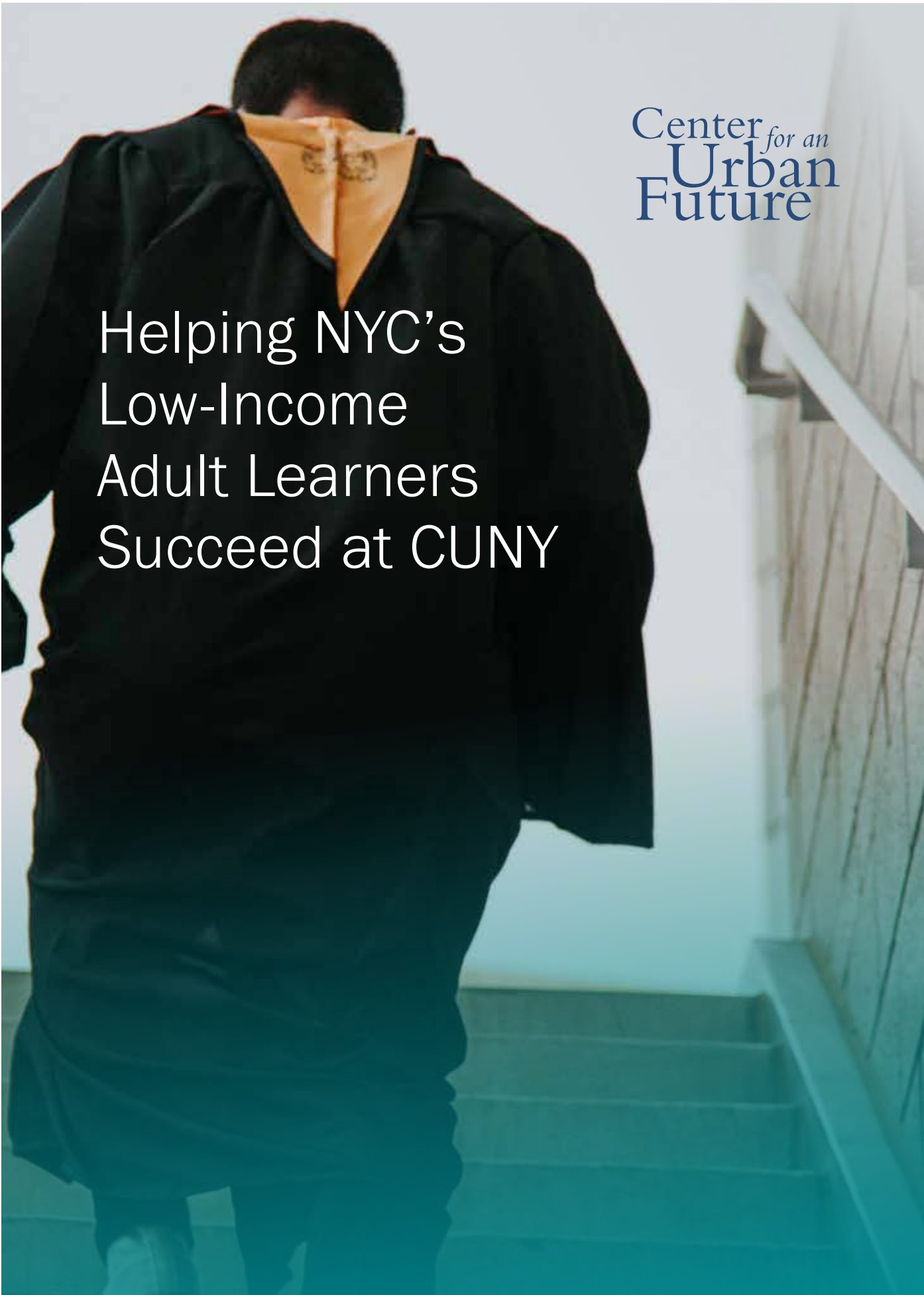


NOVEMBER 2024

Center *for an*
Urban
Future

Helping NYC's Low-Income Adult Learners Succeed at CUNY



Center *for an* Urban Future

Helping NYC's Low-Income Adult Learners Succeed at CUNY is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future. Researched and written by Melissa Lent. Additional research by Eric Raimondi, Ian Galinson, Carmel Agnant, Blake Robert Mills, and Sajina Shrestha. Edited by Eli Dvorkin, Jonathan Bowles, and Dorian Block. Designed by Stislow Design.

Center for an Urban Future (CUF) is a leading New York City-based think tank that generates smart and sustainable public policies to reduce inequality, increase economic mobility, and grow the economy.



Deutsche Bank

This report was supported by a grant from the **Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation**, which serves communities in the Americas, grounded in a longstanding tradition of social responsibility.

General operating support for the Center for an Urban Future has been provided by **The Clark Foundation** and the **Altman Foundation**.

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Helping NYC’s Low-Income Adult Learners Succeed at CUNY

IN RECENT YEARS, NEW YORK CITY AND STATE LEADERS HAVE WORKED WITH THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF

New York (CUNY) to help boost the number of New Yorkers from lower-income backgrounds who succeed in earning college degrees. These achievements are vital for ensuring that far more New Yorkers get on the path to well-paying careers at a time when accessible industries have shed employment, even as well-paying jobs that typically require bachelor’s degrees continue to grow.

But further progress will only be possible through a significant expansion of supports for CUNY’s 41,000 undergraduate adult learners, too many of whom are falling behind on the path to a degree.

Today, nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of all degree-seeking undergraduate students at CUNY are adult learners—students over the age of 25. These students are juggling an outsized share of family and work responsibilities compared to the traditional 18-year-old freshman. They are much more likely to be among the 31 percent of all working CUNY students who have full-time jobs, and among the 13 percent of all students who are financially supporting children—including one in six community college students.¹ And adult learners at CUNY are more likely to be Black and/or women than are students under 25.

Adult learners bring many strengths with them to college. As a result, some adult learners at CUNY do very well; more than 13,900 students over 25 earned undergraduate degrees in 2023. But too many never get to the college finish line. The majority of CUNY students over the age of 25 are transfer students who have already earned some college credits. But just 51.1 percent of them earn a bachelor’s degree in six years. In contrast, 65.3 percent of CUNY transfer students under 25 earn a bachelor’s degree in the same period. Both part-time and full-time adult learners have lower bachelor’s degree success rates than younger students, and age-related gaps exist for all races and genders for which data is available.²

Helping more adult learners succeed at CUNY will require addressing a handful of unique barriers these older students face. First, few CUNY colleges currently offer enough flexible online, night, and weekend scheduling options to meet the needs of working students. Likewise, while on-campus childcare provides a key support for many adult learners, less than half of the current centers are open after 6 p.m., limiting access for many student-parents who are also working jobs during the day, and most are at capacity, with waiting lists of up to 30 student-parents each.³ Many adult learners struggle to access financial aid, because they used up the limited dollars they were eligible for during a previous period of enrollment, while others are working just enough to exceed income caps of as little as \$30,000 per year for single, working adults.

CUNY has taken crucial steps to better support this population, from granting academic credit for previous work or life experiences to expanding access to on-campus childcare. But CUNY will need more city and state support to scale up the programs that are working and tackle persistent challenges, from relief from unpaid student balances to additional advising services.⁴ Moreover, CUNY’s nation-leading college success initiatives, such as Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) and Accelerate, Complete, Engage (ACE), are more than doubling graduation rates. But these programs are reserved for full-time students, leaving behind the majority of CUNY’s adult learners—55.4 percent of whom attend on a part-time basis.⁵ Beyond CUNY’s own programs, New York City is home to several effective nonprofits focused on supporting college success; however, most work with students directly from high school into college and funding from the city and philanthropy largely targets students under 25.

CUNY is already among the nation’s most effective generators of economic mobility, but too few of today’s adult learners are able to realize this potential. By stepping up support for working adult students at CUNY, policymakers can ensure that thousands more New Yorkers are able to earn college credentials and achieve success in New York’s fast-changing economy.

THIS REPORT SHINES A SPOTLIGHT ON CUNY'S adult learners, and analyzes what more will be needed—from Mayor Eric Adams and other city policymakers, from Governor Kathy Hochul and other state leaders, and from CUNY itself—to get more of these students across the college finish line. Supported by a grant from the Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation, this study builds on decades of CUF research around increasing college attainment for lower-income New Yorkers. The study was informed by extensive data analysis and interviews with more than 60 CUNY officials and staff, leaders of nonprofits focused on college and career success, adult learner and higher education experts, and current and former adult learners in CUNY's degree-granting programs.

As of the fall 2023 semester, there were 41,388 degree-seeking undergraduate students over 25 at CUNY, which is more than all undergraduates at New York University and Columbia University combined.⁶ Adult learners now account for nearly a quarter (23.2 percent) of all CUNY students, and the share is even higher at the city's community colleges, where students 25 and over make up 29.3 percent of the student population, up from 28.2 percent a decade ago.

Even as overall enrollment has declined at CUNY over the past decade, the number of older students has held relatively steady. As a result, adult learners now comprise a growing share of all undergraduates at 5 out of 7 community colleges: Kingsborough Community College (from 26.4 percent in 2013 to

Share of CUNY undergraduate students over 25 seeking a degree by college, Fall 2023

College	Share (%)	Count (#)
Total Community College Adult Learners	29.3%	16,287
Total Senior College Adult Learners	20.4%	25,101
University Total of Adults Learners	23.2%	41,388
School of Labor and Urban Studies	83.5%	76
School of Professional Studies	82.0%	2,440
Hostos Community College	41.4%	2,024
Medgar Evers College	38.5%	1,310
Bronx Community College	34.5%	1,990
Lehman College	34.0%	3,553
LaGuardia Community College	33.1%	3,494
Kingsborough Community College	30.6%	2,334
York College	29.6%	1,315
Borough of Manhattan Community College	25.3%	4,269
Queensborough Community College	24.1%	2,125
New York City College of Technology	20.9%	2,712
Brooklyn College	18.8%	1,960
Queens College	18.2%	2,374
John Jay College of Criminal Justice	17.7%	2,004
College of Staten Island	14.6%	1,366
Hunter College	13.7%	2,282
The City College of New York	13.6%	1,621
Baruch College	13.3%	2,088
Guttman Community College	4.8%	51

Source: CUF analysis of data from the CUNY Office of Applied Research, Evaluation, and Data Analytics.

