



Adult Learner Playbook

Unlocking Career Success for Special Populations



Playbook Introduction

Career-Career-connected learning is an educational strategy that combines high-quality academic instruction, skill-based learning, and real-world experiences to prepare students with the knowledge and skills that they need to pursue their college and career goals. Career-connected learning can be delivered in a variety of ways, including in core content classes, through career and technical education (CTE) programs, in partnership with community and technical colleges, and through work-based learning experiences like internships, pre-apprenticeships, and registered apprenticeship programs. Career-connected learning is especially important for an often-overlooked group of students, adult learners. The term “adult learners” encompasses many groups of people. For instance, for purposes of the [Adult Education and Family Literacy Act \(AEFLA\)](#), an “eligible individual” is an individual— (A) who has attained 16 years of age; (B) who is not enrolled or required to be enrolled in secondary school under State law; and (C) who— (i) is basic skills deficient; (ii) does not have a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, and has not achieved an equivalent level of education, or (iii) is an English language learner.

Focusing on adult learners is crucial to our economy and nation because they represent a significant portion of our population striving to further their skill development and career prospects. Adult learners often face added challenges, such as balancing work and family responsibilities while pursuing their education, so it is important they maximize the benefits from their education. Career-connected learning plays a pivotal role in supporting adult learners by offering practical, hands-on training that directly aligns with evolving industry needs. This targeted approach not only equips adult learners with relevant skills but also increases their employability in competitive job markets. By focusing on CTE adult learners can complete their education while acquiring certifications, gain real-world experiences, and work as apprentices, leading to more promising career opportunities and personal financial stability.

One of the most significant innovations brought about by WIOA was to position the Federal adult education program firmly within the workforce development system. Integrated education and training (IET) is a program model and instructional approach that provides adult education and literacy activities concurrently and contextually with workforce preparation activities and workforce training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster, for the purpose of educational and career advancement toward meeting WIOA goals. The instruction combines three required components to accelerate student learning and career advancement: basic literacy and language instruction, workforce preparation, and workforce training. To support states to build their capacity to offer IET, the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) funds several technical assistance (TA) efforts, the most significant of which are the IET Toolkit, IET Quality Indicators, and the Basic and Advanced IET Design Camps.

- Correctional education and reentry programs play a critical role in preparing incarcerated adults for success after release, especially as measured by increased employment outcomes and reduced recidivism (Davis et al., 2014; Western, 2006). Data from the 2014 U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies Survey of Incarcerated Adults indicate lower educational attainment rates for incarcerated adults compared with the general U.S. population (Petersilia, 2003; Taliaferro, 2017). Many incarcerated adults also lack job skills and a steady employment history (Petersilia, 2003; Western et al., 2001), creating hurdles to finding employment after release. To address these challenges, state and facility correctional education leaders are turning to evidence-based practices, such as Integrated Education and Training (IET) models, to prepare participants for release by aligning and contextualizing education and workforce instruction and accelerating participants’ progress along a career pathway.



Adult Learner Playbook

Unlocking Career Success for Special Populations



- IET programs are gaining momentum across the country as an evidence-based strategy for building academic, employability, and occupational skills together and often leading to an industry-recognized credential (Institute of Education Sciences, 2021). In corrections, effective IET programs align with and enhance existing reentry education services (as illustrated by the [Reentry Education Framework](#)) by leveraging similar components and accelerating the learner experience. IET programs in corrections can help participants earn academic and occupational certifications to prepare them for success after release.

Unlocking Career Success

[Unlocking Career Success](#) is one of the priority initiatives within Secretary Cardona's Raise the Bar initiative, and it is an interagency program that reimagines how our nation's high schools prepare all students to thrive in their future education and careers. The initiative blurs the lines between high school, college, and career to provide students with accelerated and innovative opportunities to earn college credits and gain real-world career experiences. This joint effort across the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Commerce supports public and private sector leaders, government agencies, and other community-based organizations to help students earn postsecondary degrees and industry-recognized credentials that our employers need, and our economy demands. Unlocking Career Success seeks to strengthen systems of multiple pathways to success, fulfilling the promise of education as the key to economic and social mobility and providing our students with rewarding, joyful, and purposeful college and career pathways that lead them to reach their endless potential.



Adult Learner Playbook

Unlocking Career Success for Special Populations



Actions

Schools, adult education providers, community-based organizations, and business and industry can increase pathways through career-connected learning to [Raise the Bar](#) for adult learners by taking steps to:

1. Understand and Disseminate Local Labor Market Needs.

It is important that those in the adult education space understand local labor needs, as well as collaborate with business and industry to determine which credentials and certification programs would be most beneficial for adult learners looking to increase their standing in the workforce.

