeting core GED® modules and achieving a CASAS reading score of 225, the student builds the cognitive literacy needed to comprehend the medical text.

Rung 2 (The Economic Stabilizer): Rather than waiting years for a traditional degree, the student steps onto the second rung: immediate, short-term "workhorse" training (CNA or phlebotomy). This provides a rapid, tangible license that yields immediate earning power.

Rung 3 (The Accountability Engine): This rung infuses the student with the nonacademic skills needed for long-term retention. It layers intensive interview preparation, professional soft skills, and stacked credentials (BLS CPR and OSHA) onto their technical knowledge.

Rung 4 (The Professional Gateway): Backed by instructor recommendations, the student steps into a clinical placement secured by regional partnerships.

Rung 5 (The High-Mobility Target): Safely standing on a foundation of academic confidence, financial stability, and corporate backing, the student is now perfectly positioned to reach for the fifth rung—matriculating into an LPN or RN degree program.

IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

Establish Interdepartmental Data Sharing: Connect adult basic education tracking software with technical training attendance logs to operationalize the Daily Attendance Link. Or, as is done at Kent ISD, grant the navigator access to the Student Information System in order to track attendance.

Secure Local Employer Agreements: Target regional hospital networks to lock in priority clinical placement rotations and encourage postgraduation hiring channels.

Embed Microcredentials Early: Integrate American Heart Association BLS and OSHA training modules directly into the syllabus early in the clinical instruction.

Enforce Hard-Entry Cutoffs: Maintain the CASAS Reading threshold at a minimum of 225 for tracks requiring complex medical vocabulary. ⌘

Jessie Comden serves as the career and technical education (CTE) program navigator for Kent ISD Adult Education, bringing 13 years of experience to this role. Her background includes more than a decade supporting high school CTE programs, followed by 2 years focused entirely on empowering adult learners. Jessie holds a bachelor's degree in business management, which informs her approach to program alignment and student advocacy. Driven by the firm belief that CTE is a vehicle for closing skills gaps across Michigan, she focuses on expanding academic and vocational options for adult learners. She is deeply committed to offering a wide variety of diverse programming options, ensuring that local students have access to the best possible opportunities for success and upward mobility after earning their GED®. In her current role at Kent ISD, Jessie works closely with regional community partners to bridge the gap between adult education and meaningful employment, creating clear pathways to stable, high-demand careers. Her daily work ultimately supports the diverse personal and professional goals of adult students, equipping them with the practical skills, industry credentials, and the long-term confidence needed to successfully thrive in today's workforce. She may be contacted at jlcomden@gmail.com.

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THE TALENT PIPELINE: Adult Education's Role in Workforce Development

THEORY TO PRACTICE

ADULT EDUCATION AS A VISIBILITY INFRASTRUCTURE: REIMAGINING THE TALENT PIPELINE

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ABSTRACT

Workforce development discussions often focus on skills, credentials, and employment outcomes. While these measures matter, they overlook a foundational challenge facing many adult learners: visibility. Adults frequently possess knowledge, experience, resilience, and workplace competencies that remain unrecognized by employers, institutions, and credentialing systems—not because those capabilities are absent, but because systems lack reliable mechanisms for detecting them. This article introduces Recognition Friction Theory, a conceptual framework proposing that many barriers to economic mobility arise not from a lack of ability, but from a lack of recognized evidence of ability. Drawing on labor-market signaling theory, recognition theory in the social sciences, and prior learning assessment research, the article argues that adult education programs serve as *visibility infrastructure*—systems that translate existing and developing capabilities into forms that institutions and employers can recognize, evaluate, and reward. Implications are discussed for workforce measurement, credential design, employer-education partnerships, and the role of adult educators as validators and translators within the talent pipeline. Findings from recent empirical work on credential-visibility interventions support the framework's practical relevance and are integrated throughout.

Keywords: adult education, recognition friction, visibility infrastructure, credentialing, prior learning assessment, workforce development, talent pipeline

INTRODUCTION

The language of workforce development is dominated by discussions of skill gaps. Employers report difficulty finding qualified workers. Policymakers seek strategies to increase workforce participation. Educators develop pathways that prepare learners for employment and advancement. Underlying these conversations is a largely unexamined assumption: that workforce challenges primarily stem from deficits in knowledge or skill.

Adult educators encounter a different reality every day.

The parent who managed a household budget for 20 years may possess strong mathematical reasoning but lacks a credential that demonstrates it. The formerly incarcerated individual may have developed leadership, problem-solving, and conflict-management skills in highly complex environments but possesses no formal documentation of those abilities. The immigrant worker may have extensive professional experience from another country but struggles to translate that experience into credentials that employers recognize. The employee who has mastered workplace tasks may remain in entry-level positions because their competence is invisible to hiring systems.

These examples reflect a pattern that cuts across populations: Workforce barriers are not always learning problems. Often, they are recognition problems.

This distinction has practical stakes. More than 70 million U.S. workers—whom Opportunity@Work (2025) identifies as Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs)—possess work-relevant skills acquired outside of traditional degree pathways. Research by Athey and Palikot (2025) found that a minimal-cost intervention designed only to make existing credentials more visible to employers increased new employment by 6%, with effects of 12% concentrated among the least employable workers—without adding any new skills. These findings come from a working paper not yet peer-reviewed; however, the study's randomized experimental design—spanning more than 800,000 credential earners—provides stronger causal warrant than most observational research in this area. These findings suggest that for many adult learners, the problem is not what they know. The problem is that what they know cannot be *seen*.

Introducing Recognition Friction Theory, this article proposes a conceptual framework that positions adult education as *visibility infrastructure*—a system that translates existing and developing capabilities into forms that can be recognized, evaluated, and rewarded. The framework draws on labor-market signaling theory (Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1973; Stiglitz, 1975), recognition theory in the social sciences (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Honneth, 1995), and prior learning-assessment research (Klein-Collins et al., 2020; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2012) to reframe adult education's role in the talent pipeline. Practitioners, policymakers, and workforce systems must account not only for what adults can learn, but for what systems are capable of recognizing.

Theoretical Background

Recognition Friction Theory is not without precedent. Its intellectual lineage extends through four related bodies of scholarship that converge on a shared insight: Access to opportunity depends not only on what individuals know, but on whether systems can *verify* what they know.

Labor-market signaling theory (Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1973; Stiglitz, 1975) holds that because employers cannot directly observe worker productivity, they rely on observable credentials as proxies. Education functions partly as a *signal* of preexisting ability rather than solely as a skill-building intervention. From this perspective, the credential does not create

capability—it makes it legible. Tyler et al. (2000) confirmed this mechanism empirically, finding that the GED® credential increased earnings for qualifying White dropouts by 10% to 19%, independent of measurable skill gains. Importantly, Tyler et al. also found no statistically significant earnings effect for minority dropouts, a disparity that the visibility-infrastructure framework must confront rather than paper over: Recognition mechanisms, if left unexamined, can reproduce bias.

Recognition theory in the social sciences adds a normative dimension. Honneth (1995) argues that the withholding of social recognition is not merely inconvenient—it is a form of injustice. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) demonstrate how institutions convert culturally arbitrary forms of capital into apparently objective merit, systematically disadvantaging those whose capital takes forms the institution cannot read. Applied to workforce development, these frameworks suggest that adult learners who possess genuine competence but lack the institutional vocabulary to express it are not simply underprepared, they are misrecognized.

The UNESCO Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) framework (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2012) operationalizes these concerns at the policy level, articulating an international commitment to "making visible and valuing individuals' real competences" acquired through nonformal and informal learning. In the U.S. context, this framework maps onto prior learning assessment (PLA) and competency-based education practices. Klein-Collins et al. (2020) found that among more than 230,000 adult students, those who received PLA credit completed degrees or certificates at a rate of 49% compared to 27% for non-PLA peers. Yet only 11% of adult students received PLA credit—and uptake was nearly twice as high among non-Pell recipients as among Pell-eligible students. The infrastructure exists; access to it remains inequitable.

Most recently, Opportunity@Work's (2025) documentation of the "paper ceiling"—the invisible barrier that constrains advancement for workers without bachelor's degrees—and Athey and Palikot's (2025) experimental evidence on "information frictions" in hiring provide the empirical grounding that earlier theoretical frameworks lacked. Recognition Friction Theory integrates these traditions and extends them specifically to the adult education context, offering practitioners a vocabulary for understanding and naming what they already observe in their classrooms and case notes.

RECOGNITION FRICTION THEORY

Recognition Friction Theory proposes that individuals experience barriers to economic and educational opportunity when their knowledge, skills, experiences, or capabilities are difficult for institutions to recognize and validate. Recognition friction occurs when there is a disconnect between what a person can do and what systems can verify. The greater the friction, the more difficult it becomes for individuals to access education, employment, advancement, and opportunity.

The framework distinguishes between *capability*—what a person actually knows or can do—and *recognized capability*—what institutions can detect, document, and reward. Traditional human capital theory (Becker, 1964) treats investment in learning as the primary lever for

economic mobility; Recognition Friction Theory argues that this analysis is incomplete. Opportunity is shaped not only by what individuals know but by whether systems possess mechanisms sensitive enough to detect it.

Recognition friction is not uniformly distributed. It falls hardest on populations whose capabilities were developed through channels that credentialing systems were not designed to read: adult basic education learners, English language learners, justice-impacted individuals, immigrants and refugees with foreign credentials, and adults returning to education after long absences. For these learners, advancing in the workforce often depends as much on reducing recognition barriers as on acquiring new skills.

This is a both/and framework, not an either/or one. Recognition Friction Theory does not claim that skill development is unimportant or that all barriers are recognition problems. Many adult learners face genuine skill gaps that require substantive instruction. The theory argues, rather, that recognition barriers constitute a distinct and underaddressed category of constraint—one that persists even after instruction has occurred and can prevent capable adults from accessing the opportunities their abilities warrant.

ADULT EDUCATION AS VISIBILITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Viewed through this lens, adult education serves a function that extends beyond instruction. Adult education acts as visibility infrastructure—a system that connects human capability to social recognition. The infrastructure metaphor is deliberate. Roads connect communities. Telecommunications systems connect information. Utility systems connect resources. These systems do not create what they transmit; they make transmission possible. Similarly, adult education often does not create the competencies learners carry with them into the classroom. What it does is make those competencies transmissible—convertible into forms that institutions and employers can receive.

This infrastructure performs three distinct but overlapping functions: validation, documentation, and translation.

Validation refers to the formal recognition of existing competence through mechanisms such as prior learning assessment, competency-based education, and portfolio review. CAEL's Klein-Collins et al.'s (2020) PLA research demonstrates that when institutions invest in validation infrastructure, adult completion rates improve substantially. The Migration Policy Institute found that approximately 1.9 million college-educated immigrants experienced skill underutilization during 2009–2013, representing $39.4 billion in forgone wages—a systemic cost of inadequate validation infrastructure (Batalova et al., 2016). Leu and Lee's (2025) work on verifiable credential wallets extends this function into the digital domain, describing tools designed to make learners' skills "open, transparent, and accessible" to employers across systems.

Documentation refers to the process of generating portable, employer-legible records of learning and competence—credentials, certificates, stackable badges, and learning and employment records (LERs). The GED® credential is perhaps the most familiar example: It

does not create intelligence, determination, or capability; it provides a recognized signal that allows institutions and employers to identify qualities that may have existed long before the credential was earned (Tyler et al., 2000). Documentation infrastructure matters because, as Athey and Palikot's (2025) experimental evidence suggests, the difference between having a credential and having a credential that is *visible* to an employer is itself a meaningful intervention.

Translation refers to the interpretive work adult educators perform in helping learners render informal, nontraditional, or foreign-earned competencies into employer-legible language. An adult who managed a household budget has practiced applied mathematics. An adult who supervised a work crew in another country has practiced project management. An adult who navigated reentry from incarceration has practiced adaptive problem solving under constraint. Adult educators routinely help learners identify, articulate, and document these competencies—a form of translation that reduces friction without requiring that the learner acquire anything fundamentally new.

From Talent Development to Talent Recognition

The phrase "talent pipeline" often implies a process of producing talent. Adult education certainly contributes to talent development, but it also performs an equally important function: talent recognition. Adult educators routinely identify strengths that learners do not recognize in themselves. They help learners articulate experiences, connect prior knowledge to formal learning, and translate life experiences into employable skills. This process is particularly important for populations that have historically experienced high levels of recognition friction.

For justice-impacted individuals, recognition friction takes a distinctive form. Research summarized by Bryant (2025) documents that a conviction history reduces employer callback rates by roughly 50%. Lindsay (2022) describes what she calls the "prison credential dilemma," in which formerly incarcerated workers must choose between disclosing incarceration to showcase skills developed inside—or concealing both. The credential and the context are bound together; the visibility infrastructure available to this population is particularly thin.

Immigrant workers face a parallel constraint. Batalova et al. (2016) document that credential recognition barriers—not skill deficits—account for a substantial portion of the wage gap between native-born and immigrant workers with equivalent educational attainment. The problem is not that these workers cannot perform the work. The problem is that U.S. credentialing systems were not designed to read the evidence they carry.

