


CASE  
STUDY  
#2



# *Adult Learners:* *Who are they & what do* *they need to be successful?*

**Dr. Kathy H. Thompson**

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ECMC  
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**GREAT  
EIGHT**  
CASE STUDY 2: Adult Learners

## ***The Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education (CIPE), University of South Alabama***

CIPE serves community colleges, universities, postsecondary partners, employers, and community partners to improve graduation rates and workforce outcomes for first-generation, under-represented, and under-resourced students. CIPE unifies the work of its partner communities to provide maximum benefit for participating institutions and the students they serve. CIPE assists higher education institutions in becoming more student-centered and equity-focused. CIPE catalyzes change among postsecondary institutions in digital teaching and learning, student advising, developmental education, student pathways, and capacity building, among other topics. Focusing on these objectives improves student outcomes and eliminates disparities, particularly among Black, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous students and students from low-income backgrounds.

Since 2015, Dr. Thompson and her team have honed their skill in creating partner communities, building consensus to articulate a shared learning agenda, and skillfully building relationships with site-facing supports and support providers. CIPE's purposeful and uniquely accomplished team is staffed by experts with the skill, knowledge, and ability to perform precisely at both the macro and micro levels. They develop unique operational service delivery frameworks for guidance, planning, strategy, and resources for partners to deploy in change management. CIPE's service deliverable supports constructs of holistic student success initiatives to serve students effectively and efficiently. The team's technical assistance enables partner institutions to build capacity by better understanding the practice of data utilization for decision-making and deploying efficiency in all-encompassing student success support.

**Dr. Kathy Thompson** is the Founding Director of the Center for Innovative in Postsecondary Education. She has over 30 years of experience in postsecondary administration, teaching, and workforce and economic development. Dr. Thompson currently serves as the Technical Assistance provider for the Lumina Foundation, Black Adult Learners Initiatives cohort of five HBCUs in North Carolina. Prior, Dr. Thompson served six years as the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Intermediary for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Frontier Set. She is motivated to eliminate equity disparities in education, particularly for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students and students from low-income backgrounds.

**Dr. Lisa Dunning**, Kaizen Education Group, has a deep-rooted passion for higher education. She served three years as a consultant on the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Intermediary Team for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Frontier Set. Dr. Dunning currently lends her expertise through technical assistance and strategic guidance to the Lumina Foundation's Adult Learner Initiative and Educause's CourseGateway Digital Learning Strategy. A significant chapter of her career includes her leadership role as the Associate Vice President for Student Success at a distinguished HBCU. Dr. Dunning's visionary thinking was instrumental in developing and implementing a newly designed academic advising framework, the cornerstone of student support systems.

**Carlisha Hartzog** is the Storytelling Team Project Manager, overseeing the project's design, management schedule, and outreach. She is the president and managing member of Hartzog Consulting, a full-service project and event management firm that integrates logistics management and communications support to support some of the world's most respected foundations, Fortune 500 corporations, and multinational enterprises. Her experience supporting higher education organizations includes engagement with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities (APLU), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) nationally, and public and private colleges and universities. She has more than ten years of experience managing initiatives that embrace diverse populations to create equitable access to resources and opportunities.

**Candace Spencer** is a communication specialist with more than a decade of experience in higher education marketing and strategy development. Throughout her career, she has provided valuable support to numerous postsecondary institutions spanning 21 states. She offers in-depth strategy analysis, creates impactful digital and print communication materials, crafts compelling written content, delivers training sessions that are both informative and engaging, guides brand evolution, and provides recommendations to help clients stay ahead of the competition.

**Lisa Becker** is a technical writer/editor with 28 years of experience contributing to projects and workgroups, including as Contributing Writer and Managing Editor of the Storytelling Team. She served as the communications arm of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's HBCU Intermediary Team from 2018 to 2022. She is currently contracted with the NASA Shared Services Center to work with NASA senior executive service in drafting career history/achievement papers and Presidential Rank Nominations for executive career advancement and recognition.

In collaboration with the ECMC Foundation, the Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education (CIPE) and **Alabama Possible** are delighted to share the first of a series of case studies. The focus is on the eight Historically Black Community Colleges (HBCC) and Predominantly Black Community Colleges (PBCC) in Alabama, collectively known as the "Great Eight." The eight HBCCs/PBCCs are Bishop State, Chattahoochee Valley, Gadsden State, George C Wallace, H. Councill Trenholm, J F Drake, Lawson State, and Shelton State. Over the next three years, Alabama Possible will consult with the CIPE Team to create case studies highlighting the successful initiatives of various institutions in promoting student success. These studies will cover a range of topics, including Academic Advising and Workforce Development, as well as the academic experience, campus climate, leadership and culture, data utilization, and technology. The CIPE Team's Storytellers conclude the project by developing a Storytelling Playbook that outlines these institutions' unique student success practices.

