CASE SPOTLIGHT

Making Return Possible

Building an Accompanied Path Back to College at the Community College of Philadelphia

COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF PHILADELPHIA



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ABOUT HEI

Higher Ed Insight (HEI) is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Via Evaluation, Inc. a certified Woman-Owned Small Business that offers services in strategic learning, external evaluation, custom research, and facilitated events. Our team of applied researchers and facilitators offers a range of expertise focused on improving education and workforce outcomes, especially for populations who have been historically marginalized from the promise of postsecondary education.

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Abstract

This brief explores how the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) is making return to college more navigable for learners who have stopped out and are seeking a path back. Rather than treating readmission as a single administrative step, CCP has built a more accompanied pathway that begins with early enrollment outreach, continues through required counseling, and connects learners to academic, financial, career, basic-needs, and community supports. The Counseling Department serves as a central point of connection in this process, helping learners interpret prior academic experiences, clarify current goals, identify barriers, and determine realistic next steps.

CCP's experience illustrates how an institution can support returning learners by seeing the whole learner, creating multiple points of contact, and using relationships to reduce the distance between learners and the resources they need. The brief highlights CCP's use of an Enrollment Success Navigator, intake review, required counseling, Welcome Wednesday, direct referrals, and cross-office relationships to make the return process clearer and more manageable. It also considers the professional autonomy, leadership support, staff experience, collaborative routines, and resource constraints that shape this work. Together, these practices show how reconnection can take shape through accompaniment, responsive counseling, relationship-based referrals, and an institutional commitment to helping learners move from the decision to return toward a sustainable path forward.

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Learning from HBCU and PBI Traditions of Opportunity

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have created paths to educational attainment and economic mobility for Black learners, "punching above their weight," while operating within considerable financial resource constraints[1].

As colleges and universities seek effective ways to support Black adult returning learners, HBCUs and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs) offer an important source of insight. Their collective missions, traditions, and experiences focus on recruiting, retaining, and graduating Black learners, including Black adult returning learners.

Higher Ed Insight's (HEI) Catalyzing Reconnection is a study grounded in the curiosity of what can be learned from institutions that carry generations of knowledge and wisdom developed from the day-to-day realities of serving Black students. We defined a Culture of Reconnection as identity-affirming, holistic environments that support adult returning learners. We identified four institutions to spotlight for their commitment to creating Cultures of Reconnection (listed in alpha order): Baton Rouge Community College, Community College of Philadelphia, Fayetteville State University, and Morgan State University. (See Appendix A for full study methodology.)

This brief spotlights the Community College of Philadelphia's efforts to support returning learners, with particular attention to the Counseling Department's central role in the readmission process. The lessons we learned offer insight to other institutions, initiatives, or programs seeking to expand opportunity, particularly within the context of limited financial resources.

[1] Marshall, D., Harris, D., Copridge, K., Neal, D., & Murray, L. (2025). Still punching above their weight: A focus on HBCUs' indisputable influence on the STEM sector. Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, UNCF.

Community College of Philadelphia's Reconnection Context

Returning Through Counseling, Navigation, and Relationship-Based Support

As researchers, we approached CCP staff and administrators who participated in this study as experts in their own contexts. We invited them to define what a Culture of Reconnection meant at their institution, describe whom they considered part of their reconnected-learner population, and identify the beliefs, practices, and conditions they viewed as central to serving those learners.

At the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), participants spoke primarily about students returning after having been away from the institution for at least two years, individuals the institution formally classified as readmitted students. Staff described learners who may return with unfinished educational goals and greater clarity about what they hope to accomplish, while also navigating while also navigating academic-standing concerns, outstanding student account balances, financial-aid complications, work and caregiving responsibilities, and an institution that may have changed since they last attended.

Our inquiry began with CCP's Counseling Department because it holds a central role in the readmission process. Readmitted learners are required to meet with a counselor before registering for their first semester back, creating a consistent point at which staff can review academic histories, identify possible barriers, discuss learners' goals and current circumstances, and determine appropriate next steps.