In both cases, the adult educator's role includes a function that is not captured by measures of instructional gain: the function of making invisible talent visible. This is not a soft or supplementary function. It is central to what workforce development requires and rarely what workforce systems measure.

Implications for Workforce Development

If adult education functions as visibility infrastructure, several implications emerge for how workforce development systems are designed, funded, and evaluated.

Measurement must expand beyond instructional gain. Programs create value not only through skill development but through the recognition infrastructure they provide. A program that helps 50 learners complete GED® credentials is also a program that reduced recognition friction for 50 people—a function that outcomes measures tied solely to test scores or employment rates may not fully capture.

Credentials should be understood as recognition mechanisms, not endpoints. Their value lies in their capacity to communicate competence across institutional and labor-market contexts. This reframing has practical implications for how adult education programs talk about credentials with learners, funders, and employers. The credential is not evidence that the learner has changed. It is evidence that the system can now see what was already there.

Employer-education partnerships must engage the demand side of recognition. Fuller et al.'s (2024) analysis of skills-based hiring found that dropping degree requirements increased nondegree hiring by fewer than 0.14 percentage points—suggesting that on the employer side, the shift toward skills-based hiring remains largely aspirational. Visibility infrastructure on the supply side (credentials, LERs, PLA) will not close the gap without parallel investment in employer-side capacity to read and act on nontraditional signals. Partnerships between employers and adult education providers should focus explicitly on building that capacity.

Adult educators should be recognized as translators and validators, not only instructors. The interpretive and documentary functions described above require expertise, judgment, and time. They are workforce functions, not ancillary services. Workforce systems that resource adult education only for instruction risk underfunding the visibility infrastructure that makes instruction consequential.

CONCLUSION

Adult education does more than teach skills. It often converts knowledge, experience, and potential into forms that employers, institutions, and communities can recognize and reward—and it does so for populations who have historically faced the greatest friction between capability and recognition. As workforce systems continue to seek solutions to labor shortages, economic mobility, and talent development, adult education should be understood not merely as a provider of instruction but as a critical piece of visibility infrastructure. The three functions described here—validation, documentation, and translation—offer a practical vocabulary for articulating that role to policymakers, funders, and employer partners.

A caution is warranted. Visibility infrastructure is necessary but not sufficient. Athey and Palikot's (2025) employment gains were real, but Fuller et al.'s (2024) data remind us that employer behavior has not caught up with employer rhetoric. Recognition mechanisms can also reproduce bias, as the GED®'s racially differentiated signaling effects demonstrate (Tyler et al., 2000). The goal is not simply to make more people visible to systems that remain inequitable. The goal is visibility infrastructure in service of more equitable recognition—systems that can see more and see more fairly.

The future of workforce development depends not only on helping people learn. It depends on helping society recognize what people already know, what they can do, and what they are capable of becoming. ⌘

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FROM MEANING TO EMPLOYMENT: ALIGNING ADULT LEARNER PURPOSE WITH WORKFORCE PATHWAYS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines adult learners and the role of meaning making in educational and career pathways, drawing on human development perspectives. It integrates human needs and technical skill development while considering learners' values, experiences, and aspirations. A meaning-centered approach to adult education positions adults as active meaning makers who construct educational and career decisions based on identity and purpose.

Keywords: adult learners, workforce development, meaning making, career development

INTRODUCTION

In adult education, many workforce development programs focus on aligning training opportunities with labor market demands, providing students with a pathway to rapid employment and, consequently, financial stability. From an employer's perspective, the primary objective is often to ensure that essential job functions are performed efficiently. As a result, workforce development initiatives are frequently designed, implemented, and delivered to meet immediate labor market needs. However, a distinction exists between workforce development and talent development. While workforce development often emphasizes filling positions with individuals who possess specific job-related skills, talent development focuses on cultivating the individual's long-term potential, growth, and career progression.

Adult learners are not different from recent high school graduates; they also have dreams and aspirations. Humans are intrinsically meaning-seeking beings, and in this sense, what a person decides to do as a productive member of society must make sense to the individual. Otherwise, work may become a burden rather than a source of growth, contribution, and personal fulfillment.

This article explores the connection between adult learners, meaning-centered learning, and adult education programs. We will observe the importance of individual aspirations in connection to education programs, and offer insight into a new approach that can more effectively address workforce needs and a human development approach in education.

ADULT LEARNERS AND PATHWAY DEVELOPMENT

When considering adult development, it is important to remember that adults are shaped by earlier childhood experiences and that individuals are continuously under construction

throughout their lifespan. Within this ongoing development process, adult learning is a dynamic sequence of continuous growth and meaning making. For adults, "learning is not a mental process occurring in a vacuum. The context of a person's life—with its unique cultural, political, physical and social dynamics—influences the learning experience" (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020, p. 55). This highlights the importance of adapting adult education programs by shifting the focus from labor market demands to individual learner needs.

Earlier adulthood is often characterized by novelty and a sense of freedom from parental and formal educational structures. As individuals enter the labor market, they continue learning about life while exploring different possibilities. At this stage, work is often viewed primarily as a means of income and meeting immediate needs. Over time, however, the search for meaningful engagement and sustainable life direction reemerges as a central consideration. Individuals are then confronted again with the challenge of finding work that provides both personal meaning and long-term career development. This reflects a developmental period in which career decisions are not based solely on labor market demand, but are increasingly shaped by meaning, identity, and life context. Pink (2009) illustrates this dynamic through the example of extrinsic rewards in learning, noting that when children are paid to engage in activities such as learning mathematics, they may initially show increased participation but tend to lose long-term interest in the activity. This suggests that when engagement is primarily externally driven, intrinsic motivation declines over time. A similar pattern can be observed in adulthood, after the initial excitement of financial independence and employment, sustained engagement in work increasingly depends on whether the activity is experienced as meaningful and fulfilling.

When adult learners decide to improve their skills and return to the classroom, their career decisions are not based solely on labor market demand, but also on what makes sense in their long-term life trajectory. In other words, adult career decisions are increasingly shaped by a shift from primarily extrinsic factors (e.g., income and stability) toward intrinsic considerations such as meaning, identity, and long-term purpose.

Influence of Values, Interests, and Life Experience on Career Aspirations

Human beings are guided by values, beliefs, and interests that shape how they understand themselves and the world around them. Adult learners reflect the cumulative influence of family, education, and life experience, all of which contribute to the formation of their career aspirations at this stage of life. The way they see themselves is what will influence their interests and career decisions. If a person does not see themselves as a nurse, taking care of patients, dealing with pain, and trying to comfort the sick, they will not pursue a nursing career, even if the field is in high demand and remuneration is relevant. Most of the time, personal and career interests revolve around intrinsic motivations, not external ones.

The awareness that an individual's way of mastering experience in life is a successful variant of group identity and is in accordance with space-time and life plan (Erikson, 1980) highlights that identity and self-perception influence career choices. This perspective emphasizes that identity formation is a continuous process shaped by lived experience and social context. As individuals develop a coherent sense of self, this identity becomes a central reference point

in shaping their career aspirations and guiding their educational and professional choices. Erikson (1980) further suggested that the development of "professional identities" extends the discussion beyond identity formation itself, linking it to broader stages of adult development.

Meaning as a Factor in Education and Career Choices

At this stage of adulthood, educational and career decisions are increasingly guided by autonomy and the search for personal meaning in learning and work. Allowing adults to make choices supports feelings of autonomy rather than experiences of external control or evaluation (Ryan & Deci, 2018), particularly in systems that are oriented toward producing workforce-ready individuals. By using the free-choice behavioral paradigm (Ryan & Deci, 2018), adults are given the necessary space to engage in learning activities that reflect their values, interests, and perceived life direction, strengthening intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement.

Connection Between Meaning and Motivation as a Factor for Human Development

There is a connection between meaning and motivation that can influence long-term outcomes in human development. Life decisions are guided by meaningful motivational factors that are expressed through individual actions and forms of self-expression. This is because, as Maslow (1987) suggested, when individuals prioritize coping or task completion for purely instrumental purposes, they may neglect the intrinsic value of the activity and the quality of the lived experience. In such cases, an overly pragmatic focus on utility can diminish the significance of the outcome itself, reducing individuals to a purely instrumental view of human capital and overlooking the broader dimensions of adult learning and development.

Meaningful goals increase commitment. When adult learners can align meaningful goals with skills training, commitment increases not only because of motivation, but also because there is a greater alignment between goal pursuit and behavior. Individuals can experience the difference between behavior that serves as an expression of the self and behavior that is controlled by forces external to the self (Ryan & Deci, 2018), which may not correspond to their long-term goals and aspirations.

That is to say that, when adult learners effectively get involved in education programs that make sense to their fundamental values and aspirations, they are more prone to exhibit behavior that fosters growth.

Persistence Through Challenges

Adult life is full of challenges, and educational experiences can become particularly demanding when they are not aligned with individuals' desires, goals, and self-perceptions. When learning is disconnected from a person's sense of identity and purpose, engagement may decrease, making it more difficult to sustain effort over time. In contrast, when educational activities are aligned with personal meaning and perceived life direction, individuals are more likely to persist despite obstacles.

When purpose is aligned with desired outcomes, adults facing challenges are more likely to persist, particularly when motivation has been internalized as autonomous motivation (Ryan

& Deci, 2018). In such cases, individuals are more likely to sustain important goal-directed behaviors, which support them in overcoming educational challenges and accomplishing meaningful learning objectives.

PROPOSED MODEL: MEANING-CENTERED CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Based on the theoretical integration presented in this article, a meaning-centered model of adult learning connects identity, motivation, and career development. Adult learners' values, beliefs, and life experiences shape their identity and how they see themselves, influencing goals and decisions about educational pathways. Conversely, a misalignment between learning and personal meaning reduces engagement, limiting long-term educational and career outcomes.

Traditional Workforce Model

Traditional workforce development programs frequently focus on transferring knowledge and skills with the expectation that learners will subsequently change their behavior. However, Aronson (2012) suggested that while changes in attitudes may lead to changes in behavior, attitudes themselves are often difficult to modify through education alone. This indicates that workforce programs may achieve greater long-term impact when they address the underlying values, motivations, and meanings that influence learners' educational and career decisions.

When learning is connected to individuals' broader sense of self and future goals, engagement and persistence are strengthened, as educational experiences become integrated into personal identity and life direction.

Proposed Model

In the proposed meaning-centered model of adult learning and workforce development, internal psychological processes play a central role in shaping career decisions and persistence. Within this framework, job satisfaction is influenced not only by external conditions such as remuneration and job structure, but also by internal self-evaluations. Individuals with positive core self-evaluations, characterized by a strong sense of self-worth and competence, are more likely to perceive their work as meaningful, engaging, and developmentally challenging (Robbins & Judge, 2011). This suggests that internal psychological factors influence how individuals interpret their work experiences and, consequently, how they make educational and career decisions within broader life trajectories.

Meaning

The sense of identity, shaped by values, beliefs, and life experiences, is reflected in how individuals construct a vision of themselves as professionals. This self-concept influences their perception of suitable career paths and the types of roles they are likely to pursue in adulthood.

Acquisition of knowledge, then, is often framed in terms of conscious and rational processes, such as interpretation, categorization, and storage of information. However, this perspective

may overlook intuitive, emotional, embodied, and nonrational dimensions of learning, which also play an important role in how individuals make sense of experience and construct meaning (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020). In this sense, learning is not only a cognitive process, but also a meaning-making activity through which individuals integrate experience into their identity and life direction.

The belief that one has the capacity to regulate thoughts and behaviors in response to challenges influences how individuals interact with their environment when pursuing desired goals (Schwarzer, 2016). In other words, when individuals believe in their ability to shape their circumstances and achieve meaningful objectives, they are more likely to persist in the face of obstacles. Self-efficacy, therefore, not only supports goal attainment but also reinforces the significance of the goals being pursued.

Meaning is closely connected to self-efficacy, personal values, and emotional investment, creating pathways that extend beyond immediate reactions to life circumstances. Adult learners often engage in educational activities because they perceive a meaningful connection between learning and desired life outcomes. This connection may involve improving employment opportunities, supporting family well-being, achieving personal growth, or contributing to their communities. When learning is perceived as relevant to these broader aspirations, participation becomes more than the acquisition of knowledge or skills; it becomes part of a larger life project. For adults, persistence in learning is strengthened when educational experiences align with personally significant goals and values. The relationship between learning and workforce participation illustrates this connection. Adults frequently pursue education not only to acquire credentials but also to improve their capacity to navigate the labor market, achieve economic stability, and move toward a desired future. Meaning provides a framework through which learners interpret their efforts, engagement, satisfaction, and long-term commitment to educational and career pathways.

Skills Improvement and Employment

Within the context of adult education, skills development and employment are often indicators of program success. However, these outcomes are not only the result of technical and credential work, but they are also the demonstration of learners' perceived skills acquisition, which translates into value to the agent and the job market.

When measuring job satisfaction, elements such as remuneration, environment, coworkers, opportunities for growth, participation, and the perceived added value to the labor market are typically considered. However, "research has shown that people who have positive core self-evaluation—who believe in their inner worth and basic competence—are more satisfied … and see their work as more fulfilling and challenging" (Robbins & Judge, 2011, p. 82–83). These findings support the argument that meaningful educational training and successful employment outcomes are closely connected to individuals' perceptions of competence and value. Meaning, therefore, extends beyond the learning process and continues to shape satisfaction and engagement within employment contexts.

