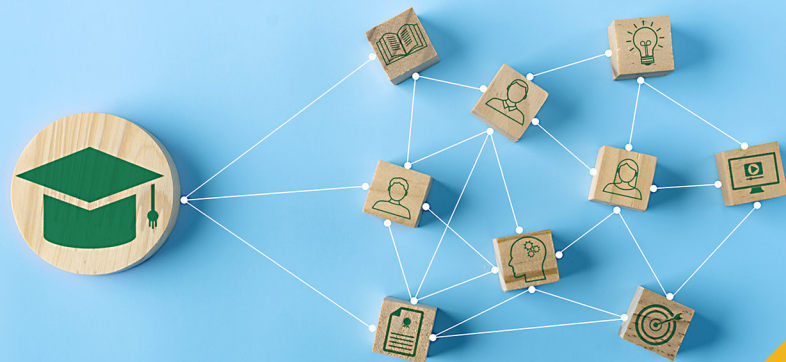


# Collaborating to Serve Adult Learners of Color: Lessons from the Partnerships for Adult Learner Success Initiative

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## Colleges and universities have struggled to understand, reach, and serve adult learners of color

The number of so-called nontraditional students enrolling in American colleges and universities has grown dramatically in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Among these students, many are older, have jobs and children, or come from underserved communities. They have different needs, aspirations, and assets compared to students enrolling directly in college after completing high school—such as family or caretaking responsibilities, prior workforce experience, or a more urgent need for gainful employment.<sup>2</sup> As colleges and universities seek to adapt and respond to their shifting student populations, adult learners of color—in particular, learners who are Black, Latino, or Indigenous—are one group colleges have struggled to understand, reach, and serve.

**This brief explores how partnerships and collaboration, on and off campus, can motivate cultural, structural, and programmatic change to better serve adult learners of color.** This brief draws insights from a study of the PALS initiative (as explained in Exhibit 1) and includes staff members' and students' perspectives and experiences at the eight urban-serving universities that received grant funding through PALS (learn more about urban-serving universities in Exhibit 2).

## Exhibit 1. Partnerships for Adult Learner Success



Lumina Foundation and the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities joined forces to launch the

**Partnerships for Adult Learner Success (PALS)** initiative, which emphasizes both external community partnerships and internal institutional collaboration. These partnerships are a means to understand and reach adult learners of color and to develop and sustain inclusive and comprehensive student supports. Across the urban-serving universities participating in PALS, partners tried various ways to reach and enroll adult students and provide them with advising and holistic supports once enrolled.

From 2021 to 2024, Mathematica engaged, interviewed, and surveyed PALS universities receiving grants from Lumina Foundation to learn about the innovative approaches they explored to improve partnerships and collaboration—and ultimately to better support adult learners of color. We also conducted focus groups with such learners at PALS universities to understand the student experience. Key findings from the PALS staff survey and student focus groups motivate and contextualize the findings shared throughout this brief.

Although this work focused on urban-serving universities, these insights can also help other institutions seeking to better reach and serve adult learners of color. Geographic context might dictate the types of external partnerships institutions seek to establish, such as proximity to large employers or community-based organizations (CBOs). However, the approaches spotlighted in this brief could be useful to all institutions interested in using innovative partnerships as vehicles for change to improve student success.

## Exhibit 2. Understanding urban-serving universities



All PALS universities are considered **urban-serving universities**. Urban-serving universities are not just situated in an urban environment. They share several characteristics:

- A commitment to diversity, partnership, and community-building and serve as anchors in their regions<sup>a</sup>
- A mission to provide access to urban and historically marginalized students in their regions
- A student population that is deeply rooted in the local community and likely to stay after graduation<sup>b</sup>

The PALS universities were in eight cities in seven states with city populations ranging from 540,000 to almost 4 million people.

<sup>a</sup> Mundt, M.H. (1998). The Urban University: An Opportunity for Renewal in Higher Education. *Innovative Higher Education*, 22(3), 251-264. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025143611774>.

<sup>b</sup> Zerquera, D. (2016). Urban-Serving Research Universities: Institutions for the Public Good. *Higher Learning Researching Communications*, 5(2), 137-154. DOI: 10.18870/hlrc.v6i2.320.

