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HEI HIGHER ED INSIGHT

CASE SPOTLIGHT

From One Office to Institutional Capacity

How Fayetteville State University Is Building Capacity to Support Adult, Transfer, and Military-Affiliated Learners

FAYETTEVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY™



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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 Fayetteville State University (FSU) is expanding opportunity for adult, transfer, and military-affiliated learners through a combination of specialized supports and broader institutional capacity building. Rather than positioning support for these learners as the responsibility of a single office alone, FSU is using the Office for Adult Learners, Transfer, and Military Students (ATM) as both a hub for direct support and a catalyst for more coordinated, institution-wide responsiveness. Across advising, transfer pathways, military learner support, financial aid, career services, academic support, and student engagement, the university is working to reduce barriers, strengthen transitions, and create more visible routes into and through the institution.

FSU's experience illustrates how an institution can respond to learners' varied responsibilities, identities, and timelines by building supports around student realities and treating adult learner success as a shared institutional responsibility. The brief highlights FSU's efforts to create clearer transfer pathways, provide early and ongoing navigation support, centralize access to key services, develop dedicated spaces for adult and military-affiliated learners, and use student feedback and data to refine programs and requirements. It also considers the beliefs, relationships, faculty and staff learning, cross-campus collaboration, and culture of listening that shape this work. Together, these practices show how reconnection can take shape through specialized expertise, distributed responsibility, institutional learning, and a strengths-based understanding of what adult, transfer, and military-affiliated learners bring to higher education.

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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 Fayetteville State University's Office for Adult Learners, Transfer, and Military Students (ATM) and the role it plays in helping the institution respond to the realities of adult learners, transfer students, and military-affiliated learners. It also examines how FSU is taking steps to adapt services, supports, and institutional practices in response to learner realities. 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.

Fayetteville State University's Reconnection Context

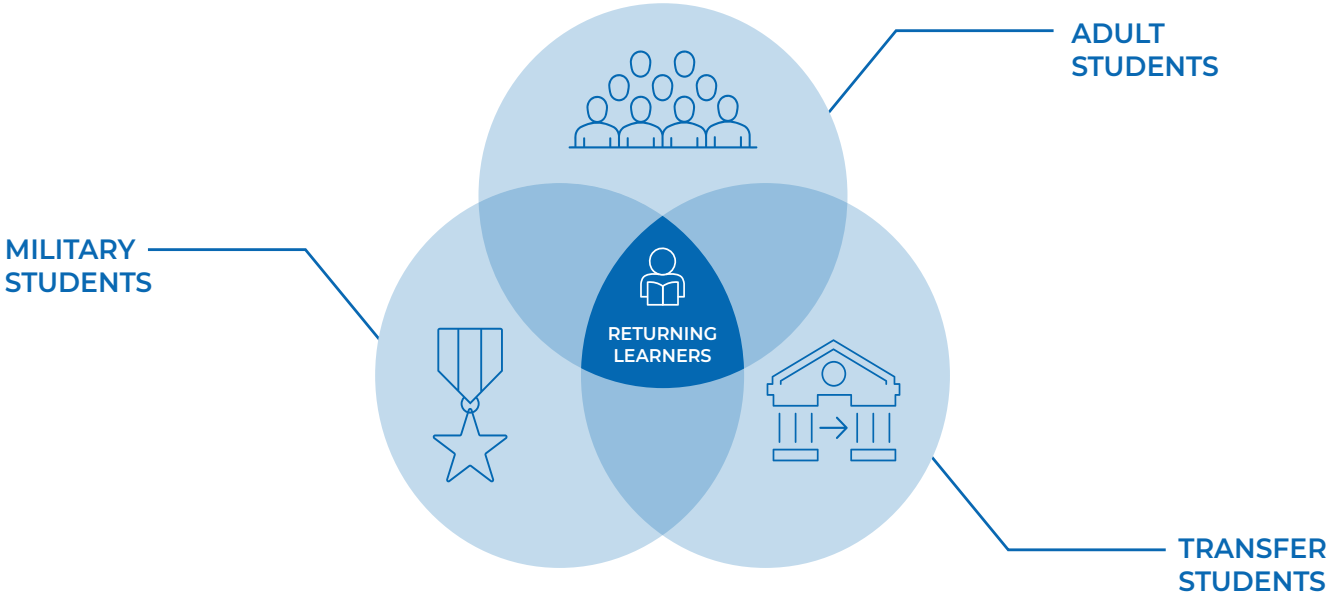
Building Institutional Capacity Through the Office for ATM

As researchers, we approached FSU 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.