Action Items for Business and Industry:

- *Signal labor needs.* How employers articulate the types of skills and occupations that they need is foundational to informing classroom instruction, work-based learning, and students' education and career plans. Business and industry can share labor market information (LMI) to inform educators and students, ensure instructional programs and resource allocation reflects the needs of employers, and support students to continue their education and enter the workforce. Available resources:
 - [Integrated Education and Training Design Toolkit](#)
 - [Promising Practices for Collaborating with Industry and Workforce Development Partners in Integrated Education and Training Programs](#)
 - [Adult Education and the Workforce Development System: Partnering to Improve Services](#)
 - [Expanding Boundaries: Taking a Regional Approach to IELCE/IET](#)
- *Support work-based learning for adult learners.* Employers are vital to providing students with the high-quality learning experiences that occur in the workplace. Work-based learning can include career exploration activities like job shadowing and more immersive experiences such as internships and cooperative education. Registered apprenticeship is the premier earn and learn model. Available resources:
 - [Promising Practices for Integrated Education and Training Pathways to Postsecondary Education](#)
 - [Promising Practices for Integrated Education and Training Programs That Serve Beginning-Level Learners](#)
 - [Supporting the Economic Integration of Adult Learners with Emerging Literacy Skills](#)
 - [The Role of Navigators in IELCE/IET Career Pathways](#)

2. Articulate Opportunities for Reengagement.

There are various pathways to support adult learners to continue their education with a focus on career-connected learning. Some of those pathways include:

- *Community College:* Community colleges offer two-year programs leading to the Associate of Arts or Associate of Science degree. These colleges also have technical and vocational



Adult Learner Playbook

Unlocking Career Success for Special Populations



programs with close links to secondary/high schools, community groups, and employers in the local community. Community colleges often lead the United States in educating students in cutting-edge fields such as biomedical technology, robotics, laser optics, and geographic information systems. The small size of classes at community colleges can be highly beneficial for international students as they adjust to the pace of U.S. academic life and practice their English-language skills.

- *Community College to Bachelor's Degree:* Undergraduate students studying at community colleges can earn academic credit towards a bachelor's degree. Earning academic credit at a community college, which is usually less expensive, can help lower the overall cost of a bachelor's degree. Community colleges and 4-year colleges and universities often develop special agreements for the transfer of credits and degrees between the institutions. In this "2+2 process," you can earn a bachelor's degree with two years of community college, followed by two years of university study.
- *Four-Year College:* Undergraduate education at a four-year institution is based on the concept of liberal arts and sciences. You can take classes in a wide variety of subjects in addition to your major field of study. The bachelor's degree is awarded after completing a specified number of courses in a major field of study. This can be completed in four years of full-time study or longer if going to school part-time.
- *Apprenticeship:* A registered apprenticeship is an industry-driven, high-quality career pathway where employers can develop and prepare their future workforce, and individuals can obtain paid work experience, classroom instruction, and a portable, nationally recognized credential.
- *Workforce development training:* Building the skills and competencies of American workers is essential to ensuring the competitiveness of business in the global economy. The public workforce development system recognizes that training for individuals must align with the needs of business and industry. There are several ways that the public workforce development system supports this need for training: pre-employment training, on-the-job training, and incumbent worker training.
- *Credential program:* Education programs that incorporate the opportunity to earn an industry-sought credential can give adults a leg up in the labor market. This is particularly important for those who choose not to pursue further learning immediately after high school or those who choose to work and learn simultaneously.

3. Strategically Utilize Funding Opportunities to Support Adult Learners.

There are multiple funding opportunities available to support adult learners at the Federal level:

- AEFLA supports programs that help adults get the basic skills they need including reading, writing, math, English language proficiency, and problem-solving to be productive workers, family members, and citizens. As title II of WIOA and one of six core programs authorized by WIOA, AEFLA also plays an integral role in the workforce development system by providing access to educational services for adult learners through the one-stop delivery system. While playing a critical role in adult attainment of a secondary school diploma, AEFLA also aims to assist in the transition to postsecondary education and training using career pathways.
- Upon submission of an approved Unified or Combined State Plan, [OCTAE](#) at the U. S. Department of Education provides grants to states to fund local programs of adult education and



Adult Learner Playbook

Unlocking Career Success for Special Populations



literacy services for eligible individuals. These services include adult education, literacy, English language acquisition, workplace literacy services, family literacy services, integrated education and training, and integrated English literacy and civics education programs.

