SUCCESS mdrc

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Supporting Adult Learners Through the SUCCESS Program

Exploring the Experiences of Students Ages 25 and Older

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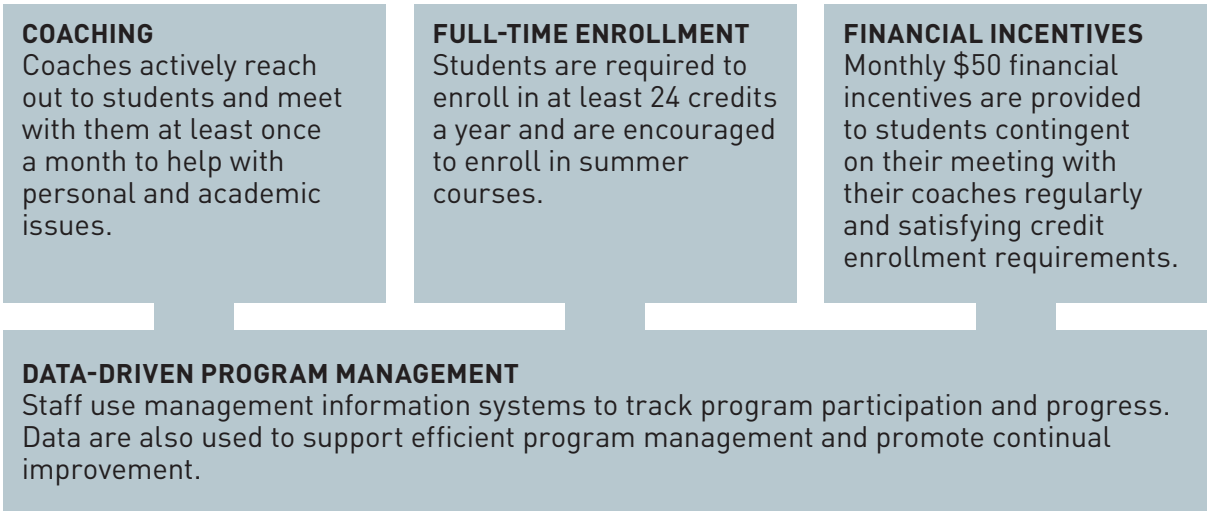
INTRODUCTION | ADULT LEARNERS AND THE SUCCESS PROJECT

In 2019, MDRC launched the Scaling Up College Completion Efforts for Student Success (SUCCESS) project to improve college completion rates for traditionally underserved students, such as students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, at community and broad-access colleges (those that have open or minimally selective admissions policies). The SUCCESS program integrates multiple evidence-based components proven in previous studies to help students stay enrolled and graduate. The SUCCESS program's components include proactive and holistic coaching (coaching that supports academic and personal issues), full-time enrollment, financial incentives, and data-driven program management (see Figure 1).

MDRC is evaluating the SUCCESS model using a randomized controlled trial at 11 institutions of higher education in five states across the country as of fall 2022. A preliminary look at the first cohort's experience, which took place in fall 2020 at the peak of the pandemic, showed that the program has not yet had statistically significant impacts on students' academic outcomes.[1] Qualitative findings from interviews with students found that they appreciated connecting with SUCCESS coaches who provide support for both personal and academic needs, they valued the program's flexibility, and they desired community even in the virtual college environment.[2]

Relatively little is known about how to best serve adult learners and improve their graduation rates. This brief highlights the experiences of adult students 25 years or older in the SUCCESS program at four institutions (Essex County College in New Jersey; Ivy Tech

Figure 1. SUCCESS Program Model



Community College Kokomo and Ivy Tech Community College Indianapolis, both in Indiana; and Stark State College in Ohio) and explores how SUCCESS supports adult learners and how it, and other programs, can do more. Namely, this research reveals that: (1) students found the SUCCESS coaching component particularly valuable in terms of keeping them accountable and providing resources; (2) the full-time enrollment requirement posed a challenge for balancing academic and personal responsibilities; (3) although students appreciated the financial incentive many still had unmet financial needs; and (4) beyond the SUCCESS components, students expressed they could benefit from additional flexibility, community-building opportunities, and support with technology.

