



Serving Adult Learners in Higher Education: Findings from CAEL's Benchmarking Study

Introduction

The Adult Learner and Higher Education

Adult learners are the new majority on many college campuses. Only about one-quarter of American college students attend full-time as residential students, while nearly half can be defined as adult learners. Adult learners are persons who:

- are no longer financially dependent upon their parents or guardians, or
- have major life responsibilities outside schooling through work, home, or community, or
- whose principal identities have evolved beyond the role of full-time student.

Typically the adult learner is defined as one who is over age 24, married, or has dependents.

Research on adults and higher education tells us that adults learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning experience¹ ; that due to multiple constraints there is a need for flexible times for services such as evenings and electronically² ; and that the curriculum is most effective when it builds upon the life experiences and interests of the adult learner.³

But although we know how to help adults achieve a college education, many policies and practices in higher education are holdovers from the time when traditional students predominated on campus. The critical need to rethink practices in higher education is succinctly stated in one of the findings of the Commission for a Nation of Lifelong Learners: "Many current higher education practices are ill adapted to the needs of employers and adult learners. They pose barriers to participation, including a lack of flexibility in calendar and scheduling, academic content, modes of instruction, and availability of learning services, among others."⁴

This assessment is not a new one. In recent years, guidelines for "good practice" have been developed and promoted by higher education associations in order to adapt to the unique needs of adults. These statements of "good practice" by adult educators include:

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- **Principles of Good Practice for Alternative and External Degree Programs for Adults** from The Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials, American Council on Education and the Alliance. ⁵
- **Focus on Adults** from The American Council on Education. ⁶
- **Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education** by Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson. ⁷

Yet, while these three documents are inspiring, they represent idealized goals rather than actual research into existing practices that are most effective for adult learners. Given the myriad of principles, practices, and models in the literature about serving adult learners in higher education, a key question is: What are the actual "best practices" being used in colleges and universities in the U.S. and beyond?

CAEL's Study

As part of its mission to make the benefits of learning accessible to adults throughout their lives, CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning) seeks to answer this question through a project that provides effective models for colleges and universities that seek to serve adult learners. This executive summary is part of CAEL's project and the first of a series which has resulted in Principles of Effective Practice for Serving Adult Learners. This executive summary provides an overview of CAEL's benchmarking study, conducted in 1999, on "best practices" in adult learning. The complete study findings, including examples from the "best practice" higher education institutions in this study, along with a more comprehensive discussion on benchmarking, is offered in CAEL's book, *Best Practices in Adult Learning*.

The benchmarking study described here focuses on the perspectives of higher education. The next stage in developing Principles of Effectiveness was gathering the perspectives of the "consumers" of higher education. CAEL conducted focus groups and discussions with business people, labor representatives, and adult learners themselves to test the findings from the benchmarking study and to identify other issues that are critical to them. This comprehensive investigation builds on the benchmarking study and surfaced different or additional issues that are particularly important to the adult learners and their employers.

From this process, along with its knowledge and expertise in workforce education, CAEL developed Principles of Effectiveness to assist all sectors impacted by the large numbers of adults returning to learning.

Benchmarking as Research Methodology

To find and examine the "best practices" at colleges and universities for serving adult learners, CAEL chose benchmarking as the research methodology for this study. Benchmarking as a research strategy emerged in the 1990s, in the business sector. Benchmarking is "the process of

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identifying, understanding and adapting outstanding practices from other organizations to help an organization improve performance." ⁸ In a more meaningful sense, "benchmarking is the practice of being humble enough to admit that someone else is better at something and being wise enough to try and learn how to match and even surpass them at it." ⁹ While about 45% of U.S. companies have started using benchmarking, ¹⁰ the technique is barely addressed in the higher education literature. Benchmarking is being introduced outside of the business arena as a method for helping to create new ways of thinking. The methodology enables individuals and organizations to "think outside the box," and to compare and question, in a structured and analytical way, their own activities with those of other institutions. ¹¹

For this study, CAEL partnered with the American Productivity & Quality Center (APQC), an organization experienced in conducting benchmarking studies in business, to plan and implement a year long study. Benchmarking is probably more adaptable to "higher education than other business quality management and improvement strategies because it is founded on the very skills which academics routinely practice - the skills of research, academic inquiry and critical analysis." ¹² The resulting best practices of an adult learning focused institution can contribute to a model through which higher education institutions in the United States and beyond may reexamine their educational practices.

