

Research, Theory, and Practice Within Academic Affairs

Innovative Approaches, Practices, and Strategies in Adult Education



Antione D. Tomlin

Innovative Approaches, Practices, and Strategies in Adult Education

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

The state of adult education is in a unique position. There are numerous adults who are fully aware that by obtaining an education it could provide them with better skills and better earning potential, but they are also aware that they may not be academically prepared to handle the rigor that is required to accomplish earning the college credits necessary for obtaining a degree or a certificate. Many adults yearn for a college degree, yet do not have the blueprint to be successful in this arena.

—Dr. Naesea S. Price, Professor of Developmental English and Reading

The state of adult education today is at a transformative crossroads, characterized by a heightened focus on accessibility, inclusivity, and technology-driven solutions. With the rise of online learning platforms and the integration of personalized learning paths, adult education has evolved to meet learners where they are, both geographically and in their learning journeys. There's an increasing emphasis on skills-based training and competency development that aligns with the rapidly changing job market, making education more relevant and applicable to real-world needs. However, challenges remain, particularly in bridging the digital divide and ensuring equitable access to quality education for all adults, regardless of their socioeconomic status or background. The future of adult education lies in its ability to adapt, innovate, and embrace a learner-centered approach that empowers individuals to achieve their personal and professional goals.

—Dr. Reginald Stroble, Director of Student Success

We as educators are adapting to meet the needs of our adult learners; we no longer build our schedules and platforms to fit our institutional history. Students and technology have forced even the most reticent institutions to rethink how we meet the needs of the populations we serve. Platforms that respond to the needs and expectations of the learners, remote synchronous, asynchronous, synchronous nights or weekends, and accelerated terms are readily available. We are allowing students to explore, use AI, and understand the implications, advantages, and pitfalls, which are all part of the evolution of education.

—Susan Delker-Grauel, Associate Professor and Department Chair of Academic Development

As the workplace continues to evolve and as more people embrace the benefits of lifelong learning as both a career and a wellness pursuit, it is critical to understand the unique needs of adults in the educational environment.

Now more than ever, we need instructional strategies and educational practices that address the unique needs of the adult learner. It is time to have a forum to share the exceptional work being done by colleagues who are embracing andragogical approaches and to create a call to action to support the needs of this growing population of learners.

—*Marcia Dawson*, Associate Professor of English

Research, Theory, and Practice Within Academic Affairs

Series Editors
Antione D. Tomlin and Sherella Cupid

The mission of the Research, Theory, and Practice Within Academic Affairs series seeks to explore current trends, practices, and challenges within academic affairs. This book series will include a plethora of topics with particular attention to the personal and live experiences of individuals who work in higher education academic affairs spaces in various colleges and universities. The intended audience is academic affairs administrators, leaders, educators, policymakers, researchers, and others interested in learning more about the experiences of academic affairs professionals.

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Innovative Approaches, Practices, and Strategies in Adult Education

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

Darian Senn-Carter

Higher education institutions are finding new, creative, and innovative ways to support adult learners. To capture some of the unique ways that practitioners are doing this, this book delves into the transformative practices and evolving challenges within higher education, focusing on strategies to enhance adult learner success and drive organizational change. Higher education institutions occupy a unique and indispensable role in today's educational landscape, particularly in their mission to serve diverse adult learners seeking to enhance their skills and pursue academic and career goals.

At the heart of this exploration is a commitment to addressing key challenges faced by educators, such as accurately assessing student readiness, supporting first-generation and adult learners, and adapting pedagogical approaches to meet diverse student needs. By examining these challenges through the lens of innovation and equity, this book aims to provide actionable insights and evidence-based strategies that educators can leverage to drive positive change.