30.6 percent in 2023); Hostos Community College (from 36.8 percent to 41.4 percent); Queensborough Community College (from 21.3 percent to 24.1 percent); Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) (from 24.6 percent to 25.3 percent); and Guttman Community College (from 1.6 percent to 4.8 percent). Adult learners comprise over one-third of the undergraduate population at seven colleges, including Hostos (41.4 percent); Medgar Evers College (38.5 percent); Lehman College (34 percent); LaGuardia (33.1 percent); Bronx Community College (34.5 percent), as well as the CUNY School of Professional Studies (82 percent) and the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies (83.5 percent).⁷

CUNY has taken action in recent years to step up support for its large and growing population of adult learners. CUNY has expanded on campus childcare, launched a university-wide push to provide credit for prior learning, expanded online and hybrid course offerings, boosted wraparound supports and benefits access, and taken strong steps to improve the transfer experience, while encouraging more adult learners to return to CUNY via the innovative CUNY Reconnect initiative. With additional support from government, CUNY can help significantly more adult learners succeed and make further progress toward a more inclusive economy.

Getting there will require city and state policymakers to address a number of barriers that adult

learners encounter on the path to a college credential. Indeed, experts who work closely with first-generation college students at CUNY say that adult learners cope with unique challenges above and beyond those faced by other lower-income students. For instance, adult learners are typically working and supporting family members, while coping without the networks of support that more traditional students benefit from when navigating college.

“It’s harder to get a degree as an adult learner,” says Danae McLeod, CEO of Grace Institute of New York, a workforce development organization for low-income women. “And without a degree it’s harder to move into a higher income bracket.”

Retention and graduation rates for many of CUNY’s adult learners are lower than for under-25 peers.

While adult learners make up a significant share of students at CUNY and a growing share of the population at its community colleges, they often struggle to complete credentials when compared to their under-25 peers. A key factor driving lower graduation rates for adult learners is that they are significantly less likely to persist from their first year to their second year of college.

CUNY Students Ages 25+ Are Graduating with Bachelor’s Degrees at Lower Rates Than Under-25 Peers

Overall Population	6-year graduation rate, 2017
Over 25	51.1%
Under 25	65.3%
Part-Time Students	
Over 25	37.8%
Under 25	43.5%
Full-Time Students	
Over 25	61.6%
Under 25	68.7%



It's harder to get a degree as an adult learner. And without a degree it's harder to move into a higher income bracket.

DANAE MCLEOD, CEO OF GRACE INSTITUTE OF NEW YORK,
A WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION FOR LOW-INCOME WOMEN

Overall, CUNY retains just 37.3 percent of transfer students over 25 who are enrolled in bachelor's degree programs from year one to year two, compared to 49.8 percent of transfer students under 25.

This retention challenge is an unfortunate reality when so many adult learners—even more than a traditional student under 25—are just a single unexpected bill, job loss, family crisis, or new child away from having to choose between college, work, and family.

“We have a much higher retention rate than most, but we still lose a bit over 40 percent of our students who never graduate,” says Jorge Silva-Puras, speaking when he was interim dean of the CUNY School of Professional Studies, where 84.3 percent of undergraduate students are over 25. “And when we do exit interviews, the primary reason is because of financial needs.” Silva-Puras is now provost at Lehman College.

Many of the financial challenges faced by adult learners are also experienced by other CUNY students. Nearly 40 percent of all CUNY students come from households that earned less than \$20,000 last year. Half of all students work while enrolled, of whom nearly one-third are working full-time. And about 40 percent of all students have experienced food and/or housing insecurity in the past twelve months.⁸ These financial challenges are compounded by a mix of work and family responsibilities and policies that fall short of meeting the needs of working students, making a college degree especially challenging for many adult learners to obtain.

Although CUNY has taken several important steps to better support adult learners in recent years, much more is needed to support adult learners in their pursuit of higher education. Adult learners often find that the college-going experience is still tailored to the

18-year-old first-time freshman, while some working adults are dissuaded from pursuing a college degree in the first place.

“Too often, CUNY doesn't seem like a welcoming place to 25- and 26-year-olds,” says Stephanie Fiorelli, speaking when she was director of postsecondary readiness and success at the Urban Assembly, a nonprofit that promotes economic and social mobility by improving public education. She is now director of programs at the Eagle Academy Foundation. “And if you don't feel wanted, why would you even go to begin with?”

This report identifies five key challenges that prevent too many of CUNY's adult learners from earning degrees, including:

1. **Limited and inconsistent flexible scheduling options prevent adult learners from progressing toward degrees.** Adult learners need required classes that can fit into their busy schedules, whether at night, on the weekends, or online. If courses that are required to complete majors are mainly offered from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., then adult learners who work or care for family members during those times will be unable to earn credits toward their degrees, with some choosing to drop out as a result. Our research suggests that there are not enough flexible scheduling options at CUNY; scheduling varies widely by college and major, with only a small number of required classes available at

night, on the weekends, or online for any given major.

Data from surveys of CUNY students suggest that challenges with scheduling classes are a significant factor limiting students' academic progress. Among students who were unable to register for a course, 32 percent said it was because the course was only offered in-person but they wanted to take it online. Fully 39 percent want more courses in the evenings, and 34 percent want more courses on the weekends.⁹ CUNY does have a few initiatives dedicated to increasing flexible scheduling options, including its recent CUNY Online initiative, but the university will need additional resources and more department-level buy-in to provide a robust menu of flexible class options across all colleges and programs.

2. **Childcare centers at CUNY need additional hours, capacity, and awareness to support the needs of adult learners who are parents.** Fully 13 percent of CUNY students are parents, and a disproportionate share of them are over the age of 25, according to interviews we conducted with directors of CUNY's childcare centers.¹⁰ These publicly funded childcare centers have been hugely helpful, offerings low-cost or free childcare while students are attending classes or studying. However, most operate with limited hours and space. Without widely accessible childcare, many adult learners are unable to enroll in certain required classes, or fit night and weekend classes around their busy schedules.

Several childcare centers surveyed by the Center for an Urban Future had waitlists in Spring 2023 ranging from 5 to 30 parents: City Tech had a waitlist of 5 to 10 parents; LaGuardia had a waitlist of 10 to 15; Brooklyn had a waitlist of 20, and Hostos had a waitlist of 30 parents. Our research also finds that only seven of the seventeen CUNY childcare centers are open during the week after 6 p.m. Just two of the seventeen centers are open on the weekends.¹¹

"I know for my major, some of the classes are not available in the morning. They are afternoon

classes from 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. or from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. and the center only runs until five," says Johana Sibri, an adult learner at City Tech studying mechanical engineering while taking care of her child. "I had to withdraw some of the classes because I couldn't leave my son for a longer period in there."

3. **Adult learners who are working or previously attended college face major challenges accessing financial aid.** New York State offers some of the nation's most generous financial aid programs, including the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Excelsior Scholarship. Unfortunately, many of CUNY's adult learners are not able to take advantage of this assistance. The problem is that many adult learners who are working make just enough to be disqualified from financial aid but too little to afford to pay for college out-of-pocket. Students are unable to access TAP if they live independently and earn more than \$60,000 annually as a married couple with no tax dependents, or more than \$30,000 if single—and these limits were only just raised from \$40,000 and \$10,000, respectively, in the FY 2025 New York state budget.¹² Experts say that the previous limits prevented many adult learners from accessing financial aid. Going forward, state policymakers will have to assess whether the increased limits are still too low to support college-going among lower-income adult learners—for instance, the new limits are below what a single adult would earn working full-time at a minimum-wage job in New York City.

"There may be an adult learner who's currently working and right at the threshold of earning financial aid," says Theory Thompson, chief program officer for education and vocation programs at Good Shepherd Services, a social services nonprofit that supports college students. "It's not enough to necessarily live off of and thrive. But it's too much to qualify for financial aid. So how is this adult learner going to go back and get an education?"

Additionally, many adult learners used up TAP eligibility during a previous attempt at college

and may have little, if any, dollars remaining after reenrolling.

The state's Excelsior Scholarship, which provides tuition aid to students from households making up to \$125,000, is likewise structured in a way that impedes access for many adult learners. Part-time students are ineligible—leaving out the majority of CUNY's adult learners—and returning students are only eligible if they were taking a full-time course load with no break in enrollment in the semesters before they returned to college. These requirements serve to prevent adult learners who were originally part-time students from receiving Excelsior when they return to college, and bars first-time adult college students who are enrolled part-time.

4. **Unpaid balances prevent adult learners from reenrolling in college.** In addition to the disproportionate challenges that adult learners face with scheduling required classes, managing childcare, and maintaining financial aid, many face a major obstacle to reenrolling in CUNY: unpaid balances. College administrators say that many of the students who drop out of CUNY each year leave owing the university money, often because other life and financial challenges led them to withdraw, or due to a loss of financial aid. Few of those students are in a position to settle their final bills after leaving college, or to pay off previous balances in order to reenroll. Experts say that even an unpaid balance as small as \$100 can derail working adults with some college but no degree from returning or deter existing adult learners from returning for the next semester as they weigh whether to pay an overdue balance or an urgent bill such as rent or food.

"You cannot re-enroll unless you pay off the \$250 from this class that you dropped after the period," says Rochelle Sinclair, executive director of college success nonprofit OneGoal. "Some of that seems insignificant, but that's an incredible burden for many of our New Yorkers in terms of making a decision about

whether they're going to persist in their post-secondary path."

