



# Building Equitable Pathways to Careers:

A toolkit inspired by a California Community Colleges community of practice

# Centering Adult Learners

Adult learners<sup>1</sup> are a critical student population in the California Community Colleges system. They provide valuable contributions to classrooms based on their life experiences, hold great promise to meet workforce needs, and are substantial in number across the California Community Colleges system. Colleges have an important opportunity to transform their institutions to better serve current and potential adult learners.

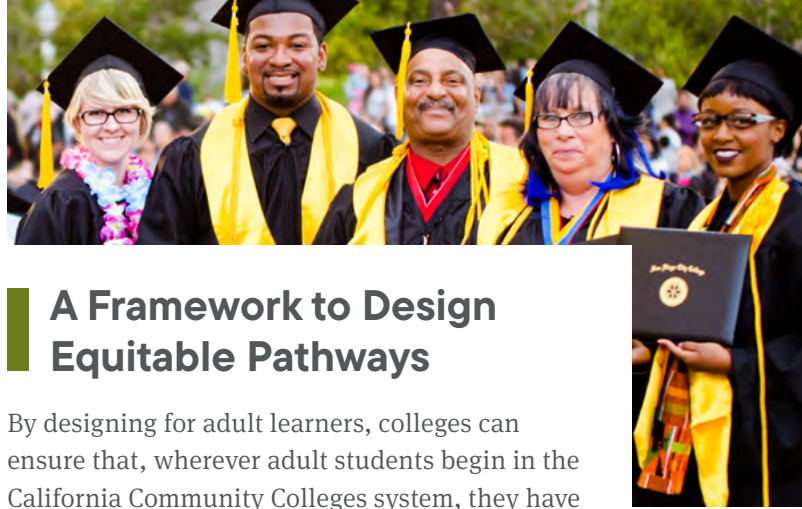
More than 4 in 10 current students in the California Community Colleges are age 25-plus, totaling nearly 1 million students. They may grow as a share of the total student population as the number of high school graduates declines over the next decade (State of California Department of Finance, 2023). Supporting adult learners is an equity imperative because people of color comprise more than half of current adult learners in the California Community Colleges and more than half of potential future learners — 6.8 million Californians ages 25-54 with a high school diploma and no postsecondary credential (California Competes, 2021).

Vision 2030 recognizes that adult learners are an important population to focus on when pursuing transformational change. This includes the vital work of taking college to learners that the system has not yet reached.

The California Community Colleges system is poised to serve as the main engine of economic and social mobility for adult learners and, in turn, develop a more skilled workforce for the state. To do this, we must respond to changing demographics by transforming our pathways, policies, and practices to respond to adult learners' unique needs.

**Adult learners need more accessible, stackable, flexible, and relevant instruction that students can complete anywhere and anytime** (UPCEA and Thinking Cap Agency, 2021).

<sup>1</sup>Data on adult learners includes students age 25-plus. However, the suggested policies and practices are meant to serve students of any age who have life circumstances more typical of adult learners, such as working, caring for dependents (children, parents, siblings), and/or being financially independent.



## A Framework to Design Equitable Pathways

By designing for adult learners, colleges can ensure that, wherever adult students begin in the California Community Colleges system, they have a transparent path to a high-value postsecondary credential and family-sustaining wages. To support those efforts, this toolkit details the process that 22 colleges participating in the Racial Equity for Adult Credentials in Higher Education (REACH) Collaborative used to develop pathways inclusive of adult learners. The national [REACH Collaborative](#) developed a three-pillar framework for designing academic pathways for Black, Hispanic, Latinx, and Native American adult learners:

- 1. Credentials to Degrees Pathways:** By stacking short-term credentials in a sequence that leads to an associate degree, students can start to make faster academic and career gains, allowing them to apply for higher-wage jobs more quickly while continuing to grow their skills and work toward larger goals.
- 2. Bundled and Sequenced Supports:** Combining academic supports, like tutoring and nonacademic or basic needs supports, in a sequence that is designed to meet adult students' needs at each stage of their college journey proactively eliminates barriers to success.
- 3. Culturally Sustaining Practices:** Culturally sustaining practices are designed to embrace students' lived experiences and contribute to their sense of belonging in college.

