CASE SPOTLIGHT

# Understanding the Journey Before Designing the Pathway

How *Morgan Completes You* Is Helping Adult Learners Return, Complete, and Move Forward




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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.


***Special thanks to Morgan State University for providing the photography featured throughout this project. All images are used with permission, courtesy of MSU. Their visual assets play a vital role in bringing this content to life.***

# Abstract

This brief explores how Morgan State University's College of Interdisciplinary and Continuing Studies is expanding opportunity for adult returning learners through ***Morgan Completes You***, a set of flexible degree-completion pathways designed for learners whose educational journeys have been interrupted, delayed, or redirected. Rather than beginning with a fixed pathway, ***Morgan Completes You*** begins with learners' stories, using inquiry meetings, advising conversations, learner profiles, and transfer evaluation to understand adults' goals, prior experiences, responsibilities, and constraints before helping them identify a feasible route toward completion.

Morgan State's experience illustrates how an institution can support returning learners by designing pathways that recognize what learners have already accomplished while responding to the realities shaping their return. The brief highlights ***Morgan Completes You***'s efforts to understand learner motivations, evaluate prior coursework and learning, incorporate Credit for Prior Learning, adapt pacing and curriculum options, provide advising and practical support, and build cross-campus relationships that make return and completion more navigable. It also considers the leadership, organizational home, partnerships, data-informed outreach, faculty connections, and shared philosophy that support this work. Together, these practices show how reconnection can take shape through learner-centered inquiry, responsive pathway design, and institutional structures that help adults return, complete, and move 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 *Morgan Completes You*, housed within Morgan State University's College of Interdisciplinary and Continuing Studies (CICS). This program creates responsive pathways for adults returning to higher education. The spotlight focuses on how CICS begins with learners' lived journeys, using what staff learn about adults' goals, prior experiences, responsibilities, and constraints to shape program structures, academic pathways, and support practices. 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.

# Morgan State University's Reconnection Context

*Building Degree-Completion Pathways Around Learners' Lives and Goals*

As researchers, we approached MSU staff and administrators who participated in this study as experts of their own context. 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.

*Morgan Completes You* represents the university's signature response to serving adult returning learners.

**Morgan State University launched CICS in 2021 to provide flexible degree pathways for returning students, working adults, and other learners who need or prefer distance education.** CICS describes its mission as empowering adult learners to complete their degrees through accessible and flexible online programs grounded in educational and economic justice. The college houses *Morgan Completes You*, a collection of 18 interdisciplinary degree-completion programs offered at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels.



**The establishment of a college focused on interdisciplinary and continuing studies gave *Morgan Completes You* an academic and organizational home, rather than positioning degree completion solely as a stand-alone initiative.** The various programs were designed to draw from academic offerings across the university and provide pathways aligned with learners' accumulated college coursework, professional experience, and educational or career goals.

**The adults served through *Morgan Completes You* do not arrive with a single motivation or follow a common route back to college.** As one participant described, "Every student comes with a story and we really start with understanding that story." Staff described learners whose

educational journeys may have been interrupted by caregiving responsibilities, the loss of a parent or loved one, employment changes, financial pressures, or the demands of balancing multiple jobs. Others return seeking career advancement, hoping to change professions, or pursuing a long-standing goal of completing a credential that remained unfinished for years. Across interviews, participants consistently framed these interruptions as consequences of life circumstances and not as evidence of academic inability.

**Returning learners also bring substantial assets. Participants repeatedly pointed to previously earned credits, workplace expertise, professional certifications, military experience, and/or years of learning acquired outside traditional classrooms.** Several staff members noted that, compared with when they first enrolled, learners often returned with a clearer understanding of their goals and a stronger sense of why completing a degree mattered at this stage of their lives.

*The **Morgan Completes You** program represents broad efforts at Morgan State University to respond to a growing population of adults seeking to complete degrees, advance their careers, or pursue new opportunities; the program is designed to help those individuals build on what they have already achieved.*



# Understanding Learners To Design More Responsive Pathways

Morgan Completes You *uses inquiry meetings, advising conversations, and broad learner profiles to understand why adults are returning, what they hope to accomplish, and what circumstances may shape their progress. These practices help CICS move beyond assumptions and connect individual learner journeys with more intentional approaches to outreach, advising, curriculum, and support.*

*Morgan Completes You* has developed a series of practices intended to better understand the experiences, goals, and circumstances of the adults it serves. Staff frequently described the importance of learning why a student is returning, what interrupted their previous enrollment, what they hope to accomplish now, and what resources or challenges may shape their path moving forward. Inquiry meetings, advising conversations, and recruitment interactions all serve as opportunities to gather that understanding before recommending an academic pathway.

