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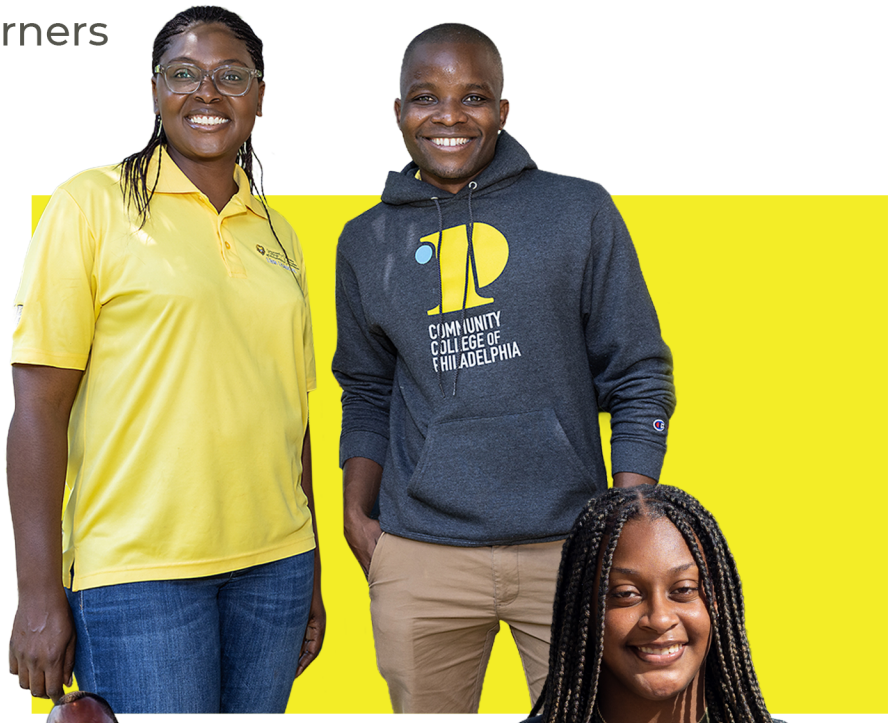
HEI HIGHER ED INSIGHT

CROSS-CASE REPORT

Building the Capacity to Reconnect

What Four HBCUs and PBIs Teach Us About Supporting Returning Learners









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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 Baton Rouge Community College, Community College of Philadelphia, Fayetteville State University and Morgan State University for providing the photography featured throughout this project. All images are used with permission of each college. Their visual assets play a vital role in bringing this content to life.

About the Catalyzing Reconnection Study

The Catalyzing Reconnection study explores how Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs) are supporting adult learners returning to college after time away. The study was designed to learn from institutions with longstanding traditions of serving Black learners and communities, including how they create identity-affirming, holistic environments that support learners' return and continued progress.

We refer to each such environment as a Culture of Reconnection.

The study examines four institutions—Baton Rouge Community College (BRCC), Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), Fayetteville State University (FSU), and Morgan State University (MSU)—to understand how reconnection takes shape in different institutional contexts. Drawing on interviews, institutional materials, and observations, we explored how institutions understand returning learners, organize and resource their work, navigate tradeoffs, and adapt policies, practices, and structures in response to learner needs. For additional information about the study design, data collection, analysis, and limitations, see Appendix A.

This report brings the four cases together to identify cross-cutting insights, tensions, and questions for other institutional leaders. It complements four individual case spotlights that tell each institution's story in greater depth.

Abstract

Adult learners who return to college after time away often encounter institutions that were not designed around the realities of their lives, responsibilities, and prior experiences. This report examines how four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs)—Baton Rouge Community College, Community College of Philadelphia, Fayetteville State University, and Morgan State University—support adult returning learners and build what we describe as a ***Culture of Reconnection***. The study drew on interviews, focus groups, institutional documents, and site visits to explore how institutions understand returning learners, redesign pathways, support navigation, and sustain the people and relationships that make reconnection possible.

Across the four cases, we did not find a single model for reconnection. Instead, we found different ways institutions develop the capacity to understand learners' circumstances, adapt policies and pathways, connect learners to resources, and respond to challenges as they emerge. Five cross-cutting themes surfaced across the cases: seeing learners more fully, translating understanding into institutional design, making institutions more navigable, cultivating relationships that support connection, and creating conditions that sustain this work over time.

Rather than offering a prescriptive roadmap, this report highlights questions, tensions, and institutional conditions that may help colleges and universities strengthen their own approaches to supporting adult returning learners. The findings suggest that building a Culture of Reconnection requires institutions to see learners more fully, translate that understanding into institutional design, make pathways and resources more navigable, cultivate relationships that connect people across institutional boundaries, and sustain the individuals and conditions that make this work possible over time. Together, the cases illustrate how institutional responsiveness can become an ongoing capacity rather than a single program or initiative.

Acknowledgements

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What Does It Take To Reconnect?

A returning learner may return to college with years of professional experience, prior credits, family and caregiving responsibilities, and a much clearer sense of what they want from their education. But returning also means encountering an institution whose schedules, policies, pathways, and support structures may have been built with a very different kind of student journey in mind. For colleges and universities seeking to reconnect these learners, opening the door to reenrollment is only part of the work.