5. **Without fully resourced advising offices, adult learners are more likely to stop out.** Advisors are essential navigators for helping adult learners complete their credentials; if students do not have consistent access to an advisor, they can fall behind in their academic progress while remaining unaware of vital supports that can help offset costs. However, the typical academic advisor at CUNY has a caseload in the hundreds, seriously curtailing the time they can spend with students. According to interviews with college administrators, the ratio of students to advisors is upward of 900 to 1 at most senior colleges and roughly 400 or 500 to 1 at most community colleges. Experts say that adult learners in particular benefit when they have close advising relationships, which can make the difference for students struggling to balance tuition payments, nontuition costs like books and technology, work responsibilities, childcare, and more. But fully 51 percent of CUNY students say that they haven't met with an academic advisor, underscoring the challenge of reaching the students who would benefit most from one-on-one advising amid such a persistent undersupply.¹³

This report also finds three key areas of opportunity where additional city and state support can help boost college success for more of CUNY's adult learners, including:

1. **Credit for prior learning is a powerful but underrealized tool at CUNY.** Credit for prior learning is a valuable process whereby students can earn academic credit for college-level learning acquired outside of the traditional classroom—including industry training and credentials; military service; a portfolio assessment of past personal and

work experiences; or by passing one of several dozen nationally recognized exams that assess non-classroom learning. Credit for prior learning can help adult learners save considerable time and money on their college path; a major 2020 study found that students who received prior learning assessments graduated at nearly double the rates of students who did not participate in CPL; students at 2-year and 4-year public institutions saved from \$1,500 to almost \$3,800.¹⁴

In 2020, CUNY approved a university-wide credit for prior learning policy, a major step forward in supporting college completion for adult learners. However, CPL implementation remains spotty across colleges; only half of CUNY's senior colleges and a little more than half of all community colleges offer CPL currently.¹⁵ College administrators and CPL experts say that several challenges persist at CUNY, including generating buy-in from faculty who are resistant to the idea of applying prior learning toward degree requirements; establishing requirements that departments offer credit to students who pass challenge exams or portfolio reviews; standardizing credit awards for specific forms of prior learning across departments and colleges; and approving credentials and certifications obtained outside CUNY as eligible for credit toward degrees.

2. **Expanding or replicating college success programs to serve part-time students can better support CUNY's adult learners.** Several important CUNY programs, supported by city, state, and philanthropic funding, provide students with evidence-backed academic and wraparound supports that have proven to increase graduation rates. The nationally recognized CUNY ASAP initiative, for instance, now reaches nearly 25,000 community college students each year, and participating students have posted graduation rates more than double those of peer non-ASAP students.¹⁶ But programs like ASAP, ACE, and College Discovery require full-time study, leaving out the majority of adult learners

who are part-time students. As a result, approximately 82 percent of ASAP participants were 22 or younger from 2007 to 2019.¹⁷ If city and state leaders were to help CUNY launch a program like ASAP for part-time students, more adult learners could receive essential wraparound supports to help them succeed in college.

3. **Community-based nonprofits are instrumental in boosting college success, but need support to serve more students over 25.** Thousands of CUNY students benefit from relationships with nonprofit community-based organizations that have the trust and experience needed to support them in the pursuit of a degree. However, our research suggests that the vast majority of the students served by these programs—an estimated 90 percent or more—are under the age of 25. One leading nonprofit, Good Shepherd Services, reports that its college support programming typically serves students 17 to 21; the college success nonprofit OneGoal reports typically serving students 15 to 19; the Urban Assembly works with high school students and alumni up to two years post-graduation.

Representatives from these organizations say they would not turn away students over 25, but their models focus on a younger demographic. One roadblock to working with older students is that there is no clear pipeline: many community-based organizations have worked with students from high school into college. Another major hurdle is securing government and private funding to serve students over 25. Several nonprofit leaders say that the city contracts and philanthropic grants that support their college success work either specifically focus on students in their teens through ages 21 to 24, or have never included funding tied to supporting the adult learner population.

“To my knowledge, there is no specific funding to target that older population interested in going to college,” says Theory Thompson of Good Shepherd Services. Nonprofit leaders

add that key funding streams allocated by city agencies to support college access and success programs are expressly limited to students under 25. “A lot of the funding that the city distributes is for young adults, and that means it can only go toward services for 17- to 24-year-olds,” says Danae McLeod of Grace Institute.

Strengthening Pathways to College Success for Adult Learners at CUNY

The city and state have helped CUNY make important strides to boost graduation rates—enabling thousands more New Yorkers, mostly from low-income backgrounds, to complete a credential and broaden their career opportunities. But more is needed to help CUNY’s 41,000 undergraduate adult learners earn degrees at rates comparable to younger learners, while boosting support for working students juggling a myriad of responsibilities beyond college.

At the same time, New York City is in the process of helping tens of thousands of additional adult learners with some college credits but no degree to return to CUNY through the groundbreaking CUNY Reconnect initiative. Yet without additional efforts to tackle the barriers to a degree that disproportionately derail adult learners, the impact of that program may not reach its full potential.

To strengthen CUNY’s vital role as an engine of economic mobility, New York City and State leaders will need to work closely with CUNY on investments, programs, and initiatives that support adult learner success.

“It feels like a no-brainer to invest in adults who want to pursue degrees,” says Shalema Henderson, senior director of the College Allies program at CARA, a nonprofit focused on helping low-income students succeed in college. “By getting more people degrees, their communities and their kids and generations beyond will benefit.”

There’s a lot that city and state leaders should do to help more of CUNY’s adult learners succeed in earning college degrees. Most urgently, policymakers should focus on reducing the financial barriers that disproportionately limit the ability of adult learners to pursue and achieve college credentials. Specifically, New York State should raise the income threshold requirements for TAP and eliminate the requirement for successive semesters of study to qualify for the Excelsior Scholarship, expanding access to crucial financial aid for thousands more adult learners. The city and state should also work with CUNY to launch a CUNY Fresh Start initiative to resolve unpaid balances up to \$1,000 if a student has not been enrolled for more than two semesters, allowing adult learners to come back to college.

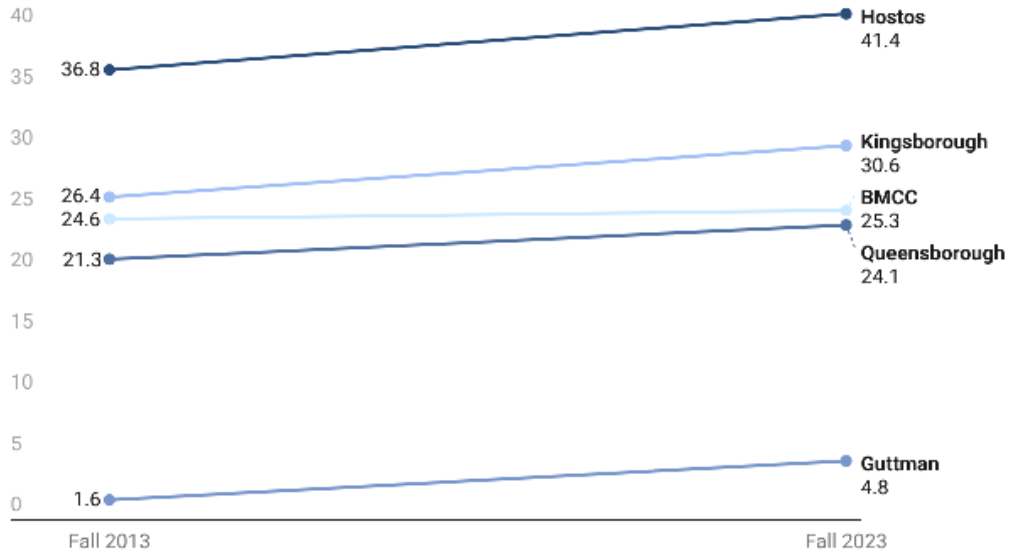
To scale up promising but limited efforts to provide credit for prior learning to more working-age New Yorkers, the New York State Education Department should develop a Credit for Prior Learning Review Board that can accelerate the adoption of outside certifications, credentials, and work experience that can count as credit toward a degree, reducing the administrative burden on CUNY.

Going forward, Mayor Adams and the City Council should pilot a wraparound support program specifically designed for part-time adult learners—call it CUNY Flex—that would extend crucial supports like hands-on advising, free MetroCards, and technology to part-time, working students who are ineligible for the highly effective CUNY ASAP and ACE programs. As part of this approach, the city should partner with nonprofit college success organizations to support adult learners by launching the NYC Adult Learners Network, providing competitive grants for community-based organizations to support college success for students ages 25-plus.

At a time when adult learners are comprising a growing share of all students at CUNY’s community college and nontraditional learners are becoming the new normal, city and state leaders should step up support for CUNY’s adult learners, invest in the services and supports that can help far more adult learners earn college degrees, and ensure that thousands of working New Yorkers are able to earn the credentials needed to thrive in New York City’s economy.

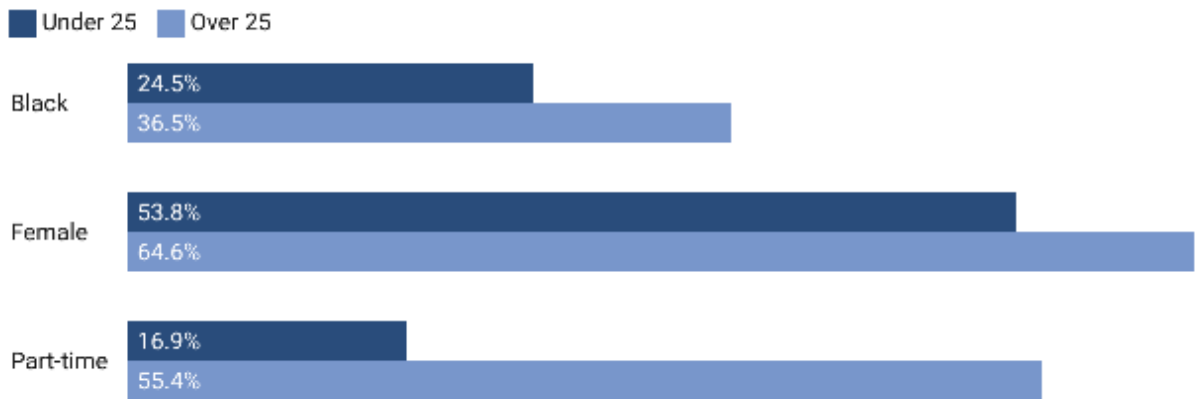
CUNY colleges with an increase in adult learners

Five colleges have seen the share of degree-seeking undergraduate students who are ages 25-plus grow over the past 10 years.