Recruitment staff hold individual inquiry meetings with all prospective students, meetings designed to be more than simple informational appointments. These conversations are designed to help staff understand prospective learners' goals, educational histories, family responsibilities, support systems, work schedules, readiness for returning to school, and the day-to-day realities shaping their lives. As one staff member described, "In this meeting, it's not just a meeting. We are building rapport. We're really, like, in this 30 minutes, we're building a relationship and that's where that trust comes in."



Over time, CICS found that understanding learners individually remained important, but that recurring patterns also emerged across their scholars. To help staff think more intentionally about those differences, the program developed four learner profiles that continue to shape how the college designs outreach, advising, curriculum, and support strategies. Staff described these profiles as starting points rather than fixed categories, helping them connect learner motivations with educational pathways without treating adult learners as a single population.

**FIGURE 1**

### *Inquiry Meetings: Beginning with the Learner's Story*

Staff described inquiry meetings as an opportunity to understand learners' goals, experiences, responsibilities, and readiness before recommending an academic pathway.




## The Anatomy of a Completion Pathway

*Morgan Completes You builds completion pathways from what learners have already accomplished and what they hope to achieve next. Transfer evaluation, credit for prior Learning, interdisciplinary coursework, industry-aligned credentials, advising, and multiple pacing options work together to connect learners' prior experiences and current circumstances with a feasible route toward degree completion.*

Understanding learners' experiences is only the first step. Across interviews, participants described a consistent effort to translate what they learn about adult learners into degree pathways that recognize prior learning, build on existing strengths, and help learners continue from where they are.

For example, staff described using the learner profiles to shape and align potential educational pathways. Participants discussed how different learner goals influence advising conversations, credential recommendations, course selection, and career planning. Learners seeking career advancement may require different educational experiences than those pursuing a career transition or returning to complete a long-standing personal goal. In this way, the learner profiles help connect learner motivations with curriculum recommendations, credential options, advising conversations, coaching strategies, and overall pathway design.

## FIGURE 2

### *From Learner Goals to Completion Pathways*

*Morgan Completes You* developed four learner profiles to help staff understand the goals, experiences, and motivations adult learners bring when returning to higher education.




Staff emphasized that learners do not always fit neatly into a single profile. Instead, the framework helps staff connect learner motivations with advising strategies, credential recommendations, curriculum choices, coaching approaches, and degree pathways.

**Transfer evaluation plays an important role in this work.** Several participants described transfer evaluation as a way of helping learners understand how much progress they have already made and reducing unnecessary repetition of coursework. In describing the approach taken during the transfer evaluation process, one staff member shared, "They don't look at the paperwork and just say, okay, this is who you are. This is what you can do. No, they meet with their students first." Staff noted that uncertainty about prior credits can discourage learners from reenrolling, a dynamic that makes timely and transparent evaluation processes particularly important. Participants described a coordinated effort to help learners understand how previously earned credits may apply toward a degree and what additional coursework might be required. Several staff members emphasized that understanding transfer credit early in the process helps learners make more informed decisions about whether returning is feasible and what degree completion may realistically require.

**"They don't look at the paperwork and just say, okay, this is who you are. This is what you can do. No, they meet with their students first.**

**Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) represents another strategy designed to recognize knowledge gained through work, military service, industry credentials, examinations, and other learning experiences.** CICS has played a leading role in advancing Morgan's CPL policy and creating pathways for learners to receive recognition for learning that occurred outside traditional college classrooms. Participants pointed to military training, professional certifications, examinations such as CLEP, portfolio assessment, and other forms of learning as examples of experiences that may contribute toward degree progress through the CPL process.

**The college's curriculum design also reflects an effort to align pathways with learner goals. As staff learned more about the adults enrolling in *Morgan Completes You,* they identified opportunities to adapt program structures, course offerings, and credentials to better respond to what learners were seeking.** These efforts have included incorporating industry-aligned credentials, expanding access to professional development opportunities, and connecting learners to additional credentialing opportunities through platforms such as Coursera. Staff also discussed developing coursework and learning experiences that support both career advancement and career transition (e.g., course-based internships); these are among ongoing efforts to ensure pathways remained responsive to different learner goals.

**Affordability also shaped the design of *Morgan Completes You* pathways. After realizing some learners could not realistically afford the program's original accelerated structure, one significant change related to curriculum design and pacing.** In the initial model, students with substantial prior credit could potentially and quickly complete the program through large-credit courses, including an 18-credit course and a 12-credit course. CICS retained that accelerated option for learners who were ready and able to afford it while also creating smaller-credit course options that spread coursework over time. The college also broke the 12-credit course into multiple, fewer-credit courses. These changes were designed to allow learners to progress in ways that aligned with their financial circumstances, time, and responsibilities.