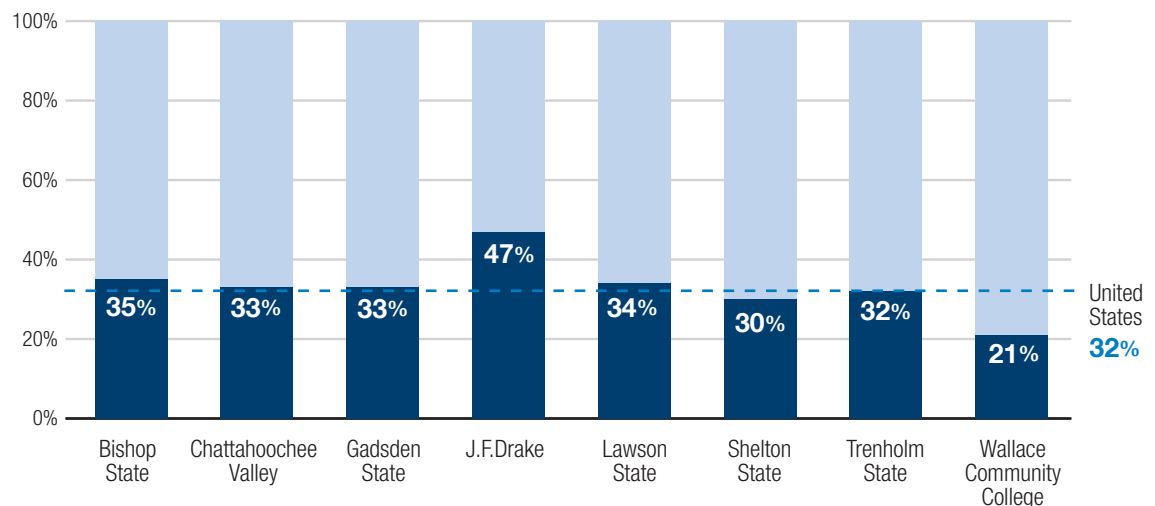
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**THE GREAT EIGHT** identified adult learners as a key factor when asked about successful policies and practices that drive their student success initiatives. This case study will examine who adult learners are, what they want from college, how to support them, and the Great Eight evidence-based practices they use to help adult learners succeed during and after their college experience.

**Who are adult learners?**

Because the definition of adult learners is widely debated, we will use <sup>1</sup>the National Center for Education Statistics’ definition of students aged 25 and older. <sup>2</sup>The Lumina Foundation reports that about 38 percent are older than 25, more than 25 percent are raising children, and 58 percent work while enrolled in college. <sup>3</sup>Adult learners are diverse; they could be Baby Boomers, millennials, veterans, parents, and career changers. Some have prior experience with college; others might not have any experience with higher education, and some might have taken a few classes online or in-person or completed multiple degrees.

The Great Eight adult learners population, according to the <sup>4</sup>National Center for Education Statistics for Fall 2021:



**What do adult learners want from college?<sup>5</sup>**

Many adult learners aim to earn a certificate or degree for various reasons; such as: pursuing a different career, advancing in their current job, gaining knowledge, and exploring the world through education.

**What does the data say about adult learners?**

A Public Agenda and The Kresge Foundation study found that 47 percent of adults believe an associate degree or certificate is a good investment. <sup>6</sup>However, the Lumina Foundation study (April 2023) found that fewer than half, or 45.7 percent, of the 174 million Americans over age 25 have a degree or certification. And, compared to 50 percent of white adults, just 34 percent of Black adults, and 27.8 percent of Native American and Hispanic adults, hold college degrees.

1 Fast Facts, *National Center for Education Statistics*, accessed on August 7, 2023 (<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>)  
 2 Lumina Foundation Report (2018), accessed on August 7, 2023 (<https://www.luminafoundation.org/resources/>)  
 3 EAB Daily Briefing, October 23, 2019  
 4 Fast Facts, *National Center for Education Statistics*, accessed on July 18, 2023  
 5 A Report by Public Agenda and the Kresge Foundation (2018). *A Major Step: What Adults without Degrees Say About Going (Back) to College*.  
 6 Essien, Frank Swanzy and Parsons, Kelle (April 11, 2023), Why College? A deep dive into adult learners’ journey. To learn more about the study and findings, access the AIR website at <https://www.air.org/project/supporting-postsecondary-enrollment-adult-learners-color>.

