



Evidence to Action

Supporting Adult Learner Transitions: Unlocking Postsecondary Opportunities

Introduction

Successful transition to postsecondary education can mean a significant shift in adult learners and their family's life trajectories as educational attainment generally correlates positively with wages, salaries, and lifetime income (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025). A core purpose of adult education includes preparing individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in postsecondary education and the labor market. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Title II requires programs to report transition outcomes (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act 2014).

At the state level, moving adult learners along educational and career pathways for their goal achievement and socioeconomic mobility is a priority of California adult education (California Adult Education Program n.d.). This priority is well-aligned with the California Department of Education (CDE) Adult Education Office's State Plan and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office's (CCCCO) Vision for Success goals. The CDE provides curriculum and program support for college and career readiness, professional development, digital literacy integration, and accountability support to facilitate and track adult learner outcomes (CDE n.d.). The CCCC Vision 2030 prioritizes expanding access to postsecondary education for 6.8 million adults seeking credentials, including "working learners such as apprentices, journeypersons, and student parents," and "justice-involved and justice-impacted Californians" (CCCCO 2025). According to the statewide data, only 6.5 percent of adults aged twenty-five to forty are currently enrolled in higher education, but over 25 percent intend to enroll (California Competes 2025). The California adult education consortia face a great opportunity to bolster adult learner transitions and postsecondary enrollment.

This evidence-to-action brief aims to support California adult education programs in enhancing their practices to create coordinated and more easily navigable pathways

into postsecondary education. This brief examines the current data landscape and challenges, highlights state legislative measures related to postsecondary transitions, and reviews relevant literature on promising practices. In addition, the brief showcases examples from four California adult education consortia that have implemented innovative and effective strategies and thus offer practical insights and transferable lessons.

Definition of Postsecondary Transition and the Data Landscape

California Adult Education Program (CAEP) defines transition to postsecondary education as the enrollment of adult learners from English as Second Language (ESL), Adult Basic Education (ABE), or Adult Secondary Education (ASE) courses into a grades K–12 adult education or community college Career Technical Education (CTE) course, or into a non-developmental credit college course for the first time within the same or subsequent year (i.e., Metric 602A). This definition helps adult education agencies collect data to track adult learners' postsecondary transition outcomes as well as program effectiveness for continuous improvement based on performance data.

Data Tools and Sources

California adult education programs use multiple data systems to track adult learner progress and postsecondary transitions. The metrics available on the [Data Vista](https://datavista.cccco.edu/data_views/metric_themes_caep)¹ website integrates information from CASAS TOPSpro Enterprise and CCCC Management Information Systems (MIS) to calculate overall postsecondary transition metrics. Data Vista includes statewide data as well as specific data by institution, consortium, or region for year-over-year comparisons and to examine long-term patterns (CCCCO n.d.). The data can also be disaggregated by factors such as program area, student age, ethnicity, and gender.

¹ https://datavista.cccco.edu/data_views/metric_themes_caep

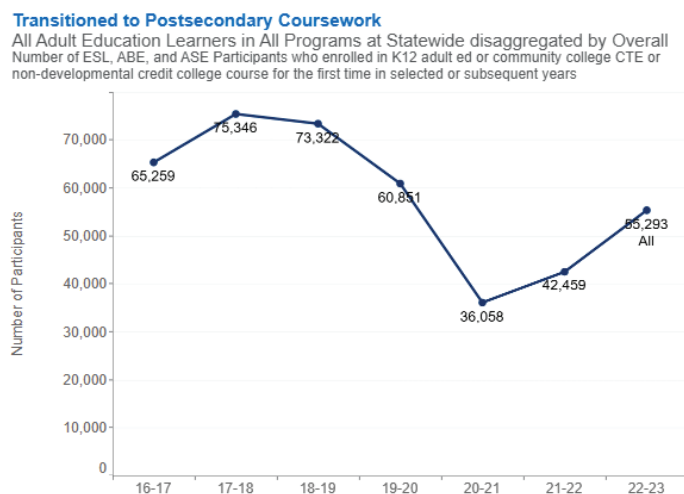
Call to Action!

Review your institution's or consortium's transition data on Data Vista to develop your goals and action plans.