What happens before and after that door opens matters. Can learners make sense of the options available to them? Does the institution recognize what they have already learned? Can students find a pathway that works alongside the rest of their lives? When they encounter a barrier, is there someone who can help them figure out what comes next?



Across Baton Rouge Community College, Community College of Philadelphia, Fayetteville State University, and Morgan State University, we found different answers to these questions. The institutions did not organize reconnection in the same way. Responsibility sometimes lived in a specialized office or academic unit, sometimes within counseling and navigation, and sometimes more broadly across the institution. Their approaches reflected different missions, organizational structures, student populations, and local contexts.

In other words, what we found across the four institutions was not one model for reconnection. We found different ways of doing the same underlying institutional work: learning who returning students are, changing pathways in response to that data, helping students navigate across institutional boundaries, and creating the conditions for that responsiveness to continue. We describe this set of efforts as an institutional capacity for reconnection.

Much of that capacity is visible in formal structures such as policies, programs, advising models, organizational arrangements, leadership decisions, and investments of time and resources. But some of that capacity is less visible and potentially easy to miss. Someone notices that a learner is stuck. Someone knows which colleague(s) can help. Someone makes an introduction rather than sending the learner to another office. And colleagues build relationships with one another, relationships that allow those connections to happen for students.

Across the four institutions, these seemingly ordinary acts were part of how institution's practiced reconnection. These acts helped make institutional resources usable and connected parts of colleges and universities that can otherwise feel fragmented to the people trying to navigate them. These acts also led us to new questions. Where does reconnection actually live within an institution? Who carries the relational and connective work that makes it possible? And what happens when an institution depends heavily on particular people to keep that work going?

These are not questions with a single answer, and we do not attempt to present a model that institutions should simply replicate. We did not assess whether approaches caused student outcomes, and the four cases should not be read as a ranking of institutional performance. Instead, we use their different experiences to examine the work beneath reconnection: how institutions come to understand returning learners, how that understanding reaches institutional practice, how people and relationships make systems navigable, and what it may take to sustain that responsiveness over time.

For institutional leaders considering their own approaches to returning learners, the cases offer less of a roadmap than a set of questions worth asking. Who are the learners trying to return? What are they bringing with them? Who's primarily responsible for ensuring a successful return? Who is carrying that responsibility in practice? And has the institution created sustainable conditions for the work and the people doing it?

Four Institutions, Four Approaches to Reconnection

The Catalyzing Reconnection study brought us to four HBCUs and PBIs approaching the work of reconnecting adult learners from different institutional starting points. Their structures, student populations, and approaches vary, but each offers a window into how colleges can rethink the pathways, relationships, and institutional practices that shape a learner's return.

These brief snapshots are intended to orient readers to the four cases. The sections that follow draw across them to examine what their experiences collectively help us understand about building a Culture of Reconnection.

Baton Rouge Community College

Reconnection through workforce mobility and pathway redesign



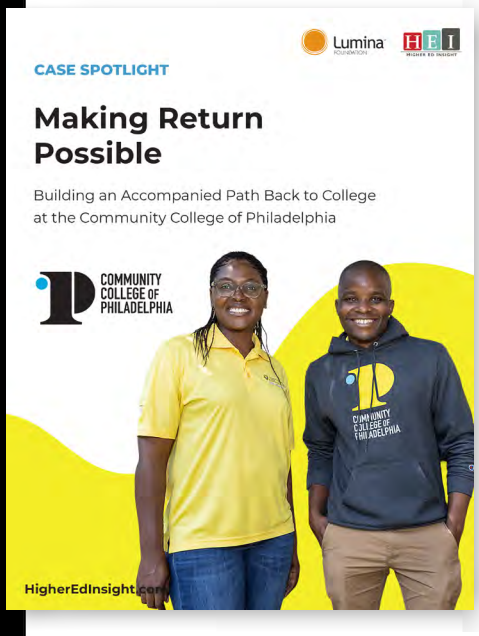
At Baton Rouge Community College (BRCC), supporting returning learners is embedded within a broader effort to create flexible pathways for a diverse community of students rather than housed in a separate adult-learner structure. The college has worked across academic and workforce programs to recognize learning acquired through work and other experiences, reconsider course and program structures, and create multiple routes from education to employment. Navigators provide learners with a point of connection while responsibility for responding to their needs extends across the institution.

What this case contributes: How reconnection can take shape through distributed responsibility, pathway redesign, and a willingness to reconsider what counts as learning and progress.

Read the full case spotlight: Link placeholder

Community College of Philadelphia

Reconnection through accompaniment



At the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), Counseling plays a central role in helping returning learners make sense of what happened before, what has changed, and what a workable return might look like now. Through counseling, navigation, structured intake, and connections across the college, learners encounter people who can help them identify barriers, consider their options, and move from one part of the institution to another. The approach makes visible an important distinction between making resources available and helping learners actually reach and use them.

What this case contributes: How accompaniment, professional judgment, and relationships can turn institutional resources into navigable pathways.