How the Benchmarking Methodology Worked in this Study

The benchmarking methodology in this study consisted of a multi-step research process.

1. **Forming a benchmarking group.** The group consisted of three subject matter experts from U.S. and Canadian higher education institutions, representatives from CAEL, and benchmarking specialists from the APQC.
2. **Planning the research project.** The group met numerous times to identify the scope of the project, to nominate best practice institutions to be surveyed, and to design the initial written screening survey.
3. **Screening survey to identify best practice institutions.** Sixty-three higher education institutions in North America and Europe were nominated as potential best practice institutions and were mailed a screening survey. The 33-item survey asked about best practices in the research areas of informational issues, access and equity, academic and social integration, and career integration. Thirty-three institutions responded by the deadline.
4. **Best practice site selection.** Subject matter experts analyzed the blinded survey answers and selected six best practice higher education institutions in a day-long process. Five institutions are in the U.S. and one is in Canada.
5. **Site visits.** While the screening survey asked what the best practices were, site visits to the six institutions added the "how" and "why" of the practices. An interview guide structured the day-long data collection with faculty, staff, and students at each institution. Transcripts of the interviews

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and discussions at the site visits provided a common data record for later analysis, along with individual notes and a multitude of documents and materials from each institution.

6. **Best practice findings.** The subject matter experts read and analyzed all the data and individually proposed best practice "themes." The group convened and further analyzed the data and themes and distilled them into an initial set of findings. These findings continued to be refined in two additional rounds of analysis.

Best Practice Institutions

Through the comprehensive benchmarking screening process, the following six colleges and universities were selected as "best practice" institutions:

- Athabasca University, Athabasca, Alberta, Canada
- School of New Resources, College of New Rochelle, New York, New York
- The School for New Learning, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois
- Empire State College (SUNY), Saratoga Springs, New York
- Marylhurst University, Marylhurst, Oregon
- Sinclair Community College, Dayton, Ohio

It should be noted that a "best practice" institution is not synonymous with the "world's best" institution. Every institution faces challenges and strives for improvement in many areas. This is true of the "best practice" institutions in this study. However, in these six colleges and universities CAEL found the most comprehensively effective practices in serving adult learners. These colleges and universities offer inspiration and lessons to other institutions that strive to serve the fastest growing population of college students today.

Introduction to the Summary Findings

The complex findings from the benchmarking study have been distilled into one overarching theme and eleven findings. The overarching theme reflects the centrality of the adult learner in all that a college or university does. The set of eleven findings are organized around the operational or structural elements.

Overarching Theme of the Key Findings:

The Adult Learning Focused Institution of Higher Education has a culture in which adult-centered learning, sensitivity to learners' needs, flexibility, and communication drive institutional practice.

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Adult-Centered Learning

A pre-eminent feature of an Adult Learning Focused Institution of Higher Education is an environment which is inclusive, supportive, and respectful of difference and personal preference. The Adult Learning Focused Institution thinks, breathes, and operates with adult learners in mind. The operational structure is imbued with a belief system, values, and ethos that demonstrate the institution's respect for the central role of the adult learner in all aspects of the educational experience. Faculty and staff of an Adult Learning Focused Institution see and feel the unique culture of their institutions, in which the adult centered philosophy and purpose are paramount. There is a fundamental mindset that every employee should interact with adult learners on their level. Underlying this mindset is the practice of active listening to adult learners, and interpreting and translating what is heard into a response that addresses the learners' needs.

Meeting Learners' Needs

The Adult Learning Focused Institution deliberately acts in creative ways to modify practice in order to meet learner needs. The institution consistently revisits the following questions:

- What are the needs of the adult learner?
- How can we meet adult learners' needs?
- How can our academic and support services be more convenient for adult learners?
- How can we assist adult learners to meet their educational, career and personal goals?

Faculty and staff collaborate *with* adult learners across all segments of the college, enabling workable answers to these questions to emerge. The result is an educational experience and curriculum which responds to adult learners' goals and interests.