At Fayetteville State University (FSU), participants described their reconnected learner efforts being largely centered on adult, transfer, and military-affiliated[2] students. Aligned with this reality, in 2023 FSU established the Office for ATM. Participants described ATM as a central hub for supporting students whose needs may not always align with structures originally designed for traditional-age, residential learners. ATM's work includes advising, outreach, transfer partnerships, military learner support, transition assistance, and opportunities for connection and community. Participants also described the office as a place where students can seek guidance, navigate challenges, and connect to broader university resources.

FIGURE 1

FSU's Adult Returning Learners



[1] FSU is located in Fayetteville, NC, which is home to Fort Bragg, one of the largest military bases in the world. Additionally, FSU has been awarded has been awarded gold status in the 2025-2026 Military Friendly® Schools designation.

Several staff described ATM as a consistent point of connection for students moving through the institution. As one participant explained, “Our office is here for you. If you know nobody else, our office is here for you.” This perspective suggests that ATM functions not only as a provider of services, but also as a place where learners know they can return when questions, barriers, or new needs emerge.

Participants consistently suggested that ATM’s significance extends beyond the services it directly provides. Staff in Career Services, Financial Aid, the Student Learning Center, Enrollment Management, and other areas described efforts to adapt their own practices, resources, and supports in response to adult learner needs. In this way, the creation of ATM appears to represent the institution’s commitment to build capacity across the university to better understand and serve adult, transfer, and military-affiliated learners.

Throughout the interviews, participants frequently described adult learners through an asset-based lens. Staff highlighted the experiences, skills, perspectives, and resilience that adult learners bring to the institution. Phrases such as “Welcome Back, Broncos,” “Once a Bronco, Always a Bronco,” and descriptions of returning learners as “seasoned” reflected a belief that students are returning to higher education with valuable strengths that can contribute to both their own success and the broader campus community. These beliefs appear to shape how FSU has approached the development of programs, services, spaces, and supports for adult learners.



Building Supports Around Student Realities

FSU has developed multiple access points and supports designed to help adult, transfer, and military-affiliated learners navigate key transition points, access resources, and remain connected to the institution from admission through degree completion.

Adult learners rarely experience college as a stand-alone activity. Work schedules, caregiving responsibilities, financial obligations, and additional commitments often shape when, where, and how students engage with higher education. Recognizing these realities, FSU has taken a number of steps to make its institution easier for adult, transfer, and military-affiliated learners to access and navigate.

Yet conversations with mothering students underscored why responsiveness begins with questioning assumptions about what adult learners need. Their experiences revealed that flexibility, belonging, and support can mean different things depending on the responsibilities learners are carrying.

FIGURE 2

What Listening to Mothering Students Revealed

Adult learners are not a uniform population. Listening to mothering students surfaced important differences in how caregiving responsibilities can shape scheduling, campus engagement, and participation in the classroom. These insights underscore the importance of learning with students rather than relying on a single definition of flexibility, belonging, or support.

Common assumptions about adult learners:

1. Flexible scheduling primarily means offering classes or services during evenings and weekends.
2. Adult learners are focused mainly on completing a credential as efficiently as possible.
3. Adult learners' life experiences make them natural authorities or representatives in the classroom.



Insights from Mothering Students:

1. Evenings and weekends can be the hardest times to participate because of caregiving responsibilities.
2. Some learners want connection, involvement, campus traditions, and a meaningful college experience, not only an efficient path to completion.
3. Mothering students may desire their experiences to be respected without being expected to speak for parents or adult learners as a group. They want to participate as learners and peers.

The insights shared by mothering students provide important context for understanding FSU's efforts to create multiple access points and forms of support across the learner journey, including programs designed to ease students' transition into the institution.

