

**College Opportunities for Adult Learners in the  
City University of New York System**

**Position Paper – Executive Summary**

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*Millions of adult students are seeking degrees in a system built largely for – and around – traditional students.  
We must recognize this paradox if we hope to fully educate our workforce.  
Lumina Foundation, 2007.*

**Higher Education Attainment in the United States and New York State**

The United States college completion rate has been stagnant since the 1970s and is falling behind other developed nations. The US ranked 14<sup>th</sup> worldwide in higher education attainment in 2012.<sup>i</sup> President Obama’s administration established a 2020 goal to restore US to the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.<sup>ii</sup> To accomplish this goal the US will have to increase by 50%, or 8 million, the number of U.S. residents who earn at least an associate’s degree.<sup>iii</sup> To achieve this goal, adult and worker learners must be included as a focal point in higher education strategies.

**Unique Needs of Adult Learners**

In 2007 Lumina Foundation issued the “*Returning to Learning: Adult’s Success in College is a Key to America’s Future*”, arguing that too often “adult learners have typically been treated as an afterthought in higher education” (p. 3). Adult learners have unique challenges including struggles with balancing work and family responsibilities, difficulties adapting to an education system designed to serve a younger population, challenges in adapting their lives to institutions that serve full-time students and tend to pursue education through the Continuing Education / Non-Credit bearing units of higher education institutions only later to learn they must build college credit to pursue credentials that advance their careers.

Being an adult learner is sufficient condition to be considered an “at risk” – with different “risk levels” depending on the student’s personal circumstances and characteristics. Adult learners experience an array of challenges including inconvenient hours of student services; complicated processes that prevent worker-learners from enrolling as they balance family, work obligations; “college readiness” measurements based standards set for traditional students, while ignoring the experience and persistence skills possessed by adult learners; course and program structures inadequate for fulltime workers; delays in time to completion due to difficulties in transferring credits; ineffective remedial education programs that are not supportive of adult learning styles; and educational pathways that are misaligned to career pathways.

**CUNY and Adult Learners**

Data reported by NCES in 2014, in the CUNY system from 20 to 45 percent of the students enrolled in 17 of their 18 campuses are adults.<sup>iv</sup> Adult learners are typically underreported, because percentages of adult learners do not include the large numbers of adult learners enrolled through schools of continuing

education, as non-matriculated students, in remedial courses, and in non-credential-based training programs (Pusser 2007, p.7).

In addition to adult learners, CUNY serves significant numbers of students also considered at-risk. Enrollment data about CUNY colleges published by NCES in 2014 show that twelve of the eighteen CUNY schools are Hispanic Serving Institutions – that is, 25% or more of the students enrolled are Hispanic/Latino. In eleven schools at least 20% of the students are Black or African American. Compared to other colleges in the US and in NYS, the CUNY system provides education services to a significantly large number of “at risk students”.

### **Proposal for an Adult Learners Centralized Institutional Unit**

Research points out that even when leaders in higher education are aware of the needs of adult learners, the institutional actions and strategies to serve them are “neither generally systemic nor empirically based. Nor do they sufficiently account for the diverse identities, characteristics, and needs of the adult learner population” (Pusser, p.7). The misconception that adult students’ education is circumscribed to the school of continuing education has systematically neglected a significant part of the student body in the US and individual institutions. Increasingly, adult learners require full integration into the credit bearing side of college to advance along career pathways, as well as the wraparound services to support their success.

Higher education’s current structure and set of priorities is what prevents the success of adult learners. (Hoffman and Reindl, p. 9). Institutions need to synchronize the efforts of multiple divisions and departments to improve the services and programs that will help these students succeed in college. The systemic coordination and articulation of services and initiatives are more necessary when the implementation of policy includes and impacts a multiplicity of campuses and service units.

The 1199SEIU Training and Employment Funds proposes the creation of a centralized unit for adult learners. The function of such a unit could include evidenced-based practices for adult learners:

#### ***Single Point of Contact***

A “single point of contact for returning adults” (Lane et.al, p. 11) has been identified as a successful strategy where adults will be welcomed and provided support. It is too often the case that colleges that belong to the same higher education system develop different policies to deal with identical issues, such as admission and transfer policies. The lack of consistency delays the time to degree completion. Facilitating administrative processes for this population will significantly improve the retention and completion of these students.

A single point of contact or entry for all adult learners has been a successful best practice at institutions such as Penn State and Mohawk Valley Community College in NY and in university systems, like University of Wisconsin. The units of adult learners handle administrative processes and support services, while respecting the autonomy of degree programs and academic departments.

#### ***Handling the College Application, Admission, and Transferring Processes***

The institutional autonomy that characterizes higher education colleges and universities open the space for implementation of policies and procedures that inadvertently prevent adult learners from applying

and enrolling in school. All application, admission, and transferring process should be reviewed in the light of the need of: increasing education attainment, increase enrollment of adult learners in postsecondary education, and support workers and the economy by developing a better educated and skilled workforce. The Adult Learner Unit could handle:

- Review admission policies and requirements for adult learners, including the use of standardized tests. Consider alternative admission requirements such as interviews, application essays, and previous higher education experience.
- Institutionalize “Prior Learning Assessment” and encourage transferability of credits earned through PLA. Work with national organizations that evaluate prior learning.
- Evaluate transcript records of potential and enrolled students to reduce the redundant duplicity of knowledge earned in previous institutions.
- Articulate transfer agreements among colleges within the system and engage in transfer agreements with independent institutions – make the transferring process as seamless as possible.