Adult learners of color can, themselves, offer insights on how colleges and universities might better support their success. During recent focus groups at several urban-serving universities, adult learners<sup>3</sup> told the PALS evaluation team that they feel most supported when their universities engage in specific activities:

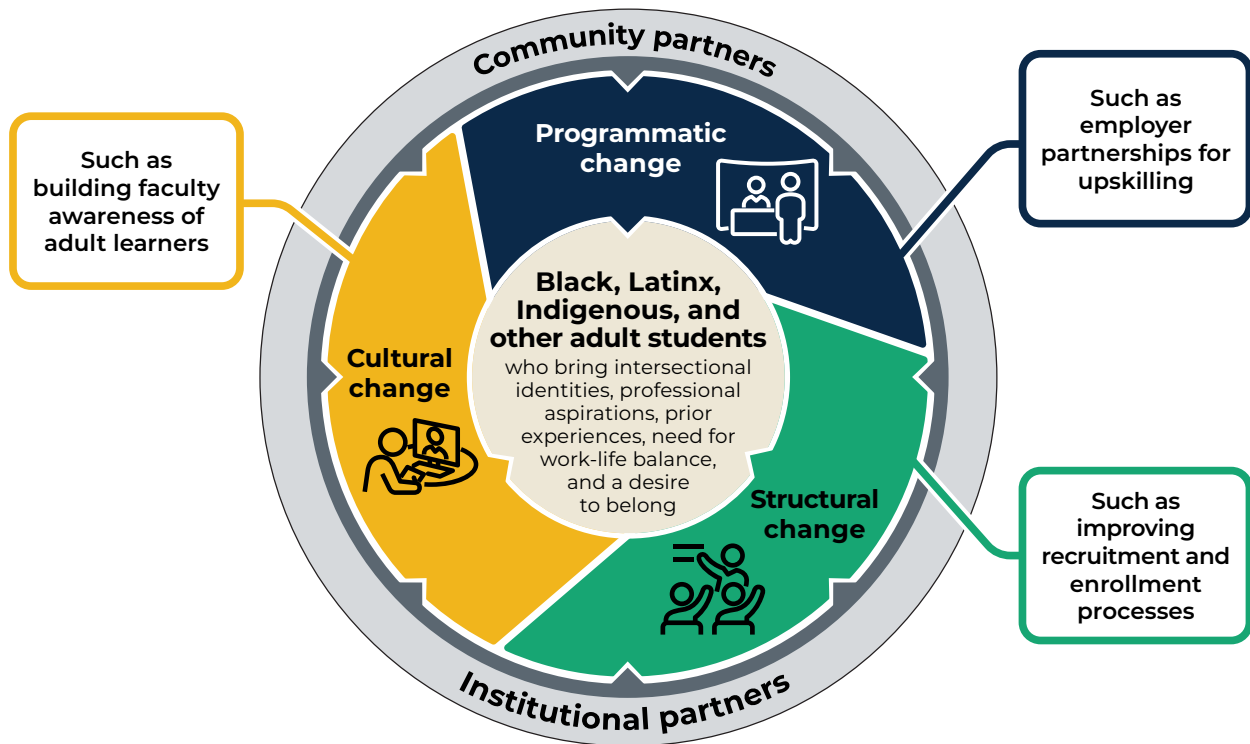
- Recognize and appreciate students' identities beyond their identity as a student
- Support their work–life balance
- Promote their sense of belonging
- Provide them with professional growth and development opportunities

Conversely, when universities fall short of taking these steps, adult learners of color report feeling unseen, unsupported, and excluded as they navigate postsecondary education.

Though universities can take steps to address adult learners' needs, scaling and sustaining innovative and inclusive approaches can be challenging. Institutional silos and bureaucracy can lead to delays or miscommunication within initiatives, and limited funding and staff capacity can push universities to prioritize sustaining existing services rather than exploring new opportunities. Similarly, universities often struggle to define and track their adult learner populations and to disaggregate data to understand these students' experiences and outcomes.

**To effectively include and support adult learners of color and scale the types of innovative approaches developed through PALS, universities must make cultural, structural, and programmatic changes (see how these levers of change come together in Exhibit 3).** By enhancing and expanding inclusive and equitable supports, such changes can contribute to improving outcomes not only for adult learners of color, but for all students.

