



**Date: January 2024**


**To: CSU Faculty, Staff, and Administrators**

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**Topic: More than an Enrollment Strategy: How Equity-Focused Student Retention Improves Institutional Structures to Support Returning Students**

Higher education in the U.S. has received a fair amount of critique for low graduation rates. Only 64% of first-time, full-time students matriculating in fall 2014 graduated within six years.<sup>i</sup> Many students enrolled hoping that the social mobility a college degree facilitates would improve their lives and the lives of their families. Unfortunately, students who are least likely to complete a degree are often the first in their families to attend college, have limited financial means, and are from minoritized populations.<sup>ii,iii,iv</sup> Some students who leave college attempt to return to finish what they started. For those who are successful in re-enrolling, only a fraction complete a credential. After taking the initiative and maneuvering a complicated re-enrollment process, overcoming obstacles, and perhaps taking on additional debt, many who re-enroll find that postsecondary education has failed them a second time. The ecosystem of higher education is not designed to support students who do not fit within the confines of its structures, the most stringent of which include course offerings, program design and requirements, transfer credit articulation, housing, and general service hours for everything from academic support to the business office.

This [Knowledge Center](#) memo is created by the [CSU Student Success Network \(Network\)](#). The Knowledge Center is an online resource created by the CSU Network that will provide curated, synthesized, and succinct information and links to support faculty, staff, and administrators in adopting equity-minded and student-centered approaches on their campus. The CSU Network was created by and for CSU faculty, staff, administrators, and students to advance equitable student learning, engagement, progression, and success. It is facilitated by the [Education Insights Center \(EdInsights\)](#) at [Sacramento State](#), an independent research and policy center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education.



Institutions across the country are being impacted by a demographic cliff, expedited perhaps by the COVID-19 pandemic. There are simply fewer college-age students and fewer college-age students choosing to go to college. Colleges and universities are increasingly including re-enrollment as a strategy to stabilize declining enrollments. Employers are also feeling the pinch, with more jobs requiring education beyond high school.

The large population of 40.4 million Americans with some college but no credential<sup>v</sup> is an attractive prospect to both stabilize college enrollment and meet workforce needs. However, this population is inclusive of students with distinct characteristics who require targeted supports. Many are adult learners (those over 24), parenting students, transfer students, and military affiliated students. The largest share of students the National Student Clearinghouse defines as Some Credit, No Credential (SCNC) are located in California, with 16.4% or 6.6 million students. California saw a 4% increase in SCNC students from the previous year as compared to the national increase of 3.6%.<sup>vi</sup>


A large percentage of SCNC students are first in their families to attend college and come from low-income families. In fact, minoritized students are overrepresented in the SCNC population where Latinx and Black students comprised 43% of the total compared to 34.7% of overall undergraduate enrollment.<sup>vii</sup>

In its 2023 analysis of SCNC students, the National Student Clearinghouse reported that, of those who re-enrolled in the 2020-21 school year, only 53.9% persevered to the second year. Two populations emerged during this study. One was potential completers: students who had made at least two years' worth of progress toward a credential at the time of stopout. The other was recent stopouts: those whose last enrollment was May 2019. These two groups of students have the highest likelihood of completing a credential within a year of re-enrollment. In fact, potential completers earned credentials nearly two times more frequently than the overall SCNC population or the recent stop-out population. Although Black SCNC students who complete credentials are more likely to complete a certificate, potential completers are more likely to earn an associate's or bachelor's degree regardless of race/ethnicity.<sup>viii</sup>

Given these realities, re-enrollment needs to be more than an enrollment management strategy; it must include an equity-focused student success component. This memo discusses key findings from literature exploring equitable approaches to supporting returning students and offers reflection questions for institutions seeking to not only increase the number of students they re-enroll but ensure their success.

## Key Findings from the Literature

Several strategies emerged from the literature on supporting returning students. It should be noted that there is a lack of empirical evidence on supporting this population. What is available are evaluations of grant-funded initiatives aimed at



improving environments and policies within institutional and state system contexts. There is, of course, a growing base of literature examining the efficacy of supports for populations that are represented within the stop-out population, including first-generation, low-income, and minoritized populations; transfer students; and adult learners broadly. Lessons from this literature base can be applied to the returning student context, provided we use them to create programs and supports that reflect the nuanced needs of returning students.