From this perspective, skills improvement and employment are not separate constructs, but interconnected elements within a broader meaning-centered framework of adult learning and workforce development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

To integrate career exploration into adult education with a meaning-centered approach to workforce development, we have to observe a structure that reflects learners' interests and connect educational content intentionally supporting aspirations with real demand in the labor market. This process must support the development of a clear identity improvement, helping adult learners make informed decisions about education and career goals.

Developing this approach requires that educators move beyond a skill-based model of instruction, incorporating a level of autonomy support for both educators and learners, along with guidance that helps learners to evaluate options related to their values, experiences, and aspirations. Drawing on Ryan and Deci's (2018) observations in organizational settings, when managers are supported by autonomy-supportive environments that allow subordinates' perceptions and satisfaction to be taken into account, and when the approach is considered cost effective, positive motivational outcomes are observed among employees. Applying this same principle to educational programs suggests that similar positive motivational effects may also emerge in adult-learning contexts.

This indicates that autonomy-supportive instructional practices may contribute to increased motivation, engagement, and persistence in adult education settings.

Practical Strategies for Adult Educators

Because learning is also contextual and meaning-based (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020), workforce programs should incorporate strengths identification, interest mapping, and reflective practice.

The integration of meaning, identity, and motivation in adult learning suggests several practical strategies for educators and workforce development professionals. Rather than focusing exclusively on content delivery or technical skill acquisition, instructional design can incorporate approaches that help learners connect educational experiences to their personal values, interests, and life goals.

One effective strategy is the intentional inclusion of strengths and interest identification tools within the learning process. Instruments such as strengths-based assessments can support learners in recognizing their natural talents and preferred ways of engaging with tasks, thereby increasing self-awareness and guiding more meaningful career decisions (Rath, 2007). When individuals understand their strengths, they are more likely to perceive alignment between their identity and their educational or professional pathways.

Reflective practice activities can be used to help learners connect learning content with lived experience. Structured reflection encourages individuals to interpret their educational journey in relation to their personal history, values, and future aspirations, reinforcing meaning making as part of the learning process. This aligns with the view that learning is not only cognitive but also contextual and experiential (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020).

Finally, workforce programs can enhance persistence and engagement by supporting autonomy in learning pathways. Allowing adult learners to make informed choices about

their learning goals and career direction fosters internalized motivation, which is associated with sustained effort and goal commitment (Ryan & Deci, 2018). When learners perceive that their educational experience reflects who they are and who they are becoming, engagement becomes more consistent and purposeful.

Together, these strategies suggest a shift from traditional skill-centered training toward a more integrated model in which meaning, identity, and strengths are central to instructional design and workforce development practice.

Interests and Strength Identification, Along With Values and Purpose

As an adult educator and a credentialed coach with the International Coaching Federation (ICF), I have observed how individuals are constantly seeking opportunities to express their sense of self through meaningful activities and life choices. As a human development professional, I have found tools such as the Gallup StrengthsFinder assessment (Rath, 2007) useful in helping individuals recognize their strengths and areas for development. The assessment describes 34 talent themes and identifies the five most dominant talents, providing individuals with greater self-awareness and a clearer sense of direction. This process illustrates how meaningful goals are strengthened when behavior is aligned with personal values, interests, and strengths.

In relation to career goals, cultural differences in perceptions and values influence how individuals engage in knowledge acquisition, skill development, and labor market participation. These cultural frameworks shape both motivation and the meaning individuals attribute to their educational and career choices; the use of these tools can be of great value.

These kinds of tools promote self-awareness by helping individuals recognize the talents and strengths that distinguish them from others (Rath, 2007). This increased understanding of personal strengths can provide a greater sense of direction, contributing to stronger commitment toward educational, career, and personal development goals.

Benefits for Learners, Programs, and Employers

In adult education, a meaning-centered approach yields benefits for learners, programs, and employers. For learners, aligning educational experiences with personal values and goals enhances engagement and persistence, improving completion outcomes. When learning is perceived as relevant to identity and future aspirations, individuals are more likely to remain committed to their educational pathways. Ryan and Deci (2018) analyzed aspirations and goals related to well-being. They found that the selection of life's priorities is not merely a philosophical question, but rather a choice people in modern society must make. In other words, when learners experience education and skill development as meaningful, this perception contributes not only to employment attainment but also to how they evaluate and experience their work after entering the labor market.

For adult education programs, integrating meaning-based strategies strengthens instructional effectiveness and improves participation levels. Finally, for employers, this approach contributes to workforce and human development alignment, increasing motivation and skills learning, since it is closely connected to both personal and organizational interests and needs.

CONCLUSION

Adult education is an important and vast area that needs to be explored intently. It extends beyond the mere acquisition of technical skills and workforce competencies to fill an open position. Humans are not cold machines and should not be treated as such. While skills training remains essential for employability, it is insufficient on its own to provide persistence, engagement, retention, and long-term success in adult learning and career goals. The findings and arguments presented in this article offer a new approach, suggesting that meaning plays a central role in adult choices, shaping how adults learn, interpret their educational experiences, and commit to their goals.

When meaning is left unobserved, the absence of this important human characteristic turns the process of learning, working, and even experiencing life purely into an instrumental activity that may not fully support personal motivation and sustain fulfillment as a meaningful and productive member of society. In contrast, when learning connects to identity, values, and long-term aspirations, it becomes integrated into a purposeful life experience, supporting both educational persistence and workforce participation.

The integration of meaning-centered planning within adult education encourages educators, institutions, and the workforce to support learners in their long-term skills development, strengthening a sense of identity and aligning education decisions with personal, meaningful life directions. In it, adult education can better provide a bridge and support both human development and workforce expectations. ⌘

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RELATIONAL WORKFORCE READINESS: BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH VOLUNTEER-INTEGRATED ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

As workforce systems increasingly prioritize credentials and technical skills, a critical component of workforce readiness remains underdeveloped: the relational competencies and social capital required to navigate complex, human-centered work environments. This article presents a practitioner-informed model of volunteer-integrated adult education as a strategy for building these essential, durable skills. In this model, adult learners engage in sustained, one-on-one and small-group interactions with volunteers across generations, professions, and cultural backgrounds, creating a dynamic environment for practicing adaptive communication, intergenerational fluency, and confidence in diverse social contexts. Drawing on program implementation and learner narratives, the article illustrates how these relational experiences lead to measurable outcomes, including increased persistence in education, transitions into postsecondary pathways, entry into more stable employment, and expanded professional aspirations. Learners move beyond skill acquisition to develop a sense of belonging in workforce spaces and access to informal networks that support long-term economic mobility. The article argues that integrating community members as a core instructional strategy, rather than a supplemental support, strengthens the talent pipeline by equipping adult learners with both the skills and social capital needed to thrive.

Keywords: adult education, workforce development, social capital, relational workforce readiness, volunteer-integrated learning

INTRODUCTION

Adult education plays a critical role in workforce development, supporting learners in building foundational skills, earning credentials, and pursuing employment opportunities. As alignment between adult education and workforce systems has deepened, there has been increasing emphasis on measurable outcomes such as job placement, credential attainment, and wage progression. These indicators are essential, but they do not capture the relational competencies required for adults to enter, navigate, and persist in today's workforce.

Workplaces are inherently relational environments. Success depends not only on technical proficiency but also on the ability to communicate across differences, interpret social cues, build trust, and engage effectively with colleagues, supervisors, and customers. For many adult learners, particularly those who are new to the U.S., reentering education, or navigating economic transition, these relational competencies and access to networks are underdeveloped or unevenly distributed.

Adult education programs are uniquely positioned to address this gap. Beyond delivering instruction, they can create environments where learners actively practice navigating diverse social interactions and build the confidence and social capital necessary for workforce participation. This article presents a practitioner-informed model of volunteer-integrated adult education that positions sustained human interaction as a central mechanism for developing these skills. It argues that when programs intentionally design for relational learning, they strengthen workforce outcomes by developing people, not just skills.

Relational Workforce Readiness and Social Capital

Workforce readiness is often defined in terms of employability skills, technical competencies, and credentials aligned with labor market demand. While these components are critical, they are insufficient on their own. Increasingly, employers emphasize the importance of "durable skills," including communication, adaptability, collaboration, and problem solving (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], n.d.). These skills are inherently relational and context dependent.

Social capital—the networks, relationships, and connections that provide access to information and opportunity—plays a determining role in workforce access and advancement (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000). Individuals with stronger social capital are more likely to access job opportunities, receive mentorship, and navigate workplace expectations. For many adult learners, especially those from marginalized or historically excluded communities, access to these networks is limited.

Relational workforce readiness refers to the capacity to engage effectively in the interpersonal dynamics of the workplace. This includes the ability to communicate across cultural and generational differences, interpret varying communication styles, build rapport, and develop a sense of belonging in professional environments. These competencies are not easily taught through traditional instruction alone; they are developed through sustained, meaningful interaction.

This distinction is particularly relevant for adult learners, whose prior educational and work experiences may have emphasized task completion over relational navigation. For learners who have experienced interruption in education, displacement, or entry into new cultural contexts, opportunities to observe and practice communication across differences are often limited. As a result, even when technical skills are present, uncertainty in navigating interpersonal dynamics can act as a barrier to full participation in workplace environments. Adult education settings that intentionally incorporate relational practice can help address this gap by providing consistent, low-risk opportunities to engage, adapt, and build confidence over time.

Relational workforce readiness is not developed through isolated instruction or short-term exposure. It is built through repeated opportunities to engage, adapt, and reflect within real interpersonal contexts. For adult learners, particularly those navigating new cultural environments or reentering education after extended absence, these opportunities are critical. Without them, learners may acquire technical skills but still face barriers in applying those skills within workplace settings.

Traditional workforce preparation models often assume that communication and collaboration skills can be taught explicitly and then transferred into practice. However, these skills are highly contextual. The ability to interpret tone, adjust communication style, and respond to unspoken expectations develops through interaction, not instruction alone. Adult education programs that intentionally create these relational environments can bridge this gap.

A VOLUNTEER-INTEGRATED MODEL OF ADULT EDUCATION

The model presented in this article integrates community volunteers as a core instructional strategy rather than a supplemental support. In this approach, adult learners engage in one-on-one and small-group instruction with trained volunteers alongside professional educators. Volunteers represent a wide range of ages, professions, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences, including former students, working professionals, college students, and retirees.

This diversity is intentional. It creates a learning environment where learners must regularly navigate different communication styles, perspectives, and expectations. A learner may engage with a college student in one session and a retired professional in another, requiring them to adapt their language, pacing, and interaction style. These repeated interactions require learners to practice adaptive communication in ways that mirror real-world workplace dynamics.

Importantly, these interactions are sustained over time. Learners work with volunteers regularly, allowing relationships to develop and deepen. This continuity enables volunteers to provide encouragement, reinforce strengths, and support learners in setting and pursuing goals. At the same time, clear boundaries are established and reinforced through ongoing volunteer training to ensure that interactions remain supportive, appropriate, and learner centered.

In this model, learning occurs not only through curriculum but through relationships. The presence of volunteers expands the instructional environment to include real-time practice of interpersonal skills and exposure to broader networks of experience and opportunity.

In practice, this model is intentionally structured while remaining relational and flexible. A typical class session includes a combination of whole-group instruction and extended one-on-one or small-group interaction. Educators design individualized learning plans and provide guidance to volunteers, ensuring that instruction remains aligned with each learner's goals while allowing space for authentic conversation and connection.

Classes are designed to include learners with a range of goals and proficiency levels, including adult basic education, high school equivalency preparation, and English language learning across literacy and fluency levels. Because instruction is individualized and supported by volunteers, learners are able to engage in the same classroom while working toward different outcomes. This structure creates opportunities for peer modeling. Learners at earlier stages benefit from seeing what progression can look like, while more advanced learners reinforce their own skills through leadership, explanation, and support of others.

Volunteers are integrated into both whole-group and small-group instruction, often sitting alongside learners rather than apart from them. In this role, they help reinforce content, support comprehension, and model behaviors such as confidence, persistence, advocacy, and comfort with making mistakes. These visible behaviors contribute to a learning environment where learners can practice not only academic skills, but also the interpersonal and self-regulatory skills required in workplace settings.

Volunteers are not positioned as instructors in the traditional sense, but as partners in the learning process. Their role is to engage, respond, and support rather than direct. This distinction allows learners to take ownership of their learning while practicing communication and problem solving in a low-risk environment.

Ongoing training reinforces this structure. Volunteers receive guidance on maintaining appropriate boundaries, recognizing learner strengths, and supporting without overstepping. This ensures that interactions remain productive and respectful, while still allowing for the development of genuine relationships.

This approach is not without constraints. It requires consistent coordination, clear expectations, and ongoing communication between educators and volunteers. Without these structures, interactions can become uneven or unintentionally shift away from learner goals. Programs considering this model should attend to scheduling consistency, volunteer retention, and alignment with instructional objectives. When these conditions are in place, the relational aspects of the model can function as a reliable and intentional component of workforce preparation rather than an informal byproduct of instruction.