**Exhibit 3. Levers of change that can affect outcomes for adult learners of color**




### Partnerships to Motivate Change in Culture, Structures, and Programs

As part of the PALS initiative, universities established partnerships on and off campus. They collaborated internally with a range of student affairs, academic affairs, and leadership offices, as well as with community-based and nonprofit organizations, community colleges, independent consultants, large corporations, and school districts. Internal partnerships, both formal and informal, were particularly critical to creating momentum for sustainable change. External partnerships

provided understanding and access to recruit adult learners of color and extended additional tailored supports to kick-start, build on, or accelerate the work accomplished by internal partnerships (Exhibit 4 offers more details on types of partners and how they played critical roles). Exhibit 5 provides a snapshot of the external partners that universities engaged as part of the PALS initiative, along with their role in supporting work with adult learners of color. Both internal and external partnerships supported cultural, structural, and programmatic changes across institutions.

**Exhibit 4. PALS staff survey shows how partners contributed to the success of PALS work**



Representative staff at PALS universities identified their most critical partners for serving adult learners of color and shared why these partners were critical to success. The most common reason was to gain institutional buy-in.

■ **Internal partners**

- Many of the “most critical” partners identified (82 percent) were internal to the university.
- The most common offices identified as critical partners were:
  - Returning or transfer student center and office of continuing education,
  - Student support services and resource center,
  - Office of assessment and credentialing, and
  - Office of institutional research and institutional effectiveness.

Notably, all PALS universities worked with their institution’s office of institutional research or institutional effectiveness. These offices helped them use data to understand students and track progress.

■ **External partners**

- A little more than one-third of the PALS universities reported that external partners provided expertise relevant to adult learners and helped bring an equity lens to their work.
- One-quarter of PALS universities noted external partners’ usefulness in helping them identify and reach adult learners of color.

**Exhibit 5. Examples of key external partners, their roles, and areas of change in the PALS initiative**

Type of external partner	Partner role	
<b>School district</b>	Support a pipeline of students from middle school through graduate school	S
<b>Community college</b>	Facilitate transfer supports	S P
<b>Professional development provider</b>	Design and deliver faculty training on equitable, inclusive teaching methods for adult learners	C
<b>National prior learning assessment (PLA) organization</b>	Consult to refine, standardize, and expand PLA options	S
<b>Leadership development consultancy</b>	Develop specialized coaching curriculum for adult students	C P
<b>Community-based social service provider</b>	Provide local community insights to inform outreach strategies	C S P
<b>Employer partner</b>	Create pathways to credentialing	C S

Culture
Structure
Programming

## Partnerships to Shift Institutional Culture



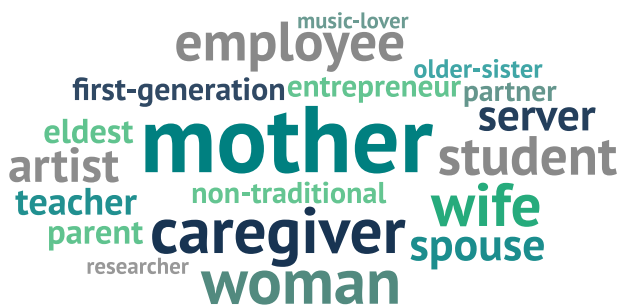
Institutional culture at universities refers to the organizational norms that define “what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it.”<sup>4</sup> During focus groups, adult

learners noted they often felt as if they existed on the outskirts of their university, but they wanted to feel recognized and included. The eight PALS universities drew on partnerships to promote cultural changes on their campuses that could help adult learners feel more integrated. Such adjustments included identifying and understanding the adult learner population at their campus, equipping faculty to promote a sense of belonging among learners, and collaborating to holistically serve learners. Exhibit 6 describes additional examples of strategies universities can take to shift institutional culture based on learnings from PALS universities.

### Understanding learners to proactively amplify assets and address needs

Students hold various identities (as demonstrated by the focus group responses shown in Exhibit 7) and want to feel “seen” on campus. Institutions that recognize and honor an individual’s background and foster campus environments that are culturally engaging correspond to a greater sense of belonging for students.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, campuses are better equipped to serve adult learners of color if they know who those students are and how to track their progress.

### Exhibit 7. How adult learners describe themselves



Source: Adult learners’ responses to a focus group question asking them to name key aspects of their identity.

## Exhibit 6. How to do it? Examples of shifting institutional culture



- Hold empathy interviews, focus groups, or other structured conversations with adult learners to better understand them.
- Use institutional data to define the adult learner population and track their pathways and experiences.
- Train faculty on how to work with and teach adult learners, including using culturally inclusive pedagogy and incorporating flexibility into syllabi and coursework.
- Foster partnerships among multiple institutional offices to break down silos and create clear and supportive pathways. Include employers or CBOs in these partnerships to create a comprehensive pathway in and out of the university.