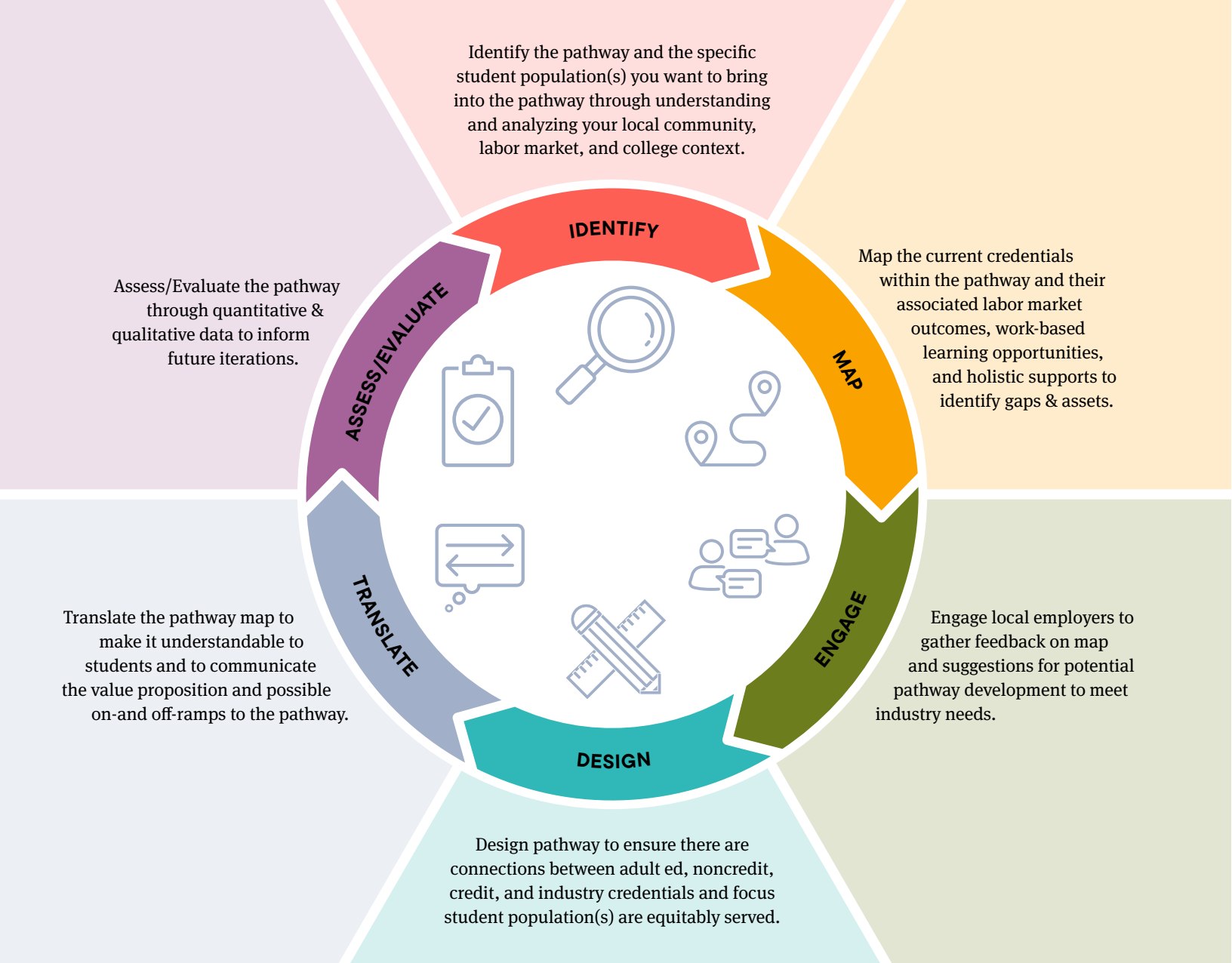
On behalf of the Chancellor’s Office, the Success Center tailored REACH for the California Community Colleges system, integrating it into existing **Guided Pathways** efforts. REACH colleges expanded on their Guided Pathways work by aiming to **clarify paths** that provide students streamlined entry points and exits to jobs with living wages; **help students enter paths** through outreach; **help students stay on paths** with culturally sustaining supports; and **ensure students are learning** the right skills by engaging employers. From August 2021 through December 2024, 22 California colleges implementing Guided Pathways engaged in REACH.



When developing pathways within the Equitable Pathways to Careers design process, it is essential to keep equity at the forefront. According to the California Community Colleges Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Glossary of Terms, “equity” is “the condition under which individuals are provided the **resources** they need to have access to the same opportunities as the general population.

Equity **accounts for systematic inequalities**, meaning the distribution of resources provides more for those who need it most. Conversely, “equality” indicates “uniformity where everything is evenly distributed among people.” To reach the goal of racial equity for adult credentials in higher education, we must move beyond uniformity toward supporting the success of disproportionately impacted students, resulting in an educational system where outcomes cannot be predicted by race.