Read the full case spotlight: Link placeholder

Fayetteville State University

A specialized home that extends responsibility outward



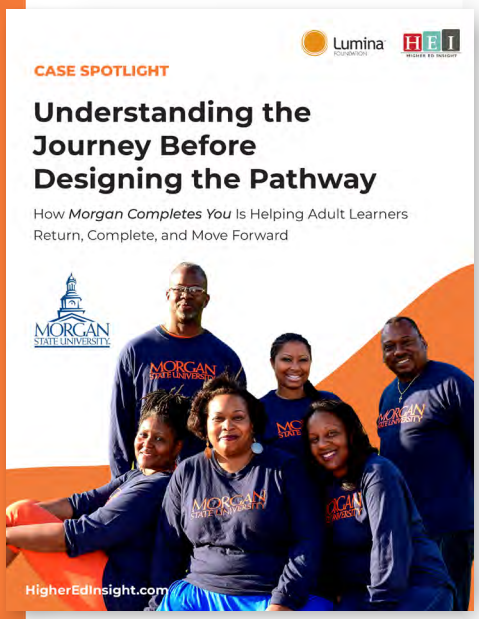
Fayetteville State University (FSU) has created an identifiable home for adult learners through its Office for Adult Learners, Transfer, and Military Students (ATM), while also working to make supporting these learners a broader institutional responsibility. ATM connects learners to resources, builds relationships before and during their transition to the university, and brings adult-learner expertise into conversations across campus. FSU's work also underscores the diversity within the adult-learner population, revealing that what creates flexibility or belonging for one learner may not do the same for another.

What this case contributes: How specialized expertise can provide an anchor for learners while helping an institution build broader capacity to respond.

Read the full case spotlight: Link placeholder

Morgan State University

An academic home designed around the returning learner's journey



At Morgan State University (MSU), the College of Interdisciplinary and Continuing Studies (CICS) provides returning learners with an academic and organizational home through Morgan Completes You. The approach begins by learning about learners' goals, prior experiences, responsibilities, and reasons for returning, then uses that understanding to help construct pathways that may include transfer credit, recognition of prior learning, different pacing options, advising, and connections across the university. CICS pairs this dedicated structure with relationships and partnerships that extend beyond the college itself.

What this case contributes: How a dedicated organizational home can connect learner understanding, pathway design, and cross-campus relationships.

Read the full case spotlight: Link placeholder



What the Four Cases Reveal About Building a Culture of Reconnection

Across the four institutions, five themes surfaced that help illuminate the institutional work required to build a Culture of Reconnection. They show how reconnection begins with understanding who learners are, extends into the pathways and relationships that shape their return, and depends on institutional conditions that make responsiveness sustainable.



SEE THE LEARNER

Reconnection Starts with Understanding Who Is Returning



CHANGE THE PATH

Turning Understanding into Institutional Design



ACCOMPANY THE RETURN

Making the Institution Navigable



CULTIVATE CONNECTION

How Connection Makes Reconnection Work



SUSTAIN THE PEOPLE

Who Make Connection Possible

SEE THE LEARNER

Reconnection Starts with Understanding Who Is Returning

Before institutions can respond differently to returning learners, they must see them differently. They must see them not simply as students who stopped out, but as adults returning with experiences, responsibilities, learning, and goals that may have changed considerably since they were last enrolled.

An academic record can tell an institution where a learner left off. It cannot necessarily explain why they left, what has happened since, what they have learned along the way, or what they hope for in their return. Across the four institutions, we saw staff looking beyond the record to understand more of that story. At CCP, counseling conversations create space to ask, "How is this time different?" At MSU, Inquiry Meetings begin from a similar premise: as one participant put it, "Every student comes with a story and we really start with understanding that story."

The shift from asking primarily, "What requirements does this student still need to complete?" to also asking "Who is this learner now, and where are they trying to go?" can change what becomes visible to an institution.

One thing that becomes visible is what returning learners bring with them. Years away from college are not necessarily years away from learning. Adults may return with professional expertise, military experience, workplace training, previous college credits, or knowledge developed through other parts of their lives. BRCC's work around credit for prior learning and MSU's attention to transfer and prior learning illustrate different ways institutions can consider whether some of those experiences should count toward a learner's new pathway. More fundamentally, credit-recognition policies ask institutions to decide what forms of learning they are prepared to value, document, and count when an adult returns.



Seeing learners more fully also means resisting the temptation to replace one narrow picture of a college student with another. “Adult learner” can be a useful category for identifying populations that institutions have historically underserved, but it can obscure substantial differences among the people inside it. Returning learners may be parents or caregivers, working full time or between jobs, returning after a few semesters or several decades, seeking a credential for career advancement or pursuing a goal with personal, family, or community significance.

MSU’s use of learner profiles offers one way to make that distinction more concrete. CICS identified profiles such as traditional degree completers, career changers, promotion seekers, and legacy learners. These profiles are not intended to sort learners into fixed categories, but to help staff notice patterns in why learners return, what they hope to accomplish, and what circumstances may shape their progress. Seeing the learner, then, means holding two truths at once: returning learners may share some common experiences of interruption and return, but they do not all need the same pathway, support, or institutional response.



CHANGE THE PATH

Turning Understanding into Institutional Design

Understanding returning learners matters when those learnings change the pathways, policies, and practices learners encounter. Across the four cases, reconnection involved more than inviting adults back. It meant reconsidering whether the routes available to them made a return feasible in the first place.