Flexibility

Flexibility and expectation of change pervade every aspect of the culture at the Adult Learning Focused Institution, such as: faculty roles, administrative structure, instructional modes, student services practices, delivery times and places, and day-to-day interaction with adult learners.

Communication

High levels of communication are necessary for effective functioning in all organizations, but in the Adult Learning Focused Institution it is a top priority. Extensive resources are devoted to facilitating one-to-one communication between adult learners and faculty, between adult learners and staff, among learners, and among faculty and staff because it is recognized that communication is at the heart of successfully meeting adult learner needs.

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The themes of adult-centered learning, responsiveness to learners' needs, flexibility, and communication can be found, both explicitly and implicitly, throughout the benchmarking findings.

Mission

a) The Adult Learning Focused Institution has a clearly articulated mission that permeates the institution and inspires and directs practice.

The mission of an Adult Learning Focused Institution is clearly articulated through philosophies which greatly influence curriculum development, instructional practice, support services, organizational structure, policy and procedures, and which yield a high level of staff attention devoted to adult learners. Often coupled with explicit institutional goals and key performance indicators, the mission of an Adult Learning Focused Institution guides the institution in a common direction that is mutually shared and for which all are accountable. A steadfast commitment to the adult learner, and a belief that the institution is special in its focus on this group of learners, permeates the organizational structure and the individual behavior of staff and faculty. The result is a shared culture in which administration, staff, and faculty align themselves strongly with their institution as well as with professional organizations, collective bargaining units where applicable, or associations related to academic disciplines.

Decision-making

b) Institutional decision-making at the Adult Learning Focused Institution is a shared responsibility that uses collaborative processes inclusive of faculty, staff and adult learners to create rapid, flexible responses to learner and community needs.

While formal governance and decision-making structures may differ considerably from one Adult Learning Focused Institution to another, they have one common characteristic: decision-making is decentralized and widely shared among a large group of stakeholders which includes faculty, adult learners, staff, and community organizations and individuals. A decentralized decision-making process enables the institution to make rapid decisions and to tailor administrative responses to meet the needs of individual learners with flexible policies and practices.

The stakeholders are involved in the governance and decision-making process in a variety of ways, but central to their involvement in this process is an on-going series of conversations on institutional operations and structure. These conversations may take place via meetings, task group sessions, telephone calls, or video conferences. Not only do these conversations lead to decisions, but they also build the organizational culture that plays such an important

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role at the institution - a culture with a shared sense of mission and responsibility for the operational success of the institution and the educational success of the students.

Admission

c) The Adult Learning Focused Institution uses an inclusive, non-competitive admissions process to determine the best educational match for the adult learner.

The admissions process at the Adult Learning Focused Institution is designed to be inclusive of adults with diverse backgrounds and abilities. Adult learners are viewed as partners in the admissions process, and both the potential student and the institution are expected to demonstrate capability and commitment in determining the "fit" between the adult learner and the college.

In seeking a degree program, the adult learner assesses whether the institution has the courses and services that will meet her educational goals, and whether the courses and services are sufficiently flexible and accessible to accommodate complex schedules and life situations. This information is readily provided to adult learners through web sites, print materials, one-on-one admissions advising with faculty or staff, and regular information sessions for prospective students at convenient times and locations. Word-of-mouth is also a common source of information. The Adult Learning Focused Institution actively provides adult learners with information to make an informed decision about how well the college matches their interests and needs. In this respect, a fundamental task of the institution in the admissions process is to demonstrate its capabilities to the adult learner.

Another fundamental task of an Adult Learning Focused Institution is to assess the adult learners' academic goals and readiness to learn. The primary mode of assessment is through one-to-one dialogue between potential students and faculty, sometimes supplemented by basic skills tests or writing samples. Faculty explore adult learner interests and goals, previous academic experiences, current work and life situations that might influence their school experience, and feelings and motivations related to returning to school. Although traditional admissions criteria, such as standardized test scores or prior academic achievement, are sometimes factors in the admissions decision-making process, they are factors among many. The knowledge, skills and interests adult learners bring to the college experience are also very important and can often outweigh prior test or educational performance.

Educational Planning

d) The Adult Learning Focused Institution engages adult learners in an ongoing dialogue designed to assist them with making informed educational planning decisions.