Source: CUF analysis of data from the CUNY Office of Applied Research, Evaluation, and Data Analytics. Created with Datawrapper

CUNY's adult learners are more likely to be Black, women, and part-time than the under-25 student body



Source: CUF analysis of data from the CUNY Office of Applied Research, Evaluation, and Data Analytics. Created with Datawrapper

Overcoming the Key Challenges that Prevent CUNY’s Adult Learners From Earning Degrees

DESPITE THE GRIT, TENACITY, AND MATURITY THAT so many adult learners possess, several significant barriers prevent many older college students from obtaining a college degree. Our research identifies five core challenges that should be addressed in order to improve outcomes for CUNY’s 41,000 students ages 25-plus.

CHALLENGE 1

Limited and inconsistent flexible scheduling options prevent adult learners from progressing toward degrees.

Having many different course options available allows adult learners to fit education into their already busy lives, whether that is taking night or weekend classes, remote classes, or classes that blend in-person and online meetings. While CUNY has made strides to offer flexible class options—including a system-wide expansion of online classes due to the pandemic—current offerings remain inconsistent across degrees, departments, and colleges. Without a robust menu of course offerings at different times and in different formats, an adult learner may not be able to take all the classes required of them, and may choose to drop out of college before leaving their job or neglecting their caregiving duties.

Currently the number of flexible options available to students is highly variable, depending on the institution and, even within a college, the degree they plan to pursue. At Queens College, for example, no courses for the bachelor of arts in Accounting & Information Systems were offered asynchronously, meaning online without a specific class time, in Spring 2023. However, at Medgar Evers, 25 out of 27 required major courses were offered online asynchronously the same semester for a bachelor of science in Accounting. Yet, another

degree at Medgar Evers, a bachelor of science in Computer Science, requires almost entirely in-person attendance in Spring 2023, with only 3 out of 34 courses (required and major-specific electives) offered asynchronously.

Some majors are all but impossible to complete without in-person attendance during the daytime for required courses, at times when adult learners may have to work part-time or full-time. At Hostos, an associate degree in computer science has highly limited evening options; only 2 out of 9 courses were offered after 5pm in Spring 2023. Another degree program at LaGuardia, an associate in psychology, cannot be completed by just taking evening courses; only 5 out of 24 courses were offered in the evening. Staten Island’s BS in Communications program had only 1 out of the 13 Communications-specific electives offered in Spring 2023 after 5pm: in-person courses were offered at 8am, 10:10am, 12:20pm, 2:30pm, and 4:40pm.¹⁸

“The vast majority of adult students are working nine to five, Monday to Friday, probably 95 percent; so we need to accommodate their needs while still serving the ones that still want to come during the day,” says Pamela Hinden, director of the Adult Degree Program at Lehman College. “At Lehman, students have a wide variety of major options, but not all majors are available to evening students. Since Covid, Lehman has adapted more majors that can be taken completely online, which helps, but doesn’t completely solve the issues faced by adult learners.”

Nonetheless, a few notable programs at CUNY that aim to give students flexible scheduling options do exist.

Some promising recent initiatives underway at CUNY are helping increase flexibility around course scheduling. The CUNY Online initiative supports colleges in expanding the number of fully online programs, particularly in high demand fields such as health and human services, technology, education,



The vast majority of adult students are working nine to five, Monday to Friday, probably 95 percent; so we need to accommodate their needs.

PAMELA HINDEN, DIRECTOR OF THE ADULT DEGREE PROGRAM AT LEHMAN COLLEGE

and business. CUNY now has nearly 200 programs offered fully online, according to a university administrator who's been involved in the initiative. At a smaller scale, the KCC Flex, a program within Kingsborough Community College, works with faculty to develop online and hybrid degree programs that are more accessible to working students.

But the fact remains that, across all the university's 25 campuses, there are not enough flexible scheduling choices for adult learners. The options, including for online program offerings, differ from school to school, experts tell us. "It varies widely by campus, where several colleges have made significant progress in developing their online education infrastructure, and others haven't," says Kim Siegenthaler, CUNY's associate vice chancellor for academic strategy and operations, who leads the CUNY Online initiative. "CUNY-wide, there is still room for substantial growth both in online programming and student support structures."

And while CUNY pivoted to online during the early years of the pandemic, some students have said there has been a quick revert to traditional models of education rather than a balance of scheduling options—including night and weekend classes that could provide all the benefits of in-person learning while accommodating the needs of working adult students.

In Spring 2023, Jessica Ortiz was a 34-year-old student at BMCC who enrolled because she could take classes online alongside her full-time job and taking care of her children. Ortiz has worked since she was 14 years old to support her family and never had the opportunity to get a college degree until a few years ago when online education rapidly progressed. A children and youth studies major, Ortiz realized while

online courses allowed her to start her education at CUNY, her options soon became limited as more classes returned to an in-person modality.

"Class scheduling at CUNY is not geared for adult learners. It's geared for somebody that doesn't have a job, that doesn't have the responsibilities of childcare, and all of these other things," says Ortiz. "And the way those online classes have diminished since 2021 reflects exactly that, because the expectation is that everybody is supposed to come in. Now as an adult learner, you don't have that option." Ortiz graduated in May of 2023, but said her last two semesters were much more challenging for her schedule, and took valuable time away from family, because she had to take class entirely in person.

There are several reasons that flexible scheduling at CUNY has not reached its full potential. There is great variation in available resources and expertise by campus. It also takes a lot of effort to collaborate with faculty to be able to offer a full degree program in a flexible format, and CUNY officials have noted some faculty are resistant to teaching online, at night, or on the weekends—or will require more consistent training to make online and hybrid courses as effective as in-person classes.

"They've [CUNY] been around for a very, very long time and we're entering a new frontier," says Renea Burke, an academic success coach for KCC FLEX at Kingsborough Community College. "And it takes a lot of convincing to get people to see the future of education. Our challenge was just getting departments to understand we have an online program now, not just one or two classes here and there in your department, but we need at least 15 classes."

Also, faculty need to be trained on how to teach effectively online and how to utilize the technologies. CUNY officials and nonprofit leaders working in college attainment describe how, while CUNY pivoted to online during the start of the pandemic, that didn't necessarily mean everyone had an understanding of how to teach effectively online.

There are also bureaucratic obstacles to offering majority-online programs. The New York State Education Department requires any program, where at least 50 percent of the requirements can be completed online, go through a separate review process, even if the content is the same as an already approved in-person program. Requirements were largely waived during the pandemic, but that flexibility ended in 2024.¹⁹

CHALLENGE 2

Childcare centers at CUNY need additional hours, capacity, and awareness to support the needs of adult learners who are parents.

Many adult learners are attending CUNY while also raising children, making the already challenging college experience even more difficult and costly. Overall, 13 percent of all CUNY students—and 18 percent of its community college students—are parents.²⁰ In recent years, city and state policymakers have admirably invested public funds to establish childcare centers across CUNY. Today, 17 of CUNY's 25 campuses offer childcare services.

The problem is that funding and capacity challenges means that many on-campus childcare centers are lacking in the number of spots, hours, and types of care they can offer student-parents. Without robust childcare options that meet the unique needs of adult learners with children, these student-parents struggle to enroll in the limited flexible scheduling options available to them and research suggests they are more likely to drop out before earning a credential. Alarming, nearly half (43 percent) of community college mothers surveyed nationally said they expect to drop out, according to a 2017 study.²¹

While CUNY's childcare centers serve all student-parents, staff at those centers told us that adult learners make up a disproportionate share of the individuals they serve. As of Spring 2023, BMCC's childcare director estimated that 70 percent of their parents are over 25; Medgar Evers's childcare director estimated 90 percent; and Brooklyn College's childcare director estimated 97 percent. But many adult learners are not making use of this vital resource. Only 5 percent of CUNY parents (of children of any age) report using on-campus childcare. Fully one-third did not even know the resource exists, suggesting the need to ramp up awareness, especially among the adult learner population.²²

For those who are aware of on-campus options, capacity and scheduling can be an issue. Although CUNY has many childcare centers, they have a limited number of spots they can offer parents. Several childcare centers surveyed by the Center for an Urban Future in Spring 2023 had waitlists ranging from five to 30 parents.

Overall capacity is limited. As of Spring 2023, Hunter College had 43 spots in its childcare center; City Tech had room for 50 children, and Medgar Evers had 40 spots. Many of the centers simply don't have the physical space to accommodate any more children.

"We've been here for 10 years this year. We will never increase capacity because we're utilizing every bit of space we have," says Jaci Maur, director of the Lehman College Child Care Center. "They would have to find additional space for us to increase our capacity. I would have to say most of the centers are in similar situations."

The childcare centers also have limited hours of operation. Many are open early, but only seven of the seventeen centers are open during the week after 6 p.m., and just two are open on the weekends.²³ Those adult learners who want or need to take evening or weekend classes as they manage school with their busy lives may not be able to enroll in necessary classes because they have no one to look after their child.

"We're not open on evenings and weekends," says Catherine Garcia-Bou, director of the Children's Center at Hostos Community College. "And we do have parents looking for support in the evening."



Class scheduling at CUNY is not geared for adult learners. It's geared for somebody that doesn't have a job, that doesn't have the responsibilities of childcare, and all of these other things.