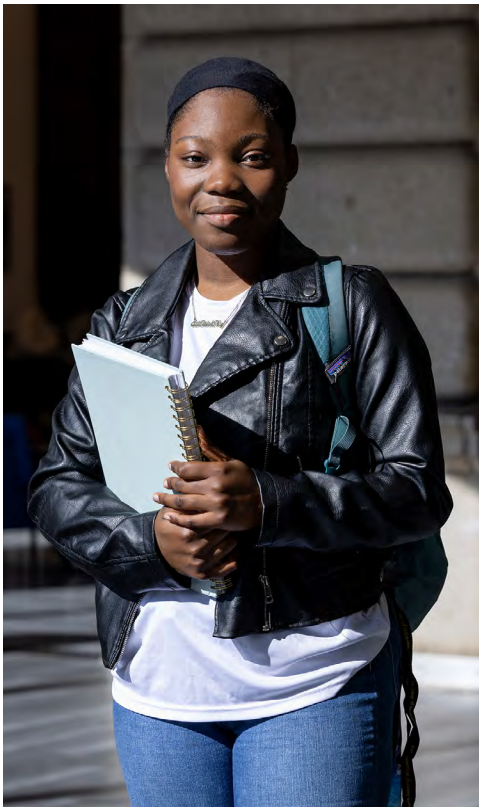
The department's role extends beyond course selection. Counselors provide enrollment, academic, transfer, career, and personal counseling, giving this office visibility across multiple dimensions of a learner's return. Staff described interpreting academic records, discussing manageable course loads, connecting educational decisions to longer-term goals, and helping learners reach the offices or individuals able to address financial and administrative concerns. In some cases, counselors make calls, accompany learners to another office, seek an exception, or remain involved until the learner has a clearer route forward. One group likened this bridging role to that of an "unofficial ombudsman."

The Counseling Department is therefore the primary vantage point for this spotlight, but not its only focus. Intake staff, an Enrollment Success Navigator, financial-aid and scholarship personnel, and academic and basic-needs programs also contribute to the developing re-entry pathway described by participants. The case examines how these roles and resources intersect, as well as the conditions that continue to shape the work.

Seeing the Whole Learner

Counselors described looking beyond a learner's academic record to understand what has changed, what the learner hopes to accomplish, and what conditions could make returning sustainable. This perspective shapes how staff interpret prior challenges, recommend pathways, and define progress.

For counselors at the Community College of Philadelphia, seeing the whole learner means looking beyond the academic record to understand the person returning to the institution. Staff described beginning with questions about what led the learner to leave, what has changed since then, and what the learner hopes to accomplish now. One counselor captured this orientation in a question frequently posed to readmitted students: "How is this time different?"



That question creates room for counselors to interpret earlier academic outcomes within a learner's broader circumstances. A transcript may show withdrawals, unsuccessful courses, or academic probation without revealing the work schedule, caregiving responsibility, health concern, transportation problem, or other condition that shaped the earlier enrollment period. Staff described asking about those circumstances directly, along with learners' educational experiences, technology skills, financial-aid status, and current responsibilities. This approach places the learners' academic record within the fuller context needed to plan a return.

Counselors also emphasized the strengths learners bring back with them. Participants described returners as purposeful, persistent, and often clearer about what they want from college than they were during an earlier period of enrollment. Staff discussed learners returning to complete an unfinished degree, transfer credits from another institution, advance at work, pursue a new career, or fulfill a longstanding personal goal. Rather than presuming one definition of success, counselors described beginning with a direct question: "What is your end goal?" They then consider how course selection, transferability, program fit, and enrollment pace align with that goal.

This orientation can lead counselors to recommend a path that differs from a conventional full-time model. Staff described reviewing earlier course-taking patterns and discussing how work, family, and other responsibilities might affect a learner's current capacity. As one counselor explained, the goal is to "pick something that works

within your current life" rather than plan around an idealized scenario in which everything else stops because the learner has returned to school. A sustainable return may therefore involve fewer courses, a different instructional format, a certificate program that provides an earlier route into employment, or a pathway that eventually continues at another institution.