The Bronco Benefit program was established in 2024 to ease the transition from community college to FSU. The program offers guaranteed admissions to FSU to graduates from any of the 20 participating community college partners. Through this program, ATM staff members work with its community college partners to help prospective transfer students understand academic pathways, evaluate transfer credits, and prepare for the transition to university life. Additionally, graduates from three of the fifteen institutions, with at least a 2.8 GPA, receive full-tuition scholarships.

ATM staff also engage students through initiatives such as Bronco Beyond and Registration Palooza, which help newly admitted learners navigate enrollment, registration, and other key processes that can create confusion during transition periods. As one staff member described, "We hit them as soon as they get in the door."

For example, Bronco Beyond is an event where newly admitted students are invited to virtual drop-in sessions where they can ask questions, learn about university processes, and connect with campus resources before classes begin. These sessions are offered at different times, including evenings, and are recorded so students can access information later if they are unable to attend. These efforts helped create an early point of connection and provided students with guidance during a period that can otherwise feel uncertain or difficult to navigate. These efforts reflect a belief that support begins during the transition into the institution rather than waiting for a learner's first day of classes.

Once students accept FSU's admission offer, they are provided an email address, which allows staff to begin establishing rapport and orienting students to the university before they enroll. Once enrolled, ATM continues to serve as a source of advising, navigation support, and connection. Staff described working with students as they manage transfer questions, military-related issues, academic concerns, and broader life circumstances that can affect persistence and completion. This support is often highly individualized, reflecting the wide range of experiences students bring with them when they enter or return to college.

FSU has also invested in structural supports intended to simplify how students access services and information. One example is the university's One Stop model, which brings advising, registration, financial aid, and related services together in a centralized location on the first floor of the campus library. This centralized approach keeps students from having to travel to multiple offices across campus, thus reducing barriers to accessing support.

The university has paired these efforts with investments in physical spaces designed to support adult learners and military-affiliated students. Two dedicated ATM spaces, one in the ATM office and another on the third floor of the library, provide access to technology, printers, study areas, and learning environments that students can use throughout the day. Participants described these spaces as practical resources that support studying, virtual participation, and connection with other learners, who may not live on campus.

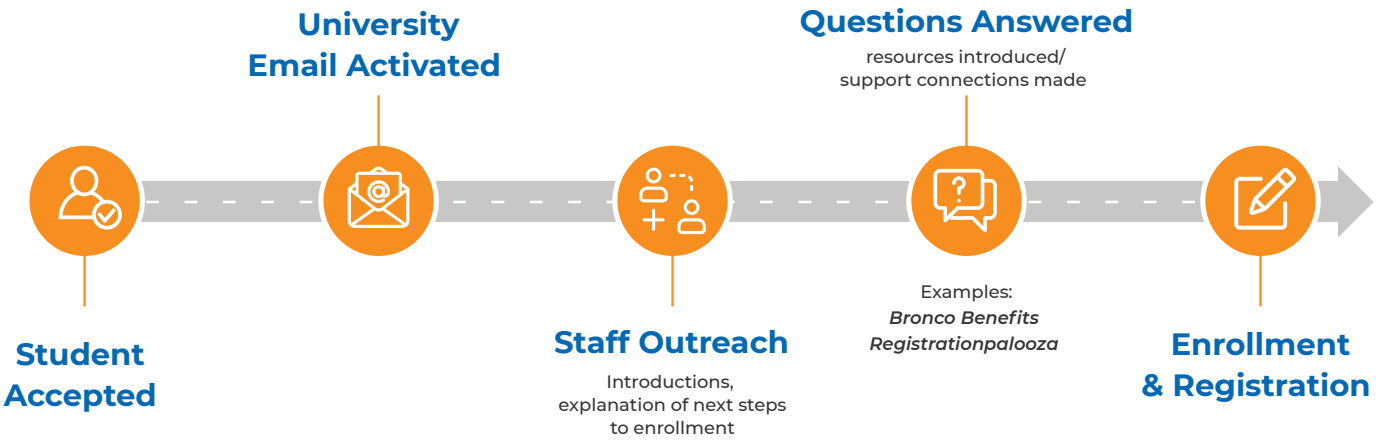
FSU also offers resources to help adult learners navigate the financial aspects of higher education. Resources include financial literacy workshops (e.g., credit, financial planning, and homeownership), scholarship opportunities, and access to military tuition assistance. During a review of transfer scholarships, staff identified a group of students who narrowly missed the minimum GPA requirement but were nevertheless persisting and succeeding academically.