Statewide Transition Data and Trends

State data indicate that 15 percent of the 369,660 adult learners in 2022–23 transitioned to postsecondary coursework (CCCCO n.d.). While the overall percentage has increased consistently since 2020–21, it has not recovered to its highest pre-pandemic level, which was 17.4 percent in 2017–18 (figure 1). There are also notable variations across regions, age groups, racial and ethnic groups, and program types. For example, in 2022–23, in the Inland Empire region, there was an increase of 700 students who transitioned to credit college courses; and in the Bay Area, there was an increase of 1,500 students even though another region with a large learner population experienced a decline (see implementation examples from California consortia section for further information). Transition patterns also show that learners age twenty-four or younger account for a substantial share of postsecondary enrollment, and that ABE and ASE students transitioned at higher rates than ESL learners (Skjoldhorne, Barrat, and Willson Toso 2023). These disparities indicate that there is room for improvement in transition practices.

Figure 1. Statewide Postsecondary Transition Data from Data Vista, 2016 to 2023



Source: CASAS TOPSpro Enterprise, Chancellor's Office Management Information System
Notes: Due to the continued challenges noncredit community college institutions have faced in reporting student attendance hours for noncredit distance education courses, the hour threshold requirement for Participants is not enforced for noncredit community college students during spring 2020 and all terms in 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23. An enrollment record in an adult education program is used as a proxy for the hour threshold component of Participants during the timeframe.

Data Challenges

Although data infrastructure has advanced over the years, monitoring adult learner transitions remains challenging for practitioners. Across consortia, data-sharing practices are inconsistent, and some CAEP agencies found the data-sharing process to be cumbersome (Freedman et al. 2017). Separate reporting platforms required for federally funded programs and CAEP can complicate timely cross-agency data sharing. To overcome this issue, some consortium partners have created shared spreadsheets to track current individual students for case management. Having formal agreements, such as a memorandum of understanding for data sharing, is considered best practice because safeguarding student information and complying with laws, for example the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, is critical (Pathways to Adult Success 2024).

State Legislative Measures Facilitate Learner Transitions

The Consortium Model and Partnerships

Grades K–12 school districts under CDE and California Community Colleges have historically been the main providers of adult education in California. Starting in 2013, through a series of legislative decisions, California has established 71 regional adult education consortia to re-envision the adult education system to better coordinate the provision of education, training, and services in regions (Portantino 2017). This consortium model is designed to facilitate seamless transitions by fostering intentional partnerships between adult schools, community colleges, workforce agencies, and community partners (CAEP 2024). By aligning curriculum, programming, and support services across systems, consortia can reduce structural barriers and facilitate adult learners' transition into postsecondary education and training.

Dual Enrollment Pathways for Adult Learners

Dual enrollment in adult education has been evolving since the pilot program at the West End Corridor Chaffey Regional Adult Education Consortium, which led to the passage of Senate Bill 554 in 2019 (Mollica and Simon, 2021; San Diego and Imperial Counties Regional Consortium, 2025). The legislation allows for expanded postsecondary opportunities for adult learners and to simultaneously work toward high school diploma/equivalency and college credentials. Adult dual enrollment is designed to remove the tuition cost and time constraints as access barriers. Dual enrollment can also foster the

mindset of adult learners to attend college (San Diego and Imperial Counties Regional Consortium 2025). Studies on grades K–12 dual enrollment show that it supports college access, persistence, and credential attainment for students who might otherwise not have considered or been prepared for postsecondary education (An 2013; Blankenberger et al. 2017; Liu et al. 2020; Lee and Villareal, 2022).

Promising Practices and Improvement Strategies

Studies on postsecondary transitions for adult learners indicate that transition outcomes can improve when systems collaborate; barriers are addressed; and students receive proactive, personalized support (Mollica and Simon 2021, 2022; Hart, LeFevre, and Willson Toso 2023).

Collaborative Partnerships and Referrals

Promising practices that support the transition of adult learners into postsecondary education emphasize strong collaborative structures. Regular consortium meetings provide a foundational structure for communication across adult schools and community colleges, allowing partners to share effective strategies, identify service gaps, and coordinate program improvements (Hart, LeFevre, and Willson Toso 2023). These meetings can help address competition for student enrollment and funding by facilitating regional alignment, reducing duplication of services, and offering programs that reflect local needs. Effective partnerships also extend beyond education. Collaborations with workforce boards, community-based organizations, employers, and social service agencies expand adult learners' access to training, wraparound support, and employment opportunities (Mollica and Simon 2021). These partnerships create a more comprehensive support ecosystem that addresses both academic and nonacademic barriers. Such shared knowledge building and referrals between institutions may create coordinated pathways that support learner transitions (Hart, LeFevre, and Willson Toso 2023).