The educational planning process at the Adult Learning Focused Institution is collaborative and flexible, and has both formal and informal elements. It aims to assist adult learners with determining what their level of educational development is upon entry, where they are going, and how to get there as efficiently as possible. Educational planning is a key ingredient in establishing long-term relationships with adult learners and encouraging them to take greater responsibility for their own learning. It is a continuous process which begins with the initial inquiry and continues through graduation.

Pre-enrollment

The Adult Learning Focused Institution recognizes that the initial contacts between the institution and the adult learner are of critical importance. In the pre-enrollment phase, faculty and staff attempt to allay the anxiety which adults often experience at the prospect of returning to formal learning by discussing the prospective student's educational goals and demonstrating that learning acquired outside of formal settings is valued and respected. The Adult Learning Focused Institution works hard to ensure that all staff and faculty who have contact with adult learners treat them with respect and provide them with accurate information about the mission, structure and goals of the institution. This information is often used by adult learners to make an informal assessment about whether the programs and services will be the best "fit" in helping them to achieve their educational goals.

Prior Learning Assessment

The Adult Learning Focused Institution understands that adult learners often enter college with the mistaken assumption that the only skills and abilities which count are those gained from taking courses for credit. In reality, Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) serves as a foundation for educational planning at the Adult Learning Focused Institution. PLA is a process of defining, documenting, measuring, evaluating, and granting credit for college-level learning acquired outside of traditional academic settings. Using PLA, the Adult Learning Focused Institution helps adult learners by:

- validating the worth of learning they have achieved on their own.
- identifying what they need to learn in order to achieve their personal, career, or academic goals.
- shortening the time necessary to earn a college credential.
- saving tuition by reducing the number of required courses.

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- enhancing their pride and self-esteem for what they have accomplished as learners.
- enhancing their understanding of learning as a lifelong process.

An assortment of tools and methods are used by the Adult Learning Focused Institution to evaluate prior learning, including: standardized examinations, institutional examinations, evaluation of creative works, direct observation of performances, portfolios showing evidence of learning, and the use of recommended guidelines such as those developed by the American Council on Education that equate instructional offerings of business, labor unions, and the military to equivalent college courses. Sometimes, courses and seminars are offered to guide adult learners through the process of identifying and documenting their prior learning.

Ongoing Educational Planning

The Adult Learning Focused Institution engages adults as active partners in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of their own learning, and emphasizes and encourages ongoing learner self-assessment. Some institutions require entering students to enroll in a comprehensive program planning course which orients them to the college culture and eases the transition into formal study. Such courses are part of an initial step in the student's educational experience. At the Adult Learning Focused Institution, ongoing advising and assessment are critical components of both the faculty workload and the student curriculum. Faculty relationships with adult learners are based on the creation of mutually respectful learning partnerships in which ongoing advising and assessment enables students to keep their coursework on track toward meeting their individual learning goals.

Faculty Roles

e) Faculty at the Adult Learning Focused Institution function as managers and facilitators of the learning process, not merely as dispensers of information.

Faculty at the Adult Learning Focused Institution respect the knowledge, interests, and life-situations adults bring to their education. Faculty build upon these resources to develop learning experiences and are dedicated to removing barriers that keep adults from their educational goals. Faculty work with adult learners, staff, adjunct faculty, and local community resources to develop rich collaborative learning experiences. The result is that faculty do not limit themselves to the traditional role of the lecturer in their classrooms. Faculty are willing to act in a variety of blended roles which may include administrative duties, advising, and teaching.

For example, faculty at the Adult Learning Focused Institution may:

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- Advise adult learners about non-traditional curriculum options, including how the curriculum works and how it can be designed for the adult learner's particular interests and goals.
- Help students develop learning plans.
- Teach classes and schedule advising sessions at times convenient to their students, including evenings and weekends.
- Evaluate prior learning.
- Serve as "translator," liaison, and advocate for their students, helping them with administrative questions, working out administrative glitches, and assisting them with access to student services.

Teaching-Learning Process

f) The teaching-learning process at the Adult Learning Focused Institution actively involves adult learners in collaborative learning experiences typically centered around their lives and work.