**What support do adult learners need?**

When asked about the support they need for success, adult learners typically respond:



**Access to support services** (Tutors, Mentors, Coaches)



**Financing**



**Flexible course options** and scheduling<sup>7</sup>

**The Great Eight understands the needs of adult learners and has implemented practices and policies that provide support for adult learners:**

**Bishop State Community College**

*Mobile, Alabama*

- URBAN
- RURAL

**Flexible Scheduling:** Offer flexible schedules at different times of the day or week to accommodate working adults with other obligations.

**Credit for Knowledge and Skills:** Award credit for knowledge and skills gained through work or military training.

**Advising and Tutoring:** Provide tutoring, academic coaching, and study groups to help adult learners succeed in their coursework.

**Career Counseling:** Provide career counseling by helping adult learners identify their career goals, explore career options, and connect with job opportunities.

**Financial Support:** Offer financial assistance to help adult learners pay for their education.

**Chattahoochee Valley Community College**

*Phenix City, Alabama*

- URBAN
- RURAL

**Orientation:** All adult education students must attend orientation before entering the G.E.D. program.

**Instructor Coaches:** An instructor coaches each student as they move through the G.E.D. program

**Progress Tracking:** Benchmark testing is given every 40 hours to identify a student's progress.

**Career Coach:** Career coaches meet with adult education students after passing two G.E.D. subjects and develop a plan after the G.E.D.

**Support Services:** college applications, FAFSA, scholarships, and general college information

<sup>7</sup> *How Flexible Courses Promote Access and Success for Returning Adult learners at Community Colleges*, (June 2021) The College System of Tennessee, Office of Policy and Strategy. (<https://www.tbr.edu/sites/default/files/media/2021/06/FlexibleCourseOptions.pdf>)

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## Gadsden State Community College

Gadsden, Alabama

- URBAN
- RURAL

**The Education Opportunity Center:** Provides services that take an adult learner from completion of the G.E.D. to enrollment in college.

**Adult Education Certification:** Offer M.S.S.C. Certification Training throughout the academic year for those wanting to master core manufacturing competencies.

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## H. Council Trenholm State Community College

Montgomery, Alabama

- URBAN
- RURAL

**Early Alert System:** The Early Alert System is in place to allow instructors to report students who may be struggling with both academic and non-academic issues to the College's Student Success Center. Center staff engage with the students to provide student and educational support services. This intervention is fully implemented across the entire College.

**Tutoring:** The College Success Center provides free tutoring by peer and professional tutors in multiple disciplines. In addition, the Center offers access to free online tutoring 24/7. This intervention is fully implemented across the entire College.

**Stackable Credentials:** Almost all of the College's credit-bearing programs have embedded, stackable short-term certificates. Only two of the College's thirty-four programs do not have a stackable certificate, and these are accredited allied health programs that do not allow shorter certificates.

**Co-requisite Math and English Courses:** The College has reduced the number of developmental courses that underprepared students must take. Instead, the college has implemented a corequisite model for gateway English and math courses whereby students who need extra support enroll in a one-credit-hour support course along with the gateway course. This intervention is fully implemented across the entire College.

**Online and Hybrid Courses:** The College offers many online and hybrid courses, allowing students flexibility in scheduling.

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## J.F. Drake State Community College

Huntsville, Alabama

- URBAN
- RURAL

**Enrollment Process:** It is streamlined to eliminate barriers preventing students from enrolling.

**Last Dollar Scholarships:** Help students pay their remaining balances, now funded by the Foundation Board after the CARES Act funds ended.

**Dropout Detective Software:** This software was implemented to help with retention goals for each program. Students receive academic support to help overcome risk factors identified during the semester.

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## Lawson State Community College

*Birmingham, Alabama*

- URBAN
- RURAL

**Flexible scheduling:** mini-terms, evening, online, and weekend classes to accommodate the schedules of adult learners who work or have familial responsibilities.

**Prior Learning Assessment (PLA):** PLA is a process that assesses a student's prior learning, training, and experiences to determine if they can receive college credits for what they already know. LSCC accepts College-Level Examination Program, CLEP, in exchange for college credits.