# Supporting the Return

Morgan Completes You *combines advising, coaching, mentoring, technology assistance, proactive outreach, and faculty referrals to help learners navigate the readjustment to higher education. Current students, program graduates, and staff with adult learner experience add another source of insight, connection, and practical guidance to this support network.*

For many adults, returning to college involves more than selecting a degree pathway or transferring prior credits. It also requires navigating unfamiliar systems, balancing competing responsibilities, rebuilding academic routines, and adapting to educational environments that may look very different from the ones they left years earlier. Across interviews, staff consistently described supporting learners through this transition as an essential part of ***Morgan Completes You***'s work.

Participants described returning to college as a period of readjustment that extends beyond academics. Several interviewees discussed learners returning after years or decades away from higher education, often navigating unfamiliar technologies, online learning platforms, and new expectations about communication and coursework. Others pointed to confidence issues, self-doubt, and reluctance to ask for help as challenges emerge when learners return after extended absences. Staff also noted that many learners are balancing work, caregiving responsibilities, parenting, and other commitments while simultaneously rebuilding academic routines.

Advising emerged as one of the central mechanisms through which ***Morgan Completes You*** supports learners after reenrollment. Staff described advising as extending beyond course registration to include conversations about life responsibilities, long-term goals, affordability, degree pacing, transfer credit, and/or career aspirations. These conversations also involved navigating the delicate but critical balance of helping learners build realistic completion plans that align with their circumstances, while keeping learners motivated.

Staff also described support through connecting learners with resources, strategies, and relationships they may need as challenges emerge. Student support staff use outreach, referrals, and individualized conversations to help learners address challenges before they become larger obstacles. Staff described helping learners connect with campus resources, navigate personal difficulties, and develop strategies for managing competing priorities. Participants described connecting learners with counseling services, disability support, social workers, and other campus resources, while also helping learners develop time-management and planning strategies that support persistence. One participant characterized much of the work as helping learners move through barriers that are often unrelated to academic ability but can nonetheless affect persistence.

Technology support emerged as another recurring theme. Across interviews, participants observed that some returning learners lacked confidence using certain learning management systems, digital tools, or online communication platforms. Staff discussed helping learners navigate Canvas, understand assignment submission processes, access course materials, and build familiarity with the technologies required for online learning. Several participants noted that what may appear routine to individuals who regularly use digital platforms can represent a significant adjustment for adults returning after long absences from formal education. “I’m just afraid of this thing,” one learner told a staff member, referring to the computer. The staff member’s response was simple: “Don’t be afraid… if you have a problem, reach out to me. We’ll figure it out together.”

*Morgan Completes You* has also incorporated practices intended to identify challenges earlier. One highlighted practice was the use of Canvas Intelligent Insights to identify patterns such as delayed assignments, reduced engagement, lower grades, or extended periods without logging into courses. When concerns arise, staff can see them through weekly reports and can initiate outreach to students or their faculty to better understand what is happening and determine whether additional support is needed.

Staff described these efforts as one way of reminding learners that someone is paying attention, cares about their success, and remains available for support when challenges emerge. Describing the impact of personalized outreach, one participant shared, “Getting a call from our peer mentor meant that they were being seen, that they weren’t just slipping through the cracks.”



Faculty relationships also play an important role in this support network. Participants described efforts to build communication pathways between instructors and student support staff so that concerns can be identified and addressed earlier. Several interviewees noted that instructors are often among the first people to notice when learners begin falling behind, disengaging from a course, or experiencing difficulties. These relationships between faculty and staff facilitate opportunities for intervention and support.

Several participants also described the perspectives that current students, recent graduates, and staff with adult learner experience bring to the support model. Some had navigated *Morgan Completes You* themselves, while others were balancing education with work, family responsibilities, and other commitments. These experiences appeared to help them recognize practical barriers, anticipate questions, and understand why processes that seem routine to an institution may feel unfamiliar or difficult to someone returning after time away. Their lived experience did not replace, but instead supplemented, professional knowledge and formal training, assistance grounded in firsthand experience.