Shared Staff and Co-Location of Programs and Services

Another promising practice involves shared staffing models, including co-located transition specialists, navigators, and counselors. These roles provide personalized guidance, warm handoffs, and proactive advising, which are reported to increase students' sense of belonging and persistence during the transition from

adult education to college (Mollica and Simon, 2021; Hart, LeFevre, and Willson Toso 2023). Effective transition services include holistic support such as academic, financial, technological, and personal advising (Mollica and Simon 2022). Shared faculty models, such as co-teaching or mirrored classes and college courses offered at adult schools, further strengthen continuity by aligning curriculum and exposing adult learners to college-level instruction in a supportive environment (Mollica and Simon 2021). When counselors and faculty work together across both systems, students encounter familiar faces and consistent expectations, reducing the intimidating feelings often associated with entering college for the first time.

Program Models That Accelerate Progress

Concurrent enrollment and coordinated program models also play an important role in helping adult learners. For example, Integrated Education and Training (IET) and adult dual enrollment help adult learners gain multiple skills simultaneously and increase their exposure to workforce training/CTE or college level expectations (Mollica and Simon 2021; 2022). Structured transition programs, such as College 101 workshops, bridge programs, campus tours, and proactive outreach from community colleges, help adult learners adjust and feel comfortable on college campuses (Hart, LeFevre, and Willson Toso 2023).

Call to Action!

Explore CALPRO's IET virtual workroom:

<https://calpro-online.org/integrated-education-and-training-iet>



Tailored Outreach and Support

As mentioned in the data infrastructure section above, transition outcomes vary by program type and demographic group, indicating the need for tailored and intentional practices. ESL students, particularly from Hispanic or Asian backgrounds, and older adult learners

(i.e., age twenty-five and older) are reported to transition at lower rates than their peers (Skjoldhorne, Barrat, and Willson Toso 2023). Offering multilingual and culturally responsive support as well as designing services and programs that recognize adult learners' reality, work schedules, and family responsibilities can help close the access gap (Hart, LeFevre, and Willson Toso 2023). Research on the postsecondary enrollment of older adult learners indicates that their social networks, such as family members, spouses, and peers, have a greater influence on their educational decision-making than institutional staff (Hatcher et al. 2025). The individuals in adult learner networks provide encouragement and motivation as well as logistical support such as finances and childcare. Conversely, high school students from underrepresented groups are less influenced by their families and more often influenced by education professionals, such as high school or college admissions counselors (Ross 2025). This distinction presents an opportunity for colleges to enhance outreach strategies tailored to adult learners by leveraging their existing networks. Colleges can help address logistical barriers and reinforce the college-going mindsets of adult and ESL learners by providing them with wraparound services, application assistance, and community-based proactive outreach to make the path to college more accessible.

Adult education consortia can enhance pathways into postsecondary education by combining collaborative structures; shared staffing; concurrent or coordinated instructional models; and tailored supports.

Call to Action!

Check out the toolkit for supporting adult learners in postsecondary education to learn more about tailored outreach and program development:

<https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/AIR-Adult-Learner-Institutional-Change-Toolkit-June-2025.pdf>



Implementation Examples from California Consortia

Sustainable Structures and Collaborative Culture

[The Education to Career Network of North San Diego County](#) (ETCN)² discovered that real progress needs more than one or two champions working in isolation. It requires weaving effective strategies into the fabric of institutions. Instead of relying on person-reliant practices, ETCN focused on building sustainable structures that can outlast changes in personnel and anchor effective practices, such as data coordination, curriculum alignment, counseling, advising, and bridge programs. During the consortium planning period, ETCN has created and expanded common and shared positions designed to support successful learner transitions. Each member district receives funding to maintain common positions, including career advisors and transition coordinators. All member districts share a consortium operations team including a data coordinator and a partnership coordinator. Through these changes, the consortium has made strides in providing consistent support across the member districts.

Call to Action!

Host a CALPRO training on “collaborative curriculum alignment” or “supporting student transitions to postsecondary education and the workforce”:

<https://calpro-online.org/regional-professional-development>



ETCN has also been intentional about building a shared collaborative culture. The consortium holds monthly leadership meetings, quarterly data dialogues, and cross-agency professional learning communities, allowing staff

²The ETCN is an adult education consortium comprising Palomar College and five adult schools (i.e., Escondido Adult School, Ramona Adult School, San Marcos Adult School, Vista Adult School, and Poway Adult School).

to collaborate across the consortium. For example, what started as curriculum alignment conversations is growing into vibrant consortium-wide networks of faculty and staff. The consortium's deliberate commitment to collecting common data and engaging in regular data dialogues helped develop a strong foundation for decision making that is grounded in evidence rather than opinion. These efforts have translated into steady gains in adult learner persistence and smoother transitions into college and careers, as well as in building trusting relationships across member districts.

The lesson ETCN keeps coming back to is simple: Successful postsecondary transitions happen when effective practices are embedded in organizational structures, shared across partners, and reinforced by a culture of collaboration.