### ***Offering Strong Career Counseling and Academic Advising***

Provide academic and career counseling customized specifically for this adult learners and working students.

- Take into account the availability of programs within the entire CUNY system, not only those within one college, and at all education levels (from certificate to graduate programs). Assist students with transferring to the most appropriate program of study within and between colleges to meet their career goals.
- Develop education pathways within one discipline (Degree Mapping), taking into account the student’s immediate career goals and the availability of jobs in the industry.
- Make sure that students know the next steps required to transition to higher levels of education.

### ***Center for Innovation and Program Incubator***

Conceptualization and monitoring of pilot projects, development of innovative pedagogical strategies, and assessment of initiatives can be centralized. A Center for Innovation for adult learners can develop programs that are designed to specifically meet the needs of workers-learners and are aligned to industry career pathways. What works should be scaled and reproduced, and even become system-wide policy.

- Develop and offer faculty training to use and implement the best pedagogical strategies for adult learners.
- Develop innovative curricula, contextualize learning, and insert innovative pedagogical approaches, such as the I-BEST model and bridges to college that contextualize learning with workplace skills. Assess the success of the programs. Encourage successful models to be implemented in the individual campuses.
- To facilitate transition from lower to higher levels of education, develop certificate programs that incorporate academic credit that can be counted toward a college degree completion across CUNY colleges.

- Make sure that campuses are offering programs of study that can be started and completed while attending school on a part-time basis. Many programs require students to attend school on a full-time basis making it impossible for a working student to finish their program of study or discouraging many from applying to these programs of study.
- Establish the grounds to incorporate competency based courses and hybrid courses in the traditional curricula.
- Create innovative programs, such as “retrieval” programs which reconnect adults who have some previous college credit to accelerated completion programs.<sup>v</sup>
- Serve as a location to leverage existing state and federal policy to advantage adult and worker learners, such as the NY State Education Department Program that enables people with 24 general education credits to qualify for high school diplomas.<sup>vi</sup>

### ***Conducting Research and Assessment of Adult Education***

One of the main obstacles to develop institutional policy leading to increase adult learners’ success is the lack of availability of data about these students and analysis of their needs and risk factors. The centralized unit would serve as a center for research in action, conducting rigorous evaluation into pilot projects and other adult learner focused programs across CUNY. The unit can assess the success of pilot projects and innovative programs, publish the results, and reproduce what works across CUNY.<sup>vii</sup>

### ***Industry and Union Partnerships for Workforce Development Outcomes –***

The disconnection between the needs of the industry and what higher education institutions are providing to students (knowledge and skills) has to be addressed and quickly. In today’s economy all industries are making rapid changes in technology, productivity, and service delivery models. To meet the workforce and economic needs of NYC, the Adult Learner Unit should:

- Partner with union training entities to understand the need for new programs or curricula content changes based on the specific industry needs. Programs could be offered in partnership with CUNY campuses where appropriate. Such programs might include Health Educators or medical transcriptionists, but need not be confined to the health care industry. Partner to apply for grants and other sources of funding, including government financial support for workforce development.
- Facilitate internships of students in the industries before graduation and provide them with the experience required for employment.

### ***Providing Wraparound Support Services***

Support services that complement the student’s coursework and facilitate the student’s ability to attend class and do the work are crucial for the adult learner success. The new unit can:

- Coordinate childcare or preschool services within the education system or offered by private providers.
- Facilitate the availability of academic services being provided outside regular working hours (9 to 5) and explore the possibility of providing services online.
- Make sure that the institutional units or colleges are offering the necessary courses during weekends and the evening.

The Adult and Worker Learner Centralized Unit should be a place that solves problems unique to non-traditional students, including facilitating policy and practice reviews that present unnecessary barriers to higher education, innovative programs that promote adult student success, rapid design of new programs aligned to industry needs, and support systems and initiatives that accelerate completion.

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<sup>i</sup> There are 34 countries members of the OECD.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/higher-education>.

<sup>iii</sup> US Department of Education. 2011. *Meeting the Nation's 2020 Goal: State Targets for Increasing the Number and Percentage of College Graduates with Degrees*. March, 18. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/guid/secletter/110323insert.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> The Stella and Charles Guttman Community College is a school focused on traditional students and admitted students for the first time in September, 2011.

<sup>v</sup> Census data indicates that 22% of the adult population in the US has earned college credits but have not completed a degree. These have been identified as the “ready adults”, the “stop-outs”, or the “near completers” (Lane 2012, x). The “ready adults” are an easy to target group that will quickly help to reach the nation and state’s achievement goals.

<sup>vi</sup> This strategy is particularly important in NYC where credential evaluation can be challenging, given limited available of records from countries of origin for many immigrants.

<sup>vii</sup> Successful programs for traditional students, such as ASAP and CUNY START, began as pilot programs and were later reproduced in multiple colleges across CUNY.