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HEI HIGHER ED INSIGHT

CASE SPOTLIGHT

Expanding Opportunity Through Workforce Mobility

How Baton Rouge Community College Is Rethinking Learning, Completion, and Educational Pathways

baton rouge COMMUNITY COLLEGE ™



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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 for providing the photography featured throughout this project. All images are used with permission, courtesy of BRCC. Their visual assets play a vital role in bringing this content to life.

Abstract

This brief explores how Baton Rouge Community College (BRCC) is expanding opportunity for returning and adult learners through flexible educational and workforce pathways. Rather than housing reconnection primarily in a separate adult-learner structure, BRCC treats support for learners as a shared institutional responsibility. The college is working across academic and workforce programs to recognize learning gained through work and other experiences, redesign pathways, reduce barriers, and create multiple routes into education and employment.

BRCC's experience illustrates how an institution can respond to learners' varied goals, responsibilities, and timelines by rethinking how learning is recognized and how completion is defined. The brief highlights BRCC's efforts to connect credit and noncredit learning, expand use of Credit for Prior Learning and Prior Learning Assessment, embed meaningful credentials along educational pathways, and examine institutional requirements that may slow student progress. It also considers the leadership, partnerships, data use, faculty engagement, and culture of continuous improvement that support this work. Together, these practices show how reconnection can take shape through distributed responsibility, pathway redesign, and a broader definition of what counts as learning, completion, and progress.

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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 Baton Rouge Community College (BRCC) and the ways it is rethinking learning, completion, and educational pathways in response to the varied goals, experiences, and responsibilities of the learners it serves. It examines how BRCC staff and administrators seek to create responsive structures, recognize learning that occurs beyond the classroom, and expand opportunities for educational and workforce advancement. 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.

Baton Rouge Community College's Reconnection Context

Serving a diverse community through flexible educational and workforce pathways

As researchers, we approached BRCC 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 Baton Rouge Community College (BRCC), participants did not describe reconnection as a discrete initiative serving a narrowly defined population of adult returning learners. Instead, they described an institution working to serve the broader community through educational and workforce opportunities designed to meet learners at different stages of their personal, professional, and educational journeys. Across interviews, participants consistently emphasized that learners arrive with different goals, experiences, responsibilities, and timelines, but should not be separated into fundamentally different systems of support.

Participants frequently connected this approach to a broader institutional transformation. Historically, BRCC was often viewed as a transfer-oriented institution, serving as a pathway to four-year colleges and universities. Participants described how the college has evolved over time into an institution that increasingly emphasizes workforce mobility, industry-aligned credentials, and multiple forms of educational attainment. As one participant explained, BRCC now seeks to be understood as "a welcoming place for anyone at any stage in their educational professional lives," with pathways that allow the public to see how the college can connect to their personal, professional, or educational goals.

This evolution has occurred within a broader Louisiana policy environment that places significant emphasis on workforce preparation, credential attainment, and alignment with labor market needs. Yet rather than describing these priorities as external mandates, participants characterized them as opportunities to rethink how educational pathways are designed and how learners can access meaningful outcomes.

BRCC's reconnection context reveals an evolving institution that has experienced significant enrollment growth, serves an increasingly diverse learner population, and works to align structures, supports, and pathways with the realities of students' lives and the workforce opportunities available to them.

One Institution, One Student: Designing for a Diverse Community of Learners

BRCC seeks to serve learners with different goals, experiences, and responsibilities through one connected institution, pairing shared access to resources with supports responsive to individual circumstances.

Across interviews, participants consistently resisted defining adult returning learners as a separate group requiring a separate institutional system. While they readily discussed the unique realities many returning learners face, including work responsibilities, caregiving obligations, prior educational experiences, stop-out histories, and changing career goals, they described these realities as part of the broader diversity of learners served by the college. Central to this perspective is the idea that the institution is responsible for serving the entire community and creating opportunities for learners to access the resources, supports, and educational options that fit their circumstances. One participant captured this orientation plainly, “We don’t siphon students” into separate categories or pathways that limit what they can access.