**FIGURE 3**

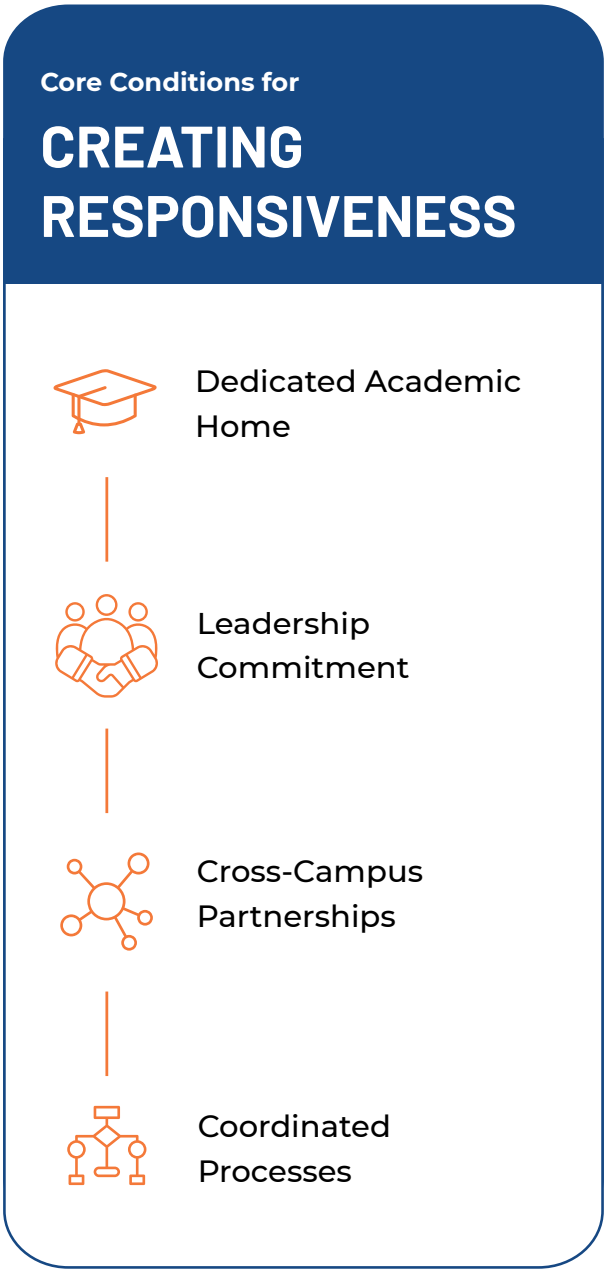
### *When Those Who Know the Journey Help Guide It*

*Morgan Completes You*'s support network includes current students, recent program graduates, and staff who have navigated adult learning themselves. Their experiences offer different forms of insight into what returning can require.



# Creating Conditions for Responsiveness

Morgan Completes You *is supported by a dedicated academic home, leadership commitment, cross-campus partnerships, coordinated routines, and a shared philosophy about adult learner potential. Together, these conditions help CICS move learner needs across organizational boundaries and distribute responsibility for reconnection beyond any single staff member, service, or office.*




***Morgan Completes You's* ability to adapt pathways, provide individualized support, and respond to learners' evolving needs depends on more than any single program or service.** Across interviews, participants' responses illuminated a set of organizational conditions that help make their work possible. These conditions include leadership commitment, cross-campus partnerships, staffing structures, coordinated processes, and a shared philosophy about how adult learners should experience their return to higher education.

**To begin, the creation of the College of Interdisciplinary and Continuing Studies represented an important structural decision and institutional investment.** Participants frequently connected the creation of CICS to a broader institutional commitment to access, completion, and pathways for learners whose educational journeys had been interrupted before earning a credential. Staff described CICS not simply as a collection of degree programs, but as an organizational home that allowed the university to focus intentionally on adults whose lives, experiences, and educational journeys often differed from those of traditional-age students.

**Participants also repeatedly emphasized the importance of collaboration.** Rather than operating independently, *Morgan Completes You* relies on relationships across multiple university offices. Interviews repeatedly highlighted partnerships with Enrollment Management, Transfer

Initiatives, Registrar Services, Information Technology, the Center for Continuing and Professional Studies, counseling services, and other campus units. These relationships were framed as essential for addressing learner needs in a more efficient matter. One routine that was recently implemented was biweekly meetings between the CICS student success team and MSU's office of transfer initiatives. Across collaborative relationships and contexts, CICS's presence provided a space for staff to actively represent and elevate the CICS scholar experience in broader institutional planning and decision-making conversations. As one staff member reflected, "If you're leading this work at an institution that serves traditional 18- to 24-year-olds, you have to be prepared to be the advocate."

**The LOVE framework also emerged as an important organizing philosophy across interviews.** The acronym stood for lifelong learning and legacy, opportunity and optimism, value and vision, and the process of engaging, excelling, and evolving through education. The elements reflect a belief that returning adults are not starting over: they have an opportunity to finish, and staff see their role as helping learners define and navigate their own path toward their next chapter. Although not always visible externally, the framework helped to organize staff efforts and to create a common orientation toward adult learners across different functions within the college.

**FIGURE 4**

***The LOVE Framework***



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.