JESSICA ORTIZ, FORMER ADULT LEARNER AT BMCC

“In an ideal situation, the hours of our center would be 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., or 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.,” says a childcare worker at Baruch who asked to remain anonymous to speak freely. “But due to insufficient funding, we will realistically be open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.”

Johana Sibri, a 26-year-old parent at City Tech in Spring 2023, came back to the college after a first attempt when she was 18 years old. Because her family could not afford to send both her and her sister to college at the same time, Sibri dropped out. She was able to return because of the New York State Dream Act, which provides tuition scholarships to undocumented students. Now finishing her mechanical engineering degree, Sibri says the childcare center at City Tech allows her to “finally focus in school, get my stuff done.”

However, Sibri says she wishes the childcare centers had longer hours. In the Spring 2024 semester, she had a required class that started at 6 p.m., and had to pick up her child from the center, commute to her parents' home to drop him off, and then rush back to the college; she was almost always late. Previously, she was unable to enroll in certain evening classes because there would be no one to look after her son. “If there are night teachers that can come in or afternoon teachers that can come in and support my son in his education, and making sure that he's well taken care of, then that would be great,” she says. “It'll make things so much easier for me making a schedule.”

Childcare center directors at CUNY commend the state for stepping up capital investment in childcare centers, but caution that a lack of funding for staff and operations is limiting their impact.

“While the state has provided one-time support to expand CUNY child care programs, we are not able to sustain the expansion,” says Wendy Woods, executive director of the childcare center at City Tech.

There are incentives for teachers to work at city schools, says Woods, such as better pay and benefits. But those same incentives are not given to teachers in CUNY's childcare centers, which makes it tougher to attract and retain staff.

“There's a reward for [public school] teachers, that [the city and state] will do away with their loans if they promised to work for two years in a district public school,” says Woods. “The childcare programs are not part of that. So we would like to be included, because it puts us at a further disadvantage otherwise.”

CHALLENGE 3

Adult learners who are working or previously attended college face major challenges accessing financial aid.

Financial aid is one of the driving factors that convinces adult learners that they can afford to pursue a college credential on top of their other expenses. But financial aid options such as the state's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Excelsior Scholarship require certain eligibility criteria that many adult learners cannot meet, including very low income thresholds to receive aid and required full-time attendance for successive semesters. If faced with the full cost of

college, adult learners may prioritize their urgent bills such as rent or groceries for the month rather than reenrolling in classes.

Adult learners who work jobs often make slightly too much income to receive aid but too little to afford college alongside their other bills. To receive TAP, a student who is a dependent or has a tax dependent, may have a household income up to \$125,000, an increase enacted as part of the FY 2025 state budget; but if a student has no tax dependents, they may only make \$60,000 if married or \$30,000 if single.²³ (Prior to 2024, these limits were \$80,000, \$40,000, and \$10,000 respectively.) About 24 percent of CUNY students come from households that earn more than \$30,000 but less than \$60,000.²⁴

“While not perfect, these higher income levels certainly help adult learners. But if you have a single adult male earning \$45,000 a year working at a non-profit organization, he qualifies for nothing,” says Pamela Hinden, the director of the Adult Degree Program at Lehman College. “I mean, you’re living on \$45,000 in New York City. How are you going to pay for classes?”

In Spring 2023, Keyarah Phelps was a 26-year-old student who dropped out of City College due to mental health challenges. She wanted to return, but her steep tuition bill deterred her.

“I haven’t been receiving a lot of financial aid help because I ‘make too much as a single person,’” Phelps says. She works part-time as a residential specialist at a domestic violence shelter. When she left school, she started working an extra shift to make more money.

“Finances are what’s really discouraging me from going back to school. And working four days a week doesn’t really help,” she said at the time. “Because I still got other bills to pay. So that’s the thing that stresses me out and makes me not want to go back to school at all.”

By the summer, she managed to reenroll in classes, but in spring of 2024, she decided to take only one class because of the stress from juggling a demanding job and coursework

Another huge financial aid hurdle for adult learners is that many who are reconnecting to college fail to qualify for TAP if they already used up their financial aid allotment during their earlier stint in college.

“Most adult learners attempted at college at some point. And it might have been a private school where all of their financial aid was absorbed or most of it,” says Renea Burke, academic success coach of KCC Flex at

Kingsborough Community College. “So, coming back to Kingsborough, which is very affordable, but if there’s no money left in the bank, it doesn’t seem that way.”

Many adult learners also find themselves shut out of financial aid because TAP has historically been reserved for full-time students—those taking at least twelve credits a semester. But a majority of adult learners are part-time students. The result is that in 2021, students 25 and under received almost \$220 million out of the \$245 million in TAP awards handed out that year, 91 percent of the money dispersed. Students 26 and older received just \$23.1 million, or 9 percent, even though these older students made up 20.1 percent of all full-time students that fall.²⁵

Fortunately, this landscape is changing. In August 2022, Governor Hochul announced a major \$150 million expansion of TAP so more part-time students could benefit. Now, students taking between six and 11 credits can receive part-time TAP, which presents a significant opportunity to better support adult learners. These changes were enacted in April 2024 in the state’s FY 2025 budget, which also authorized increases in the TAP income eligibility limits.

As of March 2023, the state has awarded over \$8 million in part-time TAP to over 7,000 CUNY students, according to the university’s executive director of financial aid. However, there are still challenges, according to financial aid experts at CUNY. Many students are not even aware this type of aid is available to them; at LaGuardia Community College, its financial aid office says that although 35 percent of undergraduate students attend part-time, only 182 students obtained part-time TAP eligibility as of Spring 2023, suggesting that thousands of eligible students are not even applying. Students are also required to enroll initially on a part-time basis to be eligible; as a result, adult learners who may have started with a full courseload and changed to part-time status cannot access this aid.

The state also administers the Excelsior scholarship for eligible students at CUNY and SUNY whose households earn up to \$125,000, but even with a higher income bracket, the tuition award is not designed to meet the needs of most working adult learners. One particularly challenging factor is a requirement that eligible students earn 30 credits toward a degree in the academic year prior to the year in which they are applying for aid.²⁶ This requirement makes the Excelsior Scholarship inaccessible to most

adult learners who are enrolled part-time, as well as those who drop out as part-time students and then seek to return part-time or full-time.

“There are more financial opportunities for students who are going to college right out of high school,” says Jennifer Lee, speaking when she was associate dean of enrollment management and student services at the CUNY School of Professional Studies. (Lee is now the associate vice president of enrollment services at School for International Training.) “Excelsior really leaves out adult students or anybody returning to school because of that very specific criteria that you can’t have a break in enrollment. While a program like Excelsior is great for students who are on that traditional four-year path, we know that’s really not many students.”

CHALLENGE 4

Unpaid balances are preventing adult learners from reenrolling in college.

Along with the unique challenges that adult learners face with scheduling required classes, finding child-care, and accessing financial aid, many adult learners face another hurdle to reenrolling in CUNY: unpaid balances. Low-income adult learners may incur balances and fees at CUNY if their delicate financial stability changes. Any unpaid amount on an adult learner’s balance prevents them from reenrolling in classes, either when they come back to college or if they are already studying and moving to the next semester.

Experts and peer counselors who work directly with CUNY students say that unpaid balances are a major reason why working adults end up not reenrolling in CUNY after initially stopping out. Solving this challenge will prove especially critical for maximizing the impact of the CUNY Reconnect initiative, which aims to reenroll tens of thousands of New Yorkers with some college credits but no degree, many of whom left CUNY initially with an unpaid balance.

“For some students it feels like unless they have the money to pay it off, they can’t come back,” says Shalema Henderson of the College Allies program. “So I think students are not even trying to come back because if they owe \$3,000 or \$5,000, it just feels like a barrier that they’re never going to overcome or not worth the investment in the short term.”

To help address this challenge, CUNY and then Governor Andrew Cuomo launched a first-of-its-kind, \$125 million debt forgiveness program in 2021 called CUNY Comeback, which eliminated unpaid tuition and fee balances accrued from the onset of the pandemic through spring of 2021. However, the program was paid for through one-time emergency relief funding from Congress, which has since expired. Meanwhile, unpaid balances have continued to accrue over the past two years.

Keneil Martin, a 23-year-old computer engineering major at City Tech in Spring 2023, may not be over 25, but still faces many of the same challenges as other adult learners. After a mistake was made in his financial aid paperwork, he lost access to financial aid and incurred a balance; although he tried to get his paperwork in order to prove he still needed aid, he ended up stopping out of college to work off his unpaid balance. Along with his existing job at an afterschool program, he also picked up a night shift at UPS.

“I obviously didn’t have the money [to cover the sudden loss of financial aid],” says Martin. “And so, I stopped going and then after that I was basically working two jobs just to catch up.”

CHALLENGE 5

Without fully resourced advising offices, adult learners are more likely to drop out.

College advisors help students chart the path toward a degree and troubleshoot any problems that arise along the way. But every CUNY college copes with enormous student-to-advisor ratios—ranging from 400 or 500 to 1 up to nearly 1,000 to 1 at some CUNY senior colleges—and inadequate access to advising leaves adult learners without the support needed to keep them on track academically, navigate the transfer process, and gain access to financial aid and other resources.

“A lot of times at CUNY, an advisor will have hundreds of students to their caseload,” says Danae McLeod, CEO of Grace Institute of New York. “Students aren’t able to make informed choices about the types of classes they need to take, and so there’s a lot of accumulation of unnecessary credits leading to a degree path.”

This can be especially true for the working adults with some college but no degree who have not attended college for some time, and need extra support to reintegrate themselves in a higher education environment—including many of the more than 33000 New Yorkers who have reenrolled in CUNY through the CUNY Reconnect program.