I feel like a lot of faculty and staff—to them, the term **adult learner** has a negative connotation. [I] would want to help them see it’s not a negative ... [it’s] not that we’re hindered. We just have more responsibilities than a few of the younger ones, which isn’t even all true either. I had responsibilities at that age too. It’s just different. We just need a different kind of support.

– Focus group participant

Some universities' involvement with the PALS initiative was the first time they set out to adopt a formal definition of adult learners that represented the varying experiences of their students. PALS universities worked to understand the adult learner population by conducting empathy interviews with such learners on their campuses. These interviews are "one-on-one conversations that use open-ended questions to elicit stories about specific experiences."<sup>6</sup> Universities also engaged their own offices of institutional research to use data to understand and track these students. One university representative mentioned that its PALS work prompted the institution to start tracking the experiences of students older than 25 for the first time. Others said the work pushed them to think about adult learners more holistically, expressing a desire to disaggregate data not only by race and ethnicity, but by other factors, such as being a parent of minor children and socioeconomic and employment status.

### **Encouraging faculty to promote a sense of belonging among adult learners of color**

Awareness of and consideration for this population of students is important across all levels of a college or university, but students emphasized that faculty are particularly critical for promoting a sense of belonging. Faculty often serve as the face of the institution for most students, given their central role in adult learners' main experience of a campus—the classroom. Faculty also commonly interact with students by supervising campus jobs or student organizations. Adult learners' reflections emphasize the need for faculty to be better informed about the assets, needs, and characteristics of adult learners in their university (Exhibit 8 offers examples of how faculty influence adult learners' experiences).

### **Exhibit 8. Faculty approaches can make or break a student's experience**



Focus group participants spoke positively of classes with intentional and engaging professors. They described how these professors connected classroom content to the real world and justified the relevancy of certain topics, especially as they related to career goals, a core tenet of adult learning theory.<sup>3</sup> In particular, two learners took a class led by a participant in the faculty training institute and described it as an outstanding example of an inclusive and purposeful classroom. According to these learners, this professor had an approachable teaching style, flexibility in grading, and purposeful homework assignments with clearly defined goals and outcomes.

Both respondents noted contrasting experiences with another faculty member in their department who was rigid in his approach to deadlines and group coursework and did not give as many opportunities for engagement throughout long lectures.

The emphasis among adult learners on flexibility—versus rigidity—with respect to topics like homework deadlines, grading, and group work is not a matter of adults being unable to meet the demands of higher education. Rather, it shows attention to and accommodation for their very real needs to balance school with other equally important obligations, such as family and work.

<sup>3</sup> Kenner, C., & Weinerman, J. (2011). Adult learning theory: Applications to non-traditional college students. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 41(2), 87–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10790195.2011.10850344>.

One PALS university aimed to shift culture by designing a faculty training institute in partnership with an external consultant. This summer institute educated faculty on the principles of working with and teaching adult learners and shared best practices in inclusive pedagogy. To recruit faculty members to join in this optional opportunity, university staff working on the PALS initiative drew on internal connections such as departmental leadership.

## Partnerships to Improve Institutional Structures



Institutional structures create rules and procedures that shape the processes students, staff, and faculty navigate. As PALS universities worked to improve the culture to better serve adult learners of color, they also developed new structures to reinforce and promote cultural shifts and break down silos to serve students more holistically. Exhibit 9 provides an overview of some steps universities can take to shift institutional structures.

### Creating new pathways for enrollment through internal and external partnerships

Streamlining the recruitment and enrollment process for adult learners of color through structural changes can reduce barriers. In PALS focus groups, several students mentioned difficulty understanding the classes they needed to take at the community college level to transfer to a four-year institution, as well as how to receive credit for classes completed at other two- and four-year campuses after they enrolled at their new institution. Conversely, several others shared positive experiences with advisors at both the community college and university levels, which resulted in successful transitions between institutions.



I have been able to connect with my professors.... [One of them] is a parent herself. She says to the class what networking events we can attend, what programs we can get into.