Studies identified several common themes among institutions seeking to improve the institutional structure and environment to support returning students. These include the following:

- Determine institutional readiness to serve returning students and adult learners.
- Tailor academic experiences and student services to returning students' needs.
- Provide financial and holistic supports.

## Determine Institutional Readiness to Serve Returning Students and Adult Learners

A common theme in the evaluation literature is determining institutional readiness.<sup>ix,x,xii</sup> Readiness can be determined by several means. First, consider whether the institution has knowledge of their population of SCNC students. Have any data been collected from students identifying their reasons for stopping out? Are there trends in either the entering academic profile (e.g., high school GPA, students' geographic region, or standardized test scores) or the academic behaviors and status of students post-matriculation (e.g., academic standing or degree velocity)? Are students who depart taking on more debt than students who stay? Similarly, what is known about students who return and their academic success? Mining student data is essential to determining the target population for re-enrollment and offers clues for how best to serve them upon return.<sup>xiii</sup>

Second, consider the re-enrollment process from a student's perspective. By mapping the steps involved (an exercise known as process mapping), institutions can determine whether their process promotes or hinders re-enrollment and where improvements may be needed. This approach can be used for a number of critical processes including registration, advising, transfer articulation and more. Valuable information can be gathered from students who have recently returned. Taken together, findings from process mapping and student experience can highlight inequities present in current structures and support the redesign of processes to better meet the needs of students.



Another approach is to use a diagnostic tool like the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL) Adult Learning Focused Institution Assessment. This proprietary tool helps institutions examine their current student supports against CAEL's nine principles for serving adult learners. CAEL has recently implemented a 360-degree model that incorporates student voices in addition to the assessment survey. The organization also provides technical assistance to those who will interpret assessment findings and create action plans to reach their determined goals.


Regardless of the approach, as with all change management initiatives, it is imperative that the institution has leadership support,<sup>xiv</sup> fosters a collaborative spirit, and creates a cross-functional team to support adult learners. Collaboration could and should extend beyond the campus to include community partners and nearby institutions.<sup>xv</sup> These external partnerships could build institutional capacity by distributing support for students beyond the confines of the campus, providing course inventory that is necessary for students to make timely progress, and building a community of practice to support the professional growth of individuals tasked with the design and implementation of returning student programs.

## Tailor Academic Experiences and Student Services to Returning Students' Needs

This category encompasses an array of strategies for providing meaningful academic experiences that also meet the needs of returning students. These strategies include:

- course redesign,
- flexible scheduling,
- transfer credit and credit for prior learning,
- micro-credentials,
- proactive advising, and
- tailored student supports

The first common approach is course redesign. Developmental or general education courses are often the focus of redesign efforts. Courses categorized as developmental or included in a general education program are often the source of adult learners' anxiety toward course content. For many adult learners there has been a considerable length of time between their last classroom exposure and their current enrollment. Their high level of motivation to do well adds another level of anxiety; in addition, they sometimes question the relevance of the course content due to their lived experience. Some institutions designed sections of lower division courses specifically for returning adults so that the entire course was culturally responsive and tailored to adult learners.<sup>xvi</sup>




Another common approach was to structure programs and courses to fit into the busy lives of returning students. Shorter, eight-week terms allow for returning students to enroll more quickly and build momentum. Eight-week terms also create opportunities to stay on track if a student needs to take time away for unexpected reasons. As Scobey (2016) notes, “nearly all have to fit their education within a complex ecology of roles and stressors. Their footholds in college are often precarious, from term to term, even week to week, any change in work shifts, family income, children’s health, daily schedules, even access to transportation can provoke an academic crisis” (pp. 111).<sup>xvii</sup>

Transfer credit and credit for prior learning are key components to improving the likelihood that returning students graduate. A study conducted by CAEL found that 56% of students receiving credit through prior learning assessment (PLA) earned a postsecondary degree within seven years of return. Forty-three percent earned a bachelor’s degree, compared to only 15% of students who did not receive credit through PLA. Thirteen percent of PLA recipients earned an associate’s degree as compared to only 6% who did not receive PLA. Regardless of institutional size, institution level (two-year or four-year), institution type (public, private not for profit, for profit), academic ability, age, gender, race/ethnicity, or whether they received financial aid, PLA recipients had higher graduation rates than students who did not receive credit for prior learning.<sup>xviii</sup> These findings align with the concept of academic momentum—the idea that the more credits students enroll in, the higher the likelihood of their retention.<sup>xix</sup> The momentum students feel as they complete meaningful credits and make progress towards their degrees motivates them to continue pursuing their academic goals.