- *The Free Application of Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)*: FAFSA is an application for Federal student aid and needs to be every adult learner's initial step in identifying Federal funding for educational programs. Individuals must complete the FAFSA form to apply for Federal student aid such as Federal grants, work-study funds, and loans. Completing and submitting the FAFSA form is free and easier than ever, and it gives you access to Federal student aid—the largest source of aid—to help you pay for college or career/trade school. In addition, many states and colleges use your FAFSA information to determine your eligibility for state and school aid. Some private aid providers may use your FAFSA information to determine whether you qualify for their aid.
- *Pell Grants*: Federal Pell Grants usually are awarded to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree. In some cases, a student enrolled in a postbaccalaureate teacher certification program might receive a Federal Pell Grant. Additionally, you may be eligible to receive a Federal Pell Grant if you are [confined or incarcerated and enrolled in an approved Prison Education Program](#). A Federal Pell Grant, unlike a loan, does not have to be repaid, except under certain circumstances.
- *Ability to Benefit (ATB)*: In December 2014, the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, was changed to allow a student who does not have a high school diploma or the [recognized equivalent of a high school diploma](#), or who did not complete a secondary school education in a homeschool setting, to be eligible for Title IV aid through one of the ATB alternatives if the student is enrolled in an “eligible career pathway program,” or ECPP. Students who are enrolled in an ECPP may be eligible to receive *Title IV* aid if the student meets one of the following ATB alternatives:
 - Passes an independently administered U.S. Department of Education approved [ATB test](#);
 - Completes at least six credit hours or 225 clock hours that are applicable toward a degree or certificate offered by the postsecondary institution: or
 - Completes a state process approved by the Secretary of Education.

On October 30, 2023, [final regulations](#) were published implementing this statutory change. These regulations amend the provisions of the state process alternative and provide regulatory requirements for ECPPs that are used for establishing student eligibility for *Title IV* funds and will be effective July 1, 2024.

4. Consider policies, processes, programs, and practices that increase access to and success in career-connected learning for adult learners.

There are a variety of programs that stakeholders can utilize to support adult learners in career-connected learning:

- OCTAE's Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) [funds digital literacy initiatives](#) to enable adult learners to succeed in a range of academic activities, including STEM and college



Adult Learner Playbook

Unlocking Career Success for Special Populations



and career readiness. These initiatives enhance the integration of technology into instruction, increase student access to technology and leverage learning outside the classroom.

- Employability Skills are general skills that are necessary for success in the labor market at all employment levels and in all sectors. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 includes employability skills as a key component of workplace preparation activities for education and training programs. The [Employability Skills Framework](#) describes a set of nine key skills, organized in three broad categories: Applied Knowledge, Effective Relationships, and Workplace Skills.
- The [Advancing Innovation in Adult Education](#) project highlights practices from across the country that improved outcomes for adult learners. The resources shared offer valuable insight for adult education professionals on the innovative practices showcased throughout the compendiums of innovative practices. Resources include:
 1. Compendium of Innovative Practices: Secondary Credentialing
 2. Compendium of Innovative Practices: Bridge & IET Programs
 3. Compendium of Innovative Practices: Holistic Approaches to Adult Education Services:



Adult Learner Playbook

Unlocking Career Success for Special Populations



Additional Resources

- The [Literacy Information and Communication System \(LINCS\)](#) project represents a commitment by the Department to support both States and local AEFLA funded providers in their continued implementation of WIOA and building successful adult education programs. LINCS is the main dissemination vehicle used by OCTAE (DAEL) to disseminate evidence-based resources and professional development materials intended to improve the quality of instruction for adult learners. LINCS demonstrates OCTAE's commitment to delivering high-quality, on-demand educational opportunities to practitioners of adult education, so those practitioners can help adult learners successfully transition to postsecondary education and 21st century jobs. LINCS consists of the following components:
 - [LINCS Resource Collection](#) a collection of vetted resources for adult education practitioners
 - [LINCS Community](#) an online community of practice
 - [LINCS Courses](#) online courses for adult education practitioners
 - [State Resources](#) professional development and technical assistance opportunities for States and information on current and past Federal initiatives.
 - [Learner Center](#) resources for adult learners

These components provide adult educators with the information, resources, professional development activities, and online network they need to enhance their practice and ensure their adult students receive high-quality learning opportunities.

- The [Advance Integrated Education and Training \(ADVANCE IET\)](#) project represents a commitment by the Department to assist State and local adult education staff plan, design, implement, and evaluate effective IET programs and service approaches that are responsive to State and local labor market demands.
- The [Integrated Education and Training in Corrections \(IETC\)](#) project represents a commitment by the Department to provide resources and technical assistance to assist State and local adult education staff plan, design, implement, and evaluate effective IET programs and service approaches in correctional facilities that are responsive to State and local labor market demands.
- The [Enhancing Access for Refugees and New Americans \(EARN\)](#) project represents a commitment by the Department to build the capacity of States, local programs, and classroom instructors to provide comprehensive immigrant integration services, centering around Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) and Integrated Education and Training (IET) programming - by providing technical assistance that supports the linguistic, civic, and economic integration of immigrant communities.

Legal Disclaimer

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