Illustrative Learner Experiences

The impact of this model is evident in learner experiences that reflect shifts in aspiration, identity, and workforce participation.

In one case, a young adult who initially entered the program as a volunteer began engaging in conversations with other volunteers about education and career pathways. Through these interactions, he was encouraged to consider options beyond his current employment in the service industry. After learning about nursing programs, he applied to a local community college. When he encountered challenges with the science portion of the entrance exam due to vocabulary gaps, he transitioned into the program as a student to build the language skills needed. He was subsequently accepted into the nursing program and later returned to volunteer.

This trajectory reflects not only skill development but increased exposure to opportunity, encouragement from peers, and persistence in navigating barriers. It demonstrates how exposure to new possibilities, combined with encouragement and relational accountability, can shift a learner's trajectory. In workforce terms, this represents movement into a higher skill career pathway supported by both skill development and social capital.

In another example, a learner working toward her high school equivalency demonstrated strong aptitude in mathematics but lacked confidence in other subject areas. Through consistent interaction with volunteers, her strengths were recognized and reinforced. She

began supporting peers in math, shifting from learner to tutor within the classroom. These experiences contributed to a growing sense of identity as someone capable of teaching and leading. Through conversations with volunteers, she began to see college as a viable path and is now pursuing postsecondary education with the goal of becoming a teacher.

This shift from learner to tutor is particularly significant. It allowed the learner to experience herself as a contributor within a learning environment, reinforcing both confidence and competence. These experiences translate directly to workforce settings, where confidence in one's abilities and the capacity to support others are highly valued.

A third example involves an individual working in the gig economy, taking on short-term, independent jobs rather than traditional employment, who engaged informally with volunteers during program hours. Through ongoing conversations and encouragement, he began reading more consistently and discussing ideas with volunteers. These interactions contributed to increased confidence and a shift in how he viewed his own potential. He subsequently secured his first stable job, enabling him to move toward independent housing. This progression illustrates how relational engagement can support entry into more stable employment. While the initial interactions were informal, they contributed to a shift in self-perception and motivation that ultimately influenced workforce participation.

Not all outcomes are immediately tied to employment transitions. In one instance, a former learner who had initially entered the program to build English skills and engage more fully in her community was later observed confidently interacting with other parents at a school event. While less directly tied to employment, this example reflects a critical component of long-term workforce success: social integration. The ability to engage confidently in community settings supports broader participation in workplace and civic life.

Across these examples, the common thread is sustained relational engagement, not a single instructional intervention. It expands learners' sense of possibility, strengthens their communication skills, and connects them to networks of support.

In another case, a learner who completed the program pursued certification as a certified nursing assistant (CNA), securing stable employment that allowed her to support her family. This stability had impacts beyond her own employment. Her children were able to pursue higher education, expanding opportunities across generations. Years later, following a life-altering injury, one of her sons, who had completed a business degree, partnered with her to start a catering business. Together, they built a sustainable family enterprise.

This example reflects the extended impact of workforce participation supported by adult education. While initial outcomes may be measured in job placement or income stability, the longer term effects include intergenerational mobility, entrepreneurship, and community contribution. These outcomes are made possible not only through skill development, but through the confidence, networks, and relational capacity built over time.

Expanding the Talent Pipeline Through Volunteer Engagement

While much of the focus in workforce development is placed on preparing learners to enter the workforce, this model also influences how the workforce itself understands and engages

with talent. Volunteers bring a wide range of professional, educational, and lived experiences, including college students, working professionals, stay-at-home parents, and retirees from fields such as law, medicine, technology, and public service. This diversity creates a learning environment where learners are exposed not only to different communication styles, but to a broad spectrum of workforce identities and pathways.

These interactions often occur across socioeconomic lines that are otherwise unlikely to intersect. Through sustained engagement, volunteers develop a deeper understanding of the complexities learners navigate, including trauma, economic instability, and systemic barriers. What may initially be perceived as unreliability or lack of readiness is often reframed as resilience, adaptability, and persistence. Over time, these shifts in perspective influence how volunteers understand potential, contribution, and readiness for work.

Many volunteers enter with a desire to support literacy in their community, often because their professional roles do not provide a direct avenue to do so. Through ongoing engagement with learners, they are able to live out this value while also expanding their own perspectives. Volunteers who are also professionals, supervisors, or employers carry these experiences into their workplaces, influencing how they evaluate, support, and advocate for talent.

In this way, the model contributes to the talent pipeline in two directions. Learners build the skills, confidence, and networks necessary to enter and persist in the workforce, while volunteers develop a more nuanced and human-centered understanding of workforce readiness. This reciprocal dynamic strengthens not only individual outcomes, but the broader systems through which talent is recognized and developed.

In practice, these shifts are often visible in small but meaningful ways. Volunteers begin to adjust how they interpret attendance, participation, and communication, recognizing that what may initially appear as inconsistency can reflect external pressures or barriers rather than lack of commitment. They adapt their expectations and interactions accordingly, often expressing increased confidence in a learner's potential over time. For volunteers who hold roles as supervisors or hiring managers, these experiences can influence how they evaluate candidates, support employees, and create more inclusive workplace environments.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The experiences described above suggest several implications for adult education programs seeking to strengthen workforce outcomes through relational approaches.

Design for Sustained Interaction, Not One-Time Engagement

Programs should prioritize repeated, relationship-based interactions between learners and volunteers. While one-time or episodic volunteer experiences can increase community awareness and offer brief points of connection, they do not create the sustained relational conditions necessary for developing the adaptive communication skills and social capital associated with workforce readiness. This may require programs to reconsider how volunteer time is structured and prioritized. Rather than maximizing the number of individuals who participate in short-term opportunities, programs may benefit from investing in fewer volunteers who engage consistently over time.

Prepare Volunteers for Relational Work Through Ongoing Training

Effective integration of volunteers requires ongoing training that addresses boundaries, cultural responsiveness, and strategies for supporting learners without overstepping. This ensures that interactions remain respectful, appropriate, and aligned with learner goals. This training is not a one-time event. Ongoing reinforcement helps volunteers navigate evolving relationships and ensures consistency across the program. It also creates space for volunteers to reflect on their own learning and growth.

Intentionally Build a Diverse Volunteer Base

Recruiting volunteers across a range of ages, professions, and lived experiences enriches the learning environment. Exposure to diverse perspectives allows learners to practice navigating different communication styles and social expectations. Programs may also find that volunteer recruitment and retention improve when individuals experience meaningful, sustained relationships with learners. Diversity within the volunteer base should be framed as an instructional asset, not simply a recruitment goal. Programs can explicitly communicate how different backgrounds and experiences contribute to a richer learning environment.

Make Learning Visible and Reflective

Programs can strengthen impact by helping learners recognize and reflect on the skills they are developing through interaction. Naming competencies such as adaptive communication, confidence, and problem solving reinforces their relevance to workplace contexts. Because these skills are often developed implicitly through relational experiences, making them visible supports learners in articulating their strengths in educational and employment settings. This reflection can be integrated into existing instructional practices through brief check-ins, goal-setting conversations, or structured reflection activities. Even small moments of recognition can help learners connect their experiences to broader goals.

One practical approach is to incorporate brief reflection prompts into regular instruction. For example, educators might ask learners to describe a recent interaction where they adjusted how they communicated, asked for help, or supported a peer. These moments can be named explicitly as skills relevant to workplace contexts, helping learners connect their experiences in the classroom to expectations in employment settings. Over time, this practice builds both awareness and the ability to articulate these strengths in interviews and professional conversations.

Recognize and Measure Social Capital as an Outcome

Programs should expand definitions of success to include indicators such as increased confidence in professional interactions, expanded networks, and shifts in aspiration and identity. These outcomes reflect the development of social capital and relational workforce readiness, which are critical but often undermeasured. Collecting learner feedback on sustained interaction with volunteers can provide meaningful insight into these dimensions and strengthen program evaluation. Expanding outcome measures may also support stronger communication with funders and partners, helping to articulate the full impact of adult education programs beyond traditional metrics.

CONCLUSION

As adult education continues to evolve within workforce systems, there is a need to broaden how workforce readiness is defined and developed. Technical skills and credentials remain essential, but they are most effective when paired with the relational competencies and social capital that enable individuals to navigate complex, human-centered environments.

Volunteer-integrated models of adult education offer a practical and replicable strategy for building these capacities. This approach also invites a broader reconsideration of how workforce systems define readiness and potential. When relational competencies and social capital are treated as central rather than peripheral, the responsibility for workforce development expands beyond individual skill acquisition to include the environments in which those skills are practiced and reinforced. Adult education programs are uniquely positioned to serve in these environments, creating conditions where learners can build both the capabilities and the confidence required for sustained participation in the workforce. By embedding learners in sustained, diverse interactions with members of their community, programs create conditions where communication skills, confidence, and networks develop in tandem with academic learning.

This reframing also has implications for how programs communicate their value. When relational learning and social capital are recognized as central outcomes, adult education can more fully articulate its role in workforce systems, both as a provider of skills and as a setting where individuals develop the confidence, adaptability, and connections required for long-term success.

When relational experiences are treated as central rather than supplemental, adult education programs strengthen the talent pipeline beyond immediate job placement. They support learners in building the skills, relationships, and sense of belonging necessary for long-term participation in the workforce and broader community. ⌘

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FROM PREPARATION TO PARTICIPATION: ADULT EDUCATION AS A CODESIGNER OF WORKFORCE READINESS

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ABSTRACT

Adult education plays an essential role in workforce development, yet workforce readiness is often defined through technical skills, credentials, and employer demand rather than the broader knowledge, literacy practices, dispositions, and lived experiences that shape meaningful occupational participation. Grounded in practice-based curriculum development within a nonprofit workforce-training program serving adults navigating obstacles to employment, this theory-to-practice article examines how competency mapping, employer partnerships, and curriculum design can reposition adult education as a codesigner of workforce readiness. Drawing on community cultural wealth, funds of knowledge, vernacular literacies, New Literacy Studies, disciplinary literacy, communities of practice, and Gee's concept of discourse, the article introduces occupational discourses as an organizing framework for the language, texts, tools, values, identities, dispositions, problem-solving practices, and patterns of participation through which people become recognized members of an occupation. The discussion offers implications for curriculum design, competency mapping, employer collaboration, and equitable talent-pipeline strategies that begin with recognition rather than remediation.

Keywords: adult education, workforce development, workforce readiness, occupational discourses, competency mapping, community cultural wealth

INTRODUCTION

When I accepted a curriculum development position at a nonprofit workforce-training organization serving adults navigating obstacles to employment, I expected the work to center on aligning workplace training with industry-recognized credentials, defining learning outcomes, and building pathways to academic credit. Those responsibilities remained important, but time spent alongside participants, mentors, supervisors, and industry partners quickly revealed a broader question: What does successful participation in an occupation actually require?

That question shifted attention from curriculum content alone to the knowledge, skills, abilities, dispositions, communication practices, relationships, and forms of judgment that experienced workers use each day. It also raised an equity-centered concern. Workforce development often emphasizes skills gaps and credentials, which can position adult learners according to what they lack. Participants, however, enter training with knowledge developed through employment, family responsibilities, caregiving, military service, volunteer work, and

community life. These experiences shape how they solve problems, communicate, adapt, and make meaning.

Viewed through a literacy lens, workforce preparation involves more than learning discrete technical skills. Learners enter occupational communities with specialized texts, tools, values, identities, and ways of participating. Curriculum can help learners interpret these occupational expectations while building from the knowledge and resources they already possess.

This article introduces occupational discourses as an organizing term for the integrated language, literacy practices, tools, values, identities, dispositions, problem-solving practices, and patterns of participation through which people become recognized members of an occupation. Building on disciplinary literacy, New Literacy Studies, communities of practice, and community cultural wealth, the article argues that adult education can strengthen talent pipelines by helping learners extend existing assets while collaborating with employers and educational institutions to define authentic workforce readiness.

REFRAMING WORKFORCE READINESS: FROM SKILLS TO PARTICIPATION

The language of workforce development often emphasizes skills. Employers identify skills shortages, policymakers invest in skills training, and educational institutions develop curricula designed to teach the technical competencies associated with specific occupations. Although these efforts have expanded opportunities for adult learners, the language of skills alone risks oversimplifying what it means to become successful in a profession. Competence is rarely demonstrated through isolated technical abilities. Instead, it emerges through participation in the everyday practices of an occupational community.

This distinction is particularly important for adult education. Adult learners are not preparing to simply perform a series of technical tasks. They are preparing to enter communities with their own expectations, communication practices, values, identities, and ways of solving problems. A welder does not simply weld. A machinist does not simply operate machinery. A healthcare worker does not simply perform clinical procedures. Members of every occupation learn to interpret specialized texts, communicate with colleagues, make judgments, mentor newcomers, navigate workplace cultures, and demonstrate the dispositions valued within their profession. Workforce readiness, therefore, extends beyond technical proficiency to include the ability to participate meaningfully within an occupational community.