There's a reason why lower student-advisor ratios are a cornerstone of CUNY's most effective student success initiatives. For instance, CUNY ASAP maintains ratios of approximately 150 students to 1 advisor. Students will meet with an ASAP advisor at minimum twice a semester, and as often as twice a month.²⁷ But largely, this level of advising does not happen outside of programs like CUNY ASAP—more than half (51 percent) of CUNY students say that they never met with an academic advisor during the most recent semester.²⁸

“Unless you're in an opportunity program, you don't really have a counselor,” says Emily Jimenez, speaking when she was the director of the College Access and Success Program at Queens Community House, a social services settlement house. She is now the learning program director at Brooklyn Job Corps. “You may be assigned to an advisor, but you're not having one-hour sessions with them because they have a caseload of thousands of students.”

Tamesha Thompson is an adult learner who dropped out of Hunter College, and says she wished she had better access to mentorship and advising. She started at BMCC and eventually enrolled at Hunter to pursue a bachelor's degree in political science. But several events in her personal life, including an injury and the loss of her grandfather, derailed her; at the same time, Thompson was taking care of her daughter. Her grades dropped. Thompson says while she felt the momentum at BMCC because she was in supportive mentorship programs, she felt when she was at Hunter, she had no one to turn to so she could get back on the path to her degree.

“No one reached out to me. No one at all,” says Thompson. “I personally feel like a lot of the teachers, a lot of the advisors, they had so much on their plate that it was kind of hard for them to even dedicate more than like a 5- to 10-minute conversation with the student.”

Seizing Vital Opportunities to Boost Support for Adult Learners

IN ADDITION TO THE CORE CHALLENGES THAT MANY adult learners face, a number of policy changes and recent investments show promise for supporting adult learners on the path to a degree. But for the most part, these opportunities remain largely untapped. This report identifies three key opportunities that should be strengthened and expanded in order to better meet the needs of adult learners and deliver improved outcomes.

OPPORTUNITY 1

Credit for prior learning is a powerful but underrealized tool at CUNY.

Credit for prior learning is a vital resource for adult learners, especially for those that have work experience and are returning to college. CPL programs grant students credit toward a degree by recognizing competencies in certain subjects through examinations, previously earned credentials, and experience such as work or military service. These credits benefit adult learners by saving them time and money, while helping to incentivize enrollment. While CUNY does have a university-wide CPL policy, credit for prior learning adoption is still piecemeal at the campus level. Obstacles include uneven buy-in from college and departmental leadership, limited capacity to review outside credentials and inconsistent systems for applying credit, and no university-wide requirement to review student portfolios or administer challenge exams that can help establish competency and provide college credit.

There are several methods of evaluating credit for prior learning at CUNY: standardized exams such as advanced placement and the college-level examination program (CLEP); approved industry training and

credentials, including industry certifications reviewed by colleges or evaluators like the American Council on Education (ACE) and military training; institutionally prepared assessments or “challenge exams” that are created alongside faculty to test a student’s knowledge in a subject area; and a portfolio assessment that reviews a student’s professional, volunteer, and life experiences and awards credit for the knowledge they’ve obtained.²⁹

Credit for prior learning has shown remarkable results. At Hostos Community College, officials say, one student received nine credits toward a community health degree through the CPL program, saving nearly a full-time semester’s worth of time and money. Research suggests that adult learners who receive CPL are 2.5 times more likely to persist in college and graduate with a degree than students who receive none.³⁰ One landmark study of more than 465,000 students at 72 institutions found that 49 percent of students who received credit from a prior learning assessment completed a postsecondary degree within 7.5 years, opposed to just 27 percent of those without CPL credits.³¹

In 2020, CUNY officially approved a university-wide credit for prior learning policy—a significant step toward formalizing and standardizing CPL across colleges. And CUNY’s recently launched Transfer Explorer tool will make it easier to see what CPL options are available at each college.³²

“Credit for prior learning recognizes that an adult is different from a first-time freshman in that they have this huge gap of life experience between when they ended their formal education and when they’re coming back to us,” says Michael Guy, the university associate dean for undergraduate studies at CUNY. “And we know that there’s value there that should be recognized and equated to credits that help them toward their degrees.”

Although all CUNY colleges now offer some form of CPL, the methods of awarding credit vary and the pace of adoption differs significantly among campuses.³³ Some campuses have moved more swiftly to award credit for prior learning than others: for instance, as of March 2023, Hostos has awarded CPL to about 50 students since 2018, while the College of Staten Island has awarded almost 2,900 credits.

The extent of credit for prior learning options a student sees at their campus relies largely on the commitment of faculty to help develop them. Several CUNY officials cite faculty and departmental buy-in as an obstacle in implementing CPL policy, leaving some campuses with multiple options while others have none.

“It has taken off differently at different campuses,” says Jennifer Lee, speaking when she was associate dean of enrollment management and student services at the CUNY School of Professional Studies. “It is something that requires a lot of faculty buy-in, participation, because the faculty are essential in terms of reviewing the rigor and the content of a credential and determining its equivalency on the academic side. How open your faculty might be to that may determine how a CPL policy takes hold on your campus.”

One method of determining CPL—reviewing outside industry training and credentials such as bootcamps or certification courses—requires significant work and staff capacity that many colleges do not have, CUNY officials note. Granting academic credit for the completion of workforce training programs is a promising opportunity to help more adult learners pursue and complete college credentials. However, college administrators say that assessing the thousands of different training programs, certifications, and credentials available in New York and nationally in order to determine their alignment with the objectives and competencies of their academic courses poses a challenging lift.

“There are so many providers offering credentials that it is very difficult to measure the value of them all,” says Jorge Silva-Puras, speaking when he was interim dean of CUNY School of Professional Studies. “You can go by reputation. For instance, if it is a certificate from AWS [Amazon Web Services], or Google, you probably attribute high quality to the certificate.

But what about many other providers who offer opportunities for CPL, since we don’t have the capacity to assess the quality of most of them?”

Critically, CUNY colleges are not required to institute two of the most promising methods of assessing credit for prior learning for adult learners: the portfolio review and the challenge exam. For those adult learners who have worked for years before going to college, these options allow them to receive credit for the knowledge and skills they have gained from real-world experience.

“They left it up to colleges to decide whether they’re going to do the portfolio or challenge exams,” says one CUNY official at a community college, who requested anonymity in order to speak freely. “They allowed for colleges to opt out of these things, which I think has not been beneficial to students.”

Similar to evaluating outside industry credentials or certifications, creating and maintaining the assessment infrastructure to offer a portfolio review is a heavy lift for individual colleges.

“There’s a ton of interest across CUNY in this particular form of credit for prior learning,” says Alyssa Vine, university director of credit for prior learning at CUNY. “That’s something we’re really starting to grapple with: how could we make portfolio assessment available to students across CUNY in a way that would not require each college to develop its own system, but rather through some kind of hub approach that could provide consistent, standardized support to students?”

Lastly, the system struggles with inconsistencies in credit distribution: colleges may accept credit for prior learning that a student received at another institution, but they may only accept it as general elective credit. If credit does not count toward any specific degree, then they may be of little use to a student.

“If it’s not part of an established articulation agreement, then the four-year colleges can just accept it as elective credit,” says one CUNY official at a community college. “And so that doesn’t really do much for the student. I would like to see more guarantees that that credit that’s given is going to help with their degree requirements.”

OPPORTUNITY 2

Expanding or replicating college success programs to serve part-time students would better support CUNY's adult learners.

CUNY has a variety of internal programs that aid students, including the nationally recognized ASAP program. However, these programs are largely restricted to full-time students, while a majority of adult learners (55.4 percent) study part-time. To better support these students, CUNY will need the assistance of city and state government to build a college success program for adult learners that addresses their specific needs, reducing the disparity in graduation rates and helping more adult learners earn degrees.

CUNY ASAP offers academic and wraparound supports for students pursuing an associate's degree so they can graduate on time: a dedicated advisor, a free MetroCard, a tuition gap waiver, money for textbooks, special registration options for classes, enhanced career development and academic support services, and more. These supports have helped ASAP more than double graduation rates for participating students, compared to their non-ASAP peers.³⁴ College success experts say that instituting a similar program for adult learners could have a tremendous impact on retention and graduation rates.

"ASAP has such a tremendous impact on your traditional population," says Stanley Taylor, senior director of partnerships at Year Up, a job training program partnered with CUNY. "How do we take that framework and then wrap those same supports around an adult learner who in some cases might actually need more support?"

CUNY's Accelerate, Complete, Engage (ACE) program, modeled after ASAP but for students pursuing a bachelor's degree, also requires participants to be enrolled full-time, with at least 15 credits per semester. College Discovery and SEEK, two other important college opportunity programs, also require full-time enrollment and are limited to first-time freshmen. These programs provide much-needed support for students who might not otherwise attend college, but for the majority of CUNY's adult learners juggling multiple responsibilities, these programs are still largely inaccessible.

Emily Jimenez, speaking when she was the director of the College Access and Success Program at Queens Community House, a social services nonprofit, says that more work is needed to meet the needs of CUNY's adult learners, who face challenges that go beyond those experienced by other low-income students who are younger.

"If we want to really have this population be successful, we need to understand that there isn't a cookie-cutter approach," says Jimenez. "We have to fill the gaps that they need, not have them try to conform to what we're looking for."

OPPORTUNITY 3

Community-based nonprofits are instrumental in boosting college success, but need support to serve more students over 25.

The city is home to several nonprofit community-based organizations that support college access and success for students from low-income backgrounds. However, their access and funding pipelines mostly center around serving students younger than 25. If the city could help more nonprofits work with adult learners, these students could access much-needed wraparound supports and resources to thrive in higher education.

Several of the city's nonprofits run college success programs that fill in some of the gaps in supports that students need to enroll and graduate from school, including mentorship, guidance on applying to college, post-secondary readiness training, stipends, and tutoring. However, most of these programs largely serve students under 25.

Our research suggests two key reasons why CBOs tend not to serve many adult learners. First, most organizations either connect with students while they are still in high school, and focus on helping them transition into college, or engage with first-time freshman soon after they enroll.