This perspective shapes how BRCC approached organizing its student supports. Participants described substantial investments in structures intended to help learners navigate the college environment regardless of where they begin. Among the most visible examples is the college navigator model, which expanded from two professional advisors to twelve. Participants described navigators as “holistic professional advisor[s]” who offer students a “centralized point of contact” for locating resources, asking questions, and making decisions throughout their educational journey. The navigator model was intended to make student resources more visible, coordinated, and easier to access.

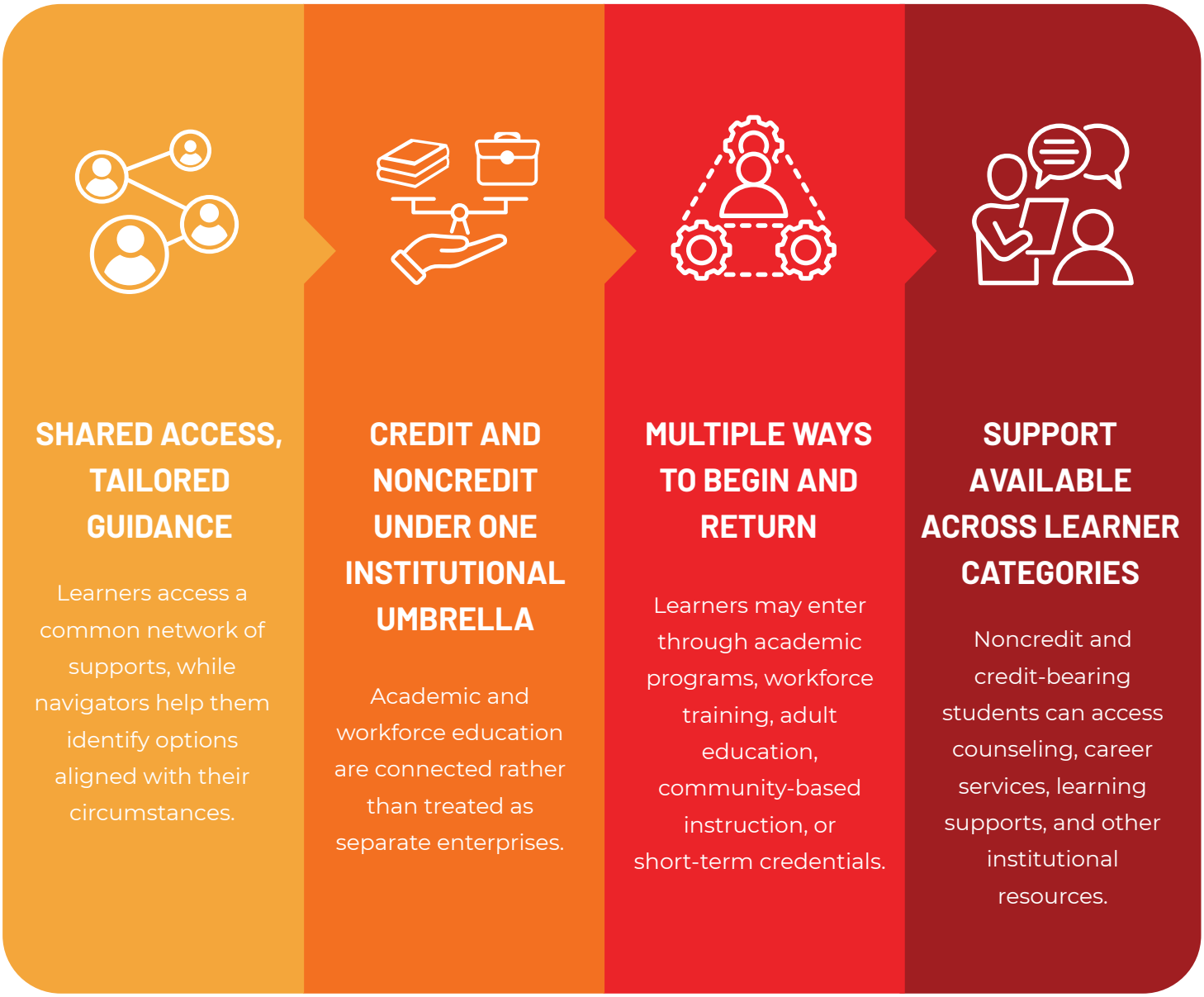
Participants also emphasized that support structures are not reserved for a particular student category. Non-credit learners have access to many of the same resources available to credit-bearing students, including counseling, career services, and other campus supports. Similarly, workforce education and academic education are increasingly integrated, with every academic division containing its own workforce component, creating opportunities for students to move between workforce training, industry credentials, and academic programs within their specific discipline.