Disciplinary literacy offers an important lens for understanding this process. Rather than viewing literacy as a collection of general reading and writing skills, disciplinary literacy recognizes that each discipline develops specialized ways of reading, writing, communicating, thinking, and constructing knowledge (Lent, 2016; Moje, 2015; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). These practices are inseparable from participation within the discipline itself. Similarly, Gee's (2015) conception of discourse extends beyond language to include the socially recognized ways of speaking, acting, valuing, believing, and interacting that allow individuals to be recognized as members of a community. Wenger's (1998) work on communities of practice further helps explain how newcomers learn through participation, moving gradually toward fuller membership within a community.

The term *occupational discourses* builds on these overlapping traditions rather than replacing them. This article adapts Gee's (2015) concept of capital-D Discourse while using the lowercase phrase occupational discourses as an organizing term rather than a proper name. Occupational discourses encompass the language, texts, tools, values, identities, dispositions, problem-solving practices, and patterns of participation through which people become recognized members of an occupation. Technical competencies remain essential, but they represent only one dimension of workforce readiness. Workers also learn to communicate, collaborate, solve problems, exercise professional judgment, and participate in the social practices that define a profession.

Adult learners do not enter workforce education as blank slates waiting to acquire occupational practices. New Literacy Studies challenged autonomous models of literacy by emphasizing literacy as socially situated practice rather than a neutral set of universal skills (Street, 1984). Barton and Hamilton (1998) described local literacies as reading and writing practices embedded in everyday lives, communities, relationships, and purposes, while Hull and Schultz (2001) showed how formal institutions often overlook consequential learning beyond school.

Contemporary literacy scholarship continues this social-practice orientation while extending it to multimodal, material, embodied, and affective dimensions of literacy (Pahl & Rowsell, 2020; Papen, 2023). Across these developments, literacy remains connected to people's identities, relationships, purposes, and participation in social worlds. This continuing tradition supports an understanding of vernacular literacies as the everyday, community-based practices people use to make meaning, navigate relationships, solve problems, and participate in social life beyond formal schooling.

These perspectives connect directly to community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), which remind us that learners already possess rich linguistic, cultural, experiential, and problem-solving resources developed through their families, communities, previous employment, and everyday lives. These assets often remain invisible when workforce readiness is defined primarily through deficits or credentials. Adult education occupies a unique position because it can recognize these existing strengths and intentionally connect them to the occupational discourses learners are preparing to enter.

Viewed in this way, workforce preparation becomes less about replacing what learners know and more about extending existing repertoires into new contexts. Adult education is uniquely positioned to facilitate this process by partnering with employers, educational institutions, and learners themselves to identify the knowledge, skills, abilities, dispositions, and occupational practices that support meaningful participation in high-demand careers. Rather than asking only what learners need to acquire, adult educators can also ask what learners already bring and how those assets can become foundations for future participation and economic mobility.

Listening Before Designing: Competency Mapping as a Process of Recognition

Competency mapping can begin with industry-recognized credentials, learning outcomes, and course content, but those elements do not necessarily reveal what successful participation

looks like in practice. A more productive starting point is to ask what experienced workers know, do, communicate, notice, and value within the occupation.

Within a nonprofit workforce-training program serving adults navigating obstacles to employment, mentors, supervisors, instructors, and industry partners participated in a more intentional mapping process. Rather than identifying curriculum topics alone, the conversations examined what distinguishes an experienced employee from a novice, which communication practices matter on the shop floor, how workers solve problems, which dispositions support long-term success, and how mentors respond to common novice errors. These questions shifted the work from listing technical competencies to examining the broader occupational discourses that shape participation in advanced manufacturing.

The mapping process identified the knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions experienced workers considered essential. Participants discussed how frequently competencies appeared, how complex they were, how they affected workplace safety, and how proficiency developed over time. The process produced useful curriculum documents, but it also revealed that experienced workers rarely separated technical knowledge from communication, judgment, collaboration, mentoring, or problem solving. They described success as an integrated way of participating within an occupational community.

The conversations also challenged assumptions about what learners lacked. Mentors recognized persistence, adaptability, teamwork, responsibility, communication, and resourcefulness that participants already demonstrated. Learners drew on previous employment, family responsibilities, volunteer work, military service, caregiving, and community involvement when approaching unfamiliar workplace situations. These experiences did not replace occupation-specific learning, but they often provided foundations for it.

Competency mapping, therefore, should identify both occupational expectations and the points at which learners' existing knowledge, experiences, and dispositions already align with them. Beginning with recognition rather than remediation allows curriculum developers to build on existing strengths rather than treating learners as though learning starts from zero. Employer partnerships also become more than advisory relationships. Employers contribute expertise about occupational practice, while adult educators contribute expertise about learning, literacy, and human development. Together, these perspectives support a collaborative definition of workforce readiness and more meaningful learning experiences.

REDEFINING RIGOR THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

As the competency mapping process evolved, a broader question emerged beyond curriculum design. Who decides what counts as workforce readiness? More specifically, who determines which forms of knowledge, expertise, and participation should be recognized as evidence that someone is prepared to succeed within an occupation? Community and technical colleges, workforce-development organizations, employers, apprenticeship programs, and industry associations all answer these questions differently. Educational institutions often organize learning around measurable outcomes, academic standards, and credential attainment.

Employers frequently emphasize performance, adaptability, communication, problem solving, and the ability to contribute within authentic workplace contexts. Neither perspective is inherently incomplete. Rather, each recognizes different forms of expertise.

This distinction became particularly visible during efforts to align workplace learning with postsecondary credentials. Conversations about articulation and credit often began with an understandable question: Does this workplace learning demonstrate sufficient rigor to warrant college credit? While this question remains important, the process suggested it was being asked only in one direction. Rather than asking whether workplace learning measures up to academic expectations alone, perhaps we should also ask how educational institutions and industry partners might collaboratively define the knowledge, skills, abilities, dispositions, and literacy practices that characterize meaningful participation within an occupation.

This shift does not lower academic standards. Instead, it invites a broader understanding of rigor. Reading complex blueprints, documenting quality concerns, troubleshooting production challenges, mentoring new employees, communicating across teams, and exercising professional judgment are intellectually demanding practices. They require learners to integrate technical knowledge with communication, reasoning, collaboration, and decision making in authentic contexts. These practices represent forms of rigor that may not always be fully captured through traditional academic measures, yet they remain essential for successful occupational participation.

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital provides a useful lens for understanding this tension by explaining how institutions recognize some forms of knowledge, credentials, and expertise as legitimate while overlooking others. Misrecognition occurs when socially valuable forms of knowledge are not fully recognized because they do not align with the forms of capital privileged within a particular field. Educational credentials carry important forms of symbolic value, just as years of workplace experience represent significant occupational expertise. Challenges emerge when one form of expertise is privileged while another remains invisible.

At the same time, Bourdieu's framework requires cautious use. Yosso (2005) critiques traditional interpretations of cultural capital for often positioning marginalized communities through deficit frames and instead offers community cultural wealth as a way to recognize the knowledge, skills, abilities, and networks that communities already possess. This critique matters for workforce education. Adult education should not simply help learners convert their existing strengths into forms institutions already value. It should also challenge educational and workforce systems to expand what they recognize as valuable in the first place.

Viewed in this way, employer partnerships become opportunities not simply to validate curriculum but to coconstruct it. Rather than asking employers to review educational programs after they have been designed, adult educators can engage industry partners as collaborators in defining workforce readiness itself. Competency mapping becomes one mechanism for making occupational discourses visible, allowing educators and employers to identify together the knowledge, skills, abilities, dispositions, and literacy practices that support meaningful participation in high-demand careers. This collaborative process

strengthens talent pipelines while creating more authentic pathways for adult learners to move from community knowledge to occupational participation without requiring them to abandon the strengths they already possess.

REIMAGINING ADULT EDUCATION'S ROLE IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The practice-based experiences described throughout this article point to a larger responsibility for adult education within workforce development. Aligning workplace training with academic credentials and industry expectations remains important, but adult education should not simply respond to workforce needs. It should help define them. This article suggests three implications for the field: adult education must help define workforce readiness, talent pipelines should begin with recognition rather than remediation, and competency mapping should capture occupational discourses rather than technical skills alone.

Adult Education Must Help Define Workforce Readiness

Across the United States, conversations about workforce development frequently center on labor shortages, credential attainment, economic mobility, and employer demand. These conversations are necessary, but they often begin after workforce readiness has already been defined. Employers identify the competencies they need. Postsecondary institutions determine learning outcomes. Credentialing organizations establish standards. Adult education programs are then expected to prepare learners to meet those expectations.

Adult education has a much greater contribution to make. Adult educators possess expertise that neither employers nor higher education institutions hold independently. Adult educators understand how adults learn, how literacy develops across contexts, how prior experiences shape future learning, and how instruction can support meaningful growth. Employers understand the realities of occupational practice. Community and technical colleges understand academic expectations and credentialing systems. Rather than viewing these perspectives as competing, adult education can help bring them into conversation.

This shift changes the role of adult education from implementing workforce preparation to coconstructing it. Instead of asking employers to validate curriculum after it has been designed, adult educators can invite industry partners into conversations about the knowledge, skills, abilities, dispositions, literacy practices, and ways of participating that define success within an occupation. Likewise, educational institutions can contribute their expertise in learning, assessment, and credentialing to ensure these expectations remain rigorous while also reflecting authentic workplace practice.

Viewed this way, workforce readiness becomes a collaborative definition rather than an institutional assumption. Adult education is uniquely positioned to facilitate that collaboration because it understands both learning and work.

Talent Pipelines Should Begin With Recognition Rather Than Remediation

A particularly significant implication concerns the learners themselves. Curriculum development often begins by asking what participants still need to learn. This question is

understandable, yet it subtly positions learners according to what they lack. Listening to participants, mentors, and supervisors raises a different question: What do participants already know, and how can those strengths become the foundation for future learning?

Community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and scholarship on vernacular literacies show that adult learners arrive with extensive knowledge developed through their families, communities, workplaces, and lived experiences. Many participants had spent years solving complex problems, supporting families, navigating systems, caring for others, leading teams, volunteering within their communities, or working in occupations that required communication, adaptability, and resilience. These experiences may not always appear on a résumé or transcript, but they represent valuable forms of knowledge that deserve recognition within workforce education.

Recognizing these assets does not mean lowering expectations or suggesting learners already possess everything they need for success within a new occupation. Rather, it changes where instruction begins. Adult education can intentionally connect existing strengths to new occupational expectations instead of assuming learning starts from zero. In practice, this shift transforms competency mapping from an exercise focused solely on identifying gaps into a process of recognizing where learners' existing experiences already align with occupational practices and where intentional support can extend those strengths further.

Imagine what workforce development might look like if every curriculum conversation began there. Instead of designing programs around deficiencies, adult educators, employers, and educational institutions could begin by identifying the assets learners already possess and collaboratively designing opportunities that expand those assets toward meaningful occupational participation. Such a shift has implications not only for instruction but also for recruitment, advising, assessment, and the ways workforce systems define learner success.

Competency Mapping Should Capture Occupational Discourses, Not Just Technical Skills

One practical lesson concerns competency mapping itself. Competency mapping is often understood as a process of identifying the technical knowledge and skills required to perform a job successfully. Although technical mapping remains essential, conversations with experienced mentors and supervisors consistently move beyond technical competencies alone. They spoke about judgment, communication, collaboration, troubleshooting, mentoring, adaptability, safety, professionalism, and the countless decisions workers make throughout a typical day. Success was rarely described as the completion of isolated tasks. Instead, it reflected a way of participating within an occupational community.

This broader view reframes competency mapping. Rather than documenting only what workers do, competency mapping can help adult educators understand how workers think, communicate, solve problems, and interact with others. In other words, it can help make occupational discourses visible.

This perspective has important implications for curriculum development. Courses such as blueprint reading, technical mathematics, workplace communication, or technical writing should not be viewed simply as standalone content areas. They are opportunities for learners to engage in the literacy practices, reasoning processes, communication patterns, and

problem-solving approaches that define participation within a profession. Reading a blueprint is not merely decoding symbols on paper. It is learning how manufacturing professionals interpret information, anticipate production challenges, communicate with teammates, and make informed decisions. The same is true of technical mathematics, quality documentation, or workplace communication. Each represents participation in an occupational discourse rather than the isolated acquisition of technical content.

This broader understanding also creates opportunities for stronger employer partnerships. When employers participate in competency mapping conversations, they help articulate not only the technical expectations of the workplace but also the dispositions, literacy practices, and social expectations that contribute to long-term success. Adult educators, in turn, contribute expertise in learning, curriculum design, assessment, and learner development. Together, these perspectives create richer educational experiences than either could develop independently.

Ultimately, competency mapping should be understood as more than a curriculum design strategy. It is a collaborative inquiry into what meaningful participation within an occupation actually requires. When approached in this way, competency mapping becomes a powerful mechanism for strengthening talent pipelines by connecting learner assets, educational expertise, and occupational expectations into a shared vision of workforce readiness.

CONCLUSION

Workforce preparation involves more than organizing content, aligning competencies, and helping learners earn credentials. It supports meaningful participation within occupational communities without asking learners to leave behind the experiences, identities, and strengths that brought them there.