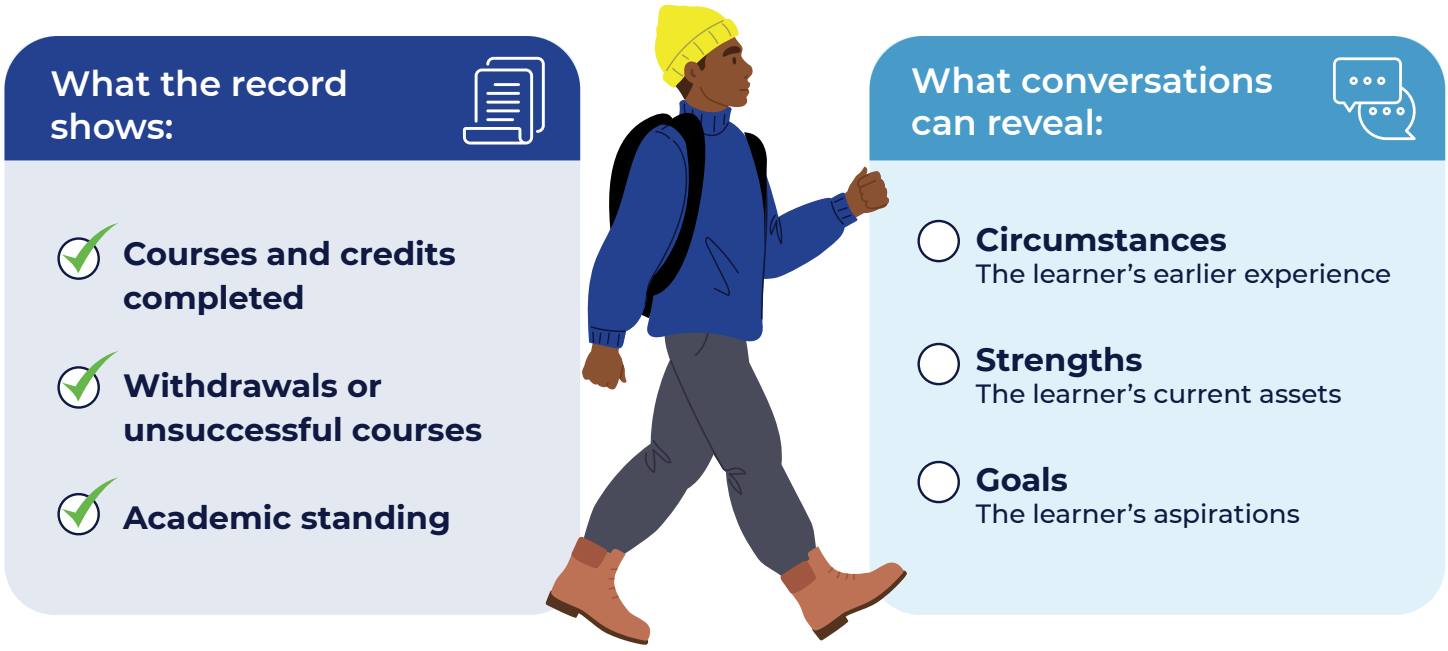
The same perspective shapes how counselors respond when a learner's stated program does not appear to fit the learner's underlying goals. In one example, a counselor used a career assessment to help a learner reconsider nursing, identify stronger alignment with behavioral health and human services, and explore a transfer pathway into social work. The goal was not simply to redirect the learner into an available program. Instead, it was to preserve the aspiration underneath the original choice while identifying a route that appeared better aligned with the learner's interests and circumstances.

Seeing the whole learner, then, is not only a statement about empathy. It is a practical counseling approach. Staff described using what they learn about learners' histories, strengths, responsibilities, and goals to interpret prior outcomes, assess current options, and construct a path that the learner will find sustainable. The approach does not remove the financial, academic, or personal constraints learners face, but it changes the questions staff ask before recommending what should happen next.