DATA SOURCES AND ANALYSIS

During the 2021-2022 academic year, over 3,000 students across eight colleges were in the SUCCESS evaluation, and 1,790 students were offered program services. Roughly one out of three students (or 32 percent) who were offered participation in the SUCCESS program were adult learners. Among adult learners, 38 percent were Black, 13 percent were Hispanic, 38 percent were White, and 10 percent were Asian or Pacific Islander, multiracial, or Native American.

To learn more about how adult learners experienced the program, the research team conducted in-depth interviews with 13 current or former SUCCESS students aged 25 years or older, as well as nine SUCCESS staff at four SUCCESS institutions. Schools with high proportions of adult students and students of color in their study sample were selected to participate in this research activity. Staff at participating colleges and MDRC invited program students 25 years or older via email to sign up for an interview. Interviews were conducted from June 23, 2022 to July 29, 2022.

Interested students were asked to complete a short demographic survey with questions about factors such as age, employment status, and caretaking responsibilities. Ten of thirteen student interviewees responded to the demographic survey. The average age of survey

respondents was 36 years old; respondents ranged from 28 years old to 43 years old. Most of the students (n = 9) were enrolled in college at the time of the survey; over half (n = 6) of those students were enrolled full time. For over half (n = 6) of respondents, it was their first time attending college. A majority (n = 7) of respondents had caretaking responsibilities, including caring for children or other relatives. Half of the respondents (n = 5) were employed full time, two were employed part time, one was seeking employment at the time of the survey, one was unable to work, and the remaining participant was not seeking a job.

SUCCESS PROGRAM EXPERIENCE

Coaching

Staff and students agreed that SUCCESS coaching is valuable for adult students, and particularly for adult students who are working and/or are parents. SUCCESS coaches often serve as dedicated institutional staff members who provide encouragement, guidance, and a sense of belonging, and give adult learners support to navigate a new college environment. As a SUCCESS coach remarked,

> *I think the impact it has is them having a go-to person and someone to be there for them. I joke around with a lot of my students that I'm their personal cheerleader. And I think that makes a huge difference, especially for those who are feeling a little discouraged.*

One student noted that it is refreshing to have a coach personally check in on them because they are often the one responsible for checking in on their family members or others. Another student shared how her SUCCESS coach was instrumental to building her confidence in navigating the unwelcoming college environment she experienced as a Black woman and a member of the LGBTQ+ community:

> *My race was kind of an issue because I'm a black lady…in a racist city. And I'm a LGBT so…I always need to prove I'm a female to use the bathroom. But talking to my [SUCCESS coach]…[helped me to] not take it too personally…and I really appreciate [the SUCCESS coach] from the bottom of my heart because, without them, I [would] not know where I would be. Because in so many ways, I was wanting to give up school because…financially it was hard for me, mentally, it was hard for me and all those things. But they [were] there… to support me.*

Both students and staff remarked on the value of the program for adult learners. Although information provided through workshops, such as time management, was often familiar to students, having someone encourage their academic success, provide personalized resources, and keep them accountable when life got busy, motivated students to continue working toward their academic goals.

Financial Incentive

Although the economic needs of participants varied, all students who received the financial incentive of $50 for meeting with their coaches regularly and satisfying the credit enroll-

ment requirements, noted that it was helpful. They reported spending it on items such as school supplies for themselves or their children, clothes, groceries, and holiday or birthday gifts. As one student remarked,

> *Financial support [is] really helping me…because with me not working, on disability, it's kind of hard. [H]aving extra money from the financial aid…helped me catch up on some bills… helped me not to worry about it too much…[and] helped me focus on my education more.*

When asked how the financial support could be made more helpful, students suggested adding gift card options, distributing it on the same day for consistency and reliability, and offering larger sums. As one student said,

> *If I got an actual in-person gift card, it might be easier to get some of the things that are more of a necessity, like gas so that I can get back and forth to class, or groceries. But since it's virtual…I can't get the groceries, I can't get medications…unless I order it and then I have to wait…and of course, it doesn't [put] gas in the tank.*

Several participants were only enrolled part time and, therefore, ineligible to receive the incentive. Despite this fact, students continued to engage with their coaches regularly and considered themselves to be a part of the SUCCESS program. A few coaches expressed a desire to provide these students with the incentive since they continued to attend coaching meetings and make good academic progress.