Designing pathways that are more inclusive of adult learners of color is one way to begin dismantling the structures that have resulted in an overrepresentation of people of color achieving short-term credentials that do not provide a living wage and economic mobility. The potential of nondegree credentials to both promote equity and reinforce equities requires thoughtful design.



## How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit uses the Equitable Pathways to Careers Design Process (Figure 1) as a general design template to create pathways that stack high-value credentials — from noncredit certificates to degrees — and embed culturally sustaining supports along the way. The pathway design process builds upon colleges’ existing pathways created within guided pathways. The process is meant to be completed sequentially but is an ongoing, iterative cycle that needs to be continually reevaluated and adjusted. The design process can be used to develop any new or existing discipline pathway.

**Figure 1.** *Equitable Pathways to Careers Design Process.*

The following sections of the toolkit will provide more detail on each stage and include associated:

### IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS:

Hands-on do-it-yourself tools that colleges can use to develop their pathway.



### IMPLEMENTATION IN ACTION:

Examples of how others have operationalized this pathway development stage.



# STAGE 1:

**IDENTIFY** the high-value, in-demand pathway of focus and the specific student population(s) you want to bring into the pathway by understanding and analyzing your local community, labor market, and college data.



Before making decisions on how to develop a pathway for adult learners, colleges must first understand their local contexts. From the outset, colleges' regional labor market information should drive pathway development.



## IMPLEMENTATION TOOL:

[REACH Data Deck](#)

The Success Center and WestEd developed customized data decks to support each college. The data deck is designed to build practitioners' understanding of the demographic, economic, and labor market context in each college's service area, enabling them to focus on pathways where credentials and degrees lead to jobs with family-sustaining wages and job growth.



In this first step of the toolkit, colleges can generate their own data for analysis, using the following data points and sources:

INSTITUTIONAL DATA	DATA SOURCES
Enrollment by race, ethnicity, and age	<a href="#"><u>California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Management Information Systems (CCCCO MIS) Data Mart</u></a>
Completion by race, ethnicity, and age	<a href="#"><u>CCCCO MIS Data Mart</u></a>
COMMUNITY DATA	
Service area population by race, ethnicity, and age	<a href="#"><u>U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census</u></a> <a href="#"><u>American Community Survey (ACS) Five-Year Estimates</u></a>
Service area educational attainment by race and ethnicity	<a href="#"><u>U.S. Census Bureau</u></a> <a href="#"><u>ACS Five-Year Estimates</u></a>
Service area population, poverty, and unemployment	<a href="#"><u>California Employment Development Department</u></a>

LOCAL ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY DATA	
Largest industry sector	<a href="#">U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics QCEW</a> <a href="#">Lightcast</a>
Fastest-growing industry projections	<a href="#">U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics QCEW</a> <a href="#">Lightcast</a>
Fastest-growing occupations	<a href="#">U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics</a> <a href="#">Lightcast</a> <a href="#">Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Living Wage Calculator</a>
Highest-paying occupations	<a href="#">U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics</a> <a href="#">Lightcast</a> <a href="#">MIT Living Wage Calculator</a>
Largest occupations	<a href="#">U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics</a> <a href="#">Lightcast</a> <a href="#">MIT Living Wage Calculator</a>
High-demand skills	<a href="#">O*Net</a> <a href="#">Lightcast</a>

The data enable practitioners to identify discipline pathways that can incorporate high-value credentials (including those that third parties offer) that are relevant to the regional economy and may stack toward a degree. By leveraging data, practitioners can identify opportunities to layer content into existing courses to prepare students to test for industry-recognized credentials, making them more competitive in the labor market.

## STAGE 2:

**MAP** the current credentials within the pathway and their associated labor market outcomes, work-based learning opportunities, and holistic supports to identify gaps and assets.



After the high-value pathway is selected in the IDENTIFY stage, map the pathway in its current state. An equitable pathway to careers map should include the following elements:

1. Depicts a **macro-view of all credentials** available within a pathway.
2. Represents the **full trajectory of credentials** (certificates, industry certifications, degrees), including **on-ramps and off-ramps of a pathway**.
3. Shows how credentials **stack** on one another in a cohesive manner to encourage progress and builds students' momentum for future upskilling and credentials.
4. Outlines the **workplace value** (jobs, wages, skills) students receive with each credential attainment.
5. Includes other supports that encourage retention and success for adult learners of color, such as **holistic student supports, culturally sustaining practices, and work-based learning opportunities**.