This work can begin before a learner enrolls. FSU begins building connections through transfer partnerships, outreach, and opportunities for prospective learners to engage with the Office of Adult Learner and Transfer Services before they fully transition to the university. At MSU, early conversations help staff understand a learner's goals, previous coursework, responsibilities, and circumstances before determining what a pathway back might look like. At CCP, intake, navigation, and counseling create opportunities to identify barriers and talk through options before registration.

These practices expand the meaning of reconnection. While reenrollment is an administrative milestone, reconnection can begin earlier. A learner may first need to understand whether returning is financially or academically feasible, how previous credits will transfer, what program fits their goals, or how college might fit alongside work and family responsibilities. Addressing those questions before registration can make the path of return easier to navigate, even when the institution cannot remove every barrier a learner faces.

What institutions recognize from a learner's past also shapes that path. Adults may return with college credits, workplace training, military experience, professional certifications, or other learning accumulated during their time away. BRCC's work with credit for prior learning and MSU's attention to transfer and prior learning illustrate how institutions can ask not only what requirements remain, but also what a learner has already accomplished that should count toward what comes next. At BRCC, one participant framed the asset-based logic this way: adult returning learners may be "ahead," not behind, when prior work and prior learning can reduce the time between returning and completing.

FSU's conversations with mothering students made this especially clear. Evening and weekend options can expand access for many adults working traditional daytime hours. At the same time, FSU learned that these options may create different challenges for learners whose caregiving responsibilities intensify during those periods. The experience illustrates how an effective form of flexibility can become the starting point for further learning: as institutions understand more about learners' circumstances, they can broaden how they design opportunities for participation.

FIGURE 1

Flexibility Through the Lens of a Working Mother

What changes when we consider one working mother's experience?

STAGE 1
Create Flexibility

Evening programming can expand access for many working adults. Institutions create evening and weekend opportunities to accommodate learners whose daytime work schedules may limit participation.

STAGE 2
Learn More

Mothering students revealed another dimension of flexibility. For some learners, evenings were not "free" time; caregiving and family responsibilities often intensified during those same hours.



STAGE 4
Keep Inquiring

Each adaptation creates opportunities to learn again. Understanding one group of learners more fully can reveal additional ways to consider how institutional offerings align with the realities of learners' lives.

STAGE 3
Adapt Participation

New learning can broaden an institution's response. Family-friendly events offered one way for learners to participate without having to choose between program participation and caregiving responsibilities.

AN UNRESOLVED TENSION

Some forms of engagement can be more easily redesigned to accommodate caregiving responsibilities. For example, family-friendly events offered in the evening. Other experiences (e.g., in-person courses) may be less easily adapted. This raises an important question:

How can institutions continue to expand flexibility while working within real constraints and responding to learners' different circumstances?

The learning loop extends beyond scheduling. Flexibility can involve modality, pacing, course sequencing, credit recognition, service hours, communication, entry points, and the ability to adjust a pathway when circumstances change. An option may expand access for many learners and still leave an institution with more to learn about whom it serves well, whom it may leave out, and what further adaptations are possible. Responsiveness lies not in finding one universally flexible design, but in remaining willing to learn from how different learners experience it.

Across the four cases, then, the larger shift was not toward any single type of pathway. It was toward a willingness to reconsider parts of the institution that can easily be treated as fixed: when learning happens, how quickly it happens, what previous learning counts, where a learner enters, and what route they can take toward a credential or other educational goal.

Still, creating more responsive pathways does not mean learners can navigate them on their own. Learners still need to understand where to begin, how the pieces fit together, and whom to turn to when the next step is unclear. That is where the work of reconnection shifts again—from redesigning options around returning learners to accompanying them through an institution that may be difficult to navigate on their own.



ACCOMPANY THE RETURN

Making the Institution Navigable

Creating a workable pathway does not automatically make an institution easy to navigate. Across the four cases, returning learners also benefited from identifiable people and places that helped them understand what came next, connected them to the right resources, and remained involved when a simple referral was not enough.

Colleges and universities are often organized around areas of expertise. Admissions handles one part of the journey and financial aid another. Academic departments, advising, counseling, student support, and other offices each hold different pieces of information and responsibility. Those divisions can make sense organizationally while still requiring learners to figure out how the pieces fit together.

The institutions in this study approached that challenge differently. BRCC takes a more distributed approach, using navigators to help learners move through resources intended to serve a broad range of students. FSU's Office for ATM provides an identifiable home base where adult, transfer, and military-connected learners can ask questions and find their way to resources across campus; as one participant explained, "Our office is here for you. If you know nobody else, our office is here for you." At MSU, CICS provides returning learners with an academic home while connecting them to expertise and services elsewhere in the university. At CCP, Counseling plays a central role in the readmission process, with counselors and the Enrollment Success Navigator helping learners identify barriers, consider next steps, and connect with other parts of the college.

The structures differ, but they point to a common function: returning learners need an entry into the institution that does not require them to understand its organizational chart first.