**Academic Counseling, Advising, and Career Services:** Student Services currently provide personalized first-term advising, disability support workshops and seminars, academic counseling, and referrals to help adult learners overcome obstacles and achieve their educational goals.

**Credit for work experience:** Several technical programs offer prior learning and relevant work experience opportunities. The programs consider a student's prior knowledge. They may offer credit for relevant work experience, which can shorten the time it takes adult learners to complete a degree.

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## Shelton State Community College

*Tuscaloosa, Alabama*

- URBAN
- RURAL

**Evening L.P.N. program:** The evening L.P.N. program targets adult learners seeking to advance their career options. For flexible schedules, many of our programs can be completed online with minimal onsite requirements.

**Virtual Orientation and Advising:** Offer virtual orientation to assist working adult learners in connect with their advisors.

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## Wallace Community College Selma

*Selma, Alabama*

- URBAN
- RURAL

**Student Success Coaching:** Every adult learner attending Wallace Community College Selma is assigned a Student Success Coach to assist them in navigating the college culture. Success Coaches serve as liaisons between the student and the collegiate stakeholders to ensure that students connect to the resources the college and the community provide to assist them. The coach partners with faculty to advocate for students' needs and remove barriers to success for the student.

**Guided Pathways - W.A.Y.S. (Wallace Avenues to Your Success):** This initiative was developed to assist transfer students in completing the transfer degree at WCCS and transferring to their respective 4-yr institutions. The strategies integrated into the program are designed to help students decide on a specific transfer major upon entering the institution (Get On the Path), to provide assistance that addresses both affective and cognitive factors that present barriers to success (Stay on the Path), and to complete the degree at WCCS and at the next level (Complete the Path).

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## Financial resources for adult learners seeking to earn a certificate or degree

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Last, we want to end with one of the most common obstacles for an adult learner—financing a certificate or degree. The data shows that most adult learners are concerned about student loans and feel they cannot afford college. <sup>8</sup>Forbes Advisors (February 2023) published an article that provides insights into scholarships and grants for anyone who wants to attend college, regardless of age. Below are a few recommendations.

### *Financial Aid for Adult Learners*

**Employer-sponsored tuition assistance.** If an employer offers tuition assistance, paying for a certificate or degree using tuition assistance can be an affordable option without needing a student loan.

### *Scholarships for Adult Learners*

- 1 Job-Application.com, Working Parent College Scholarship.** Eligibility is adult learners working 12 hours per work and enrolled in a college, trade school with a 3.0 GPA. Apply at <https://www.job-applications.com/scholarships/> by completing a short form and submitting a 600-1,000 word essay explaining how you balance parenting, working, and studying.
- 2 College JumpStart Scholarship (\$1,000).** Eligibility is an adult learner committed to college who can express their goals for higher education. Submit a short form and include a 250-word statement explaining your educational goals. Apply at <https://www.jumpstart-scholarship.net/>
- 3 Boomer Benefits Scholarship (\$2,500).** Eligibility is adult learners 50 or older currently enrolled in an accredited college or university with a G.P.A. of 3.0 or higher.

### *Grants for Adult Learners*

- 1 Jeannette Rankin Foundation, National Scholar Grant.** Eligibility is female and nonbinary adult students age 35 and older who demonstrate financial need and are pursuing a technical or vocational education, an associate's degree, or a first bachelor's degree at an accredited U.S. institution. Apply at <https://rankinfoundation.org/national-scholar-grant/>.
- 2 Imagine America Adult Skills Education Program (up to \$1,000).** Eligibility is at least 19 years and older if you are enrolled in an eligible career or vocational training program. Apply at <https://www.imagine-america.org/scholarshipsforadults/>.
- 3 Patsy Takemoto Mink Education Foundation for Low-Income Women and Children. Patsy Mink Education Support Award.** Eligibility is a mother at least 17 years of age at any postsecondary education level, including technical and vocational. Winners are based on financial need, personal circumstances, educational path, vocational or occupational goals, and service or activist goals. Apply at <https://www.patsyminkfoundation.org/education-support-application>.

***For more information about the Great Eight and their work with adult learners,***

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<sup>8</sup> 11 Scholarships and Grants for Adults Going Back to School. *Forbes Advisor* (February 8, 2023), Assessed on August 14, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/student-loans/scholarships-for-adults/>

Bishop State Community College

Chattahoochee Valley Community College

J.F. Drake State Community & Technical College

Gadsden State Community College

H. Councill Trenholm State Community College

Lawson State Community College

Shelton State Community College

Wallace Community College Selma

*the*  
**GREAT  
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