Throughout the chapters, three overarching themes emerge

1. **Redefining Success Through Assessment:** We delve into the evolution of assessment practices, emphasizing the shift towards multiple measures assessments that consider holistic indicators of student potential beyond traditional standardized tests.
2. **Supporting Diverse Learners:** Highlighting the importance of inclusive practices, this book explores initiatives aimed at supporting first-generation, international, and adult learners, ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities.
3. **Promoting Flexibility and Innovation:** Recognizing the dynamic needs of adult learners, this book examines innovative pedagogical strategies, flexible learning formats, and institutional transformations that enhance educational access, engagement, and outcomes.

Guided by principles of equity, student-centeredness, and continuous improvement, we seek to inspire collaborative efforts to advance the adult learners' experience. By showcasing effective practices and evidence-based research, we aim to empower readers with practical tools and insights to foster a culture of innovation, inclusivity, and excellence in higher education. Ultimately, this book serves as a call to action to embrace innovation, cultivate equity, and prioritize student success. Through collective effort and shared commitment, we can continue to propel higher education forward, in shaping a more accessible, equitable, and prosperous future.

Theme 1: Redefining Success Through Multiple Measures Assessments

The first theme explores innovative approaches to assessing adult learners' readiness for college-level coursework. In this theme, the focus is on exploring how practitioners are redefining their approaches to student assessment. Traditional methods often relied heavily on standardized tests, which may not fully capture the potential and readiness of diverse adult learners. The theme examines the shift towards multiple measures assessments (MMAs), which consider a broader range of factors such as high school performance, noncognitive skills, and lived and learned experiences. By embracing MMAs, practitioners and higher education institutions aim to more accurately place students into appropriate courses and support their success in college-level coursework. This theme also explores the impact of MMAs on improving retention and graduation rates, and overall student outcomes. This evolution not only enhances placement accuracy but also promotes equitable access to higher education, while acknowledging and valuing the adult learner holistically.

Theme 2: Supporting Diverse Learners and Pedagogical Innovation

The second theme delves into pedagogical innovations aimed at empowering faculty and supporting diverse student populations. This theme highlights the imperative of supporting the diverse demographic of adult students within higher education. It explores innovative programs, support services, and policies designed to enhance equity and inclusivity in higher education. Key topics include mentorship programs for students, culturally responsive teaching practices, language support services for international students, and tailored academic advising for adult learners returning to education. The theme underscores the importance of creating an inclusive learning environment that addresses the unique needs and challenges faced by diverse student populations.

Theme 3: Flexibility and Adaptability in Higher Education

The third theme emphasizes flexibility as a cornerstone of success for adult learners. The theme of promoting flexibility and innovation centers on how community colleges are adapting their educational models and institutional practices to better serve learners and respond to evolving educational landscapes. This includes exploring flexible learning pathways such as online courses, hybrid formats, competency-based education, and credit for prior learning. Additionally, this theme delves into the role of technology in enhancing learning experiences, fostering digital literacy skills, and supporting personalized learning journeys. Institutional innovations such as the establishment of teaching excellence centers, collaborative learning spaces, and partnerships with industries are also examined to illustrate how community colleges are driving educational excellence and responsiveness.

Moreover, this book advocates for continuous innovation and adaptation within higher education to meet the evolving needs of learners. By embracing multiple measures assessments, enhancing pedagogical practices, and fostering flexibility, institutions can drive positive change and empower adult students from diverse backgrounds to achieve their academic and professional aspirations. This compilation of experiences and strategies provides a comprehensive exploration of the role of higher education in shaping the future of adult education. It is our hope that the insights and strategies shared here will inspire educators to collaborate in creating inclusive and transformative learning environments for adult learners.

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SECTION 1

REDEFINING SUCCESS THROUGH MULTIPLE
MEASURES ASSESSMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

ADULT LEARNER SUCCESS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES: IMPROVING OUTCOMES USING MULTIPLE MEASURES ASSESSMENTS

Johnathon E. Paape
University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, USA

ABSTRACT

Adult learners often choose community colleges as a place to begin their educational journey due to their low cost and relatively quick credential opportunities. However, many students face barriers to their education due to placement into noncredit remedial coursework that can add unnecessary time to a student's college career. Due to the often-lengthy nature of remedial courses, adult learners become delayed in getting to core college-level math and English courses, further delaying their graduation and increasing chances of attrition. Standardized placement tests have historically been used to determine placement of students into college-level courses; however, there is research that shows that these tests be inaccurate leading to misplacement. In response to these outcomes (as well as issues related to the pandemic), many researchers and state policymakers have pushed for the use of multiple measures assessments (MMAs) as an alternative to single-test placement policies. This chapter will examine adult-learners in context of the community

college, problems with single-test placement policies, how these policies affect adult learners, and the benefits of MMAs on future adult learner success.