Importantly, participants did not suggest that all learners need the same supports or follow the same educational route. Instead, interviews revealed repeated efforts to adapt institutional practices to diverse learner circumstances.

Adult learners may receive assistance navigating online learning environments, returning students may access prior learning assessment opportunities, and working learners may benefit from flexible scheduling, evening office hours, weekend registration events, or workforce training opportunities that operate on different timelines than traditional academic programs. What remains consistent is the belief that these supports exist within a shared institutional framework rather than separate systems designed for distinct populations.

FIGURE 1

Serving Different Learner Realities Through One Institution



Turning Experience into Opportunity

BRCC is working to translate learners' workplace knowledge, professional credentials, and prior experiences into academic credit and new opportunities for educational and workforce advancement.

Across interviews, participants frequently pushed back against the idea that learning occurs only within a classroom. Instead, they described learners arriving at BRCC with years of professional experience, technical expertise, and industry/workplace training. The question was not whether learning had taken place, but whether the institution could recognize and build upon what learners already knew. This perspective has increasingly shaped BRCC's approach to Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), and the growing integration of industry-based certifications (IBCs) into academic pathways.

Participants described numerous examples of students whose professional experiences align closely with college-level learning outcomes. Criminal justice professionals, law enforcement officers, childcare workers, construction professionals, paralegals, accounting professionals, and technology workers often enter BRCC with competencies that overlap substantially with coursework required within academic programs. Rather than requiring students to repeat learning they have already demonstrated in professional settings, BRCC has developed mechanisms to evaluate and award credit for relevant knowledge and skills. Depending on the discipline, these assessments may include examinations, portfolios, work experience documentation, employer verification, industry credentials, or evaluations conducted by faculty with expertise in the field.

Institutional leaders described ongoing efforts to strengthen and expand these practices by revising the college's CPL and PLA policies. One focus of this work is creating clearer pathways between IBCs and academic credit. Participants explained that while many workforce credentials already provide value in the labor market, revised policies are intended to more intentionally connect those credentials to academic programs and degree pathways. In this model, a learner who earns an industry credential through workforce training may also be able to receive academic credit toward a certificate or degree, reducing duplication and creating additional opportunities to continue their education.

Participants often framed CPL and PLA as more than mechanisms for accelerating completion. Throughout the interviews, staff and faculty described adult learners who had spent years developing expertise in workplaces, supporting families, serving communities, or advancing professionally before returning to college. BRCC's evolving approach seeks to build upon existing strengths. As one participant explained, the goal is to help adult returning

learners understand that they are “ahead,” not behind, because prior work and prior learning can reduce the time between returning and completing. A learner may receive credit for demonstrated competencies, apply an industry-based certification toward academic coursework, or use prior experience to shorten the path to a credential. Across these examples, participants emphasized helping learners move forward from where they are rather than retracing steps they have already taken.

At the same time, interviews revealed that the college continues to refine how these opportunities are communicated and implemented. Participants acknowledged that some students may be unaware that CPL and PLA options exist. One participant observed that older, more seasoned students may not know the name of the policy, but they are often the ones who ask, “this is the work I’ve been doing all this time…can I get credit for it?” Several participants described ongoing efforts to increase awareness through navigators, faculty outreach, informational sessions, website redesign, and clearer crosswalks linking industry credentials to academic credit. These efforts reflect a broader recognition that opportunities can only benefit learners if those learners know
they exist and understand how to access them.