Adult education occupies a distinctive position within workforce development. It can create a collaborative space in which educators, employers, and learners define workforce readiness together. This work begins by recognizing the community cultural wealth, vernacular literacies, and lived experiences adult learners already possess. It continues through authentic partnerships that identify the knowledge, skills, abilities, dispositions, and occupational discourses that characterize successful participation within a profession. Most importantly, it positions workforce readiness as a shared responsibility rather than an independently defined expectation.

In manufacturing, a blueprint does not build a product. It communicates a shared vision. Skilled workers bring that blueprint to life through knowledge, judgment, communication, collaboration, and experience. No two workers contribute in exactly the same way, yet each draws on existing knowledge while learning from others. The blueprint provides direction, but people transform possibility into reality.

Adult education serves a similar purpose. Learners enter programs with blueprints of their own, shaped by histories, relationships, problem-solving abilities, cultural knowledge, literacy practices, and lived experiences. Adult education should not replace those blueprints. It

should help learners interpret new occupational blueprints while recognizing that many of the tools needed to read them are already in their hands. Through thoughtful instruction, authentic employer partnerships, and meaningful opportunities to participate, adult education can help learners extend what they know into new occupational communities and new possibilities for themselves and their families.

As talent-pipeline conversations continue to evolve, adult education can shape how workforce readiness is understood. When workforce systems begin with recognition rather than remediation, invite employers into genuine partnership, and honor the assets learners already possess, workforce development becomes more than a pathway to employment. It becomes a pathway to belonging, contribution, and long-term economic mobility. ⌘

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THE TALENT PIPELINE: Adult Education's Role in Workforce Development

REFLECTION

START WITH THE VOICE: WHY EARLY ORAL INSTRUCTION BUILDS THE ADULT EDUCATION WORKFORCE PIPELINE

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ABSTRACT

Adult learners frequently enter programs with clear workforce goals, yet instructional models do not always lead directly to employment outcomes. This gap is particularly evident among beginning-level English language learners, who are often introduced to literacy-focused instruction before developing foundational oral communication skills. As a result, learners may experience slow progression and limited access to workforce opportunities. This article proposes a reframing of early level instruction within adult education: prioritizing oral, functional, and workforce-aligned communication from the outset. Drawing on program implementation and a pilot driver education initiative, it presents a four-stage pipeline model that supports progression from survival communication to career readiness. The article also outlines an emerging second phase of development and offers practical strategies for programs seeking to align instruction with workforce needs while maintaining supportive learning environments.

Keywords: adult education, workforce development, ESL, career pathways, oral proficiency, talent pipeline

THE PROBLEM: WHEN PROGRESSION STALLS AT THE START

Adult learners arrive with urgency. Their goals are not abstract—they are immediate and practical: to work, to support their families, and to move with independence through their communities. Yet the structure of adult education does not always reflect this urgency. At the earliest levels of English language instruction, learners are frequently introduced to reading and writing before they have developed the ability to communicate orally.

While literacy is essential, its early prioritization can unintentionally slow progress for learners who need to speak and understand language in real time. In many classrooms, a strong culture of care and support is present. These environments are vital. However, without

clearly defined progression systems, learners may remain at foundational levels longer than necessary. What is intended as support can, over time, become a place of extended holding rather than forward movement. The result is a quiet but persistent misalignment: Learners seeking rapid, functional communication are met with instructional models that move more slowly and often in a different direction.

RETHINKING THE START: ORAL LANGUAGE AS FOUNDATION

If adult education is to function as a true workforce pipeline, the starting point must shift. Oral communication is not an advanced skill. It is the foundation upon which all other learning—and all workforce participation—depends. For learners navigating new systems, workplaces, and communities, the ability to listen, respond, and interact is immediate and essential.

This does not diminish the role of literacy. Rather, it suggests a sequencing: oral language first, literacy built upon it. When instruction begins with functional, spoken communication—supported by high-frequency vocabulary and real-world context—learners gain access more quickly to the environments in which they must operate. They begin to participate, not simply prepare.

A PIPELINE APPROACH TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

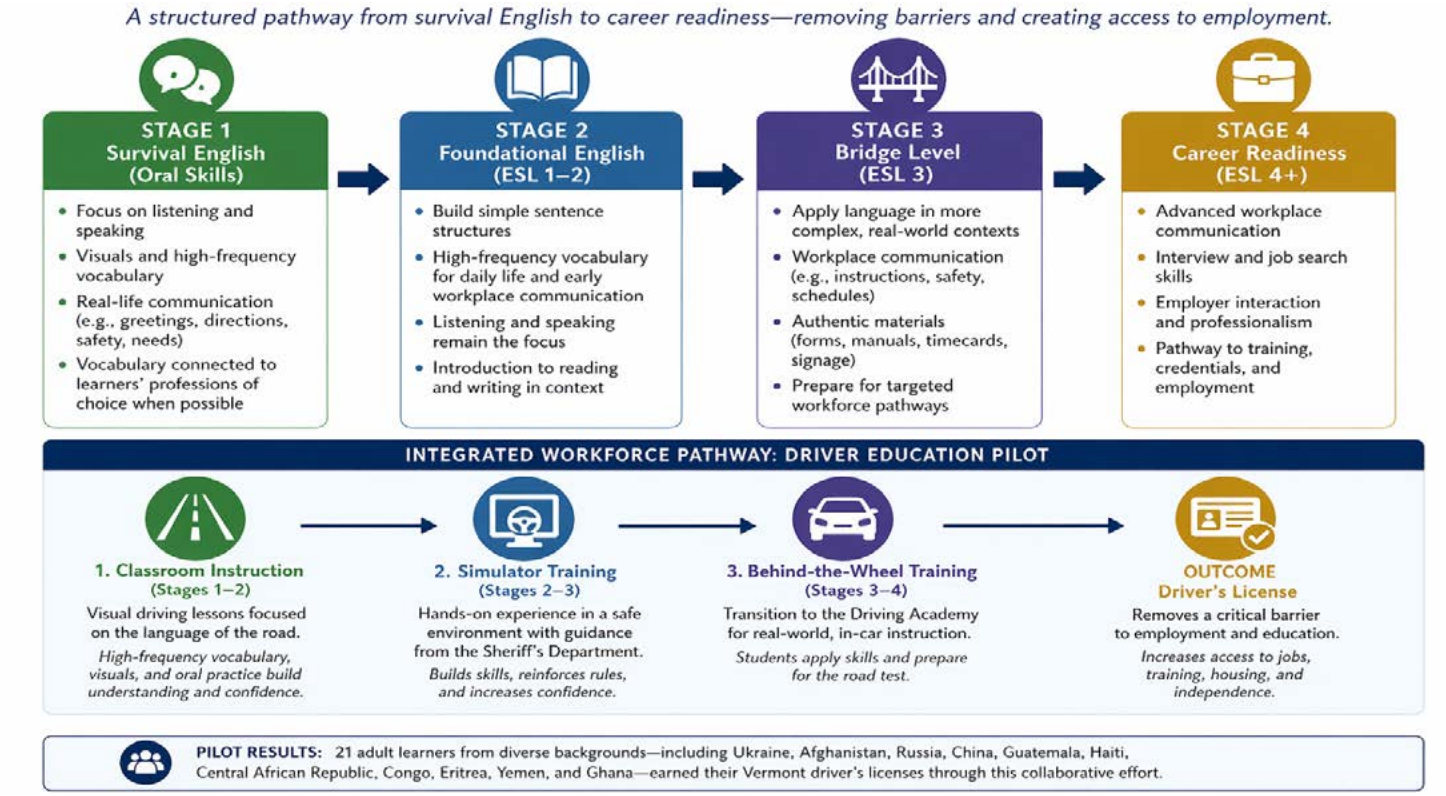
With this shift in mind, our program reframed adult education as a structured pipeline designed to support continuous movement toward workforce participation. The model includes four stages:

- **Stage 1: Survival English (Oral Skills)**: Learners focus on listening and speaking for immediate communication. Instruction uses visuals, repetition, and real-life scenarios such as directions, safety language, and basic interactions. When possible, vocabulary is connected to learners' professional interests.
- **Stage 2: Foundational English (ESL 1–2):** Learners begin forming simple sentence structures while continuing to strengthen oral communication. Reading and writing are introduced gradually and in context.
- **Stage 3: Bridge Level (ESL 3):** Learners apply language in more complex settings, including workplace communication. Instruction incorporates authentic materials such as forms, schedules, and safety documents.
- **Stage 4: Career Readiness (ESL 4+):** Learners prepare for employment through applied communication, interview practice, and engagement with workforce partners.

This progression creates clarity. Learners understand where they are, where they are going, and how to move forward (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Adult Education Talent Pipeline With Driver Education Integration



FROM OBSTACLE TO PATHWAY: THE DRIVER EDUCATION PILOT

One of the most significant insights from this work was that language is not the only obstacle to employment. In southern Vermont, transportation emerged as a critical obstacle. Without a driver's license, many learners were unable to access jobs, training programs, or stable housing. For English language learners, the licensing process presented additional challenges due to language demands.

In response, Vermont Adult Learning partnered with the Brattleboro Area Adult Driving Academy and the Windham County Sheriff's Department to develop a pilot program addressing this obstacle. Instruction was designed around the language of driving, with a focus on oral communication, visual supports, and high-frequency vocabulary. Rather than relying on text-heavy manuals, lessons used images, simplified language, and translation tools to ensure comprehension. Learners then participated in hands-on simulator training provided by the Sheriff's Department, allowing them to build confidence in a controlled environment. Those who demonstrated readiness transitioned to behind-the-wheel instruction through the driving academy.

Through this pilot, 21 adult learners from diverse backgrounds—including Ukraine, Afghanistan, Haiti, Eritrea, and the Democratic Republic of Congo—earned their Vermont driver's licenses. This outcome represents more than a credential. It represents access to

employment, community participation, and independence. A second phase of this work is currently under discussion, focused on expanding instructional materials, strengthening alignment with workforce pathways, and formalizing transitions between language learning and greater employment opportunities.

"When learners gain the ability to speak and understand from the very beginning, they are not simply learning a language—they are gaining access to the workforce."

Lessons From Implementation

Several key practices emerged:

- **Competency-Based Progression:** Learners advance based on demonstrated skills, not time spent in class.
- **Structured Transitions:** Movement between levels is supported through intentional "warm hand-offs," reducing anxiety and supporting retention.
- **Early Integration of Real-World Context:** When instruction is tied to real-life needs, engagement and persistence increase.
- **Wraparound Support Matters:** Issues such as childcare, transportation, and access to technology must be addressed early to sustain progression.

ALIGNING WITH WORKFORCE REALITY

Workforce participation requires more than technical skill. It requires communication, confidence, and access. Across the labor market, employers consistently demand competencies such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem solving (Carnevale et al., 2020). When adult education integrates these expectations early, learners are better prepared to enter and succeed in these environments. Programs that align instruction with real-world conditions move beyond preparation. They become active contributors to workforce development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Programs seeking to strengthen their role in the workforce pipeline can begin with several shifts:

- Prioritize oral communication at early levels
- Sequence literacy development after foundational language is established
- Define clear stages of progression
- Use functional, real-world learning goals
- Identify and address workforce obstacles early
- Build partnerships with community and industry organizations

These changes do not require complete redesign, but rather a reorientation of focus.

CONCLUSION

Adult education has long served as a place of opportunity. With intentional design, it can also serve as a place of movement. When programs begin with the voice—when learners are supported in speaking, understanding, and participating from the outset—they move more quickly toward the lives they seek to build. The work is not to replace care with rigor, but to align them and to create systems where support and progression exist together. In doing so, adult education becomes not only a place where learning begins, but a pathway through which lives move forward. ⌘

Sarah Fox is an English language learning advisor and instructor at Vermont Adult Learning, based in southern Vermont. Her work focuses on developing oral-first instructional models for beginning adult English language learners and aligning adult education with workforce outcomes. She designs and leads pilot programs that address real-world obstacles to employment, including transportation access, and builds partnerships across education and workforce systems. Sarah holds a CELTA certification and is committed to creating clear, structured pathways that support learner progression toward career readiness. She may be reached at sfox@vtadultlearning.org.

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APPLYING LESSONS FROM INTEGRATED EDUCATION AND TRAINING TO REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP IN CORRECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This reflection draws on lessons from two federally funded integrated education and training (IET) initiatives to examine how registered apprenticeship (RA) programs can be strengthened within correctional settings. While correctional facilities often have foundational elements in place, such as adult education, workforce training, and prison industries, these components are frequently fragmented and not aligned to postrelease employment opportunities. The reflection highlights key design and implementation strategies to address these gaps, including aligning programs with labor market demand, adapting models to the constraints of correctional environments, and fostering strong cross-sector partnerships with employers and community-based organizations. It also emphasizes the importance of flexible program structures that support continuity during reentry, as well as comprehensive learner supports such as mentorship, employability skills, and reentry planning. Additionally, the article underscores the role of data-driven continuous improvement and the need for dedicated capacity to sustain high-quality implementation. By applying these lessons, correctional systems and their partners can move beyond limited, facility-bound apprenticeship models toward more coordinated, demand-driven approaches that improve employment outcomes and support long-term economic mobility for individuals returning to the community.