Keywords: Adult learning; multiple measures assessment; remedial education; developmental education; community college; placement policies; standardized tests

INTRODUCTION

Since their inception, community colleges have been designed around educating more traditional-aged students rather than their adult counterparts. In fact, the first community colleges created were done so to act as extensions of high school as well as to offer an alternative pathway for non-university-bound students (Kisker et al., 2023; Thelin, 2011). Even today, many of the mechanisms, policies, and class structures provided by community colleges generally tend to focus on students entering as freshmen from high school. Bahr et al. (2021) discussed that adult learners "...often need or benefit from program structures and support systems than [sic] differ from those offered by colleges and oriented toward younger students" (p. 3). This discrepancy is unusual when you consider that adult learners (students age 25+) comprise just under one-third (31%) of all community college students (calculated by author using data from Jenkins & Fink, 2020 (updated Jan. 2024)). Hussar and Bailey (2017) predicted that students aged 25 and older would comprise around 9.7 million students by 2025. While this number is still lower than traditional student enrollment, it is predicted that students ages 25 to 34 and 35 years and older will increase 16 and 20%, respectively, between 2014 and 2025 (Hussar and Bailey, 2017). With decreased enrollments due to the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with expected decreases in first-time, traditional students due to low high school graduation rates and declining birth rates, this increase means that it is crucial for community colleges to adapt quickly to serve the adult population.

An issue, though, is that due to the dominant structure of higher education, many adult learners encounter barriers to their education at all levels of their college career. One such barrier is that adult learners often enter college assessed as being academically underprepared for college-level coursework. Colleges have typically relied on standardized tests (e.g. ACT, SAT, Accuplacer) to determine student readiness for college-level math and English courses; however, there is evidence that not only are these tests potentially inaccurate, but they also have a high rate of misplacement. This means that many adult learners that are placed into remedial coursework are done so despite the high likelihood they could pass college-level coursework. Even more troubling is the fact that adult learners are often highly represented in remedial courses (Bailey et al., 2015; National Center

for Education; Scott-Clayton et al., 2014; Statistics, 2023). This is especially true for women and underrepresented racial minorities (Bahr, 2010; Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Scott-Clayton et al., 2014). To combat this, many researchers, state legislatures, and state boards of higher education have begun to push for changes in policy that would eliminate college reliant use of the tests as the only factors for placement. The fruits of these labors have proliferated throughout community colleges in the form of Multiple Measures Assessments (MMAs) (Rutschow et al., 2019). Generally speaking, MMAs are the use of multiple factors to determine student readiness for college-level coursework. MMAs can take many forms, but the most common three are decision rule, decision band, and algorithmic models (Bickerstaff et al., 2021). Decision rule models use multiple options to determine placement, passing any one of which can be used to allow students into college-level coursework (Bickerstaff et al., 2021). Decision band models have specified score ranges that are used. When students exceed the scores in a range, they are placed into college-level coursework. Those who fall below the range are placed into remedial work, with those scoring within the range moving to evaluation on different factors (Bickerstaff et al., 2021). Last, algorithmic models evaluate students based on historical data to examine all factors at the same time. The result of this is an algorithm that (...combines and weights incoming students' values on selected measures to establish a placement score for each student" (Bickerstaff et al., 2021, p. 2). Though each model has its value for different institutional situations, the most common model-type is algorithmic due to its ability to be easily adjusted using continuously updated historical data. However, all of these models can contribute to reducing student remediation, especially for more vulnerable populations that are found to be placed into remediation at higher rates such as adult learners and students of color.