FIGURE 2

When Experience Counts

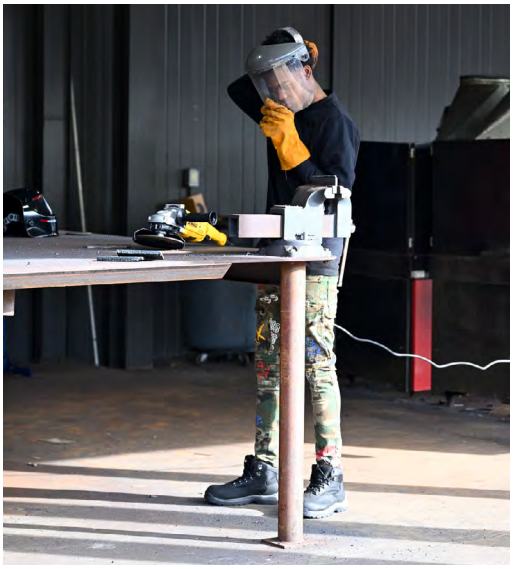
BRCC is developing multiple ways for learners to demonstrate college-level learning gained outside the classroom.

LAW ENFORCEMENT EXPERIENCE	**Professional training and demonstrated competencies**	• PLA assessment • Credit toward criminal justice coursework
CHILDCARE EXPERIENCE	**Years of professional practice or an existing CDA credential**	• Faculty assessment • Credit within an early childhood program
TECHNICAL AND COMPUTING EXPERIENCE	**Industry certification, job responsibilities, or demonstrated technical skills**	• Alignment with course outcomes • Credit toward a certificate or degree program
WORKFORCE CREDENTIAL	**Completion of an industry-based certification**	• Planned or existing articulation through PLA • Continued movement into credit-bearing education

Redefining Completion

At BRCC, completion can take multiple forms, allowing learners to earn credentials with educational and workforce value throughout their journeys rather than waiting until they finish a degree.

For many colleges and universities, completion is most commonly understood as earning a degree. At BRCC, participants described a broader view, where industry certifications, certificates, workforce training, and associate degrees were treated as meaningful educational outcomes that can create value for learners at different points in their educational journeys. While associate degrees remain an important goal for many students, participants repeatedly emphasized that completion does not need to occur only at the end of a multi-year academic pathway. Instead, learners can earn credentials along the way that provide immediate value while also creating opportunities for continued education and advancement.



One of the clearest examples of this philosophy is BRCC's growing use of embedded credentials. Participants described efforts to integrate industry-based certifications and workforce credentials directly into academic programs and, in some cases, individual courses. One participant described the value of having "an IBC embedded into the course" so that students earn "a legitimate credential" while still enrolled, giving them "the pride and the incentive to stick to it." In this way, students can earn certifications throughout their educational journeys. Faculty and administrators described designing courses and programs so that learners develop competencies aligned with industry-recognized credentials while simultaneously making progress toward longer-term certificates and degrees. Students can even earn course-level credentials, technical certificates, or industry certifications that provide evidence of skill attainment before completing a larger program of study. These credentials can then be applied toward academic pathways or used immediately in the workforce.

Participants described educational journeys as increasingly nonlinear. Learners may earn a credential, enter the workforce, return later for additional education, or move between workforce and academic pathways over time. In this context, embedded credentials and industry certifications help ensure learners can leave with meaningful accomplishments even if degree completion occurs later.

FIGURE 3

Completion as a Next Step, Not Only an Endpoint

At BRCC, completion is not treated only as the end of a pathway. Credentials earned along the way can carry workforce value, mark educational progress, and create opportunities for learners to keep moving forward.



Removing Barriers, Expanding Opportunity

BRCC regularly reexamines requirements, processes, and supports to determine where the institution can remove unnecessary obstacles while preserving the learning and preparation students need.

Across interviews, participants repeatedly described a willingness to question long-standing assumptions about how students move through higher education. Whether discussing course sequencing, academic placement, student supports, scheduling practices, or workforce training, they often returned to a common question: Is this requirement helping students move forward, or is it creating an unnecessary barrier? When barriers are identified, participants described an orientation to consider how the system itself might be redesigned.