– Focus group participant

### Exhibit 9. How to do it? Examples of shifting institutional structures



- Partner with CBOs to survey the local community about how to make recruitment and enrollment processes easier to navigate.
- Create partnerships with local community colleges to improve transfer processes.
- Establish supports for transfer students on campus through a dedicated center.
- Collaborate with local employers to create complementary work and course schedules that enable students to pursue accelerated programs.
- Partner with external credentialing organizations to implement PLAs for incoming students.

To improve the enrollment process, PALS universities took several approaches. One university pursued partnerships to create a streamlined transfer process with local community colleges considered feeder institutions. Another sought to establish a transfer center to expand the supports available to students at this important juncture in their educational journeys (this university also partnered with a CBO, as spotlighted in Exhibit 10). Implementing structures to take the guesswork out of preparing for and applying to four-year institutions to help adult learners of color have a successful start at their new campuses.

### **Adjusting structures of academic programs or courses to better reflect the needs and interests of adult students**

Universities can bolster structures at the program and course levels to address the needs of adult learners of color. One university partnered with a large corporation based in the community to gain insight into the low completion rate in its accelerated degree programs. Through its empathy interviews with adult learners, the university learned that accelerated programs did not provide adequate flexibility for working students, and the process to receive credit for prior learning was unnecessarily challenging. The university worked with its employer partner and institutional partners to develop a complementary school and work schedule that enabled students to enroll in the accelerated program while working for the employer partner. Although the university directed this approach toward students employed by the partner, it yielded changes that could help other students who work and participate in the accelerated program. Another PALS university collaborated with a local school district to serve as an external credentialing organization to create pathways for PLAs, accelerating degree completion for adult learners who had spent years in the workforce before earning their degrees.

### **Exhibit 10. Spotlight: Partnerships to drive structural change to better support adult learners of color**



PALS universities explored activities and partnerships to address enrollment-related

barriers that many students face. One PALS university aimed to improve recruitment by partnering with a CBO. The organization surveyed the local community to understand the needs and interests of potential students and their families. As a Hispanic-serving institution, the university wanted to implement structures to draw students from its local community who are predominantly Latino. The university plans to use this information to identify areas of change in its approach to recruiting, enrolling, and serving adult learners.

Although this partnership might best suit an urban-serving university, all institutions could consider establishing partnerships with those organizations most connected to their local communities, such as community centers, churches, or other professional organizations such as unions.



**I had an orientation specific to the school I'm in, not the overall college, and it was very helpful.... [They] focused on [places and content] that they'd heard from other students would be helpful to know beforehand. So, it was good to know they were asking for feedback from all of their students and applying for incoming students like me.**

– Focus group participant



## Collaborating to break down silos and serve adult learners of color more holistically

Organizational silos are well documented in higher education.<sup>78</sup> Their impact on adults and other underserved learners can be more than merely frustrating—they can slow students' progress and fail to recognize the intersectional identities of students.<sup>9</sup> During PALS focus groups, adult learners noted, in particular, the barriers encountered during the transfer and enrollment processes. The difficulties at these interaction points stemmed from a lack of clarity and coherent support across the enrollment, financial aid, and advising processes. In contrast, adult learners involved with [TRIO](#) programs—federal programs designed to support postsecondary opportunity for underrepresented and underserved students—described how a single point person helped them coordinate separate meetings with financial aid, advising, and the registrar's office, thereby bypassing the otherwise siloed nature of their university. As one PALS-associated administrator said, busy adult students need "one person, one phone number."

Recognizing the challenges posed by organizational silos, university staff involved in the PALS initiative collaborated across departments and offices, and with external partners, to explore new ways of working with and for adult learners of color. While doing so, staff took an intersectional approach and sought to understand student identities

beyond just race. Strategies included using asset-based language and programming approaches; conducting outreach through novel pipelines, such as employers and CBOs; and offering holistic supports that recognized the sometimes competing aspirations and needs of diverse adult learners.<sup>10</sup>

## Partnerships to Provide Programming for Adult Learners



In addition to the various changes in culture and structures undertaken through PALS, universities also developed new programming to serve adult learners of color. Adult learners at PALS universities offered suggestions for programmatic changes to support their educational experience, indicating that this is an area worth further exploration. Exhibit 11 details some examples of ways to shift institutional programming.

## Providing programming to address adult learners' interest in professional growth

Adult learners in focus groups shared that they are particularly committed to professionalization, often citing career advancement as a reason for returning to school. Adult learners also expressed a desire for pragmatic approaches to career advancement and securing employment immediately upon graduating. The PALS initiative suggests that universities can meet such needs through programs based on employer partnerships.