FIGURE 1

Seeing Beyond the Academic Record

A fuller understanding can lead to a more sustainable path forward.



Building an Accompanied Path Back

CCP has built several points of contact into the readmission process, beginning with an Enrollment Success Navigator and continuing through intake, counseling, Welcome Wednesday, and follow-up support. Together, these touchpoints help identify barriers earlier, clarify next steps, and give readmitted learners identifiable people to contact as they return.



At CCP, accompaniment begins when a readmitted learner applies. The College assigns cohorts of returning learners to an Enrollment Success Navigator, who serves as an early point of contact before the required counseling meeting. Staff described the navigator reviewing application completion, transfer transcripts, credit evaluation, placement requirements, and academic or financial holds. The navigator uses automated emails to provide initial instructions and follows with individual text messages that include direct contact information and an appointment link.

This early review can reveal issues that might otherwise surface only when a learner expects to register. An outstanding balance, unresolved hold, missing transcript, or incomplete requirement may prevent registration even when the learner has completed an application. When the navigator identifies such an issue, staff described providing the appropriate contact information, explaining what the learner needs to do next, and clarifying when the enrollment process can resume. The role does not guarantee that every barrier can be resolved (particularly when learners owe prior balances), but it can make the barrier and the route forward visible earlier.

From there, readmitted learners move into CCP's required counseling process. Intake staff review records for financial holds, suspended aid, and academic-standing concerns before the counseling appointment, with the goal of helping learners become "registration ready." Counselors then bring together academic, enrollment,

transfer, career, and personal considerations to help learners determine an appropriate path. This sequence gives learners several opportunities to receive information and raise questions before registering for their first semester back.

Welcome Wednesday adds a group-based reorientation experience to this individual navigation. Staff developed the program because readmitted learners do not participate in the same orientation process available to new students. Through workshops, resource introductions, and conversation, the event helps participants learn what has changed at CCP, identify available services, and meet others who are also returning. One staff member described its value as helping learners recognize that they are not the only people "picking this thing up again."

Accompaniment continues through the Counseling Department's day-to-day interactions. Staff described breaking complex processes into manageable steps, following up through email, and providing learners with direct contact information. One counselor provided an example of this approach: "I want you to do these three steps and then email me. Once they're complete, we can start working on the next set of steps." This practice provides an immediate action and opens a clear route back to assistance.

The department also provides several ways for learners to reconnect when questions arise. Staff described scheduled appointments, virtual and in-person drop-ins, telephone and email communication, later-day appointments, and access at satellite locations. Counselors reported that the department does not cap the number of counseling meetings a learner may request, allowing some relationships to continue through repeated appointments and, in some cases, after a learner transfers to another institution.

> "
>
> **You can come back... any time.**

When an issue involves another office, counselors may remain involved rather than ending the interaction with a general referral. Participants described making telephone calls, providing a specific person's name, walking learners to another office, introducing them directly, copying department heads, and helping determine which institutional process applies. Staff referred to some of these practices as "hand-to-hand" connections, emphasizing the difference between telling a learner where to go and helping the learner reach someone who can assist.

This level of support does not mean that counselors complete every task on a learner's behalf. Staff also described helping learners prepare to speak with instructors or other institutional representatives themselves. The aim is to provide enough guidance to make the process navigable while helping learners build the confidence and knowledge to act independently. Counselors reinforce that the relationship remains available if another issue emerges. As one staff member tells learners, "You can come back to me any time."

The Enrollment Success Navigator, intake process, required counseling meeting, Welcome Wednesday, flexible access, and direct handoffs create multiple opportunities for learners to receive guidance during readmission. Realizing that barriers cannot be eliminated, CCP staff described efforts to identify those barriers earlier, simplify complicated processes into actionable steps, and ensure that learners have a person to contact as they move forward.

FIGURE 2

Building an Accompanied Path Back



Connecting Learners to Resources and Relationships

Counselors described a focus on identifying as many factors as possible that could affect a learner's return. They then connect learners directly to specialized supports, often providing a specific contact, making an introduction, or helping the learner understand how the resource applies to their situation.