Keywords: registered apprenticeship, correctional education, integrated education and training, workforce development, reentry

NARRATIVE

From 2020 to 2025, RTI International led two federally funded integrated education and training (IET) in corrections projects that generated practical insights for strengthening workforce development programs in correctional settings. This work underscored the importance of programs that build relevant academic and employability skills, lead to recognized credentials, and align with individuals' career interests and workforce demand. These programs better position participants for employment after release, with benefits that extend to their families, communities, and the broader economy.

Lessons from these projects are especially timely as apprenticeship programs receive growing federal attention and investment. Registered apprenticeship (RA) is a strong workforce training model that combines on-the-job learning with related technical instruction, mentorship, and progressive wages. It can be adapted to meet the needs of employers, training providers, and correctional facilities.

However, apprenticeship programs in corrections have not yet reached their full potential. Existing programs remain limited in scale, concentrated in a narrow set of occupations, and are often shaped more by facility conditions than by labor market demand. In many cases, apprenticeships are primarily anchored in facility-based jobs, lacking clear connections to community employers and viable career pathways after release.

The authors' experience supporting over 30 state and local corrections agencies with IET development suggests that these limitations are not simply a matter of program availability; they are also a matter of program design. One of the clearest lessons from the IET projects is that correctional facilities do not need to start from scratch. Most already have the core elements in place, including adult education, workforce training, and employment opportunities (i.e., prison industries and, in some cases, work release or private industry partnerships). The challenge is to better connect and strengthen these efforts, so they support pathways to economic mobility after release.

Several lessons from IET implementation are particularly relevant for strengthening RA programs in correctional settings.

Align Programs With Labor Market Demand

Apprenticeship programs in corrections should be grounded in labor market demand. Too often, training options reflect what is easiest to offer within a facility rather than what leads to viable employment after release. The IET work showed the importance of regularly reviewing labor market information, identifying skills gaps, validating findings with employers and workforce development partners, and considering relevant state-licensing requirements. These steps can help programs prioritize pathways linked to in-demand occupations that offer participants family sustaining wages and opportunities for advancement.

Design for the Correctional Context

Program quality depends on how well the model accounts for the realities of correctional settings. Common constraints—such as facility transfers; security requirements; and limits on technology, staffing, space, and partner access—can disrupt implementation if not addressed. In the IET projects, successful sites treated implementation as an ongoing process rather than a one-time launch. Cross-functional implementation teams helped identify barriers, test adjustments, and use data to improve the fit between the program model and the correctional setting.

Build Programs Through Early and Sustained Partnership

Strong collaboration is critical to effective implementation. Across the IET projects, success depended on coordination among corrections administrators, adult educators, workforce training providers, and community partners, with early engagement helping to build buy-in and address challenges early. For RA programs in particular, this collaboration must include employers, whose involvement is essential to shaping program design, supporting delivery, and connecting participants to employment after release.

Explore Flexible Program Models and Strengthen Transitions

Apprenticeship programs in correctional settings should be designed with flexibility in

how and where key components are delivered. Programs can sequence related technical instruction during incarceration, continue on-the-job training after release, or use hybrid models that combine in-facility and community-based employment. This flexibility is critical at transition points, where programs are often disrupted by release or limited coordination with employers. To support continuity, apprenticeships should extend beyond the facility and connect to postrelease training and employment.

Support Learners Through Training and Transition

Programs should be designed around the full learner experience. Participants often need support beyond occupational training, including employability skills, digital literacy, and reentry planning and navigation. Outcomes are stronger when these supports are embedded as core program components.

Mentorship is an area where apprenticeship programs in corrections may need to expand beyond the standard model. Although RA requires on-the-job mentors to assess skill and competency development and provide workplace guidance, learners who are incarcerated often need additional support to address both immediate needs and longer term reentry goals. Layered mentorship approaches, such as pairing employer-based mentors with peer mentors or reentry staff, can help participants manage program expectations while also navigating the transition back to the community.

Use Data for Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement should be built into program design from the start. In the IET projects, programs were stronger when staff had structured ways to gather and use feedback from participants, instructors, employers, and partners. Piloting new approaches before full implementation allowed teams to test strategies, identify challenges, and refine the model. For apprenticeship programs in corrections, regularly reviewing participation, completion, transitions, postrelease outcomes, and learners' and employers' experiences can strengthen implementation and support sustained investment.

Plan for the Time and Capacity Needed for Effective Implementation

High-quality apprenticeship programs in correctional settings require time, staffing, and sustained investment. The IET projects highlighted the level of effort needed to design and implement programs, coordinate partnerships, and adapt curriculum. Correctional facilities and their partners should allocate dedicated staff capacity for RA implementation and establish structures to support this work, including clear roles and accountability, stipends, and protected planning time for instructors and program staff.

OPPORTUNITIES TO RETHINK AND EXPAND APPRENTICESHIP IN CORRECTIONS

Apprenticeship programs in correctional settings offer a pathway to quality careers, but current models must be strengthened to realize that potential. Many programs remain limited in scope and are not well connected to employment opportunities beyond the facility, making it harder for participants to continue their pathway after release. Lessons from IET, along with growing federal investment, can strengthen programs in ways that better support participants before, during, and after release.

The path forward is not just expanding apprenticeships but improving outcomes for participants. More collaborative, comprehensive, and demand-driven approaches will be critical to helping individuals prepare for and navigate reentry and secure family-sustaining careers.

Lessons from the IET project show clear opportunities to strengthen program design and implementation. Facilities and their partners already have a strong foundation in place. By expanding existing workforce efforts into apprenticeship programs and strengthening connections to employers and transition supports, they can better position participants for long-term success after release. ⌘

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A KEY PIECE OF THE PUZZLE: THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATED ENGLISH LITERACY AND CIVICS EDUCATION PROGRAMS TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

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ABSTRACT

Though debates around immigration policy remain contentious, immigrants make up an essential part of the economy, accounting for one out of every six workers in the United States. Despite this reality, workforce development programs and other efforts to upskill workers are generally not designed to serve immigrants, particularly those learning English. Over the past decade, adult education providers have developed many innovative models and practices that build pipelines for immigrant workers to fill in-demand jobs. These programs, often created as part of the Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) program, offer critical lessons for efforts to include immigrants in broader workforce development strategies. Through practices like bridge programs and individualized tutoring, IELCE providers have developed important strategies that help immigrants who are learning English to build new skills, participate in workforce training, and earn in-demand credentials. Given their workforce-oriented goals, these programs could also be meaningful investments for new and existing funding for preapprenticeship or other workforce programs. Policymakers and other stakeholders designing workforce development policy should examine the lessons from IELCE programs, and providers should seek to share their experiences more widely to help inform these growing efforts.

Keywords: immigrant integration, adult ESL, Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE), adult education, workforce development

A KEY PIECE OF THE PUZZLE: THE IMPORTANCE OF IELCE PROGRAMS TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

Political debates around immigration policy remain contentious, but there is no denying that immigrants are a crucial part of the workforce of the United States. Immigrants account for more than one in six workers in the U.S. (Batalova, 2026), and immigrants, as well as their children, have comprised the entirety of the growth of the labor force since 2000 (Batalova et al., 2024). Without immigrants and their children, the United States would have lost more than 8 million adults of prime working age in the same time period (Batalova et al., 2024). Immigrants fill a variety of important jobs, ranging from highly educated workers in tech, science, or medicine to those who provide essential labor in sectors like agriculture, transportation, and construction (Batalova et al., 2024; Dept. of Labor, 2026).

Yet conversations about workforce development policy frequently ignore the reality that in most parts of the country, efforts to address unmet labor needs in critical industries or create

programs that prepare workers for the economy of the future will inevitably encounter immigrants. Including immigrants in efforts to upskill workers is not just about responding to demographic realities. It also creates a win-win situation through which employers find the skilled workers they need, local economies grow, and immigrants and the communities they live in prosper.

Accounting for immigrants in larger efforts to build talent pipelines is a challenging puzzle, but it is one that the adult education sector is already well-versed at solving due to decades of experience serving this population. Rather than continuing to be overlooked, the expertise of local adult education providers in building innovative models to support the upskilling of immigrants should inform national, state, and local strategies on workforce development.

Barriers to Success

Efforts to create pathways for immigrants to fill in-demand jobs frequently run into common barriers. These include a range of challenges participants themselves face, such as possessing credentials or education from other countries that are not recognized in the U.S., as well as many immigrants' limited eligibility for public assistance programs that often support participation in workforce programs for U.S.–born adults (Batalova & Fix, 2021; Hofstetter & Cherewka, 2022; Lacarte et al., 2024). But perhaps the most widespread barrier is the fact that millions of immigrants have limited proficiency in English, accounting for 47% of the foreign-born population, or 23.5 million individuals, in 2024 (Batalova, 2026).

Outside of some long-standing workplace literacy programs, most traditional workforce development programs are not designed for adults who are learning English. Workforce instruction that includes advanced, technical vocabulary is usually provided only in English, and most programs are not equipped to assist participants who are also still learning to navigate American society as well as workplace and job search norms (Hofstetter & Cherewka, 2022). As a result, workforce development programs that may be theoretically open to immigrant participants are often not accessible for those learning English.

Innovating Through IELCE

Adult education providers across all 50 states have been experimenting and innovating in this space over the past 10 years, thanks to the Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education, or IELCE, program. Established by Section 243 of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014, IELCE programs receive 12% of federal funding for WIOA Title II and are intended to combine adult English instruction and workforce activities in order to support participants' entry into in-demand jobs (Hofstetter & Cherewka, 2022). To meet this requirement, programs must offer participants access to Integrated Education and Training (IET) activities (Hofstetter & Cherewka, 2022).

These requirements mean that IELCE programs funded under Section 243 have three primary components: English instruction, civics content, and workforce activities. For example, a local adult education provider might develop an IELCE program to fill a demand in their region for certified nursing assistants (CNAs). In this hypothetical program, participants would receive English instruction contextualized for the healthcare field, civics content that explores

professional norms for working with American patients, and workforce training (often delivered through a partnership with a training provider) that grants those who complete the program with an industry-recognized credential.

Since IELCE's implementation, local adult education providers across the country have been engaged in the challenging work of combining these services for participants. This has included finding ways to customize and contextualize English instruction for specific career paths and workforce programs, building partnerships with local workforce development providers, and creating class schedules that allow for participants who are working to complete the program (Hofstetter & Cherewka, 2022). Due to these efforts, IELCE providers and state-level administrators have developed a unique understanding of how to build workforce programs that can successfully serve immigrants.

Providers have also developed innovative approaches and strategies, many of which help smooth the bumps that often frustrate efforts to build workforce programs that are accessible to immigrants. To support participants who need improvement in their English skills prior to entering job training, many providers have created bridge programs that provide contextualized instruction with a direct track to IET. To navigate job markets where there are not enough major industries to sustain large classes, some providers have utilized individualized approaches that provide one-on-one instruction for English learners in workforce programs. To address the limited capacity of many adult education programs to offer cost-effective and time-intensive IET programs, other providers have come together to form consortia that deliver IELCE via regional approaches (Hofstetter & Cherewka, 2022).

LOOKING FORWARD

Despite the innovative models it has developed, IELCE receives relatively little attention and funding—roughly $86 million in Fiscal Year 2025 (Moore, 2025). These dollars are allocated to states based on a formula, leaving some states with as little as $60,000 per year (Moore, 2025). New challenges at the federal level, such as proposed cuts to federal funding for adult education and the attempted implementation of new immigration status requirements for WIOA Title II programs, have also disrupted the work of local IELCE providers, creating a new layer of uncertainty for programs with already limited capacity (Hofstetter, 2026).

At the same time, the programs that IELCE providers have built also have potential applications beyond WIOA Title II. Models that local providers have developed could be leveraged to create preapprenticeship programs and could also represent meaningful investments for new and existing workforce dollars—like WIOA Title I funds—that provide similar services but frequently struggle to serve immigrant workers.

As governors, legislators, advocates, and others look for ways to expand and improve their efforts in workforce development, immigrants will be a key population to consider. Including immigrants in such efforts is complex, but there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Adult education programs, particularly IELCE providers, are already doing this work and have important lessons to offer. They have insights and expertise built and tested by confronting this complicated and important work since the passage of WIOA. But uncovering

the importance of models from the IELCE program cannot be solely the responsibility of those focused on workforce development policy. Local providers and state administrators should also recognize the value of their programs and take steps to provide the important contributions they can make to this growing national conversation. ⌘

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ADULT EDUCATION AS A MEDIATING INSTITUTION IN WORKFORCE INTEGRATION FOR ADULT IMMIGRANT LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant workforce integration is often limited by gaps between prior education and U.S. employment outcomes. This reflection reframes adult education as a talent pipeline that aligns immigrants' existing skills with labor market needs. It highlights how programs leverage learners' professional backgrounds through language development, credential navigation, and career-focused training to accelerate workforce entry. It examines persistent obstacles such as limited recognition of foreign credentials, linguistic inequities, and fragmented support systems and shows how thoughtful program design, workforce alignment, and employer engagement can mitigate them. When structured as pipeline mechanisms, adult education programs do more than facilitate job placement; they strengthen professional identity and support long-term economic mobility. The article offers practice-based recommendations for educators, researchers, and policymakers to optimize adult education as an equity-driven workforce strategy, underscoring its critical role in improving workforce utilization and advancing inclusive economic growth.