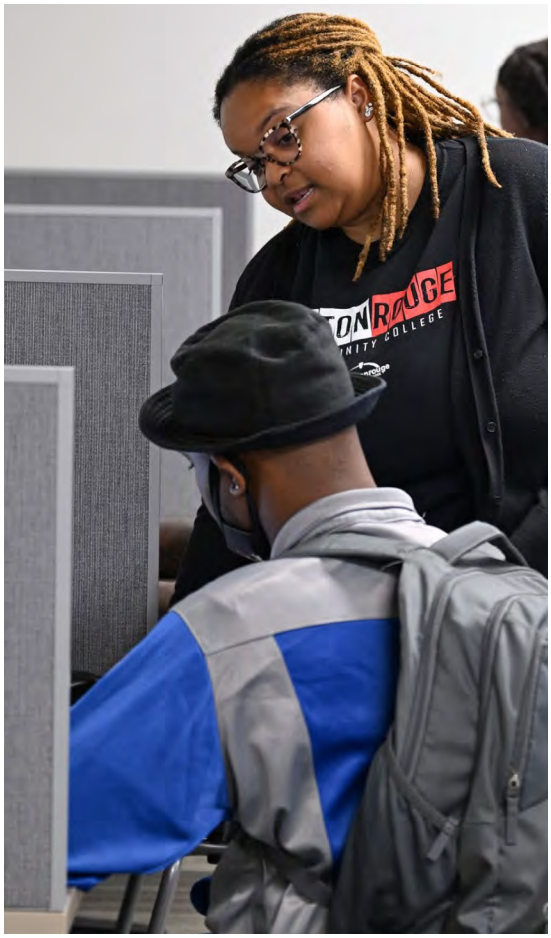
One of the clearest examples emerged through BRCC's work to review and remove unnecessary prerequisites. Participants described a process in which academic leaders worked with their unit faculty to assess which prerequisites were truly needed before students enrolled in subsequent courses. The purpose of removing a prerequisite did not eliminate the course requirement; it simply allowed students to take courses in a different sequence. This assessment mattered because students could be delayed when a prerequisite was not offered when the student was ready to enroll. By reconsidering course sequencing, BRCC sought to help students enroll as quickly as possible while preserving the learning required within the program.

> **"Is this requirement helping students move forward, or is it creating an unnecessary barrier?**



Similar thinking informed BRCC's adoption of its co-requisite English model. Participants described replacing a sequence of developmental courses with a structure that allows students to enroll directly in college-level English while receiving additional academic support through a paired co-requisite course. The change was informed by research, faculty collaboration, student data, and statewide conversations about developmental education reform. Participants explained that the model was intended to reduce the time students spent working toward gateway coursework while maintaining academic support for learners who needed additional assistance. Participants also described the model as a shift away from viewing learners through a remediation lens. The co-requisite structure reflects the belief that learners can succeed in college-level work when appropriate support is available alongside it and replaces the use of a single, standardize entrance exam alone to assess readiness.

Faculty also described the co-requisite environment as creating opportunities for relationship building, confidence development, and increased engagement with the academic community. Instructors described the small, paired course structure as a space where students "become a little family," form study groups, and sometimes remain connected long after the course ends. Faculty also described becoming students' "first line of defense" when learners needed help with registration, textbooks, technology, mental health services, or other questions that surfaced along the way.



The interviews also highlighted a variety of supports intended to address practical realities that many learners encounter while balancing education with work, family obligations, and other responsibilities. Participants discussed expanded online and hybrid offerings, evening office hours, faculty-supported study spaces, tutoring resources, Digital Learning and Academic Support Center services, weekend registration events, and flexible scheduling options. Workforce programs were described as particularly flexible because many industry-based certifications can be offered outside traditional academic calendars and often require fewer administrative steps than credit-bearing programs. Participants noted that some workforce training opportunities can begin at virtually any point throughout the year, allowing learners to engage with education when opportunities arise rather than waiting for a traditional academic term to begin.

Creating Conditions for Opportunity

BRCC's efforts are supported by leadership, shared data, faculty learning, partnerships, state policy, and an institutional willingness to test, refine, and reconsider established ways of working.