"I do think that CBOs who have success programs are typically continuing services from their access programs, which are partnered with high schools or high school-aged students," says Shalema Henderson of the College Allies program. "When students leave

college and then return later, they lose those points of connection and they end up having to navigate a lot on their own.”

Secondly, college success organizations say that little funding is targeted toward the adult learner population. Some CBOs report that city contracts or private funders prefer or even require that programs serve populations between the ages of 16 or 17 and 22 to 25 years old. One leader of a CBO with a college success program, who requested anonymity in order to discuss funding issues, says that a key source of funding from the Department of Youth and Community Development is reserved for students up to age 21; likewise, one of their private funders requires them to

work with students 17 to 24. Two other private funders do not have a set age target, but have expressed a preference that funding support students out of high school.

Grace Outreach is one of the city’s few nonprofit organizations that primarily serves low-income women over 25 who are pursuing higher education. Margaret Grace, the organization’s interim executive director, says that accessing government funding has been a challenge; while city contracts may not specify a target age range, they have never seen funding specifically designed to support programming for adult learners pursuing college credentials.

Models for Boosting Adult Learner Success: Three Innovative Policies From Other States That New York Should Consider Replicating

1. California's Credit for Prior Learning Mandate

Credit for prior learning (CPL) programs issue college credits for skills acquired through examinations, career training, work experience, and/or service activities, while helping adult students save time and money on their way to degree completion. Like many public higher education systems, California Community Colleges (CCC) had spent years experimenting with granting college credits for prior learning, with inconsistent results. For instance, while 81 percent of colleges considered military experience in granting CPL as of 2018, only 13 percent of schools considered workforce training experiences.³⁵ To address these inconsistencies and boost CPL statewide, California's legislature took action by implementing a statewide initiative to accelerate CPL adoption.

In January 2018, California State Assembly Member Sabrina Cervantes introduced Assembly Bill 1786 to expand CPL across the California Community College system and to also expand the types of prior learning assessments. Her bill was signed into law by then Governor Jerry Brown later that year, and went into effect in 2019. The legislation also compels CCC to "identify best practices for the use of course credit... and provide professional development in connection with the identified best practices."³⁶ The initiative seeks to support more than six million Californians between the ages of 25 to 54 who possess a high school diploma or some credits but no degree.

According to Jodi Lewis, senior director of strategic projects and initiatives at the Success Center for California Community Colleges, the legislation spurred colleges and faculty to accelerate the implementation of credit for prior learning schemes. "That created a catalyst for our faculty to take on CPL

in earnest, which had not been done in at least a decade," says Lewis. The Foundation for California Community Colleges then received a grant from the Lumina Foundation to help support implementation by funding pilots at different colleges. These pilot programs helped build knowledge on how CPL can be administered and provided resources for districts that needed help with implementation.

Community college officials in California say that the expansion of credit for prior learning is proving essential for enabling more adult learners to earn college credentials and develop their careers. "[This] is going to really make an impact on adult learners," says Benjamin Mudgett, articulation officer and associate professor at Palomar College. "They can come to us and reskill or upskill, based on their prior learning, and get back into the job market, or get that promotion, or that advancement, or that degree."

2. Nashville Flex's Wraparound Supports for Part-Time, Returning Learners

From working a job to pay the bills to focusing on family responsibilities such as parenting or caregiving, many adult learners do not have the bandwidth to enroll in college full-time. The problem is that relatively few programs aimed at supporting student success are available to part-time students, leaving out many adult learners who would otherwise benefit from those supports. To address this challenge, Nashville State Community College (NSCC) launched a new initiative, Nashville Flex, specifically designed to provide evidence-based wraparound supports to part-time adult learners, helping more of these students succeed in college.

NSCC worked with several partners, including the Kresge Foundation's Education Program, the Tennessee College Access and Success Network (TCASN), Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, and Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, to help create a college success program that would work for part-time adult learners. At NSCC, 43 percent of students are ages 25-plus and 75 percent are enrolled part-time. With funding from Kresge's College Promise 2.0, NSCC launched Nashville Flex in August 2022, with nearly 50 part-time adult learners receiving a suite of wrap-around supports. The program was modeled partly after CUNY ASAP, which serves as a leading national model for boosting college completion rates for community college students by providing intensive academic advising in tandem with robust career development and help offsetting non-tuition costs. Unlike CUNY ASAP, which is designed to incentivize full-time enrollment, Nashville Flex was created to provide these supports to part-time students.

Key features of the program include \$150 per semester to contribute toward textbooks; \$150 for personal expenses like gas or groceries; and the option to borrow a laptop for a semester. In addition, the program helps students build an academic and professional community with advisor support and career services while offering special class scheduling, where students can select the best scheduling format that fits their busy lives, whether that is in-person during the day or evening, online, or hybrid courses.

Early results suggest that the program is helping part-time students to persist in their academic careers and to get closer to a degree. NSCC saw a 92 persistence rate among students participating in the Nashville Flex program from Fall 2022 to Spring 2023, with some part-time students choosing to enroll in an extra class while others have been able to transition to full-time status.³⁷

Nashville Flex is also ensuring that more of the adult learners who are returning to college, thanks to the state's innovative Tennessee Reconnect program, are able to succeed. Students who participate in Tennessee Reconnect (a statewide educational initiative to help returning adult learners) are eligible for Nashville Flex, giving adult learners a holistic package of financial and academic supports as they complete their degrees.

Bob Obrohta, executive director of the Tennessee College Access and Success Network, says that

Nashville Flex is paving the way for better outcomes for part-time adult learners. "If these things work for full-time students, why wouldn't they work for part-time students who definitely have a high need for support, maybe even more so?"

NSCC's Assistant Director of the Student Success Center and Manager for the NashGRAD and Nashville Flex Programs Lindsay Hager says that other program offerings, including hands-on tutoring and an emergency grant available to cover unexpected expenses, are ensuring that adult learners stay on the path to a degree. "The unfortunate consequence for an adult student who faces an academic or logistical struggle during their time in college can be that they drop out and say something like 'I'll start next semester'. Well, statistics show that the student's not coming back," says Hager. "So we want to make sure on the front end they tell us what's going on as soon as possible so we can provide them the resources and support to keep them in their classes."

3. Ohio Innovation Grant for Competency-Based Education

Academic credits are traditionally issued based on certain rigid requirements. Students are typically required to pay for and persist through an entire 15-week semester to earn credit, even if they can already demonstrate mastery of the material. For many adult learners, especially students from low-income backgrounds with multiple competing demands on their time, the process of obtaining a degree can be highly inefficient—costing students dearly in both time and money. This presents a major barrier to college persistence for many students whose primary goal is to acquire the knowledge and credentials needed to access a career as efficiently as possible.

That's exactly the problem that a model known as competency based education (CBE) is attempting to solve. CBE programs are designed to help students save time and money while providing greater flexibility to help students meet their personal and professional obligations. Students are able to self-pace and earn credits by demonstrating their skills proficiency according to a timeline that fits their busy lifestyle. Alternatively, if a student is unfamiliar with a subject, they can take as much time as needed to master the material. This approach can be especially valuable for



ASAP has such a tremendous impact on your traditional population. How do we take that framework and then wrap those same supports around an adult learner who in some cases might actually need more support?

BOB OBROHTA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE TENNESSEE COLLEGE ACCESS AND SUCCESS NETWORK

many working adult students because it allows students to move quickly through material they already know, while slowing down only for the topics that demand closer study.

As valuable as this model can be for improving the college-going experience for adult learners, implementing CBE at scale has proven challenging. To overcome these obstacles, the Ohio Department of Education launched the Innovation Grant in 2016 to advance CBE at the college level. The grant awarded over \$700,000 in funding to Sinclair Community College and Columbus State Community College to develop the CBE model and share best practices with colleges across the state. Two years after the grant was awarded, 21 of 37 Ohio public colleges were planning or in the process of implementing a CBE structure on its campus.³⁸

College leaders in Ohio say that the Innovation Grant helped kickstart the shift toward CBE models across the state's community college system, both by providing dollars to help cover the costs of developing programs and courses, and by putting CBE higher on the agenda of individual colleges.

“The grant signaled that the state believes this to be important work and it signals to other institutions this is where we need to go,” says Christina Amato, Sinclair Community College's former CBE program manager and current dean of eLearning.

At Sinclair, the CBE route is now widely available for the 38 percent of students who are adult learners. Courses are organized by modules or units with a pre-assessment. A student can pass the course by successfully completing the pre-assessment. CBE was first established for the general business administration program and has since expanded to a total of 17 programs and more than 100 courses, providing more pathways for self-paced study. The Innovation Grant was instrumental in achieving these outcomes, says Amato.

“It increases the collaboration between institutions because with big, heavy lifts like competency-based education, it is really hard to do in isolation and in a vacuum,” Amato says. “It pools resources and encourages the kind of collaboration needed.”

Recommendations for the City and State Helping NYC's Low-Income Adult Learners Succeed at CUNY

For Mayor Adams, the City Council, and CUNY

1. LAUNCH CUNY FLEX, A WRAPAROUND SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR PART-TIME STUDENTS, WITH A FOCUS ON ADULT LEARNERS. CUNY's student success programs, including the nationally recognized CUNY ASAP, provide students with evidence-based wraparound supports that help them succeed at college, including a dedicated advisor, a free MetroCard, and money for textbooks. However, these programs require full-time enrollment, shutting out the majority of adult learners (55.4 percent) who study part-time. Mayor Adams and the City Council should help tackle this gap by launching a new wraparound services initiative for part-time learners—call it CUNY Flex—which would be designed to replicate the evidence-based supports of CUNY ASAP for part-time students, with a focus on returning students and other adult learners.