What happens after that first point of contact matters just as much. Across the cases, we saw examples of staff doing more than telling learners where to go next. They made introductions, contacted colleagues, followed up, translated institutional processes, and helped learners determine which office or person could address a particular problem. At CCP, staff described some of these practices as "hand-to-hand" connections, emphasizing the difference between a general referral and helping a learner reach someone who can assist.

That distinction may seem small, but it changes the work of navigation. A referral places much of the responsibility for the next step back on the learner: find the office, explain the situation again, determine whom to ask for, and hope the new person can help. Accompaniment keeps some of that responsibility with the institution.

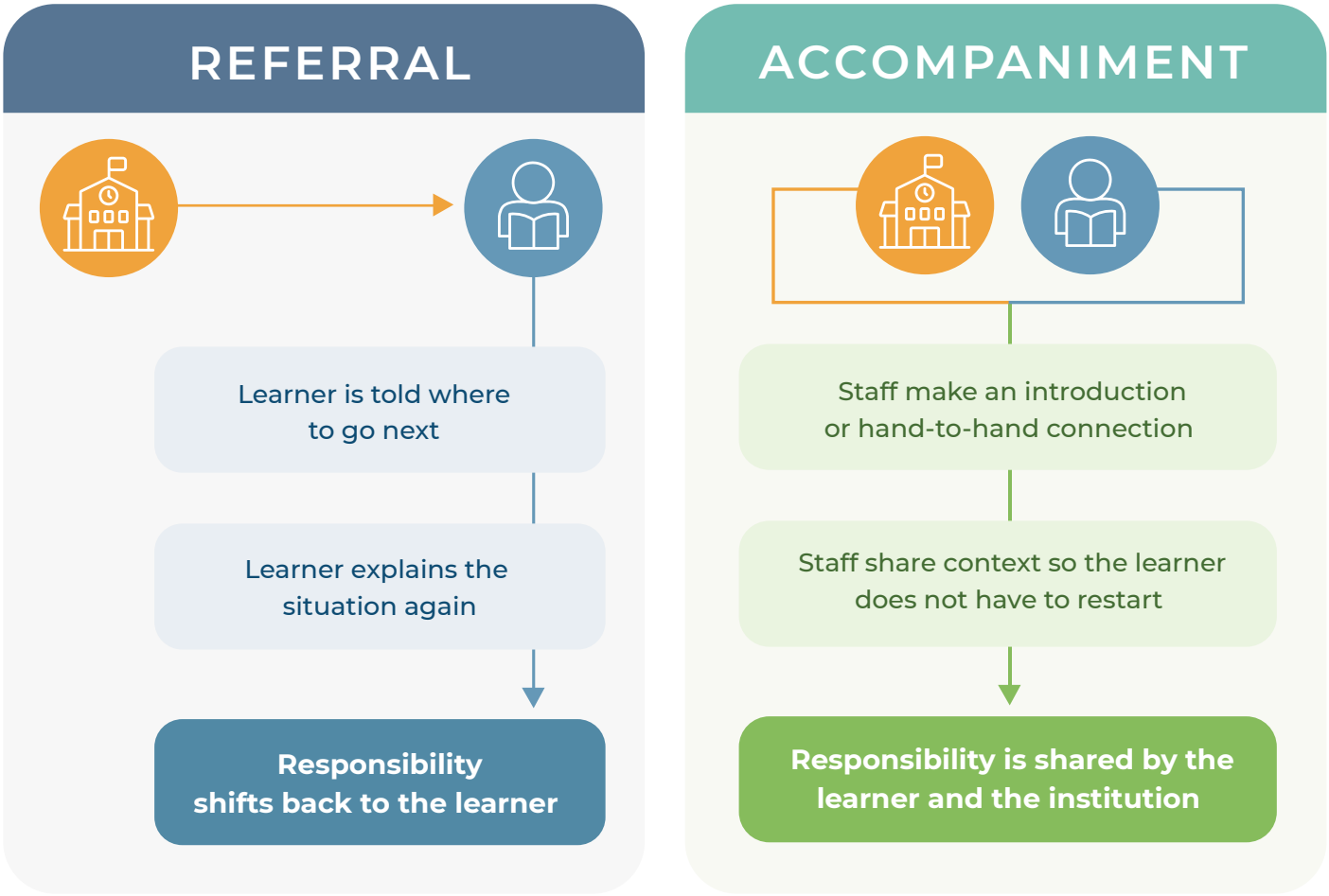
The difference is not simply whether resources exist. It is whether learners can reach and use them without repeatedly having to piece the institution together for themselves.

> **"Returning learners need an entry into the institution that does not require them to understand its organizational chart first.**

FIGURE 2

From Referral to Accompaniment

Accompaniment makes institutional navigation a shared responsibility, not an individual burden.



This work also depends on relationships among the people who do it. A staff member can make a meaningful connection because they know who has the relevant expertise. They may know which colleague will answer a question quickly, who understands an unusual policy issue, or when a learner's situation requires more than the standard process. Faculty and staff relationships can therefore become part of how learners experience the institution, even when learners never see the coordination happening behind the scenes.

Across the four cases, we came to see these connections as a form of relational infrastructure: the networks of trust, knowledge, communication, and responsibility that help people move across formal institutional boundaries. Programs, offices, and policies establish important structures for reconnection. Relationships often help those structures work together.

