A Multipronged Approach to Improving Transitions and Outcomes for Nontraditional-Aged Students in Select Pathways at Oakton Community College

by Heather McCambly

Oakton Community College (Oakton) launched a Pathways to Results (PTR) project for the first time in 2014, a decision that converged with the launch of an all-college student success team with the goal of making evidence-based decisions to significantly improve student success. Oakton chose to work initially on its manufacturing program. Preliminary discussions with employers revealed a high demand for new, well-educated workers. Oakton is located in the third largest manufacturing region in the United States, making this a key opportunity for its students.

Oakton has developed a robust manufacturing program of study for students who transition directly from high school to Oakton. Given the diverse population of students who enroll at community colleges, Oakton needed to assess the current program of study to determine if the entry and exit points are clearly defined for all students. Specific goals of this project included developing clear entry and exit points for all students, identifying gaps in student persistence as it relates to the manufacturing program of study, creating interventions to address identified achievement gaps, and aligning curricula and credentials to employer needs.
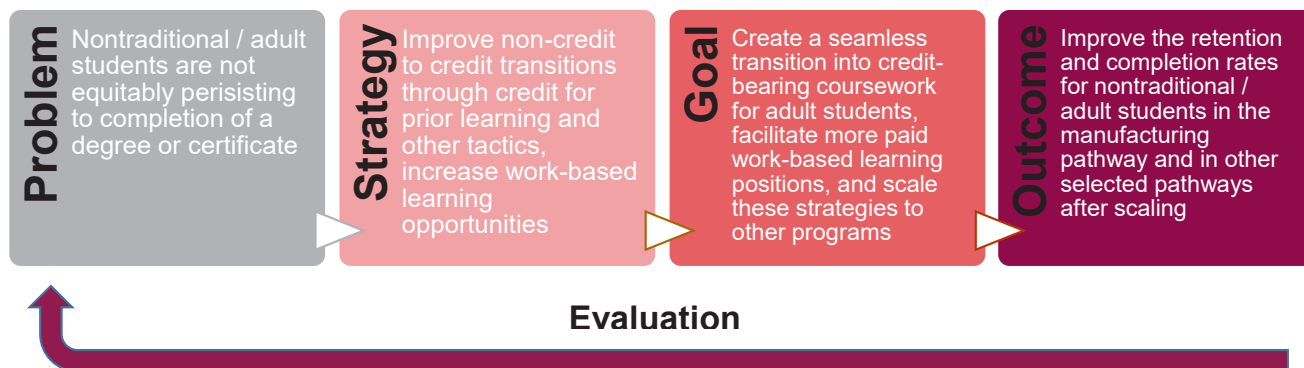
Identifying the Problem at Oakton

Oakton utilized the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways (AQCP) framework[1] and diagram as a guide for initial analysis. The team discussions and data collection included identifying student entry points, course sequences and course success data, exit points on the path to a four-year degree, and information on students' placement level, persistence, and completion. Student focus groups were held with questions that centered on the student experience and relative impact on persistence. For all student success indicators, the data was disaggregated by race/ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status (using Pell Grant information), gender, and developmental placement.

Data indicated that defined pathways for adult students (e.g., nontraditional-aged students who are over 23 years of age) were clearly lacking at every entry point. Each fall, the average incoming class from the district's public high schools was 104 students, while the number of students who transitioned from Oakton non-credit courses to credit courses was 84. The team realized that the two pools of students were of similiar scale, and yet specific bridge programming or transition plans were nonexistent. This was reflected in persistence data which indicated adult students had a persistence rate lower than that of traditional-aged students. Student focus groups were conducted to identify any factors that impacted persistence. Data indicated students who felt "connected" to the college were more likely to persist. A second factor cited were financial pressures. Based on the size of the population and the student success achievement gap, Oakton identified as its top priority the creation of a stronger pathway for the nontraditional-aged population.

[1] Learn more about the Center for Law and Social Policy's AQCP framework at http://www.clasp.org/issues/postsecondary/pages/aqcp-framework-version-1-0

About Pathways to Results: Implementation Partnerships

PTR is an outcomes-focused, equity-guided process to improve student transition to and through postsecondary education and into employment. The process engages community college practitioners and their partners to identify and understand the problematic aspects of systemic design--whether processes, practices, policies, or pedagogies--and to find sustainable solutions that will support equitable student outcomes. In 2016, a second project year was added to the Pathways to Results model, titled PTR: Implementation Partnerships. Teams who participated in an Implementation Partnership, or "Year Two," project work to implement, evaluate, and scale their work in a network of other colleges striving to improve equitable student outcomes in innovative ways.