Similar to the boost students receive through credit for prior learning, micro-credentials and stackable certificates have been a strategy for institutions hoping to motivate returning adults to continue pursuing their ultimate goal of a two- or four-year degree. As has been demonstrated in research on transfer students,<sup>xx</sup> completing a credential increases the likelihood of persistence. In the case of transfer students, completing an associate’s degree improves the likelihood that the student will complete a bachelor’s degree. For a population at such high risk of stopping out again or who need to find employment quickly, stackable certificates and micro-credentials afford students the opportunity to leverage their new skills toward promotions or job placement while they are still working toward a two- or four-year degree.

Proactive advising has emerged as a prominent strategy for supporting both first-time in college and returning students. One type of proactive advising involves having singular points of contact for re-enrollment support. Several institutions profiled in evaluation studies noted identifying a singular point of contact to guide students through the re-enrollment process.<sup>xxi,xxii,xxiii</sup> In some instances, these re-enrollment specialists were situated on campus and in others, they were situated in community-based organizations that supported a variety of institutions and academic pathways.



Proactive advising may also include the use of early alert systems. Early alert systems are mechanisms advisors, faculty, and sometimes others in the student's network, can use to alert campus partners of concerning behavior or challenges students are exhibiting or encountering. Examples might include a sudden change in class attendance, missed assignments, or failing grades on exams. The same concept can be applied to returning students, who need even more guidance on course selection and degree pathway navigation due to the likelihood that they will have transferable credit and/or could be affected by curricular changes since their first matriculation.<sup>xxiv</sup>


In at least one case, specialized training for faculty and staff was recommended to help build understanding of the nuances of the returning student experience and dispel myths about student decisions to stop out initially as well as motivations to return.<sup>xxv</sup> Although it is true that many returning students are concerned with the time and cost for completing their degrees and they are motivated to complete their credential to advance in their careers and make a better life for themselves and their families, it is also true that returning students are motivated to complete what they started and serve as role models for children or other members of their family who are or will pursue a college education.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Finally, consider the design of student services with returning adult students in mind. This means adjusting service hours to ensure these students, who are more likely to need evening and weekend access, are able to take advantage of the various resources and supports institutions offer. Mentoring programs can be designed to build community among this population of students, where returning students in their second or third semester post-re-enrollment support students in their first semester of re-enrollment. Mentoring has been identified as an effective practice for improving retention for first-time in college students and linked to the development of non-cognitive skills such as resilience, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging.<sup>xxvii,xxviii,xxix,xxx</sup> Because of this linkage, peer mentoring has been recommended as a tool to improve transfer student success, specifically to combat imposter syndrome.<sup>xxxi</sup> It is probable that the same promise exists for returning adults, particularly since evaluations have uncovered significant psychological barriers to returning, such as the fear of failure, imposter syndrome stemming from attending class with younger students, relearning study skills, and learning to use new technology.<sup>xxxii</sup>

## Provide Financial and Holistic Supports

Finances and financial pressures are a primary reason students depart without completing a degree.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Research has demonstrated that financial aid is a contributor to a student's likelihood to stay continuously enrolled.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In particular, research using data from the California Young Adult Study found that students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to stop out if they applied for and received aid.<sup>xxxv</sup> Knowing this reality, and that students who return are precariously





balancing their school, family, and work lives, it is wise to consider the financial supports that facilitate re-enrollment and persistence. There are several different approaches institutions have used to provide financial aid to returning students:

- Award scholarships and grants to those very close to completing a credential.
- Offer free summer tuition for students who take 15 hours in both fall and spring semesters.
- Provide emergency aid for students experiencing financial crisis.<sup>xxxvi</sup>
- Make available food pantries, clothes closets, and connections to community-based organizations that can support students in applying for social supports for which they may qualify.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

## Implications

These key takeaways help to inform the strategies institutions might consider using to support their returning students. They provide a roadmap to lines of inquiry that can be explored to better determine what mix of services, structures, and supports are important within individual institutional contexts. They also indicate that institutions must be prepared to adapt some of the structures and approaches that work well for first-time in college students but that may disenfranchise returning students.