CULTIVATE CONNECTION

How Connection Makes Reconnection Work

The previous section focused on what learners might experience when an institution becomes more navigable. Someone helps them understand where to begin, make the next connection, and avoid starting over each time their needs cross an institutional boundary. But those moments of accompaniment depend on another layer of work that learners may not always see—the relationships, trust, and informal knowledge among the people helping them.

It would be easy to call this collaboration. But that word does not fully capture what we observed. These relationships often involved trust built over time, knowledge of one another's strengths, willingness to intervene, and a shared sense of responsibility when the standard route did not work.

At FSU, participants described this web of trust and informal knowledge as "relationship-currency": knowing whom to call, how to make a soft handoff, and how to coordinate a response across departments. One staff member captured the way this work can extend beyond formal job boundaries: "we don't think any of us ever just truly work just in our roles."

We came to think of this dynamic as a Culture of Connection. People could help learners cross institutional boundaries because they had relationships that crossed those boundaries themselves. They knew whom to call, where expertise lived, and when someone else needed to be brought into the conversation. Connection among the people doing the work became part of how reconnection was enacted.

We do not mean that connection operated uniformly across each campus. Our study encountered particular people, offices, programs, and relationships rather than mapping entire institutions. But across those settings, we repeatedly saw that formal structures alone did not explain how the work got done. Relationships helped make those structures usable.

Connection Makes Structures Usable

Formal structures create pathways, policies, roles, and resources.

Connection helps people put those structures to work. It is what allows staff to know whom to call, when to intervene, how to share context, and how to help learners move across institutional boundaries without starting over each time.

When Connection Carries Deeper Responsibility



Some of these relationships also seemed to extend beyond ordinary notions of collegiality or good service. People assumed responsibility beyond the prescribed boundaries of their positions. They advocated, extended grace, shared institutional knowledge, and remained involved because another person's progress mattered to them.

Fictive kinship offers one lens for understanding some of these relationships[1]. In *All Our Kin*, anthropologist Carol Stack documented networks of kinship and reciprocal care within a Black community, challenging deficit-oriented understandings of Black family life. The concept, applicable to Black and other marginalized communities, describes relationships among people who are not connected through formal family ties but who nevertheless relate through forms of familial responsibility, reciprocity, care, and belonging.

We use the concept cautiously. Not every supportive relationship we encountered constituted fictive kinship; instead, fictive kinship helps us notice something that terms such as collaboration or collegiality can miss: some forms of connection carry a deeper sense of responsibility for what happens to another person.

A culture of connection, then, is more than an atmosphere of friendliness or care. It matters because relationships allow people to act, to share knowledge, cross boundaries, advocate, solve problems, and assume responsibility when learners' needs do not fit neatly within institutional divisions.

But connection does not sustain itself. People produce it. Someone remembers. Someone makes the call. Someone translates the process, advocates, follows up, and notices when the standard route is not working.

The question shifts from how relationships support reconnection to something less visible but equally important: ***What work does it take to create and sustain a culture of connection?***

[1] Stack, C. B. (1974). All our kin: Strategies for survival in a black community. Harper and Row.



SUSTAIN THE PEOPLE
Who Make Connection Possible

A culture of connection can make an institution responsive. People can notice what a formal process misses, adapt when a learner's circumstances do not fit the standard route, and draw on relationships to solve problems that no single office could address alone. But that responsiveness requires time, judgment, coordination, and initiative. When an institution continually depends on people to compensate for gaps in its systems, the people doing that work can become overextended, and the responsiveness they make possible can become harder to sustain.

Some of this work is visible in advising appointments, navigation conversations, outreach, referrals, and meetings across offices. Less visible is what people contribute to make those activities responsive: interpreting a learner's circumstances, exercising judgment, following through, maintaining relationships, and coordinating across parts of the institution. These contributions help learners move through systems that were not always designed with their circumstances in mind, but they also require time, attention, authority, and support.

The challenge is not that this work is relational. The relational character is part of what makes it responsive. Formal processes cannot anticipate every circumstance a returning learner will bring. People need room to listen, interpret, exercise judgment, and sometimes respond in nonstandard ways.

The challenge emerges when sustaining responsiveness depends too heavily on particular people's relationships, judgment, and personal capacity.

High-touch support can make an institution more responsive, and the people providing that support need time, coordination, discretion, and sustained attention to do it well. Expanding access can create new possibilities for learners while also requiring institutions to consider the capacity of the people providing that access. Relationship-centered approaches can help learners move through systems that were not designed for their circumstances, but sustaining those approaches requires attention to staffing, workload, continuity, and how responsibility is shared as the work reaches more learners.

These are not signs that relationship-centered approaches are failing. They are signs that the people who make those approaches possible need institutional conditions that recognize, support, and sustain their contributions. For institutional leaders, the larger lesson is that responsiveness has organizational consequences.

A CALL IN:
Who Carries the Work of Connection?

