



This case study is part of an eight-part series under APLU's Guided Pathways for 4-Year Institutions model.

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4-Year Guided Pathways Case Study: Adult Learner Re-Enrollment

Introduction

For many returning learners (aka adult learners), college served as a far-reaching aspiration in part to barriers to affordability and/or undeveloped/unclear pathways to a career. Whether it's an institution's specific financial aid/hold policy or nonacademic costs that act in direct conflict of pursuing a credential or degree, a myriad of problems lead to stop-outs or dropouts. Not only is this a loss for the institution by way of less tuition, but this is also a significant loss for students who often need a postsecondary degree to achieve greater upward economic mobility.

Cleveland State University's ReConnect to College Program works to develop a guided pathway for returning adult learners. The program is a unique partnership with a local non-profit, College Now Greater Cleveland, in which the two entered into an agreement to re-enroll students who stopped out as far back as 2013. ReConnect's goal is to create a seamless on-ramp back into a degree program with little to no cost and wrap-around support. A number of strategies were developed and/or used in order to develop this program. Highlights of these strategies include:

- Formalize partnership across academic affairs and enrollment services
- Develop a data-sharing agreement to give access to a third-party organization
- Align programmatic goals with state-level completion goals and institutional mission
- Create formal staffing structures and roles to effectively leverage institutional services (e.g., coaching/tutoring, transfer, etc.)

Description of Strategy

First, the institution had to identify the number of students that had stopped out between 2013 and 2016. Following negotiations and the enactment of a data-sharing agreement, CSU shares contact information for the identified stop-outs with College Now. The determination for College Now to serve as the initial point of contact was intentional as the university felt this would increase the likelihood of students' returning as the organization would not be perceived as 'bill collector' on behalf of the university. Additionally, College Now was better positioned through relationships in the community to match resources to overcome other barriers to re-enrollment so that College Now then conducted its own qualitative fact-finding on 'why' students left to better identify the institutional or environmental barriers that led to stopping out. In cataloging and flagging these barriers, both College Now and Cleveland State were positioned to act to remove such pain points.

Description of Strategy (cont.)

Examples of pain points and barriers include:

- Financial aid policies that favor traditionally aged students
- Limited financial support by way of loans or grants to help offset lingering attendance costs and/or that mitigate life events (e.g., car wrecks, family illness, etc.)
- Unclear degree pathways for specific programs in terms of poorly articulated learning outcomes

With evidence in hand, both the university and its community partner swiftly acted to drive change in support of a returning learning pathway. Students who expressed interest in re-enrolling at CSU were assigned what could be termed a “case manager” on Cleveland State’s side who worked with students in the readmissions process and matched appropriate on-campus resources and opportunities such as coaching and tutoring. College Now developed a strong relationship with a local lender, the Hebrew Free Loan Association, in which they were able to help students in need of additional funding to either pay off lingering costs or support attendance through interest-free loans for those who qualify.

To date, the program enabled the university to re-enroll a record number of students in its first term—nearly 130 students which yielded roughly over \$500,000 in net tuition to reinvest and scale the program.

Intervention

A set of core capacities were necessary to design and launch the ReConnect program. Worth noting is that these capacities do not sit in isolation but rather work together. The identified capacities also evolved over time as the program matured. Below are brief highlights and summaries for how these functional capacities supported and sustained the pathways work.

Leadership & Culture

Cleveland State was originally founded as an open-access institution to serve students who historically could not access higher education, especially adults in the greater Cleveland area. Today, the CSU’s ReConnect program is an example of revisiting its roots and strongly aligning the program to not only its anchor neighborhood status but also aligning program goals and objectives to that of state-wide completion targets. This was largely made possible by strong and invested leadership, primarily at the mid-level. The program is housed under the Provost’s office and originated through Undergraduate Studies and Academic Affairs. The vice president for academic affairs developed and enriched the relationship with College Now, in which the latter devoted organizational resources to formalize an ‘adult learner’ facing, senior-level position. As a unified front, the two change agents were able to create support and tackle structural barriers through their senior positioning and importantly strategic partnering—both on and off-campus. Internally at CSU, this required building targeted relationships with enrollment services, financial aid, and the registrar. Externally, this required leveraging community assets such as the Hebrew Free Loan Association, which offers free interest loans to qualified borrowers in which a significant number of returning students benefitted.

Intervention (cont.)

Institutional Research (IR)

Core to this work is the use and exchange of data to a third party group. Negotiations for sharing student contact information for those who dropped/stopped out required the VP of academic affairs to work alongside the university's legal team and College Now to ensure the protection of student information. This required being transparent with the use of the data and the direct alignment to College Now's role in the program—being the initial point of contact. Further, this also required the IR team to have clean enough data and a system to easily pull cohort records as far back as 4 years (AY2013) from the initial year of the project.

Strategic Finance

As part of their participation in APLU's Collaborative Opportunity Grant (COG), the Cleveland State/College Now team received technical assistance on developing an articulated business model for the ReConnect program. The team documented program design and implementation through a return on investment (ROI) perspective in which they mapped programmatic costs to the return in institutional funds (e.g., tuition) as calculated by increases in enrollment, retention, and completion rates. In its initial semester of implementation, the team enrolled about 127 students, which led to over \$500,000 in tuition back to the campus. Further, a subset of those students were able to graduate soon thereafter, which led to improved graduation rates. This was not only a win to the campus as expressed in improved outcomes in a performance funding state but more importantly, a win for the student as the credential can open new opportunities for careers and economic growth in the community. In focusing on calculating outcome data to financial terms, the institution was able to establish broader buy-in across departments, garner the attention and support of the board of trustees, and establish regional scaling opportunities by informing local community colleges and four-year institutions to develop similar programming.

Institutional Policy

Specific institutional policies were identified as creating and/or reinforcing barriers to re-enrollment and progression. In particular, the university discovered needed changes to the readmissions process, given each college had slightly different processes. An even greater barrier was acknowledged with respect to financial holds and reporting, which favored traditionally aged students. As such, the team is now working on standardizing readmissions for this subpopulation of students and is working to drop specific financial holds to enable students to qualify for aid and/or opportunities that help mitigate attendance costs.

Relation to the Model

The ReConnect program builds an on-ramp for returning learners largely to re-enroll later in the student experience (primarily the advanced progress phase). Many of the students identified have a significant number of credits and need additional support around mitigating the cost of attendance and managing competing demands such as a job and caring for dependents. As such, this type of programming and associated interventions relies on the institution to generate deeper partnerships both externally and internally. This case is especially helpful in examining the functional institutional capacities (see below) needed to support a guided pathways strategy.