Full-Time Enrollment

Adult students shared different perspectives on their ability to be enrolled full time. Often adult students enrolled full time cited personal or financial motivations for their enrollment status, such as "not getting any younger" and needing to "get it done" or having to meet requirements for financial aid. However, for other students, coaches' encouragement to attend full time and their provision of personalized resources were the key factors in building students' confidence to take more courses. One student said,

> *She helped me to change from part time to full time, because I was scared first semester… [that] if I took more than three classes, I [would] not be able to do it. But she gave me advice and she showed me the learning resource center. That really helped me to increase my classes by one class that semester. Next semester I will [take] five classes.*

Several adult students highlighted the challenges that they faced trying to enroll full time while balancing other responsibilities, such as caretaking and working. A SUCCESS student that has since graduated shared reasons why being enrolled part time felt more sustainable,

> *When I first started at Ivy Tech, I had my own two children who were in college in two different states, a full-time job, and assisting with my elderly parents who are now 82 and 86…I let someone [at the school] talk me into…doing full time. That wasn't good for me. Maybe somebody else could have done that. I mean, it just wasn't good for me, so I started to feel overwhelmed, and so I didn't do it full time anymore.*

Similarly, although coaches encouraged full-time enrollment as part of the SUCCESS program, they often noted the difficulty that full-time enrollment posed for students, particularly during the pandemic. One coach remarked,

> *I know part of the SUCCESS program was to try to push students to do full time. And I think in this environment where a lot of them are non-traditional, they're working full time, they've got families, they've got stuff going on, I think pressing them to be full time is really hard…I've had students that [have] fallen out of the program because they didn't maintain a full-time status, but I'm still in communication with them because we've found that…taking two or three classes [is] more manageable for them…and they're still on their way to their end goal, which is graduation.*

Another coach shared the sentiment that many of her students "felt defeated or like they couldn't continue in the program because they couldn't meet that particular [full-time enrollment] requirement." Coaches should remain cognizant of the need to offer personalized resources that aid students with balancing their responsibilities and thus allow more time to focus on school, when encouraging them to enroll full time. Additionally, this commentary suggests that offering a support program specifically for part-time students may be a promising opportunity.

INQUIRIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Interview respondents offered overwhelmingly positive feedback on how participating in the program and working with coaches supported their persistence. Many topics participants discussed during the interview met at the intersection of their identities as older students, caretakers, and/or employees. Some of these issues were unique to adult learners, but there were also experiences that were similar for younger students. While participants expressed how valuable the SUCCESS program was for them, they also shared their need for other forms of support that often went beyond the program's scope. The following areas offer an opportunity to systematically explore adult learners' experiences and needs through future research and practice.

Caretaker Responsibilities

For participants who were parents and/or caretakers of elderly parents, being able to manage their responsibilities at home at times conflicted with their ability to engage fully in their academics. This was a common sentiment among caretakers. One student remarked,

> *Well, sometimes I'll be so tired when I'm with my son. He's a lot, he's a toddler, 5 years old. So, he drains me and then I'm like, 'Damn, I gotta do a paper,' or …'Okay, let me make sure my son is in bed by this time.' Or let me make sure I do his homework first, sit him down, then do my homework.*

Some adult learners, particularly those with young children, shared that accessing reliable childcare was sometimes a struggle. Interviewees explained that while institutions had lim-

ited childcare options, their coaches were supportive and often helped connect students to community organizations that could help. For example, one coach shared,

> *I had [a student] early on in the fall, she wanted to take classes, and said 'Online… [because] I don't have any childcare resources.' I said, 'Oh, well, do you know that…we have a partnership where you can get childcare vouchers?' And so, that was able to alleviate [the issue] to where she could register for in-person class.*

This example of childcare vouchers illustrates both the great need student-parents have for support and the value SUCCESS coaches provide in connecting students with resources. Students also appreciated faculty who allowed students to bring their children to class, both in person and online. These actions can help parents struggling with a lack of consistent childcare; however, institutions can do more to address this need.

