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How Community Colleges Can Bring Black, Hispanic, and Native American Adults Back to Campus and Help Them Earn Valuable Credentials

New York, May 26, 2021 — In a new [set of studies](#), the Community College Research Center explores what states and community colleges can do to address the needs of racially minoritized adult learners who want to return to college to retrain for a new job, pursue a better job, or earn more money—especially in light of job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic resulted in the highest unemployment the United States has seen since the Great Depression, with particularly heavy job losses for Black, Hispanic, and Native American workers. College credentials are important for employability and higher earnings, but fewer Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults hold credentials than White adults. Community colleges can play an important role in helping those adults get back to work through certificate and degree programs that lead to better jobs. But colleges need to pay attention to the specific needs of adult students of color as they design programs to boost workers' skills for today's labor market.

The report, [*Strategies for Improving Postsecondary Credential Attainment Among Black, Hispanic, and Native American Adults*](#), commissioned by Lumina Foundation, focuses on three major areas where community colleges can improve their structures and programs:

- Aligning short-term credentials with degree programs to create smoother paths to more valuable credentials
- Improving the design and delivery of advising and other support services throughout programs
- Creating culturally sustaining instruction and supports that address the interests and needs of adults from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds

Opening paths for adult students to earn new credentials is important for institutions and students. Community colleges have been struggling with declining enrollments among students aged 25 and over of all races and ethnicities for more than a decade, and enrollments for this age group have dropped 11% since the onset of COVID-19. To attract and retain Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults, community colleges need to do much better at designing, implementing, and marketing programs and services that appeal to them.

Some strategies outlined in the report, illustrated by examples from states, include the following:

- 1. Aligning noncredit and credit programming in the same field so that credits are transferable and portable; expanding statewide systems providing credit for prior learning; and expanding financial aid for adults in short-term programs**

Virginia's FastForward initiative, for example, offers six- to 12-week programs that prepare low-income adults for entry into high-demand occupations. Over 24,500 individuals, or 93% of enrollees, have earned a credential through the initiative. FastForward is reaching a population that the Virginia Community College System has had trouble enrolling. Two thirds of participants have no prior college experience, their average age is 36 years, and about 40% are students of color. FastForward is funded through a pay-for-success partnership: The student pays one third of the cost, or \$1,100 on average. The state pays the college the remaining two thirds, up to \$3,000, when the student completes the training program.

- 2. Providing nondegree students access to the same advising and academic supports as degree-seeking students so they can make informed program choices, understand the available pathways at their college, and complete a credential; providing students with a single person or team to go to for help who will follow their progress and intervene as needed; and partnering with community-based organizations that serve racially minoritized adults in recruiting and enrolling students**

Bakersfield College in California, for example, has organized short-term (credit and noncredit) programs and associate degree programs into nine broad disciplinary areas called meta-majors. Completion coaching teams are embedded into meta-majors, and all students are assigned a team within their meta-major. Each team includes an education advisor, an administrator, a peer advisor, a discipline-level faculty member, an academic development faculty member, a student support specialist, a financial aid advisor, and a counselor. In addition, each team has a data coach who supports providers in monitoring the overall progress of students in the meta-major.

- 3. Offering culturally sustaining supports and instruction, which leverage students' culture and identities to minimize the sense of exclusion they may feel as they interact and learn on the college campus**

Cuyahoga Community College in Ohio, for example, established multicultural centers to facilitate cross-cultural engagement and community service. There is a center on each of the college's four main campuses where students can socialize, receive support, collaborate, and attend events. The multicultural centers were also designed as spaces where students can have difficult conversations about what is happening in their communities and what they can do about it. A Black American Council and a Hispanic Council are housed within the multicultural centers.

These strategies can collectively improve retention and program completion for adult students of color. Colleges will need to monitor students' progress and disaggregate data by race, ethnicity, age, and other characteristics to measure their progress toward their goals and identify areas for improvement.

The Community College Research Center (CCRC), Teachers College, Columbia University, has been a leader in the field of community college research and reform for 25 years. Our work provides a foundation for innovations in policy and practice that help give every community college student the best chance of success.