“ In my experience, I did start off feeling very lonely in the beginning and I know it's hard to relate to the younger generation, but I think it comes down to effort. I started joining clubs and talking to the classmates and I've started making more friends this semester. They're just as shy as you are—just get out there and actually make those connections. I'm in the PALS program, and that helped me meet a lot of people in the same status as me. There are more of us out there than we actually want to think that there are. I've had a really good experience so far, but it came down to me changing my perspective about it and getting out there and actually doing it.

– Focus group participant

Moreover, such programming can benefit the universities and employers, as well as students (Exhibit 12 provides an example of programmatic change).

### Tailoring programs to foster community and sense of belonging

Creating intentional programming and spaces—both physical and virtual—for adult learners of color can foster a sense of strength and affirmation for these students. Increasing students’ sense of belonging can not only affect institutional culture but also has positive effects on the experiences and success of individual students.<sup>11</sup> Adult learners of color described how affinity- or cohort-based programs on campus strengthened their confidence or provided a one-stop space to receive helpful information specific to their needs. Moreover, these smaller, intentional group settings fostered connections among peers.

“ In my support spaces, I’ll beat myself up—and my peers and faculty advisors will step back and encourage me to recognize what I’ve accomplished rather than focusing on negatives.

– Focus group participant

The experiences of students in such programs contrasted with those of many other adult learners of color who felt disconnected from the campus due to their busy schedules or obligations in their personal lives that made it difficult to get involved. One adult learner emphasized the value of enrolling in a cohort-based academic program. It offered her a built-in connection with other students with the same major and career goals despite differences in age and life circumstances. This deepened her connection to the campus and set her up to feel supported by both peers and faculty.

### Exhibit 11. How to do it? Examples of shifting institutional programming



- Work with local employers to design programming that directly aligns with job demands and could lead to employment or advancement after completion.
- Create small communities of adult learners with similar career interests or shared backgrounds. Offer physical and virtual spaces for these communities to meet, support one another, and share information.

### Exhibit 12. Spotlight: Partnerships to drive programmatic change



Two PALS universities established partnerships with local employers to engage adult learners. This relationship linked universities to adult students motivated to complete their degree programs; meanwhile, employers benefited because their employees gained knowledge, skills, and credentials. By implementing strategic programming with the specific goal of bolstering the credentials and skill set needed for immediate employment, these two universities responded to adult learners’ desire for practical approaches to securing a job upon degree completion.

## Committing to Transformational Change to Benefit All Students

Urban-serving universities draw on partnerships with both external community and internal institutional partners as an important mechanism for building and sustaining a commitment to equity-centered cultural, structural, and programmatic changes (Exhibit 13 summarizes this approach). The PALS initiative suggested that community partners—including CBOs, employers, and other external partners could be especially important for understanding and reaching potential students, whereas institutional partners were important for motivating, scaling, and sustaining change. Universities interested in equitable, inclusive change should consider leveraging these different types of partnerships to benefit not only adult learners of color, but all students.



The best practices for one group expand to all. It's about making sure we serve the students who have the most need and most potential ... giving them resources they need to succeed, then giving everyone the tools they need to succeed.

– PALS university staff member

### Exhibit 13. Spotlight: Cross-cutting approach: Partnerships to drive cultural, structural, and programmatic change



Collaboration was key to support innovative ways of working with adult learners. One PALS university partnered with a large employer in the region to help “stopped out” Black men who needed fewer than three semesters of coursework to complete their degrees. This help comprised providing financial assistance, a road map to complete their degree, and a path to employment. Staff worked with the employer and internal partners—the registrar’s office, financial aid, and academic advising—to streamline the reenrollment process for these students. Partnering broadly across the university **dismantled organizational silos** and resulted in **structural change**. In addition, staff connected these students to employment opportunities after completing their degree. By **working across departments and with external partners**, the university **generated an institutional cultural identity** that focused serving students holistically to ensure Black men on their campus could complete their degree. The accompanying **programming to support Black male students** rounded out the cross-cutting approach to partnerships to drive cultural, structural, and programmatic change at the university.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success. (2015, January 14). *Yesterday's non-traditional student is today's traditional student*. <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/CPES-Nontraditional-students-pdf.pdf>.
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