The ethos of adult centeredness at the Adult Learning Focused Institution is a characteristic that strongly influences the teaching-learning process, which is personalized, active, collaborative, experiential, and built on theories, philosophies, and best practices of adult learning. Courses and learning opportunities start with the premise that adult students want to learn, are goal-oriented, and are eager to connect their new learning with skills and knowledge applicable to their jobs, or which are needed for the careers they seek to enter. There is a high degree of interaction among adult learners, and between learners and faculty, workplaces and communities. These interactions are stimulated by teaching-learning practices that involve dialogue and problem-based learning. The class-size of group courses is kept small to maximize student involvement in the learning process. Students are viewed as co-creators of knowledge. Therefore, learning experiences and projects in courses at the institution are often designed in cooperation with students and directly relate to the student's work and personal world.

Emphasis on experiential learning and the integration of theory and application is reflected in a variety of teaching-learning practices at the Adult Learning Focused Institution, such as: required internships, work/life related class projects, service learning, use of adjunct faculty employed in fields about which they teach, and learning contracts focusing on experiential and/or work related topics of personal interest to the students. Such practices enhance learning, enrich the course experiences, and complement the expertise of faculty.

Curriculum Design and Instructional Delivery

g) The curriculum and instructional delivery at the Adult Learning Focused Institution are designed to help adult learners meet their learning goals.

Curriculum Design

Creating a curriculum which ensures that students study a wide range of subject matter while also developing a focused set of individualized learning goals is something at which the Adult Learning Focused Institution excels. The curriculum at the institution is specifically designed to meet the individual needs of a diverse population of adult learners. Both fixed and flexible components are offered which help adult learners to clearly identify their individual learning needs and goals. For example, curriculum at the Adult Learning Focused Institution may include:

- Informal and formal assessment procedures
- Identification and evaluation of prior learning
- Development of individualized learning plans which enable adult learners to track their progress in completing the curriculum
- Options that allow the curriculum to be easily adapted for each individual student or for groups of students with common learning needs and goals

Instructional Delivery

How instruction is delivered greatly influences the learning decisions adult learners make in their short- and long-term educational planning, including designing an individualized curriculum. If courses aren't offered in an accessible mode, adult learners will seek out other courses that are.

At the Adult Learning Focused Institution, flexibility and convenience are the hallmarks of instructional delivery, which is designed to remove time and place barriers. The guiding perspective is that college-level learning and instruction can take place any time, any way, anywhere. To maximize this flexibility and convenience, the Adult Learning Focused Institution employs diverse modes of instruction, a variety of schedules, and multiple locations to access education. Several options are provided for students to access learning through learning contracts, distance education courses, cross registration at other colleges and universities, correspondence courses, group courses, and tutorials. For example, at some institutions, group courses are offered in multiple time formats, including day, evening, and weekends to accommodate different student schedules, and in a variety of geographic locations convenient to students.

Student Services

h) The Adult Learning Focused Institution makes student services easily accessible and convenient through a variety of access points.

"Student-first" is the theme of student services at the Adult Learning Focused Institution. Student services are characterized by convenience and accessibility and, like instructional delivery, are designed to minimize or remove time and place barriers. They are provided through a variety of access points – in-person, telephone, web-sites, print, and e-mail. Students can often obtain service for registration, admission and advising, tutoring, faculty advising, program information, and transcripts through any one of these access points. At some institutions, personal counseling is also provided by telephone during both days and evenings to accommodate student schedules.

Adjunct Faculty

i) Part-time and adjunct faculty at the Adult Learning Focused Institution are valued for their connections to workplaces and communities, and for providing an accessible and flexible curriculum.

Part-time and adjunct faculty are responsible primarily for instruction, for designing and implementing appropriate learning environments, and for evaluating adult learners. Their roles and responsibilities are not as comprehensive as full-time faculty because their primary work is with the businesses, agencies, unions, and volunteer organizations in the local community. In this way, they serve as a vital link between the institution and the community.

The presence of part-time and adjunct faculty is common at most colleges and universities. These faculty enable the institution to rapidly create alternative curriculum paths to meet the learning needs of a changing student population. However, at the Adult Learning Focused Institution these faculty are particularly valued for their professional expertise and connections to the workplace. Because adult learners have clear career objectives for their education and are generally rooted in the community in which they take classes, adult learners rely on these faculty members to learn "how it really is" in their career field and to help them make professional contacts. Part-time and adjunct faculty often are able to develop community-based course options in which students have the opportunity to study with practitioners in their field of interest.