As one participant explained, "We had a lot of transfer students coming in that were right on that cusp of a 3.0, but not quite there... if we're under spending in this budget line and we have eligible candidates who were one or two points off the GPA metric, we need to adjust."

Based on this review, the GPA requirement was lowered from 3.0 to 2.8, expanding access to students who did not align exactly with existing criteria but had demonstrated academic success. The change reflected a willingness to use data not simply to evaluate programs, but to reconsider whether existing requirements were helping the institution reach the students it intended to support.

FIGURE 3

Supporting Students Between Admissions and Enrollment



Highlighted FSU ATM Learner Resources

Office for ATM

PURPOSE

Serve as a home base" for adult, transfer, and military-affiliated learners

DESCRIPTION

Dedicated office that provides advising, outreach, transition support, military learner support, and connections to campus resources for adult, transfer, and military-affiliated students. The office functions as a consistent point of contact where students can ask questions, navigate academic or life circumstances, and connect with broader university supports as their needs change.

Bronco Benefit Transfer Pathway

PURPOSE

Create smoother transfer pathways for NC community college transfers

DESCRIPTION

Structured transfer pathway between FSU and partner community colleges by aligning advising, transfer planning, and academic expectations. Eligible students receive guaranteed admission and waived application fees, along with unofficial transcript evaluations, personalized advising, virtual sessions, and regular campus visits from transfer liaisons. These supports provide early, consistent guidance and help reduce barriers during the transfer process.

Bronco One Stop Advising Center

PURPOSE

Simplify access to services

DESCRIPTION

Centralized advising hub where students can access academic planning, course selection and registration guidance. Students can also receive referrals to tutoring, counseling, financial assistance, and other resources. Advising is available through walk-ins, scheduled appointments, Teams, email, or phone, giving students multiple ways to connect based on their needs and schedules.

Blue Force Tracking

PURPOSE

Build institutional capacity to support military affiliated learners

DESCRIPTION

Monthly presentation hosted by the Office for ATM aimed at faculty and staff who want to better understand the experiences and challenges faced by veteran and military-affiliated students. The presentation helps participants recognize the unique issues these students encounter and equips them to provide support by connecting them with the appropriate campus and community resources.

From Specialized Supports to Shared Responsibility

While ATM serves as an important hub for adult learners, FSU's efforts suggest that responsiveness cannot reside within a single office alone. Faculty, advisors, financial aid staff, career services professionals, and student support teams all contribute to creating a more coordinated adult learner experience.

FSU's efforts to support adult, transfer, and military-affiliated learners extend beyond the programs and services housed within the ATM Office. Whereas ATM serves as an important hub for advising, outreach, and transition support, many of the supports described are distributed across multiple offices and functional areas of the institution. This approach reflects a recognition that adult learner success cannot rest within a single office alone.



Several departments have identified opportunities to better serve adult learners and have taken steps to adjust services, programs, and practices accordingly. Career Services, the Student Learning Center, Financial Aid, Advising, and Enrollment Management each described efforts that reflect an increasing awareness of the needs and experiences adult learners bring with them. Although these efforts vary in scope and maturity, together they suggest movement toward a more coordinated approach to student support.

One staff member captured this shift by reflecting that "we don't think any of us ever just truly work just in our roles." She explained that supporting learners often requires understanding the resources available across campus and being prepared to connect students to the people best positioned to help. As she noted, knowing your coworkers matters because saying "that's not my department" can eliminate an opportunity to "bridge the gap somewhere."

> **"**
>
> **We don't think any of us ever just truly work just in our roles.**

For example, Career Services staff described working with learners who are navigating career transitions, re-entering the workforce, translating military experience into civilian language, or reevaluating career goals

after time away from school. In response, the office has incorporated career assessments, résumé support, interview preparation, and individualized coaching that reflect the experiences many adult learners bring with them. Rather than assuming a traditional undergraduate pathway, these efforts acknowledge that many students arrive with existing careers, professional experiences, and long-term goals already in place.