2. ACCELERATE THE CUNY ONLINE INITIATIVE TO ENSURE THAT FAR MORE COURSES AND DEGREES CAN BE COMPLETED ONLINE—AND EXPAND NIGHT AND WEEKEND OPTIONS FOR REQUIRED COURSES. For adult learners to fit college into their already-packed schedules, more flexible scheduling options are necessary, including increased availability of online, night, and weekend classes. However, the number of online, night, and weekend courses in each major varies widely from college to college at CUNY, preventing adult learners from registering in the classes required to complete their degrees. City leaders should help CUNY scale up its emerging CUNY Online initiative so that many more adult learners have the flexibility they need as they finish college, and CUNY leadership should work with each college to develop night and weekend options for required courses.

Invest \$8 million over the next four years to make CUNY a national leader in offering online and hybrid degree-granting programs. CUNY's 2023-2030 strategic plan set a goal of expanding fully-online programs to almost 300 by 2030. The CUNY Online initiative also plans to expand hybrid (partly in-person, partly online) degree paths to give students more options in completing their credentials. To support and accelerate this goal, the city should invest \$8 million over the next four years to help CUNY accelerate progress around online learning infrastructure, with the goal of becoming a national leader in online and hybrid learning.

Train CUNY faculty on best practices for online and hybrid teaching. While the pandemic pushed universities, including CUNY, to go online, few faculty had the knowledge necessary to teach effectively in that format, even with the necessary technology. The city should invest in faculty training and professional development and create a network of online and hybrid learning ambassadors, enabling more CUNY faculty and adjuncts to gain proficiency in online learning and improve the online learning experience for their students.

3. LAUNCH THE NYC ADULT LEARNERS NETWORK WITH COMPETITIVE GRANTS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS TO SUPPORT COLLEGE SUCCESS FOR STUDENTS AGES 25-PLUS. New York City is home to several effective nonprofits that help students access and graduate from college by providing mentorship, college readiness workshops, tutoring, financial counseling, and other services. However, the vast majority of the students served through these programs are under the age of 25, either because their relationships with these CBOs started while in the K-12 system, or because existing sources of city and philanthropic funding focus on the 17-24 demographic. Policymakers can help harness the power of the city's CBOs by launching the NYC Adult Learners Network, a new initiative that would provide competitive grants to nonprofits to support CUNY's adult learners on the path to their degree, and create a community of practitioners dedicated to improving outcomes for adult learners.

4. CREATE A CUNY FRESH START INITIATIVE TO REDUCE OR ELIMINATE UNPAID BALANCES UP TO \$1,000 FOR STUDENTS WITH SOME COLLEGE CREDITS BUT NO DEGREE, ALLOWING MORE ADULT LEARNERS TO RETURN TO COLLEGE. Many CUNY students who leave without a degree—often due to a financial or family challenge—end up owing the university money for an unpaid bill. These unpaid balances prevent students from reenrolling in CUNY, and can bar students from persisting across semesters. To help more adult learners return to CUNY and complete credentials, and boost persistence, the city and state should partner on a Fresh Start initiative that would clear an unpaid balance of up to \$1,000 for CUNY students who started but have not completed their degree so that they can re-enroll and finish their credential.

5. EXPAND CHILDCARE SUPPORT FOR CUNY STUDENTS. Along with flexible scheduling, robust childcare is essential for adult learners to be able to study and attend class while raising children. New York City and State should combine resources to expand childcare offerings on campus by investing in 50 more childcare staff positions, including teachers and administrators, so that childcare centers can stay open for longer hours. They should also increase recurring operating dollars to support childcare programming. At the same time, CUNY should be integrated into Mayor Adams's childcare expansion effort, with vouchers provided for students to use at group childcare centers near their homes or to compensate friends or relatives for providing childcare services.

6. ACCELERATE THE ADOPTION OF CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING ACROSS ALL CUNY COLLEGES. Credit for prior learning is a huge boon to adult learners who have previous work experience and are returning to college—saving students time and money toward a degree, while incentivizing reenrollment. While CUNY has a university-wide CPL policy, adoption has varied significantly among colleges. The city should support CUNY in fully harnessing credit for prior learning at every CUNY campus.

Require all departments to offer portfolio reviews and challenge exams as methods to evaluate credit for prior learning. While there are many methods of assessing credit for prior learning, two that could benefit adult learners the most are not currently required by the university. Portfolio reviews allow students to submit a record of past work and learning experiences, some outside of the traditional academic experience, that could count toward credit. The challenge exam similarly tests the competences of students alongside the learning objectives of a course to award credit. CUNY should require all departments to offer these options, so adult learners who have worked and have relevant skills and experiences can jumpstart their college credential.

Expand agreements with leading nonprofit workforce development organizations so that New Yorkers who pursue career training can also accrue college credit. New York City is home to a vast landscape of workforce development organizations that give their participants the knowledge and experience to enter certain careers. Many adult learners who completed these training programs may also want to pursue a college degree, and already have the competences they would learn in some of their college courses. CUNY should partner with more nonprofit workforce development organizations, especially those aligned with growing and high-wage industries such as tech, health care, and the creative economy, so that students can earn college credits as they achieve career training goals.

Scale up the three-credit portfolio review class currently offered by CUNY SPS to all CUNY campuses. The CUNY School of Professional Studies has systemized the credit review process by providing a credit-bearing course in which students can develop their portfolios and faculty can assess them for appropriate credits. CUNY should replicate this model across all of its campuses so that adult learners can more easily tap into their past work and learning experiences to make progress toward degrees.

7. HELP CUNY MARKET PART-TIME TAP TO REACH EVERY ELIGIBLE STUDENT. In 2024, Governor Hochul and the State Legislature passed a budget that formalizes the expansion of TAP to more part-time students—an important victory for the majority of adult learners who study part-time while juggling other responsibilities. While colleges are awarding TAP to more and more part-time students, colleges have noted that only a fraction of their part-time population have benefited, indicating that many students may not even be aware of the money available to them. City policymakers should help CUNY launch a major new marketing effort around TAP expansion, so that more part-time learners can learn about and receive the necessary financial aid to continue their education.

8. ESTABLISH A MAXIMUM RATIO OF 150 ADVISORS PER STUDENT ACROSS CUNY AND FUND FULL-TIME ADVISOR LINES AT EVERY COLLEGE TO ACHIEVE THIS. College advisors provide students with much-needed guidance on how to best complete their degree path, a service that is especially valuable for many adult learners who are attempting to earn a college degree while juggling a multitude of work and family responsibilities. Due to limited funding, CUNY's advisor-to-student ratios are unacceptably high, ranging from 400 or 500 to 1 up to nearly 1,000 to 1, unless a student participates in a program such as CUNY ASAP, in which the ratio is a much more manageable 150 to 1. Mayor Adams and the City Council should prioritize investments that help lower the university-wide student-to-advisor ratio to 150 to 1, and fund additional full-time academic and career advisor lines.

For Governor Hochul and New York State

1. REFORM EXISTING TUITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS TO HELP MORE ADULT LEARNERS AFFORD COLLEGE. Financial aid is arguably the most crucial factor that determines whether an adult learner will persist and succeed in higher education. However, many adult learners cannot access the state's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) or the Excelsior Scholarship because these learners only just exceed the income threshold or fail to meet full-time enrollment requirements. At the same time, lower-income adult learners who live independently generally make too little to afford to pay for college out-of-pocket without this aid. The state can take several concrete steps to change this, and make college far more affordable for working adults.

Raise the income threshold for TAP eligibility. State policymakers took action in 2024 to increase TAP income eligibility guidelines—an important step toward greater inclusion of working adult students in financial aid. Going forward, policymakers should consider additional targeted increases for students who live independently. For instance, even after the recent increase, a New York City resident who makes minimum wage working full-time would be unable to qualify for TAP. New York State should raise the maximum income threshold for TAP to \$80,000 for married students and \$40,000 for single students so more working adult learners can receive aid

Reform Excelsior Scholarship credit requirements to expand access to more students. New York State's Excelsior Scholarship provides aid to students from households making up to \$125,000, but eligibility requirements leave out many adult learners. For instance, students who previously attended college before applying for Excelsior must have been taking a full-time course load each semester with no break in enrollment, and current students must be enrolled full-time. The state should amend these requirements to include part-time students so that the more than half of all adult learners who are enrolled part-time are able to access the Excelsior Scholarship.

2. LAUNCH NEW YORK'S FIRST COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION INNOVATION GRANT, MODELED ON OHIO'S SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVE. Competency-based education (CBE) is a flexible learning model that helps save students time and money toward a degree. Instead of sitting through a semester-long course, students can demonstrate existing knowledge of the material to accelerate through the class while taking other modules at their own pace. The structure of competency-based education suits the unique profile and needs of adult learners with busy schedules as well as prior learning experiences. New York State should launch its first Competency-Based Education Innovation Grant, modeled on a similar and successful effort in Ohio, to spark innovation around the development of CBE across the state.

3. HELP CUNY ACHIEVE ITS AMBITIOUS CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING GOALS BY LAUNCHING A CPL REVIEW BOARD. While CUNY has its own university-wide credit for prior learning policy, a major step forward to help adult learners on their way to college completion, there is more that can be done to ensure that adoption is widespread at each campus. One major opportunity for New York State to further CPL at CUNY is by establishing a statewide CPL Review Board. The CPL Review Board would expedite the review of outside professional experience, such as training in workforce development programs, volunteerism, and work experience. The CPL Review Board could also help set standards for outside certifications and industry-recognized credentials that can count as credit toward a degree in multiple degree pathways.

4. EXPEDITE THE NEW YORK STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT'S APPROVAL PROCESS FOR ADDING NEW COURSES AND ONLINE VERSIONS OF EXISTING COURSES. CUNY is seeking to make college more accessible for working students by creating more online and hybrid courses. However, registering new courses requires navigating an arduous approvals process with the New York State Department of Education, and even converting an existing course to an online format requires a separate review. State policymakers should direct NYSED—to identify process changes that can speed up the review and approval process for new courses, and streamline the approvals process for online components and conversions, as was the case during the pandemic.

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