Core Conditions for

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITY



Leadership Encouraging Culture of Innovation



Data-Informed Decision Making



Workforce Partnerships



Continuous Improvement Mindset

The initiatives highlighted in this case did not emerge in isolation. Across interviews, participants repeatedly described a set of organizational conditions that enabled BRCC to redesign programs, revise policies, experiment with new approaches, and expand educational and workforce opportunities. While the specific efforts varied across divisions and departments, participants consistently pointed to leadership, collaboration, data-informed decision making, workforce partnerships, and a willingness to embrace change as critical factors shaping the college's approach.

One of the most consistent themes across interviews was the role of leadership in establishing an institutional culture supportive of innovation and adaptation. Participants frequently referenced the influence of the college's leadership team in encouraging collaboration, sharing data, and creating space for experimentation. Staff discussed decisions-making processes that included staff and faculty town halls, shared planning processes, cross-functional task forces, and transparent discussions about institutional priorities. Critical to this approach was a shift toward a culture in which information was shared broadly, and institutional improvements were viewed as a collective responsibility.

Participants also emphasized the importance of data in shaping institutional decisions. Across multiple interviews, leaders described relying on enrollment trends, stop-out data, labor market information, credential attainment metrics,

program outcome assessments, workforce demand indicators, and employer feedback when evaluating existing programs and considering future changes. Participants also described how enrollment data informed investments in institutional capacity. As enrollment increased, BRCC expanded its college navigator team from two professional advisors to twelve, an investment intended to preserve a centralized source of guidance and connections to campus resources as the college served more students. Participants consistently framed change as something informed by evidence rather than intuition alone, evidence that included feedback from students, employers, and community partners.

Another important condition is BRCC's extensive network of partnerships. Participants described relationships with employers, workforce organizations, nonprofit partners, economic development agencies, school systems, and state organizations as essential to the college's ability to connect learning with employment opportunities. Employer advisory boards play an important role in informing curriculum decisions, identifying workforce needs, and shaping credential pathways. Participants also described partnerships that allow instruction and training to occur beyond the boundaries of the main campus, creating additional opportunities for learners to access education in community settings. These relationships help BRCC maintain awareness of emerging workforce demands while simultaneously creating opportunities for students to apply their learning in professional contexts.

Faculty adaptation emerged as another recurring theme. Several participants reflected on the fact that many faculty members were trained within more traditional academic environments, spaces that emphasized transfer-oriented pathways and degree attainment as the primary markers of success. Participants described how efforts such as prerequisite reform, co-requisite education, embedded credentials, and CPL policy revisions often required faculty to reconsider long-standing assumptions. Participants described skepticism, debate, pilot projects, faculty champions, and gradual adoption as faculty reconsidered long-standing assumptions about learning, readiness, completion, and educational value. Over time, they reported growing willingness to explore approaches that could create additional opportunities for students.



The broader Louisiana policy environment also shaped many of the conditions supporting this work. Participants frequently referenced state priorities related to workforce preparation, industry-based certifications, credential attainment, and educational responsiveness. Rather than treating these priorities as external compliance requirements, staff and faculty often described them as opportunities to rethink educational design. This context helped support initiatives focused on workforce mobility, credential stacking, prior learning assessment, and alternative pathways to attainment. While BRCC's approach reflects decisions made at the institutional level, participants consistently acknowledged that state policy helped create an environment in which experimentation and workforce-oriented innovation were encouraged.

Perhaps the most striking condition described across interviews was an institutional mindset oriented toward continuous improvement. Participants repeatedly used language that emphasized evolution, adaptation, and ongoing redesign. One participant summarized this mindset simply: "it never ends," describing a college culture in which leaders and staff are continually asking, "what's next?" This mindset appears throughout the initiatives featured in this spotlight. Prerequisites were reevaluated. Developmental education was redesigned. Prior learning policies are being revised. Embedded credentials continue to evolve. New partnerships are being explored. Existing supports are being expanded. In each case, participants framed change not as a temporary initiative but as a continuing part of how the institution operates.



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.