Similarly, the Student Learning Center's engagement methods were described as responsive to students' circumstances. Academic coaching, tutoring, peer mentoring, and learning supports are available to all students, but staff reported providing virtual communication options, flexible meeting formats, and individualized support designed to help learners who are navigating academic challenges while also balancing competing responsibilities outside the classroom.

These examples demonstrate that one approach to being more responsive to adult learners is to adapt current practices, resources, and services to the adult learner population. In this way, an office's service capacity is expanded through staff's increased expertise and skills.

As a result, building support for adult learners increasingly becomes a shared responsibility. FSU's efforts suggest that specialized expertise and institution-wide responsiveness are complementary, not competing, approaches necessary to better align institutional structures, services, and supports with the realities students bring with them.



Learning Alongside Learners

FSU's efforts extend beyond providing services to students. Participants described listening to learners, learning from their experiences, and using that knowledge to shape programs, supports, faculty development efforts, and institutional decision-making.

Building a more responsive institution involves more than creating new programs or expanding services. It also requires developing a deeper understanding of the students the institution serves. At FSU, efforts to support adult, transfer, and military-affiliated learners extend beyond direct student services and into faculty and staff learning, cross-campus collaboration, and institutional knowledge sharing. These efforts reflect a broader recognition that student success depends not only on what services are available, but also on how well faculty and staff understand the experiences students bring with them.

One example is Blue Force Tracking, an initiative designed to help faculty and staff better understand military-affiliated learners. Located near Fort Bragg, FSU serves a large population of students whose educational journeys intersect with military service, deployment, relocation, family responsibilities, and transitions into civilian life. Blue Force Tracking creates opportunities for faculty and staff to learn about these experiences and consider how they may shape students' engagement with coursework, campus services, and the broader university environment.

Programs such as Blue Force Tracking imply that student success depends both on students learning how to navigate the institution and on the institution learning how to better serve its students.

Institutional learning also occurs through collaboration. Staff described a culture of referrals and soft handoffs that relied heavily on relationship-currency among staff, developed over time through care, concern, and support among colleagues. When challenges arise, support often depends on knowing whom to call, how to connect students with resources, and how to coordinate responses across departments. These practices help distribute knowledge throughout the institution and reduce the likelihood that support remains concentrated within a single office or individual.

Several participants emphasized the importance of hearing directly from students. Student feedback, assessments, focus groups, informal conversations, and ongoing interactions provide information that can inform new initiatives, adjustments to existing supports, and future planning efforts. This orientation toward listening appeared repeatedly throughout the interviews and serves as an important foundation for institutional learning.

One leader described making student listening a deliberate part of the institution's approach, explaining that after conducting a series of student focus groups, "a lot of the things that we've implemented since I've been here is because they told me what they wanted."

Staff also described listening as more than gathering information. One participant noted that when students see their feedback reflected in new initiatives or changes to existing practices, their reaction is often, "Oh wow, I'm being heard." She connected this sense of responsiveness to trust, engagement, and retention, emphasizing the importance of moving beyond simply collecting feedback toward demonstrating how student voices shape institutional decisions.