Across the institutional settings and roles included in this study, our research team observed that Black women were especially visible among the people carrying the relational, connective, advocacy, and care work that helped make reconnection possible. Because we considered both race and gender in our analysis, this pattern became more visible and prompted us to consider not only what work sustained reconnection, but also who was especially visible carrying it. This pattern did not appear uniformly across every institution, and we do not suggest that Black women are inherently more suited to this work. Rather, the observation invites institutions to examine how this essential labor is distributed, recognized, resourced, and sustained.

When an institution's responsiveness depends heavily on particular people, those individuals may also absorb the demands created by limited capacity, unclear responsibility, or gaps in formal systems. The answer is not to expect Black women to do more, or to celebrate extraordinary effort as an unlimited institutional resource. It is to consider whether the people carrying this work have the time, authority, resources, recognition, and shared responsibility needed to sustain it.

Questions for Institutional Reflection

Who carries the work?

Who is listening, following up, advocating, connecting offices, translating processes, and helping learners navigate barriers?

Is the work visible and recognized?

Do institutional roles, expectations, and decisions acknowledge the relational and coordination work on which learner support depends?

How is the responsibility shared?

What structures, resources, and routines prevent essential support from depending too heavily on particular people?

Who absorbs the demands?

When staffing or systems fall short, who contributes the additional time, judgment, and relational effort needed to keep learners connected?

Relationships and Systems Need One Another

It can be tempting to frame the solution as greater formalization, such as building a clearer process, automating a step, creating a standard referral, or documenting what knowledgeable staff already know. Those strategies can matter because formal structures can preserve knowledge, reduce inconsistency, clarify responsibility, and make an institution less dependent on particular people.

But formalization has limits, especially since returning learners do not arrive with standardized circumstances.

The question, then, becomes, "What kinds of systems allow people to remain responsive without requiring them to continually compensate for the system itself?"

That question surfaces several recurring tensions that are not easily solved.



FIGURE 3

Tensions in Sustaining Reconnection

Sustaining reconnection means managing multiple tensions at the same time, not choosing one side over the other.



These tensions reveal why sustaining a culture of connection requires attention to the people who make it possible. Relationships can help institutions respond when formal structures fall short, but the people carrying that responsibility also need systems, resources, and shared routines that sustain their capacity to respond.

Building an Institution Ready for Return

Returning learners do not come back with the same lives they were living when they left college. They return with new experiences, responsibilities, knowledge, constraints, and aspirations. Therefore, reconnection asks more of institutions than creating a route back through the door. It asks whether the institution is prepared to respond to who learners are when they return—and whether it has created conditions that allow the people doing that work to sustain it.

The challenge is not to replace relationships with systems. It is to build institutional conditions that allow people to remain responsive without requiring particular individuals to continually hold the work together. Institutions must ask whether the work is recognized, whether there is time for it, whether people have the authority to act on what they learn, whether knowledge is shared broadly enough to survive turnover, and whether relationships across offices are supported by routines and structures. Across the cases, those questions pointed toward a shift from individual responsiveness to institutional learning.

When a counselor learns that a particular process repeatedly creates confusion, where does that knowledge go? When staff discover that a schedule designed for working adults does not work for some caregivers, who has the authority to reconsider it? When one office develops deep expertise about returning learners, how does that expertise reach faculty, financial aid, advising, admissions, or other parts of the institution? And when a trusted staff member leaves, what remains besides the relationships and knowledge that person takes with them?

Across the cases, that learning appeared in different forms: recurring conversations across offices, professional learning, data and feedback, policy and pathway redesign, leadership attention, and the discretion staff had to act on what they were seeing. The specific mechanisms varied. What mattered was whether institutions had ways to notice what returning learners and the people supporting them were encountering—and then use that knowledge to reconsider how the institution operated.

BRCC offers one example of this orientation as continuous improvement. One participant described the work as something that “never ends,” with leaders and staff continually asking, “What’s next?” The point was not change for its own sake, but an ongoing willingness to revisit pathways, policies, and supports as the institution learns more about learners, workforce needs, and community opportunities.

A Culture of Reconnection, in this sense, is not something an institution finishes building. It requires the capacity to keep learning and responding.

That distinction matters because returning learners' circumstances will continue to change. So will institutional resources, labor markets, technology, financial pressures, and policies shaping higher education. A practice that works for one group of learners, or at one moment, may need to change as those conditions change. The goal is not to design the perfect pathway once: it is to create enough institutional awareness, authority, connection, and adaptability to keep asking whether existing pathways still work.

From individual commitment to institutional conditions

The cases point toward several conditions that can help sustain a Culture of Reconnection:

Leadership that makes returning learners an institutional priority.



Leaders can make the institution's commitment visible while giving people the permission and support to question existing practices, experiment, and act on what they learn.

Routines for learning and coordination.



Meetings, feedback, data, professional learning, and other recurring practices can help move knowledge from individual experience into institutional conversation.

Places where expertise can develop.



Whether expertise is concentrated in an office, department, academic unit, or distributed more broadly, institutions need people who understand returning learners and the systems they must navigate.

Professional judgment and authority.



Staff need enough discretion to respond when a learner's circumstances do not fit the standard process.

Relationships that cross departmental and unit boundaries.



Relationships that cross departmental/unit boundaries. Expertise has limited reach if it remains isolated among the people who hold it.

Time and resources.