A counseling conversation may begin with registration or course selection but eventually surface a need that another part of the College is better equipped to address. Staff described "triaging" both the learner's immediate question and the broader conditions surrounding it. Depending on what emerges, counselors may connect learners to academic coaching and tutoring, career exploration, financial assistance, public-benefits navigation, childcare, transportation, healthcare, housing assistance, insurance support, or community-based services.

The practical work lies in turning these resources into usable connections. Staff described what they called "hand-to-hand" referrals: providing a specific person's name, walking a learner to another office, making an introduction, or contacting a colleague directly. This approach differs from giving a learner a list of offices and expecting the learner to determine which one can help. The practice is intended to reduce the number of decisions learners must make before reaching the person or office positioned to respond.

One counselor described the department as an "unofficial ombudsman." Although counselors may not control the policy or process presenting a barrier, they often know whom to contact and how to present the learner's circumstances. Staff described making telephone calls, copying department heads, accompanying learners to another office, requesting exceptions, and staying involved when an issue could not be resolved through an ordinary referral.

In one case, a returning learner appeared to need eight courses under a newer catalog but only two under the catalog that applied during the learner's earlier enrollment. Staff advocacy helped restore the earlier pathway. In another case, a learner whose program had been discontinued was permitted to complete the credential with one remaining course. These examples illustrate how counselors described using their knowledge of institutional policies and relationships to identify flexible solutions when a standard process may create an unintended obstacle.

Staff identified Single Stop and KEYS as important connections for learners facing financial and basic-needs concerns. Participants associated these programs with access to emergency assistance, public benefits, SNAP, healthcare, childcare, housing, transportation, utilities support, and related services. Single Stop, KEYS, and scholarship personnel were also described as working in partnership, with different staff helping learners gather documentation, navigate benefits, and explore educational funding.

Financial connections are especially consequential for returning learners carrying earlier balances or aid complications. Staff described reviewing why a balance exists, exploring scholarships or discretionary funds, and searching for external assistance when institutional resources are insufficient. Staff were clear that available resources cannot cover every prior balance, making financial navigation an important but limited form of support.

Academic and career connections operate similarly. Staff described referring learners to Learning Labs, academic coaches, workshops, and technology preparation when additional academic support may be useful. Career Connections offers career assessment, résumé assistance, individual guidance, and connections to employers. Population-focused programs, including the Center for Male Engagement, may provide another point of community and support for learners whose identities and circumstances intersect with the broader readmitted-student population.

These examples demonstrate why relationships matter within a distributed support system. Counseling staff do not provide every form of assistance a returning learner may need. Their role often involves recognizing when another office has relevant expertise and reducing the distance between the learner and that resource. The result is not a seamless system in which every need can be met. It is a more deliberate approach to helping learners locate the people and programs that may address a particular obstacle or goal.



FIGURE 3

Signature Programs & Supports for Returning Learners

ENROLLMENT SUCCESS NAVIGATOR

Guides readmitted students from application through enrollment by reviewing requirements, identifying missing documents and registration barriers, checking transfer-credit evaluations and holds, explaining next steps, and connecting students with relevant resources. The navigator maintains direct contact through email, text messages, and individual appointments and remains available as an ongoing point of support.

WELCOME WEDNESDAY

Reorients readmitted students to the College through an interactive, discussion-based experience that helps them reconnect with campus resources, understand the current college environment, share their experiences, and build community with other returning students.

COUNSELING

Supports returning learners through required counseling before registration, including academic, transfer, career, and personal guidance, along with connections to other College resources.

SINGLE STOP

Comprehensive support to address financial and basic-needs barriers, including public-benefits screening and assistance accessing food, health care, housing, utilities, transportation, legal services, tax preparation, and financial counseling.

KEYS

Provides eligible students receiving TANF or SNAP benefits with individualized support from a student facilitator, including academic monitoring, tutoring, advising, career and personal counseling, books and supplies, transportation assistance, childcare resources, and connections to college and community services.