### IMPLEMENTATION TOOL:

#### [Pathway Mapping Toolkit](#)



The Pathway Mapping Toolkit supports and guides colleges through the mapping process. The mapping process includes three main steps:

1. **Map your pathway:** Create an internal map with all certificates and degrees available in the pathway, holistic student supports, work-based learning opportunities, labor market information, and third-party credentials for each credential.
2. **Test drive your map:** Using a current college schedule, create a one-year schedule for adult students with varying needs (i.e., full time, evening, weekend, part time, online/hybrid).
3. **Mine your map to REACH gold:** Identify the opportunities and gaps in the map to inform the development of student-facing materials that effectively communicate this map and pathway strengths and to identify next steps.

## STAGE 3:

**ENGAGE** local employers to gather feedback on the map and suggestions for potential pathway development to meet industry needs.



It is recommended that colleges engage local employers and industry professionals before making changes to the existing pathway. This provides the opportunity to have employers as co-creators of pathways to ensure that pathways are responsive to and reflect labor market needs. Ideally, the goal is to have ongoing industry/employer engagement to provide consultation and feedback on the pathway. Building stronger relationships with employers over time can also lead to other collaboration, such as work-based learning opportunities.

### IMPLEMENTATION TOOL:

#### Circles of Engagement Activity



Developed by Chabot College's Guided Pathways team with the support of the Center for Strategic Facilitation, the Circles of Engagement activity helps colleges plan for inclusive engagement for both internal and external stakeholders. Specifically, it seeks to understand **who** needs to be engaged, **what level** each stakeholder needs to be engaged at, and **what form(s)** engagement will take. For pathway development, colleges are encouraged to get specific about engagement strategies, especially with external partners such as employers, workforce boards, and community organizations.

## STAGE 4:

**DESIGN** equitable pathways by stacking credentials that progress toward degrees, transfer, and careers.



With a map that provides a macro view of all credentials in a pathway, you can design an educational journey with various entry and exit points that enable adult learners to gradually progress in skills and wage potential while attending to other life responsibilities. The following strategies provide ways to connect credentials from the California Adult Education Program (CAEP), noncredit programs, not-for-credit programs, third-party industry providers, and credit programs into a streamlined pathway toward a degree or transfer. The strategies should be selected based on the needs of the college, industry, and local adult student population.





## PATHWAY ALIGNMENT STRATEGIES

### A. On-ramps to credit programs from CAEP

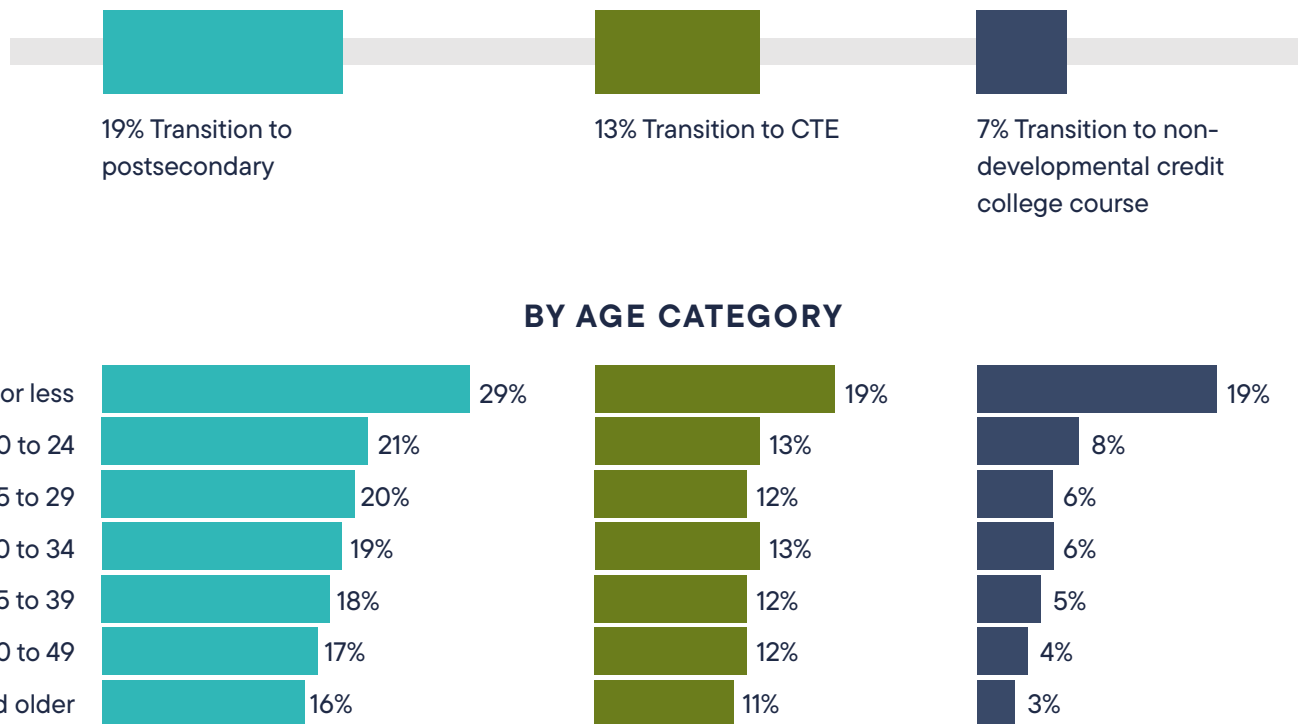
**CAEP consortia** have established programs and systems to support seamless transitions for many Californians who need language, basic skills, and other forms of instruction to reach their academic and career objectives. Thus, CAEP can provide a clear and connected enrollment pipeline for community colleges.