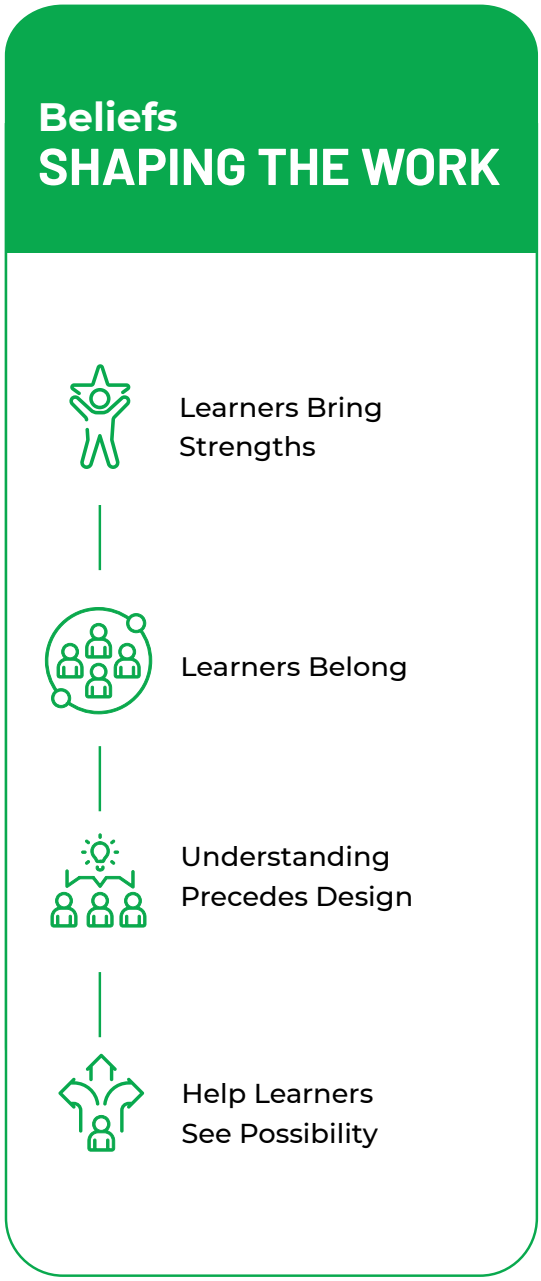
Underlying many of these examples is a belief that adult learners bring valuable experiences, perspectives, and strengths to the institution. Staff frequently described these students as capable, experienced, and resourceful, while also acknowledging that navigating higher education can present challenges for them. In this context, institutional learning is not simply about identifying student needs. It is also about recognizing student assets and ensuring that institutional structures are responsive to both.

These efforts do not guarantee that every learner's experience will be seamless or that all barriers have been removed. However, by investing in faculty and staff learning, creating opportunities for collaboration, and listening to student experiences, FSU is working to expand the institution's ability to recognize, understand, and respond to the realities of adult learners.



The Beliefs Shaping the Work

Underlying FSU's programs and supports is a set of beliefs about adult learners, their strengths, and their potential. These beliefs help explain how staff approach advising, community-building, support services, and student success.



The programs, partnerships, and supports described throughout this case did not emerge in isolation. Underlying many of these efforts were a set of beliefs about adult, transfer, and military-affiliated learners that appeared to shape how staff understood student success and how they approached their work. While these beliefs were not always articulated explicitly, they emerged repeatedly across interviews and helped explain why many of FSU's supports were designed the way they were.

One belief centered on how staff viewed adult learners. Staff frequently emphasized the experiences, knowledge, and strengths learners bring with them when they return. One staff member described returning learners as "seasoned," highlighting the ways work experience, military service, parenting, and/or other life experiences were assets. Such perspectives challenge deficit-oriented assumptions and instead frame adult learners as individuals who add to, not take away from, their classrooms, college, and community.

A related belief involved belonging. Expressions such as "Welcome Back Broncos" and "Once a Bronco, Always a Bronco" reflect an effort to communicate that returning learners remain part of the university community even after time away. These messages do more than encourage re-enrollment; they signal that learners are welcomed as community members whose prior experiences remain connected to the institution.

Another staff member described the institution as “Family State University,” suggesting that relationships, belonging, and community are not simply programmatic goals but part of how many staff understand the institution’s culture and responsibilities to learners.

Several participants also emphasized the importance of understanding students before attempting to design solutions for them. One staff member described the need to “read the room,” arguing that institutions should avoid assuming that strategies developed elsewhere will automatically work in their own contexts. Instead, effective support begins with understanding the realities, needs, and experiences of the students an institution serves.

Perhaps the most powerful articulation of this perspective came from a participant who described the importance of “speaking life into students” and helping them see possibilities they may not yet see in themselves. Throughout the interviews, staff spoke about coaching, listening, advising, encouraging, advocating, and affirming students as they navigated uncertainty. These practices reflect an investment in student success that extends beyond formal responsibilities, suggesting that support at FSU is often relational as well as programmatic.

These ideas suggest that many of FSU’s efforts are shaped by more than programs, policies, or organizational structures alone. They reflect ways of understanding learners and their experiences. Whether expressed through transfer partnerships, advising practices, dedicated spaces, professional learning opportunities, or institutional messaging, these beliefs appear to influence how the university approaches the ongoing work of supporting adult learners.



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.