Problem Nontraditional / adult students are not equitably perisisting to completion of a degree or certificate	**Strategy** Improve non-credit to credit transitions through credit for prior learning and other tactics, increase work-based learning opportunities	**Goal** Create a seamless transition into credit-bearing coursework for adult students, facilitate more paid work-based learning positions, and scale these strategies to other programs	**Outcome** Improve the retention and completion rates for nontraditional / adult students in the manufacturing pathway and in other selected pathways after scaling

Evaluation

Oakton Community College's Intervention Logic Model

Oakton's Improvement

The Oakton team moved forward with three interconnected strategies designed to maximize the potential for expedient completion for non-traditional aged students. First, they introduced a pilot work-and-learn program with area employers to allow students to complete coursework simultaneously with aligned work-based learning (WBL) opportunities, which gave students the opportunity to apply their learning, prepare for their careers, and receive financial support. Second, Oakton looked at policies and practices that would build a stronger bridge for students transitioning from non-credit to credit courses, including awarding students credit for prior learning.

The third intervention involves developing a student success report inclusive of non-credit students. Oakton routinely provides student success data to its departments, but these data only reflect new students who initiate their studies in a credit programs. All data will be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, age, and gender. This report will assess student success in career and technical departments. The information will be used to guide conversations and processes to ensure that non-credit students are entering into their desired program of study and that supports are in place to help these students achieve their academic goals. Oakton is identifying additional pathways into which they can implement non-credit to credit bridges and work-and-learn programs. Programs targeted for scale include Information Technology and Healthcare pathways.

What We Know from the Field

Oakton's approach was to introduce a suite of changes intended to better address the multiple entry and exit points of this student population. Without addressing each component of this multipronged approach, it is possible to review some of the evidence available in the field related to two of the central interventions.

High-quality prior learning assessment (PLA) practices are a critical aspect of Oakton's non-credit to credit transition. Oakton planned to use PLA to help incoming adults receive credit for non-credit coursework, as well as other experiences or training, to fulfill related degree requirements. By shortening time to degree and communicating to students that their prior learning is valued and applicable. Rigorous PLA opportunities help all students succeed, and are particularly high impact for adult students with work, military, or training experience (Klein-Collins, 2010).

PLA can support higher completion rates among underserved student groups (Klein-Collins, 2010). In fact, in some colleges, access to PLA can as much as double the associate's degree attainment rate (Klein-Collins, 2010).

The integration of WBL through the work-and-learn program is at the center of Oakton's process improvement work. Oakton selected this intervention with several of the potential benefits of WBL in mind, including enhanced and contextualized learning, career development, and financial support for adult students who face financial barriers to completion. WBL has been found to increase students' persistence, graduation, and employment rates, with notable gains for students from underserved racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Holzer & Lerman, 2014; Kuh, 2008; Lerman, 2010; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007). Students who participate in WBL experiences complete coursework at higher rates, have higher attendance, and have higher graduation rates than non-participants (Rogers-Chapman & Darling-Hammond, 2013). Additionally, earning a salary while receiving training increases students' confidence as it indicates their investment in skill development will result in increased income potential (Holzer & Lerman, 2014). This is especially important for nontraditional students who are unable to afford participation in unpaid internships, yet are seeking the high-skills training necessary to obtain family-wage employment. Moreover, employers endorse such applied learning experiences indicating these experiences better prepare graduates for career success (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Students who participate in WBL programs are more likely to gain postsecondary credentials and labor market rewards in high-demand fields (Holzer & Lerman, 2014).

Notes on Scaling

The adult student population is critical not only at Oakton but also at community colleges across the country. In 2013, 38.1% of the students served by community colleges are over the age of 25 (about double the rate at four-year publics), with another 31.6 % of the student population between the ages 20-24, meaning they likely are not enrolling directly after high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Adult students are also more likely to have other factors straining their persistence, including part-time attendance, and juggling multiple responsibilities in terms of work, family, and more (Gault, Reichlin, & Román, 2014; McSwain & Davis, 2007). Considering the challenges facing the population, and its prevalence in community colleges, this presents an opportunity ripe for scaling locally tested improvements.

Oakton was able to implement its non-credit to credit policy and practice changes, as well as the work-and-learn program, almost immediately after completing their inquiry and planning project. As such, Oakton's objective for the implementation year was quite different than that of other teams, and instructive in the context of scaling change. For the Oakton team, creating the opportunity to scale these interventions required making a case with data useful to institutional agents who held resources or responsibility necessary to making the change happen. These agents included CTE deans, program chairs, department heads, and others. Oakton is using this opportunity to make robust data available across many programs to facilitate planning conversations that would set a path to scale successful interventions across the institution.

When discussing issues of equity and scale as potentially in conflict with one another, Oakton's team sees them as interrelated not only in their systemic effort to scale where equity gaps are revealed, but also in their framework for rolling out change. The Oakton team sought to scale these interventions within a framework that braids the two values together. This framework includes four considerations: 1) establish criteria for scaling success up front, 2) determine whether there are information technology and human capital resources available to build it to scale, 3) evaluate to determine the solutions address the defined problem, and 4) ensure the student populations who are experiencing inequitable outcomes are receiving the intervention and showing improvement.

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