Responsiveness cannot depend indefinitely on people adding relational and coordination work on top of already-full responsibilities.

These are not a checklist for creating a Culture of Reconnection, nor does this study establish that any particular combination produces better learner outcomes. They are better understood as conditions the four cases invite institutional leaders to examine in their own contexts.

The four institutions also caution against treating institutionalization as synonymous with standardization. Some aspects of reconnection can and should become more durable: clearer pathways, shared knowledge, established roles, recurring coordination, and policies that no longer require the same problem to be solved repeatedly. But other aspects depend on human judgment. Learners' circumstances differ. Unexpected barriers emerge. People need room to listen and respond.

> **The goal, then, is not to remove people from the work. It is to create conditions in which people do not have to overcome the institution to make the institution responsive.**

That institutionalized flexibility may be one of the most important lessons these four cases offer. A Culture of Reconnection does not reside in a single office, policy, program, or person. It becomes visible in what an institution is able to do repeatedly: see learners more fully, change pathways when necessary, connect people across boundaries, learn from what happens, and respond again.

For institutional leaders, the question shifts from "What program should we create for returning learners?" to a more demanding one:

> **What would our institution need to become better able to reconnect learners—not only today, but as their lives and our own institutional conditions continue to change?**



Reconnection in Practice

What the five areas can look like across different institutional contexts



SEE THE LEARNER

IN PRACTICE

Morgan State University

Through ***Morgan Completes You,*** staff use individual inquiry meetings to learn about prospective learners' goals, educational histories, family responsibilities, work schedules, support systems, and reasons for returning. These conversations take place before an academic pathway is recommended, allowing staff to consider the learner's circumstances alongside credits and academic requirements. Over time, patterns in these conversations also informed four broad learner profiles that help staff anticipate different motivations and pathway needs without treating the profiles as fixed categories.



CHANGE THE PATH

IN PRACTICE

Baton Rouge Community College

BRCC creates multiple ways for learners to build on previous learning and earn credentials as they move along an educational pathway. The college connects workplace experience and industry-based certifications to opportunities for academic credit while also embedding credentials with workforce value within courses and programs. This approach recognizes that progress may be nonlinear: learners may earn a credential, enter or advance in the workforce, and return later to continue toward another credential or degree.



ACCOMPANY THE RETURN

IN PRACTICE

Community College of Philadelphia

At CCP, accompaniment begins before registration and continues through multiple points in the return process. An Enrollment Success Navigator, intake staff, and Counseling help learners identify barriers, understand requirements, connect their prior academic experiences to current goals, and determine what comes next. When another office or person is needed, counselors may make direct introductions or remain involved, creating the "hand-to-hand" connections staff described as different from simply giving learners another place to go.

CULTIVATE CONNECTION

IN PRACTICE

Fayetteville State University

FSU's Office for Adult Learners, Transfer, and Military Students provides specialized expertise and an identifiable home for learners, while relationships across campus help extend that support beyond one office. Staff described "relationship-currency" and practices such as soft handoffs, but the relationships described in the case sometimes went beyond ordinary professional courtesy: participants described deeper expectations of care, advocacy, and responsibility that the cross-case analysis understands through the lens of fictive kinship. These relationships help people share knowledge, cross organizational boundaries, and take responsibility when learners' needs do not fit neatly within a single office or formal process.

SUSTAIN THE PEOPLE

IN PRACTICE

Across the Four Cases

Across the cases, responsive work was supported by conditions that gave people room to develop expertise, exercise judgment, coordinate across organizational boundaries, and learn from what they encountered. Those conditions included leadership support, places where expertise could develop, cross-boundary relationships, routines for learning and coordination, professional judgment and authority, and sufficient time and resources. These conditions help shift reconnection from something dependent on individual effort toward an institutional capacity that can be supported and sustained.

COMPANION TOOL

Building Your Own Culture of Reconnection

The Culture of Reconnection Toolkit offers resources for institutions ready to examine their own policies and practices more closely and move from learning toward action.

Explore the Culture of Reconnection Toolkit: _____

APPENDIX A
Methodology

Our positionality as researchers shaped how we approached this study, including how we entered, navigated, and cultivated relationships with institutional representatives who participated in Catalyzing Reconnection. Our shared identities, professional experiences in higher education, and commitments to educational equity provided important points of connection with institutional leaders, faculty, and staff. We sought to build relationships grounded in reciprocity, cultural understanding, and respect for institutional knowledge. We made reciprocity tangible through institutional and participant incentives and by offering each participating institution an opportunity to request supplemental work that drew on our skills as researchers and responded to an institutional need. These commitments reflected our understanding that participation carries real costs and that research partnerships should generate value for the communities whose knowledge makes the work possible.

Our approach was also informed by Black feminist epistemology [1], particularly its emphasis on lived experience, an ethic of care, dialogue, and personal accountability. This orientation challenged assumptions that rigorous research requires distance or neutrality from the communities involved. Instead, we understood knowledge production as relational: institutional participants were knowledge holders, expertise was distributed, and researchers remained accountable for how relationships were cultivated throughout the study. This orientation informed the study design described in more detail below.

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

[1] Collins, P. H. (2000). Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment (2nd ed.). Routledge.

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.