Finances

Although, as discussed above, students appreciated the SUCCESS incentive, many expressed additional financial needs. Participants shared that their financial concerns were not just about tuition and other school-related expenses, but also about day-to-day expenses, such as gas to drive to campus and healthcare. While the SUCCESS incentive was helpful for students, coaches often connected students to other campus resources, such as applications for emergency funds or gas cards to meet their other financial needs. As one student said,

> *I've had emergency funds because my husband had two heart attacks and a spinal stroke all within…six months, and it was difficult getting around and taking care of business. So, I had some financial support to make sure that my internet got paid. Also, gas cards to help me get back and forth to school have been really helpful.*

A few participants experienced conflicts between needing to work to support themselves and their families and school responsibilities, such as being enrolled full time or having to schedule courses around their work schedules. One student remarked,

> *In August 2020, when my doctor told me I had epilepsy [and could] not work…I was worried about finances because that would be a challenge for me and I would be homeless…And I was like, 'Okay, I need to…stop going to school so I can find a part-time job to help me financially, paying my bill.' But they told me [they have ways of] helping people going through the same situation I'm going through.*

Other adult learners shared that their need to work was often tied to other needs, such as healthcare. Unlike younger peers who may continue to have healthcare through their parents, adult students take on this responsibility for themselves. As one student said,

> *Actually, I always struggle with being a full employee just to get my health insurance because when you are not working, at school they don't give you health insurance. And sometimes when you are part time, for example, I'm changing a job, because I'm starting to work in the hospital part time, but they don't give those benefits. So, currently, I don't know what will happen.*

While institutions provide some support to students internally, such as emergency funding, and direct them to external community resources, there is still a gap in the ability of some students to meet all of their financial obligations and obtain their essential needs, such as healthcare.

Institutional Flexibility and Time Management

Due to having many responsibilities outside of the institution, adult learners shared that they needed more flexibility. One of the most common challenges participants noted was the need to balance their time between academic and personal priorities (for example, parenting/caretaking and attending classes). A student who worked full time shared,

> *You see that you will have to work and have money to pay your bills…and also make sure that working will not affect your grades…So, it's something really hard, but I try to see how I can go through it because there is no other way.*

When speaking with coaches about the challenges adult learners encounter, one coach stated,

> *Sometimes they just can't make it…to a class or…to something we plan. You know, if your kid is sick or you have to stay late at work, or you have something else… those are big priorities…they just can't make it. So, that's hard. I feel like a lot of students really juggle a lot… and they're really doing the best they can sometimes, but it's just hard.*

During the first years of the pandemic, this burden was alleviated for some but exacerbated for others. One participant shared that the shift to online learning allowed her to be at home with her son and for them to work on homework assignments together. On the other hand, for those who are caretakers for others, such as children and elderly parents, the pandemic heightened tensions between home and school life. One student shared how that tension was alleviated by flexible classroom policies,

> *But I took the rest of [my classes] on Zoom or online, and especially the ones that I had on Zoom—because I had my son with me, so he was, like, bouncing around—[professors] were very understanding. It was very nice to not have to worry about him being in the video, if that makes sense, because they would record the lectures …so they didn't make me feel bad for also having him with me.*

Adult learners are sometimes forced to choose between their academic and personal responsibilities. Institutions have an opportunity to offer adult learners more flexibility through additional course options and can offer these courses in multiple modalities (for example, asynchronously). Institutions should also consider providing resources on how to successfully engage in online learning. These efforts could alleviate some of the tension students feel in attempting to maintain a balance between home and school.

Technology and Support

Since 2020, many institutions have shifted some classes, meetings with staff, and many other interactions online. For some surveyed students, this shift presented significant barriers.