Data from the Adult Education Pipeline dashboard (Figure 2) shows that a relatively low proportion (19%) of CAEP and noncredit students transition to credit pathways. Further, the already low odds of transitioning decrease for students age 25-plus.

Students of color with low incomes are more likely to stop with short-term credentials, even as national data show the economic benefits of degrees and some long-term credentials. This underscores the importance of creating and communicating clear on-ramps to credit and transfer pathways.

Examples of **strategies** to build stronger curricular on-ramps from CAEP include **adult dual enrollment through SB554**, **integrated education and training**<sup>2</sup>, CAEP/community college transition support courses, and bridge programs. Resources are available at the CAEP website, [caladulthood.org](http://caladulthood.org).

<sup>2</sup> Integrated Education and Training: Programs that integrate English as a second language, English, and math skills with occupational training, often involving both basic skills and a career and technical education instructor as co-teachers (High Road Alliance, 2021).

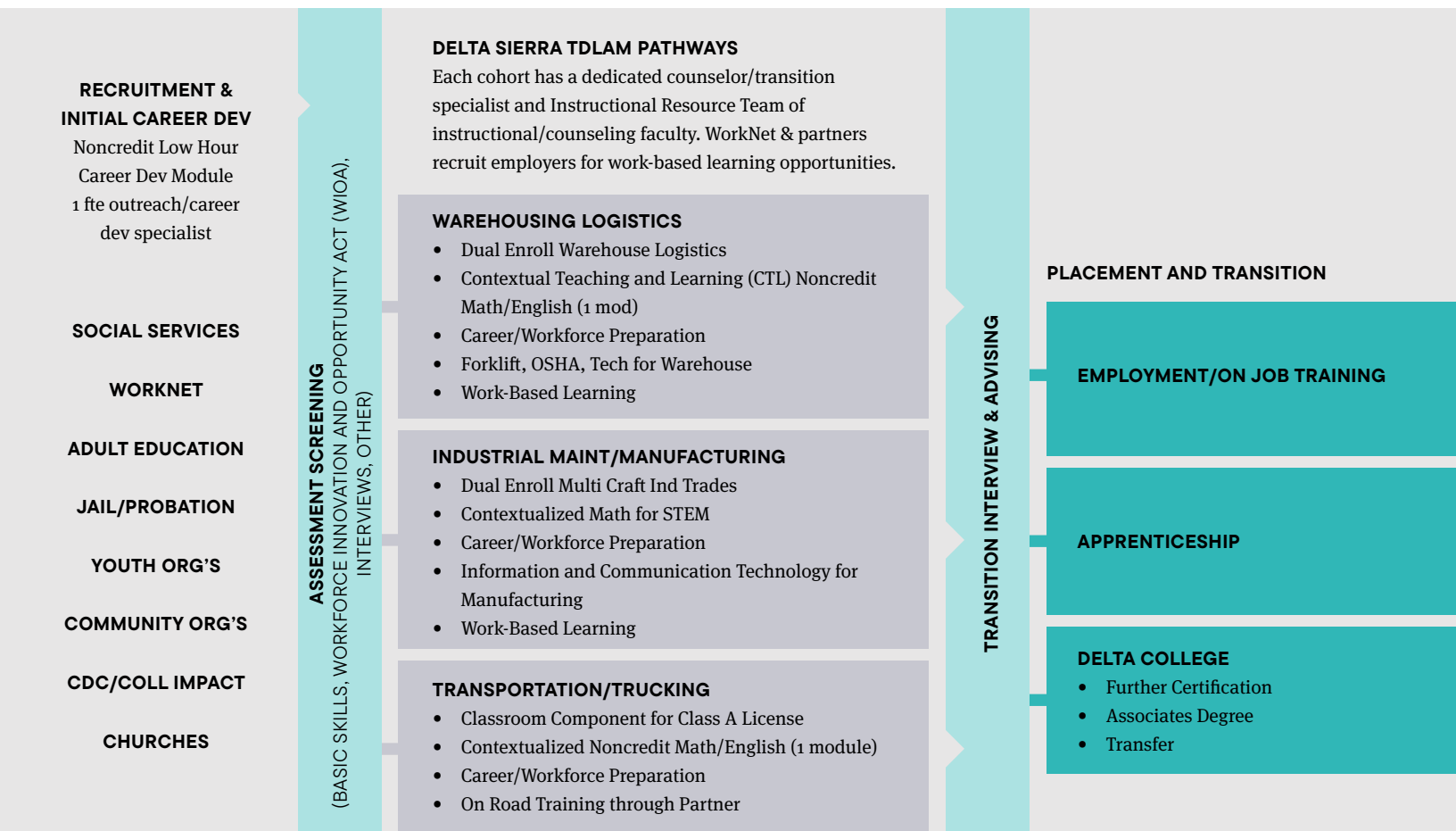


**Figure 2.** Adult Education Transition to Credit Pathways. Data Source: Adult Education Pipeline



**IMPLEMENTATION IN ACTION:** Delta Sierra Transportation, Distribution, Logistics and Manufacturing (TDLAM) Alliance

Delta Sierra TDLAM Alliance created an integrated pathway and bridge system to assist adult learners with low wages to gain employment and increase access to college credit pathways in TDLAM. The alliance used noncredit career development modules as an outreach strategy to meet students where they were in the community, such as social services, CAEP, community organizations, jail/probation, and churches. Students were then assessed and screened to onboard them into one of three cohort-based occupational programs in the TDLAM pathway at Delta, including warehousing logistics, industrial maintenance/manufacturing, and transportation/trucking. The pathway structures include a variety of pathway strategies, including embedded career development, work-based learning opportunities, and dedicated student support teams. At the end of their bridge program, students were placed through employment and apprenticeship programs, with the option for further education at Delta College.