For institutions seeking to improve outcomes for returning students, the first step is mining the available data to better understand the reasons and behaviors leading to stopout, the current outcomes associated with returning students (persistence, credentials completed, degree velocity), and the current experiences of returning students both in terms of processes they encounter, relationships they form, and their perceptions about the institution. Armed with this information, practitioners can determine the best mix of the above strategies to support their students.

Two very strong supports noted above are offering opportunities for credit for prior learning and financial aid. Both strategies have been empirically found to improve the likelihood of graduation.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Finally, the strategies identified in the key takeaways are not so very different from the strategies we implement to support our first-time in college and/or transfer students; thus, any changes we may implement for returning students will indeed support all students. However, it is important to consider the nuanced identities, lived experiences, and motivations returning students bring to our institutions and classrooms.



## Reflection Questions

For those interested in developing strategies to support returning students, we offer the following questions for reflection:

- What do we know, or need to know, about our stop-out population?
- What criteria define “potential completers”? How do these criteria shape programmatic offerings and student services?
- How ready is the institution to support returning students?
  - What policies and practices facilitate completion?
  - What policies and practices inhibit completion?
  - Are service hours (student services and operational/business services) conducive to working students?
  - What forms of credit for prior learning does the institution offer? Is it possible to expand those opportunities?
  - What staff are available to support returning students as re-enrollment navigators and advisors?
- What programs are poised to facilitate degree completion for returning students who need flexible scheduling or who have large numbers of accumulated credits?
- What levers exist to persuade institutional leaders and partners to make changes that would better support returning students?
- Are there existing student services (e.g. mentoring programs, clubs/organizations) that could be adjusted for the returning student?
- Which institutional partners are needed to collaborate on improving readiness to serve returning students? Who are the existing advocates or champions?





## Resource List

We include the following resources to highlight some of the strategies that we referenced throughout this memo:

- [Council for Adult and Experiential Learning \(CAEL\)](#) is a resource for policy support in implementing credit for prior learning and general practices supportive of adult learners. CAEL provides a list of [proprietary trainings](#).
- [American Council on Education Report](#) on work-based learning for adults.
- [American Council on Education's Transcripts](#) and ACE Learning Evaluations.
- [Tennessee Reconnect](#) is a statewide program in Tennessee to re-enroll SCNC students. The initiative is managed by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission.
- [Reach Higher, Oklahoma's Degree Completion program](#) leverages a consortia of community colleges and four-year public institutions in Oklahoma to offer degree completion programs to adult learners seeking either associate's or bachelor's degrees. Courses are offered in eight-week sessions with many delivered online. The curricula for these programs are approved by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education.

## Limitations

This memo provides an overview but not a comprehensive review of all existing research on the topic, nor does this memo provide extensive information about methodologies of the literature included. We searched for literature from within the CSU and from California more generally, but where these sources were not available we included other pertinent studies. Almost every study reviewed in this memo is evaluative in nature, describing various approaches to re-enrolling and supporting SCNC students and attempting to understand how these approaches function. Few institutions track their returning student populations to determine the effectiveness of their strategies and even fewer researchers are examining interventions in a rigorous way. This gap in the literature limits our ability to determine “effectiveness.” Due to these and other limitations, the CSU Network does not endorse the strategies presented in this memo as “best practices,” and the strategies presented may need to be tailored to specific contexts within CSU campuses.




## Acknowledgments

I appreciate the willingness of Dr. Eric Fotheringham, Assistant Vice President for Transfer Student Success and Partnerships at the UNC System, and Dr. Jessica Gibson, Senior Director of Adult Learner Initiatives at the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, to re-orient me to the important work happening in this space in North Carolina and Tennessee. Speaking with both of you reminded me of all the important work of dedicated professionals to ensure returning students and adult learners have the same opportunities for degree completion as our first-time in college students. Members of the Knowledge Center team Larissa Mercado-Lopez, Ph.D., Jeanine Cunningham, and Madeleine R. Kerrick, Ph.D., provided helpful peer review and guidance throughout. Susan Herman's copyediting, Kalifa Madden's editorial support, and Benjamin Paquette-Ferguson's layout and review for compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act pulled this memo together.



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