For example, some participants discussed not having a laptop prior to beginning courses at their institution. Although some institutions offer laptop loans to students, access to and knowledge of these programs is not consistent. One student shared, "I guess they have a food pantry, a mobile food pantry, and a laptop program to where they loan out laptops. I never knew that they did that until she told me about that."

Coaches also observed that some adult learners demonstrated a lack of technology literacy, potentially caused by a lack of consistent access to technology. One coach shared their reflections on students' experiences with technology during the pandemic, "Most of it [challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic] was…maybe not having internet at home and the devices, because we did have a lot of loaner laptops that went out, especially when it [COVID-19 pandemic] started."

Staff and students' responses also illuminated ways that online courses can be both beneficial due to the ability to take classes anywhere and a challenge due to a lack of access to technology. Many students valued the flexibility of online learning. For example, one participant shared that online courses alleviated challenges due to childcare and health issues,

> *Well, honestly, I think it's actually helped me…because I can go virtual if something goes wrong and I don't have a sitter or I have to get my kid from school early or something. I have that option that I wouldn't have had before…It's a lot easier for me because I also suffer from…narcolepsy so if I can't drive because of that, I can always chime into class virtually and it makes things a lot easier.*

A lack of access to technology, potentially caused by socioeconomic barriers, is an area that mirrors the experience of some younger students as well. Participants expressed a desire for institutions to do more to help all students who need access to technology (for example, laptops or software required for class) and provide more instruction on how to use such technology.

Building Community

Several students shared thoughts on how the program could benefit from offering more opportunities for SUCCESS participants, who are also adult learners, to meet and build a community. The desire for community aligns with research that focuses on the sense of belonging as an essential part of the college experience for students, regardless of age or institutional type.[3] One student said,

> *Some other people are parents so we bounce ideas off of each other. Sometimes, we share resources, we've studied together…I meet people who sometimes are around my age, or I've met people in class who are older than me…Literally, meeting different people in different times and spaces of their lives, and finding a connection. And of course, [the] connection starts with, 'Oh, we're all college students.' And it just grows to other things.*

Students expressed that although they were able to find peers in similar life circumstances, they would have appreciated their institutions actively providing spaces and opportunities for adult learners to connect and build community. Currently, students have to navigate this on

their own. Many of the program staff acknowledged the lack of community for participants, particularly adult learners, as an area that could be improved in the program going forward. As one coach remarked,

> *[T]hat is probably something that we have not done terribly well. And I think part of it [can be blamed on] the pandemic [and] people not coming to campus…[I]t's pretty hard to build community when you're not ever actually physically meeting people.*

Although seeking a community and sense of belonging is not unique to adult learners, practitioners and researchers have an opportunity to explore how and why these needs might differ for adult learners compared to younger students.

CONCLUSION

Adult learners comprise almost a third of all students in the SUCCESS program. This brief offers a broad perspective on a group of students whose specific needs are often overlooked within postsecondary education research and practice. The interviews with students and coaches offer a nuanced perspective on how adult learners may experience student support programs such as SUCCESS. Participants were very positive about their experiences in SUCCESS and specifically praised the support their coaches provided in many different respects. However, despite encouragement from coaches and a requirement to be enrolled full time, many students found it difficult to do this while also attending to their responsibilities outside of school. The findings in this brief offer opportunities to consider how programmatic and institutional structures may promote student success or present additional barriers to graduation for this student population.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Colleen Sommo, Marco Lepe, and Alyssa Ratledge, "Supporting College Students During the Pandemic: Early Lessons from SUCCESS," January (New York: MDRC, 2022).

2 Marco Lepe, Vivianna Plancarte, and Alyssa Ratledge, "Setting Up SUCCESS: Participating in a College Support Program During the Pandemic and Beyond," April (New York: MDRC, 2022).

3 Terrell L. Strayhorn, *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*. (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2018); Patrick O'Keeffe, "A Sense of Belonging: Improving Student Retention," *College Student Journal* 47, 4 (2013): 605-613.

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