**Figure 3.** Delta Sierra TDLAM Pathways. Source: [Delta Sierra Adult Education Alliance Program](#)

## B. On-ramps to credit programs from noncredit courses

Noncredit courses provide a low-stakes entry point to community college for adult learners. Onboarding tends to be simpler because of fewer requirements like orientation and counseling; courses are tuition-free and do not impact college grade point average. Many colleges integrate noncredit courses into credit pathways to, for example, give underprepared students time and support to build academic skills or incorporate skills-based courses that increase students' employability.

Examples include noncredit courses that provide [test prep for industry exams](#) and [Vocational English as a Second Language \(VESL\) pathways](#) that provide contextualized ESL courses to help students learn English while also preparing for careers.



### IMPLEMENTATION IN ACTION:

Mt. San Antonio College School of Continuing Education Vocational ESL Pathway to Credit



Mt. San Antonio College integrates noncredit vocational ESL into the first two semesters as a transition to its credit programs, health careers, and business pathways.

## PATHWAYS TO CREDIT

### VESL CAREER PATHS 2017-18 EXPANSION

#### VESL 1ST SEMESTER

ESL SPEAKING C // ESL WRITING C // CAREER LIFE & PLANNING // COMPUTER KEYBOARDING

#### VESL 2ND SEMESTER: TRANSITIONS



**Figure 4.** Pathways to Credit VESL Career Paths 2017-2018 Expansion.

Source: [Mt. SAC presentation at CASAS Summer Institute](#)

### C. On-ramps to credit programs using credit for prior learning (CPL)

CPL is an evidence-based strategy proven to boost credential completion rates for adult learners and save students time and money (Klein-Collins et al., 2020). Colleges are using CPL to provide streamlined on-ramps to credit programs by granting credit to students who took mirrored noncredit courses; who learned college-level skills and knowledge in [military](#) and [workforce training](#) aligned with credit programs; or who hold industry certifications aligned with credit programs. Colleges [can assess](#) prior learning through a variety of ways, such as credit by exam, portfolio, industry certification evaluation, and joint services transcript evaluation.