Transition Counseling with Academic Case Management

[The Inland Adult Education Consortium](#) (IAEC)³ uses a collective impact model to guide its transition counseling system. Within this framework, the consortium has adopted an academic case management approach, which is a structured, proactive process centered on educational planning, holistic assessment, and long-term student achievement. This model emphasizes identifying academic, personal, financial, and systemic obstacles; developing individualized education plans; providing comprehensive academic and career guidance; and connecting students to essential campus resources that promote independence, confidence, and informed decision making.

Over the past nine years, IAEC transition counselors have implemented a set of proven strategies that facilitate seamless transitions for adult learners into postsecondary education and the workforce. The counseling team has found the following strategies to be the most effective in addressing the barriers the adult learners face:

- One-on-one student appointments and academic case management with individualized support
- Dedicated counselor days at each adult school site using shared spreadsheets, continuous communication, and quarterly cross-agency meetings

³IAEC includes eight member districts: Colton Joint Unified School District (JUSD), Redlands USD, Rialto USD, San Bernardino City USD, Yucaipa-Calimesa JUSD, San Bernardino County Office of Education, Crafton Hills College, and San Bernardino Valley College.

- Summer bridge program hosted at Crafton Hills College
- College-level courses offered onsite at adult education campuses: reduces logistical barriers (e.g., transportation and campus navigation) and psychological barriers (e.g., unfamiliar staff and location)
- Connect students to key college resources, including student accessibility services, Dreamers program, first-year experience program, CalWORKs, and extended opportunity programs and services
- Matriculation and college information workshops (offered in English and Spanish at both college and adult school locations) provide information on college applications, orientation, federal student aid, CTE pathways, dual enrollment, and college ESL programs
- Campus tours and annual adult education open house events hosted by both San Bernardino Valley and Crafton Hills colleges

Over the same nine years, the transition program has facilitated more than 14,826 student contacts, including one-on-one appointments, matriculation workshops, and walk-in services. The success of the IAEC transition program is demonstrated through numerous student achievements, including the completion of Associate of Arts, Bachelor of Arts, and graduate degrees at institutions such as University of California (UC) Berkeley, UC Riverside, California State University San Bernardino, and California Polytechnic State University Pomona. Adult learners have also participated in study-abroad programs in countries such as Italy, Ireland, and Spain.

Dual Enrollment for All CAEP Students

To support postsecondary transitions for all adult learners, [the North Santa Clara County Consortium](#) (NSCCC)⁴ expanded dual enrollment opportunities to all CAEP programs beyond ASE programs. Adult education students can take up to 11 units each academic quarter (and 6 units in the summer)⁵ at their local community college at no cost. Those students can receive support from their adult school while cultivating their sense of belonging in higher education.

⁴NSCCC, <https://nscadulthood.com/>. The consortium comprises five schools: Foothill College, De Anza College, Fremont Union High School District Adult School, Mountainview Los Altos Adult School, and Palo Alto Adult School.

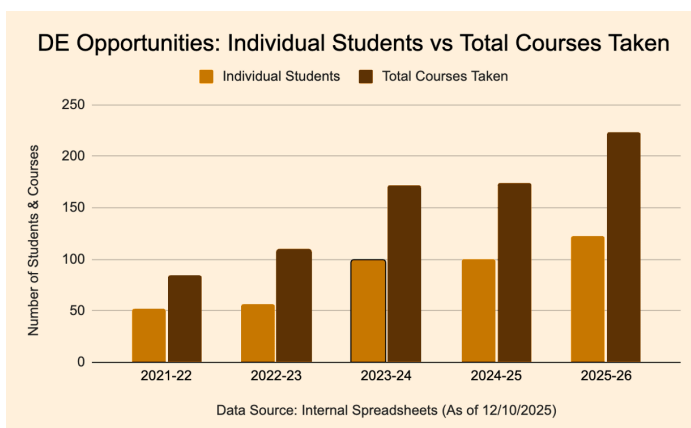
⁵Foothill and De Anza colleges are on the quarter system. The limits are the same for colleges on the semester system. The California College and Career Access Pathways Program allowances may differ.

Historically, dual enrollment opportunities have been restricted to students enrolled in ASE programs. This limitation has resulted in the exclusion of the majority of CAEP participants from dual enrollment; for example, less than 25 percent of statewide CAEP participants were enrolled in ASE programs during the 2023–24 academic year (CCCCO n.d.). Moreover, some adult schools in the NSCCC, such as Palo Alto Adult School, do not offer ASE programs. Consequently, many adult learners across the state have not had access to dual enrollment opportunities. In response to these challenges, NSCCC has expanded dual enrollment eligibility to include a wider range of adult learners for broader access to postsecondary pathways.