Information Technology

j) The Adult Learning Focused Institution focuses information technology on enriching one-to-one communication and providing

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flexible and timely education and administrative services that meet the needs of adult learners.

Advances in information technology have made it possible for higher education institutions to greatly expand the level of services they can offer to prospective and enrolled students. The Adult Learning Focused Institution ensures that information technologies do not become ends in themselves but are used to provide adult learners with flexible and timely education and administrative services focused on meeting the learners' needs. The institution sees technology as another venue for enriching the dialogue between the adult learner and faculty and administration. This does not necessarily require "cutting edge" technology, but investment in appropriate, accessible technology.

Institutional web-sites and e-mail enable adult learners to link directly with their college at any time and at virtually any place to obtain information needed for educational planning and decision-making, or to provide feedback and ask questions regarding the institution's programs and services. It also allows adult learners to keep in close contact with faculty and receive timely answers to questions.

Interestingly, in this study the most valuable technology for communication between the adult learner and the institution is the telephone. When using the telephone, administrative staff are careful to minimize the use of voice mail and answering services. In general, the six institutions strive to have each call answered in person. When this is not possible, most institutions try to respond to voice mail messages within 24 hours and alert the caller to other options for obtaining information. The telephone is thus a critical communication tool for faculty and adult learners for activities ranging from simple questions of clarification to on-going mentoring and tutoring.

Affordability

k) The Adult Learning Focused Institution makes continuous and deliberate efforts to simultaneously ensure the affordability, accessibility and quality of educational degrees and programs.

While there is an ongoing challenge to balance low cost with high access and quality, the goal of affordability visibly influences most decisions at the Adult Learning Focused Institution. Despite the high degree of ongoing, one-to-one communication and curriculum adaptation inherent in adult learner centered instructional practices and services, tuition and fees remain affordable. It appears to be a myth that large classes and standardized systems are necessary to maintain an economy of scale in order to minimize costs. Many Adult Learning Focused Institutions have demonstrated the affordability of the "student-first" approach to higher education.

Although successful at keeping education affordable, the Adult Learning Focused Institution does experience financial pressure. Often the response to

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this pressure is to increasingly diversify funding sources. There is a constant effort to be creative about ways to keep costs low for students, including multiple avenues for paying tuition, linkages to community resources, and reliance upon adjunct faculty. For example, most adult learners are employed, and many work in businesses and organizations that subsidize tuition. The Adult Learning Focused Institution actively encourages adult learners to utilize employer-paid tuition benefits. In addition, the Adult Learning Focused Institution partners with businesses and organizations to provide customized, work- or career-related education to adult learners.

Implications and Next Steps

The final phase of benchmarking is to adapt one's findings to another institutional setting with the goal of process improvement. CAEL undertook this benchmarking study with the aim of fostering quality improvement among institutions of higher education because we believe they will benefit from the discovery and dissemination of those policies and practices that assure adult learners accessible and effective education.

This executive summary provides a general overview of the study's findings and their implications. CAEL's book on the benchmarking study, offers specific examples of how the six institutions manifest the findings outlined in this executive summary and reflects critically upon what has been learned through this project, set in the context of:

- How these empirically derived findings compare with earlier concept-driven principles of good practice.
- How these findings differed from some expectations of the project team, and why those expectations matter.
- How these findings trigger additional issues, and why those issues prompt important follow-up questions.

This study thus lays the groundwork for further work which explores the expectations and issues raised through the benchmarking process and identifies Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners.

This benchmarking study is just one of CAEL's many efforts to advance lifelong learning in partnership with educational institutions, employers, labor organizations, government and communities. For 25 years, CAEL has built the capacities of people and organizations through strengthening lifelong learning opportunities. CAEL is known for its comprehensive approach to developing education strategies and learning systems for employers, designing workforce education programs, advocating for public policy related to adult learning and supporting educational institutions and professionals in adult learning. It is our hope that this study will help all who believe that lifelong learning is

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central to the vitality of individuals and communities and the foundation of a productive workforce.

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