### D. On-ramps to careers through skills badging

Through this strategy, colleges help build students' employability skills no matter where they begin in college – whether it's a basic skills course or a not-for-credit workforce development program. Employability skills are based on employer input and often include competencies such as critical thinking, communication skills, digital literacy, and collaboration. Many colleges use frameworks such as the [New World of Work](#) to provide “badges” that help students communicate their skills and the relevance of their training to employers. This approach can help students better leverage their education in jobs that they hold as they progress on their educational journeys, perhaps toward degrees or transfer.



## IMPLEMENTATION IN ACTION:

Chaffey College Skills Badging



Chaffey College's faculty leveraged digital tools in Canvas to assess employability skill competency for students across all courses and programs. Faculty have linked thousands of student assignments to employability skills, which is providing rich data-scapes that inform degree, metamajor, and institutional learning profiles while enabling the college to award block-chain encrypted digital credentials to students for skills attained. To learn more, [watch a webinar](#) hosted by the San Francisco/Bay Area Guided Pathways Regional Coordinators, where Chaffey presents on their skills badging.

## IMPLEMENTATION TOOL:

[Pathway Improvement Science Toolkit](#)



This toolkit includes specific improvement science tools that can help refine the strategies you will use to build your pathways. It also includes examples and blank templates that colleges can use and further explore design factors.

- 1. Fishbone diagram:** Identify underlying issues that exist for adult students of color not completing the pathway. This tool helps get at the root of barriers.
- 2. Metrics for success:** After completing the fishbone diagram, select four causes and list one significant action your college intends to take to address each cause and one way to feasibly determine whether your action is addressing the cause in the way you intended within 90 days of first implementing that action.
- 3. Journey map:** Map the journey of your focus student population who should benefit from this pathway. Describe each stage of interacting with your pathway including touchpoints, what they're thinking and feeling, and opportunities.

## STAGE 5:

**TRANSLATE** the pathway map to make it understandable to students and to communicate the value proposition and possible on- and off-ramps to the pathway.



One of the most critical but often overlooked steps to pathway development is translating the complex, messy internal pathway map into something that is easy to digest and actionable for students. Creating a student-facing pathway map is a good first step to communicating the pathway to students, but both formal and informal communications throughout the student journey, especially at pathway milestones, must also be planned.



### IMPLEMENTATION IN ACTION:

Student-facing maps from California REACH colleges

- [Butte College Early Childhood Education \(draft\)](#)
- [MiraCosta Office Tech to Bookkeeping](#)
- [Reedley College Information Systems](#)
- [Rio Hondo Real Estate](#)
- [Porterville Video Production](#)

### IMPLEMENTATION TOOL:

[Value Proposition Canvas Activity](#)



This activity helps colleges to articulate their pathway's value proposition more clearly. A value proposition is a concise statement of the benefits, both tangible and intangible, that a pathway is providing to students. In other words, what's in it for the students? The value proposition articulates the top reasons why your pathway is best suited for that specific student population and appeals to a student's strongest decision-making drivers. This should be communicated to students directly through various means and at different points of the student journey. Having a clear value proposition for a pathway can also help others at your college, such as the marketing department and counseling faculty, market the pathway to students.

## STAGE 6:

**ASSESS/EVALUATE** the pathway through qualitative and quantitative data to inform future iterations.



Once the pathways are implemented, colleges must evaluate the impact that the changes have made on adult learners. This impact can and should be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. Ultimately, a pathway map is ever-changing and must be re-evaluated to understand what is and is not working and respond to changing demographics and needs.

### QUANTITATIVE

There are additional key metrics that colleges should monitor at a pathway level, especially for adult learners. The California REACH team adapted the metrics below from the Education [Quality Outcome Standards Framework](#) and [national REACH Collaborative data template](#) to represent the gold standard of how success is measured at a pathway-level.

- **Student Participation**
  - Enrollment of first-time adult students, including each racial equity population, in pathway credentials.
  - Re-enrollment of adults with some college, no degree, including for each racial equity population in pathway credentials.
- **Momentum**
  - Continuation from noncredit to credit courses for adults, including for each racial equity population.
- **Completion**
  - Completion of credentials for adults, including for each racial equity population.
- **Placement**
  - Students who have completed a credential and obtained new employment/placement in an occupation within the pathway.



- **Earnings**
  - Students who have completed a credential and have a higher title or substantially higher salary at their current employment.
  - Percentage of pathway graduates whose earnings within the first full calendar year and after the fifth full calendar year postgraduation are more than 200 percent of the federal poverty level for a one-person household in the United States.
- **Satisfaction**
  - Student satisfaction: Knowing what you know now, how likely would you be to repeat this experience?
  - Employer satisfaction: Knowing what you know now, how likely are you to hire graduates from this pathway again?