The consortium data demonstrates the impact of extended dual enrollment access. Over the past five years, both dual-enrolled student count and course enrollment have steadily increased (figure 2). For example, 71 percent of the 430 students who successfully transitioned to college through dual enrollment enrolled in programs other than ASE (44 percent ESL, 22 percent Parent Education, and 5 percent CTE). Palo Alto Adult School has seen particularly strong growth in ESL students participating in dual enrollment, growing from 25 students who completed 28 courses in 2023–24 to 52 students completing 104 courses as of December 2025.

Expanding eligibility is a critical first step, but NSCCC has also invested in creating a comprehensive support system. Transition advisors/counselors, program coordinators, and instructors use aligned outreach tools in which dual-enrollment processes are clearly mapped for staff and students. NSCCC also offers embedded tutoring for academic support. These structures help participants identify opportunities, navigate enrollment, and persist through the college transition.

Figure 2. Dual Enrollment Opportunities in NSCCC: Individual Student Count and Course Enrollment



Call to Action!

Check out NSCCC's CAEP model program profile at

<https://caladulthood.org/Practice/ModelProgram/Story/303>



Student Ambassador Model

Since the inception of adult education consortia in California, the [State Center Adult Education Consortium](#) (SCAEC)⁶ has invested in building cross-agency relationships through consistent meetings, subregional collaboration, site visits, and annual planning retreats. These long-standing practices established a culture of trust, communication, and shared problem-solving that continues to guide the consortium's coordinated approach in supporting adult learners.

In 2017, SCAEC implemented a comprehensive transitions model that embeds transition specialists at adult school sites and pairs them with dedicated college counselors. This structure ensures warm handoffs, coordinated advising, and data-informed case management supported through a districtwide agreement and shared tracking systems. One key practice in this model is the annual State Center Community College District and State Center Adult Education Consortium College Showcase. This event brings adult school staff, faculty, and partners together with all four community colleges to learn about academic pathways, financial aid, student support programs, and workforce opportunities.

To elevate adult learner voices and expand outreach, SCAEC launched the Student Ambassador Program in 2024–25. The program engages former adult learners who have successfully transitioned into college, career training, or employment. Ambassadors deliver speeches to share their personal journeys with current students. Their

⁶ SCAEC (<https://www.scaeclearns.org/>) serves 21 members, including adult schools, regional occupational programs, and four community colleges across California's Central Valley.

recorded video (see the call to action below) is shown during orientations and outreach events to inspire learners. These stories help increase new students' confidence, reduce their feelings of isolation, and raise their awareness of available transition services. Andrew, a former ambassador, shared: "It has been a privilege to participate in the Ambassador Program and be able to share my struggles and successes. This program helps us ... be a voice for other students, letting them know they are not alone and that there are many programs and staff here to help them along the way."

Ambassadors receive coaching in leadership and public speaking and are honored at a recognition luncheon upon successful completion of service. To compensate ambassadors for their time, SCAEC provided stipends via external funding from the Pacific Gas & Electric Better Together Giving Program.

SCAEC's student-centered framework presents a strong model for supporting learner transitions. The consortium board members and partners remain committed to strengthening collaboration, expanding access, and advancing practices that support adult learners' transition into postsecondary education and long-term economic stability.

Call to Action!

Watch the 3-min video on the student ambassador program:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZZ4QyGL-29pe3kJt-AFVR0a9Jtq1Gsb4/view>



Conclusion

Facilitating successful postsecondary transitions is vital to advancing socioeconomic mobility for adult learners and their families, which is why delivering effective programs and services is one of the core objectives for adult education in California. Statewide data indicates a significant opportunity for adult education programs to enhance this effort and improve outcomes, supported by legislative measures (i.e., on adult dual enrollment) and established partnerships across the consortium system. Successful transitions for adult learners require intentional cross-system coordination that provides tailored, relationship-based outreach and comprehensive support, alongside innovative program models.

Identify applicable practices that your institution and consortium can adopt, such as building sustainable structures and collaborative cultures, improving transition counseling procedures, offering dual enrollment courses, or creating a student-centered outreach model. Determine your next steps and then implement them so that the adult learners in your region can access meaningful pathways to success.

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Author Credits

Sachiko Ozaki Oates (CALPRO/AIR)

Kathleen Porter (ETCN)

Emma Diaz, Maria E. Lopez, & Pedro F. Gonzalez (IAEC)

Jenée Crayne (NSCCC)

Pang Vangyi (SCAEC)