Keywords: occupational downgrading, immigrant learners, internationally trained professionals, English language learners, workforce integration

EARLY BEGINNINGS

My work in adult education began as an instructor at a career and technical college, where I taught evening classes to adults balancing work, family, and other responsibilities while pursuing education or new careers. I later transitioned to teaching adult English language learners in community and college settings, broadening my perspective and deepening my purpose. Across these contexts, I encountered committed learners, many of them immigrants, rebuilding their professional lives in the United States. Engineers driving for ride-share services, physicians working in childcare, and educators in retail illustrated occupational downgrading. These experiences revealed not only frustration and loss of professional identity, but also remarkable resilience and determination. Witnessing these journeys reshaped my view of adult education as a space for restoration and empowerment.

REFRAMING THE PHENOMENON

Occupational downgrading is well documented in the United States, particularly among highly educated immigrants whose credentials and professional experience are often unrecognized

in host country labor markets (He, 2025; Li & Lu, 2023). As a result, many experience downward mobility and work in low-wage jobs despite substantial education and expertise. Existing research frequently explains this phenomenon through individual human capital deficits, such as limited English proficiency or lack of U.S. credentials (Richwine, 2022; Xie, 2024). While valid, these explanations often obscure the institutional processes that shape how skills are evaluated and valued. I argue that adult education, especially adult English, workforce, and bridge programs, should be understood as mediating institutions that intervene between individuals and labor market structures. The question then is not whether adult education participates in workforce integration, but how it does so, and to what end.

ADULT EDUCATION AS A MEDIATING INSTITUTION

Through years of experience in adult education, I have come to understand the field as a mediating institution, one that bridges individuals and larger systems including labor markets, credentialing bodies, and broader social structures. In this role, adult education does more than teach skills; it translates, connects, and advocates on learners' behalf. This mediating role operates across several dimensions. Credential mediation helps learners navigate degree evaluations, licensure requirements, and alternative certification pathways. Many adult education programs also offer career pathways advising tied to learners' prior professions and bridge programs for internationally trained professionals. Linguistic mediation moves beyond general English instruction to occupation-specific language that supports professional reentry. Cultural mediation develops professional norms, networks, and forms of cultural capital that are typically assumed rather than taught. Finally, advocacy mediation extends beyond the classroom as programs engage institutions and policymakers to elevate adult education as a vital field and promote recognition of international education and experience.

THE DILEMMA AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Adult education is frequently evaluated using indicators such as enrollment, retention, and basic-skill gains that emphasize rapid entry into the workforce. While these measures are important, they often privilege short-term outcomes at the expense of learners' long-term trajectories. This narrow focus can inadvertently normalize occupational downgrading as a successful endpoint rather than a transitional condition. Such framing invites critical reflection on the purpose of adult education: whether it is designed merely to help learners survive economically or to support them in reclaiming professional identity, dignity, and aspiration. Reimagining success to include upward mobility, credential recognition, and meaningful career alignment challenges deficit-based narratives and affirms adult education's broader role in equity and social transformation.

If adult education is to truly function as a mediating institution, its pedagogy must be deliberately and thoughtfully designed to fulfill that same mediating role. This requires creating learning experiences contextualized to learners' professional backgrounds and future goals, rather than relying on generic content. Instruction should be asset based, drawing on learners' knowledge and expertise. It should be navigational, explicitly teaching credential

evaluation, transcript validation, and networking. Finally, it should be reflective, guiding learners to examine structural barriers to navigate and thoughtfully question U.S. systems.

When these principles are applied, instruction becomes transformative: A workplace communication lesson can help a former manager reclaim authority, and a unit on credential evaluation can reopen pathways for a former nurse. In my own practice, the most impactful moments occur when learners clearly see how learning connects to their past identities, present realities, and future aspirations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This reflection suggests several forward-looking considerations for adult education programs, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

Adult education programs should deliberately align with workforce systems to expand access to meaningful credentials and career pathways. This alignment must be paired with critical attention to structural inequities, including biased hiring and uneven credential recognition that affect immigrant and marginalized learners. Balancing system navigation with advocacy enables adult education to promote equitable mobility and inclusive workforce development.

Adult education practitioners should be supported in developing expertise beyond instruction to include career navigation and systems advocacy. In a complex workforce landscape, foundational skills alone are insufficient without guidance on credentialing, career pathways, and professional mobility. Practitioners need time, training, and institutional support to help learners navigate labor markets and licensure systems and advocate for equitable recognition of prior education and experience.

Researchers should frame adult education as a talent pipeline strategy by examining long-term career progression, not just access or initial job placement. Metrics like enrollment and completion fail to capture whether learners reenter their fields or advance professionally. Longitudinal research is essential to assess how programs support credential alignment, career mobility, and sustained integration, strengthening adult education's role in connecting immigrant talent to workforce demand and maximizing human capital.

Finally, policymakers must recognize and adequately fund the expanded role adult education plays in workforce development, immigrant integration, and economic mobility. Adult education programs act as navigators, credentialing intermediaries, and advocates, supporting immigrant adults who strengthen the talent pipeline. Sustained investment builds pathways and partnerships that promote long-term mobility beyond rapid workforce entry.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

From an adult education perspective, occupational downgrading is a systemic issue, not an individual failing. Learners do not arrive empty; they arrive misrecognized. To function as a mediating institution is to take that misrecognition seriously and to work intentionally and persistently to correct it. At its best, adult education does more than prepare individuals for

workforce participation; it helps restore alignment between who learners are, what they know, and what they can contribute to society. That work goes beyond integration. It is, fundamentally, an act of restoration. ⌘

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TEACHING IS ONLY THE BEGINNING: WHAT A DECADE OF EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS TAUGHT US

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ABSTRACT

For decades, workplace literacy programs have connected immigrant workers with the English language skills they need to advance, while offering employers a meaningful investment in their workforce. But a decade of experience at one community-based literacy organization (CBLO) has shown that the work is more complex than it might appear. This reflection draws on that experience to share four lessons for CBLOs navigating employer partnerships. First, a transferable curriculum framework creates consistency across partners, but continuous needs assessment is what keeps instruction responsive to learners. Second, effective partnerships require ongoing navigation between employer expectations and learner realities, a function that requires explicit planning and staffing. Third, employer interest is not the same as employer readiness; the administrative and relational factors required to sustain a partnership are often underestimated on both sides. Fourth, the most meaningful outcomes of this work are real but often invisible to the accountability and assessment tools the field currently relies on. The talent pipeline runs through relationships. Workforce development works when it meets adult learners where they are, builds trust over time with employers and learners alike, and embraces the variability in each partnership.

Keywords: adult education, ESOL, workplace literacy, workplace English, curriculum design

INTRODUCTION

The call seemed straightforward enough. A local employer wanted to offer English language classes to their employees. We wanted to serve adult learners who couldn't access our regular class options. On paper, it was the kind of win-win that grant narratives are built around.

A decade and dozens of cohorts later, we know it was never that simple. The complexity, it turns out, is what taught us the most.

The English Empowerment Center has received federal adult education funding for more than 15 years. Our Destination Workforce® program grew from that work. Launched in 2015, it brings career-specific language instruction to worksites, built on the premise that learning contextualized around the actual demands of the daily work environment would accelerate both language development and career advancement. Our partners have spanned hotels, restaurants, facilities services, senior living, landscaping, and university support operations as well as community organizations looking to complement their own services.

What follows are four lessons that may resonate with other community-based literacy organizations (CBLOs) navigating the opportunities and challenges of employer-partnered classes.

LESSONS LEARNED

Structure Creates Consistency and Needs Assessment Ensures Relevance

Our curriculum framework has worked across industries. Built around five competency areas, it addresses not only communication with coworkers, supervisors, and customers but also conflict management, active listening, and confidence that make employees adaptable. Employers gravitated toward soft skills and communication breakdowns most visible from a supervisor's vantage point. So we developed a workplace interaction scenario tool to help employers clarify what they wanted us to address. But 30 to 50 hours of instruction goes quickly. Incorporating both the employer's priorities and the learner's development in the same class took more intentionality than we initially expected.

This mirrors an earlier reflection from the field. Uvin (1996) described spending 90+ hours on exhaustive needs analysis for a workplace ESOL course (shadowing workers, interviewing supervisors, patients, and administrators) only to conclude that the course ultimately failed his students. The curriculum had captured the job demands but left no room for learners to voice their own priorities. Needs assessment should be ongoing with opportunities for employers and learners to articulate their priorities. And even with a structured framework, instruction must be regularly adapted based on what that process reveals.

Partnerships Require Guiding Employers, Not Just Teaching Learners

The negotiation between employer priorities and learner needs did not end when the class started. It continued across the life of every partnership, requiring work that looked less like teaching and more like coaching on both sides.

We found this out gradually. Employers have reasonable questions about what instruction can accomplish. Learners have goals and daily pressures that are not always visible to their employers. Without someone actively bridging those perspectives, even well-designed classes could disappoint. We became mediators in both directions: helping employers understand what realistic progress looks like, and helping learners navigate cultural and linguistic workplace norms.

This coaching and navigation function is rarely written into job descriptions or grant narratives, but programs need to staff and plan for it explicitly.

Employer Readiness Matters as Much as Interest

Interest in partnering with us was rarely the obstacle. Readiness was.

In many partnerships, our primary contact was a single person in human resources or operations carrying out a full portfolio of other responsibilities. That person had to navigate internal processes we couldn't always see: securing leadership sign-off, arranging shift coverage, and getting approvals for time off or pay during class hours. For smaller companies especially, the administrative lift was significant, and in our earlier years, we did not always acknowledge it clearly enough in how we framed the partnership. Some of our most complex cohorts involved a single class of employees from the same company who had different job functions, supervisors, English usage, and schedules.

The ask was significant. So, too, was the return.

Workers noticed when their employer invested in them. One learner shared: "It means so much to me [to work] for people who really care and want me to do well." Employers noticed too: Staff fluent in English at one site began asking to learn Spanish, inspired by their coworkers' determination. At another, supervisors who once described staff as reluctant to speak up found themselves being asked when the next class would start.

This raises the question for the small CBLO that is invariably planning other programs, such as family learning, digital literacy, tutoring, citizenship, or other skills-focused programming: whether designing and running a customized class for one employer is the best use of organizational capacity. Can this curriculum be reused for future employers? Can it be reformulated to offer a different version to the same students if the employer chooses to repeat the class? Does it allow new students to join partway through the relationship? While there is arguably some inefficiency in these courses, the concentrated feedback loop between the employer, the learners in the class, and the CBLO is very valuable in gaining experience in developing practical classes that address known workplace challenges. These learnings can be amplified in other programs developed by the CBLO.

Impact Is Real but Not Always Easy to Measure

NRS guidance in 2021 has opened a promising pathway through progress toward agreed-upon milestones, beyond pre- and posttest results. In theory, this suits the work we do. However, securing that level of employer engagement (articulating measurable milestones and maintaining progress reporting throughout) is harder than the guidance implies. Most employers find it difficult to do so—not for lack of willingness, but because that kind of workforce planning infrastructure is rarely in place.

But measurement challenges run deeper than policy. What we hear from employer partners (sometimes years later) are the stories. Following a food service cohort, two employees were promoted (one to sous chef, another to executive chef) and one restaurant reported increased revenue. At another business, employees began initiating conversations with their HR manager and making requests with confidence. One learner captures it well: "I was promoted yesterday. Now I have to use the computer to make and print reports for housekeeping and the front desk. I thought, 'this is so hard!' But, yesterday I did it."

These outcomes, along with the PR value of an employer being lauded for investing in their employees, are real but difficult to aggregate and often invisible to the monitoring systems we have. A program's impact can be genuine and meaningful yet still not appear in a data dashboard.

WHAT A DECADE TEACHES US

Looking back, we find ourselves even more convinced that employer-partnered adult education is worth doing and clearer eyed about what it requires.

The talent pipeline metaphor captures something true and important. It also leaves something out. The distance between a learner walking into a workplace class and an employer investing in their workforce is filled with relationship management, needs assessment, coaching, and

sustained trust building. If adult education is going to continue to make good on the workforce partnership promise (and we believe it can), policymakers and funders need to understand what that actually requires. Not just classroom hours, but the infrastructure of the work that surrounds them. ⌘

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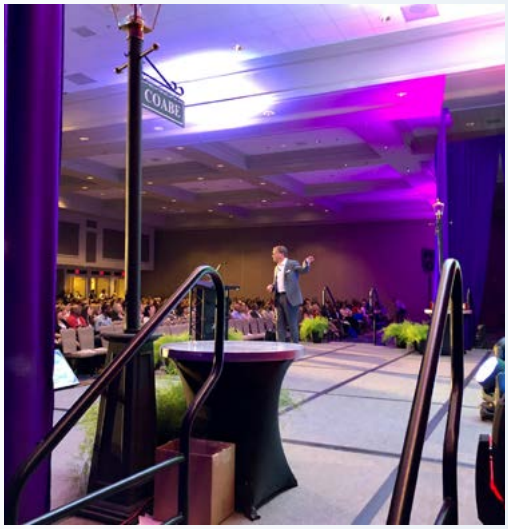

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