CENTER FOR MALE ENGAGEMENT

Provides underrepresented male students with a supportive community and personalized services, including coaching, mentoring, academic support, career exploration, leadership development, life-skills training, and opportunities for cultural and social engagement.

The Ethic and Conditions Shaping the Work

CCP's approach reflects an ethic of responsiveness through a commitment to understanding learners' circumstances, preserving their agency, and adapting support when standard processes do not provide a workable path forward. Participants connected their ability to enact this ethic to several conditions within and around the Counseling Department, including counselors' faculty status and professional autonomy, support from departmental and institutional leaders, relevant professional and lived experience, and routines for testing and refining new ideas. These conditions create room for staff to respond to learner needs, even as workload, staffing, and financial limitations shape what the department can sustain or expand.



One distinctive feature of CCP's Counseling Department is that counselors hold faculty status. Participants connected this status to academic freedom, professional development, access to sabbaticals, and latitude to identify emerging needs and test new responses. Staff described being able to develop an idea, try it on a limited basis, assess what happened, and revise the approach rather than waiting for a fully formed model. They did not attribute individual initiatives to faculty status alone, but they viewed professional autonomy as an important part of the environment in which experimentation could occur.

The department's internal routines give that autonomy a collective structure. Participants described meeting each semester to discuss what was working, what was not, and what new approaches might be worth trying. The department also uses an executive committee and issue-focused committees, including groups concerned with readmitted and transfer students and academic probation, to organize staff attention around recurring learner needs. These structures help move observations from individual counseling interactions into department-level discussion and possible action.



Staff offered several examples of this iterative approach. The department explored virtual counseling before the pandemic and retained virtual access afterward. It used participation data to reconsider late-night service hours, developed Welcome Wednesday in response to a gap in reorientation for readmitted learners, and experimented with classroom visits, Canvas content, QR codes, and shorter digital resources when conventional workshops proved difficult for some learners to attend. These examples reflect a pattern of observing a need, testing a response, and adjusting the approach rather than implementing a fixed model.

Leadership support also helped create space for staff to act on what they were learning. Participants described department heads who trusted staff members' expertise, encouraged creativity, and accompanied them when an idea required support from a dean. Other staff recalled deans who allowed the department considerable autonomy to test approaches and senior leaders who attended staff meetings, asked what employees were observing about students, and invited ideas about needed changes. These accounts suggest that leadership mattered not only through approval of individual initiatives, but also through the protection and encouragement staff received while developing them.

Staff members' professional and lived experiences provided another source of insight. Participants brought backgrounds in counseling, social work, grief support, and prior work with adult learners and "comebackers." Some also drew on their own experiences as readmitted learners or as students and graduates of CCP. Staff referenced these experiences when discussing the anxiety that can accompany return, the significance of financial and academic barriers, and the importance of creating a place where learners can ask for help without being blamed for earlier outcomes. Their experiences did not substitute for learning about each learner's circumstances, but they informed the questions staff asked and the barriers they were prepared to recognize.

Across these discussions, participants described an ethic of responsiveness grounded in the understanding that support must remain flexible enough to account for different learners, goals, and circumstances. This ethic is evident in recommendations for manageable course loads, multiple appointment and communication options, direct connections to other offices, and willingness to reconsider an approach that is not reaching learners

as intended. Flexibility, in this context, is not simply an interpersonal quality. It is reflected in how staff organize counseling, outreach, referrals, and program development.

Nevertheless, the capacity to experiment exists alongside significant demands on staff time and institutional resources. Participants described back-to-back appointments, reduced or vacant administrative capacity, expanding registration responsibilities, and limited time to design or update workshops. Some staff completed creative work outside regular working hours, while others described moving between registration demands and classroom outreach. Financial-aid regulations and limited scholarship or discretionary funds also constrain the options staff can offer when learners return with prior balances or exhausted aid.

The department has developed several ways to work within these conditions. Staff created protected administrative time on Fridays for program development and internal work, distributed preliminary questions and record review to knowledgeable intake staff, expanded virtual and drop-in access during peak periods, and used community referrals when institutional resources could not fully address a need. These adaptations allow some work to continue, but they also make visible the labor required to maintain a responsive approach when staffing, time, and funding are limited.