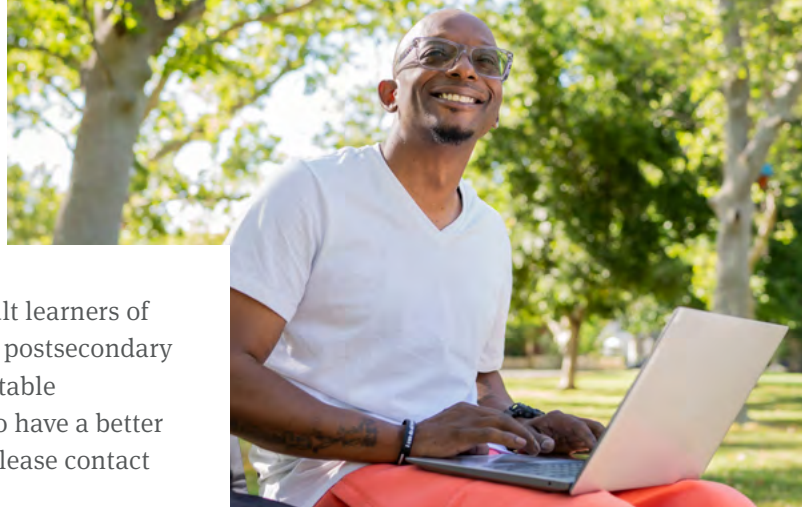
### QUALITATIVE

Research tool options include:

- Student focus groups
- Questionnaires and surveys
- Ongoing employer engagement and feedback loops

## Conclusion

We hope this toolkit helps your efforts to design with adult learners of color in mind, creating transparent paths to a high-value postsecondary credential and family-sustaining wages. By creating equitable pathways, we can ensure everyone has the opportunity to have a better education and life. To ask questions or share feedback, please contact [successcenter@foundationccc.org](mailto:successcenter@foundationccc.org).



## References

- Brock, T., & Slater, D. (2020). Strategies for improving postsecondary credential attainment among Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults. Community College Research Center. Retrieved from <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/credential-attainment-black-hispanic-native-american-adults.html>
- California Competes. (2021). Untapped opportunity: Understanding and advancing prospects for Californians without a college degree. California Competes. Retrieved from <https://californiacompetes.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Untapped-Opportunity-Report-final.pdf>
- California Department of Finance. (2023). California K-12 graded enrollment. Retrieved from [https://dof.ca.gov/forecasting/demographics/public-k-12-graded-enrollment/#:~:text=State%20Enrollment,students\)%2C%20enrolling%205%2C852%2C500%20students](https://dof.ca.gov/forecasting/demographics/public-k-12-graded-enrollment/#:~:text=State%20Enrollment,students)%2C%20enrolling%205%2C852%2C500%20students)
- High Road Alliance.(2021). Supporting transition from adult education to postsecondary education and employment in California. California Adult Education Program. Retrieved from <https://caladulthood.org/DownloadFile/1121>
- Klein-Collins, R., Taylor, J., Bishop, C., Bransberger, P., Lane, P., & Leibbrandt, S. (2020). The PLA boost: Results from a 72-institution targeted study of prior learning assessment and adult student outcomes. WICHE & CAEL. Retrieved from <https://www.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/PLA-Boost-Report-CAEL-WICHE-Revised-Dec-2020.pdf>
- Leal-Carrillo, N., Lewis, J., Lowe, A., & Mahar, K. (2022). Enabling lifelong learning in California Community Colleges: Coordinated state and local efforts. In A.M. Brower & Specht-Boardman (Eds.), *New models of higher education: Unbundled, rebundled, customized, and DIY* (pp. 219-241). IGI Global. DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3809-1. Retrieved from <https://www.igi-global.com/chapter/enabling-lifelong-learning-in-california-community-colleges/314847>.
- Lumina Foundation. (2022). Re-Imagining what works for adult learners of color. Lumina Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Re-Imagining-What-Works-for-Adult-Learners-of-Color.pdf>
- UPCEA and Thinking Cap Agency. (2021). The six personas of the new learner: Changing motivations and situations of the new learner landscape. Retrieved from [https://upcea.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Six-Personas-of-the-New-Learner\\_UPCEA-and-Thinking-Cap-December-2021.pdf](https://upcea.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Six-Personas-of-the-New-Learner_UPCEA-and-Thinking-Cap-December-2021.pdf)