Taken together, the interviews suggest that CCP's efforts are shaped not only by individual programs but also by the professional and organizational environment surrounding them. Faculty status and autonomy provide room to explore new approaches. Departmental routines turn frontline observations into collective discussion. Leadership support helps staff move ideas forward. Professional and lived experience influence how staff understand return. At the same time, resource constraints require staff to make choices about what can be implemented, sustained, or expanded. These conditions help explain both the responsiveness evident in the department's work and the limits within which that work continues to evolve.



APPENDIX A
Full Study Methodology

Study Design and Site Selection

This study employed a sequential multimethod design in which quantitative and public-source screening methods were used to identify information-rich cases for qualitative multiple-case study inquiry. The study examined how four institutions, Baton Rouge Community College, Community College of Philadelphia, Fayetteville State University, and Morgan State University, understand, implement, and sustain efforts to support adult returning learners.

The study began with a review of 2023 IPEDS data and publicly available information from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs). Institutions were assessed using indicators related to adult learner enrollment, credential completion, and adult learner participation. The research team also reviewed public-facing evidence of institutional practices designed to support adult returning learners, including reenrollment pathways, adult learner offices and programs, credit for prior learning policies, academic reset opportunities, flexible program structures, and student support services.

Results from this screening process were used to identify institutions that appeared likely to provide valuable insights into supporting adult returning learners. Final case selection combined evidence from the screening process with institutional fit, recruitment outcomes, willingness to participate, and timing considerations.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

- How do institutions define and operationalize a culture of reconnection for adult returning learners?
- What leadership, organizational, and resource-related conditions support this work?
- How do institutions navigate challenges and tradeoffs in supporting adult returning learners?
- What lessons from these institutions may inform practice at other colleges and universities?

Data Collection

Data collection centered on coordinated site visits that included semistructured interviews and focus groups with faculty, staff, and administrators. A total of 40 participants contributed across the four institutions. Interview and focus-group discussions explored institutional approaches to supporting adult returning learners, including leadership and organizational strategies, reenrollment and outreach efforts, advising and navigation supports, credit for prior learning, financial and academic policies, community-building efforts, and other practices intended to reduce barriers to reenrollment and persistence.

Participating institutions also shared documents and materials that helped contextualize interview findings, including initiative descriptions, planning materials, and information about student support structures. Institutional liaisons assisted with participant recruitment, document sharing, and visit coordination.

Participating institutions received up to $4,500 in study support. This consisted of a $3,000 contribution to a department or unit designated by the institution and up to $1,500 in participant incentives ($150 per participant for up to 10 interview or focus-group participants). Institutional and state policies varied across participating sites, and not all institutions were able to distribute participant incentives in the same manner.

Data Analysis

Analysis occurred in two stages. First, researchers conducted within-case analyses of each institution using a common codebook focused on institutional practices, policies, organizational conditions, leadership, resources, constraints, and future priorities. Transcripts were coded, analytic memos were developed, and themes were identified within each case.

Second, findings were compared across institutions through cross-case thematic analysis. Researchers examined patterns, differences, and shared tensions across cases while remaining attentive to institutional context and variation. Draft institutional spotlights were shared with participating institutions for factual review and contextual clarification prior to publication.

Limitations

This study was designed to generate practical insights rather than evaluate institutional effectiveness.

The four participating institutions were selected as information-rich cases and are not intended to be representative of all HBCUs, PBIs, or institutions serving adult returning learners.

In addition, most data were derived from interviews and focus groups with faculty, staff, and administrators. Although these perspectives provide important insight into institutional practices, priorities, and organizational conditions, findings should be interpreted as participant accounts rather than direct evidence of learner experiences.

Finally, this study was descriptive and interpretive rather than evaluative. The findings highlight institutional approaches, conditions, and lessons that emerged across the cases but do not establish causal relationships or demonstrate the effectiveness of any particular practice or strategy.