ADULT LEARNERS AND REMEDIAL EDUCATION

Students that enter college and are deemed “underprepared” for college-level coursework are often referred to remedial education as a remedy. For many years, this status was determined by how well students did on high-stakes placement exams. An issue, though, is that many students, especially adult learners who have never been to college or are returning after a long hiatus, may not understand the importance of these tests or lack preparation time (Bailey et al., 2015; Fay et al., 2013). As a result, adult learners and other nontraditional students, as well as underrepresented students of color, are often greatly overrepresented in college remedial coursework (Bahr, 2010; Bailey et al., 2015; National Center for Education; Paape, 2022; Scott-Clayton et al., 2014; Statistics, 2023). With low completion rates

among adult students in the courses, this affects not only student retention but also completion.

According to the [National Center for Education Statistics \(2022\)](#), since 2003, 31.4% of students that attended college have taken at least one remedial course. For community colleges specifically, the share of remedial students rises to 38.2%. Overall, for adult students, approximately 73% (33.6% for 24–29; 35.4% for 30+) have taken at least one remedial course. Similar disparities exist between race/ethnicity populations when compared to White students.

Before efforts were made to begin restructuring how we actually place students into remedial courses, many colleges and researchers were focused on restructuring the courses themselves. A popular method that came from these efforts was to make the switch away from lengthy pre-requisite sequences and replace them with a co-requisite model that allowed students to take remedial work and the corresponding college-level course together ([Scott-Clayton, 2018](#); [Zhao et al., 2022](#)). This is a great position for colleges to adopt considering that [Bailey et al. \(2008\)](#) found that “...only one third to two fifths of students referred to developmental education actually complete their entire developmental sequence” (p. 2) and that “...about two thirds of students who fail to complete the sequence to which they were referred do so even while having passed all of the developmental courses in which they enrolled” (p. 3). Co-requisite models have shortened this time in an effort to reduce unnecessary sequences and get students through the corresponding college course faster, thus increasing their chances of both attempting the course and, hopefully, passing it ([Bailey et al., 2015](#)). This shift, in tandem with the implementation of MMAs, greatly assists students who still happen to need remedial coursework by reducing the time it takes to get through remedial courses, thus potentially shortening time to graduation.

Though a great number of students are referred to remedial courses each year, more are referred to math than are to English. Research conducted by [Bailey et al. \(2008\)](#) showed that 59% and 33% of students were referred to math and English, respectively. More recently, in an examination of Florida’s developmental policies changes, [Zhao et al. \(2022\)](#) found that after policy implementation, 18.34% of students still needed remedial English compared to 30.34% of students who needed remedial math. This is important to note as math is commonly considered a “gatekeeper” course in colleges, often preventing many students from continuing in their educational journeys.

In terms of overall numbers, more recently, a report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCESs) found that approximately 40% of all students attending two-year, public institutions took at least one remedial course ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2023](#)). The same

report also showed that underrepresented students of color as well as adult learners are significantly impacted by this. Black (50%), Hispanic or Latino (45%), Asian (41%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (44%) were all found to take remedial courses at higher rates than White (35%) students ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2023](#)).

PROBLEMS WITH REMEDIAL PLACEMENT METHODS

Retention and graduation issues are a main concern within community colleges. As of the 2019 cohort, the average graduation rate for community colleges was 35.5% ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b](#)). Many of the woes community colleges face in this area are self-inflicted; that is, some of the reasons for retention issues stem from the high number of students the colleges place into remedial coursework who then go on to not complete that sequence's college-level course, let alone a degree. Colleges have traditionally relied on high-stakes standardized placement tests as the primary determinant of whether a student will be able to enroll in college-level math and English courses. As noted by [Counterman and Zientek \(2022\)](#), "Placement tests are considered high-stake assessments because scores can alter students' paths to college completion" (p. 1). These can take the form of prepackaged tests or tests created and assessed by college faculty for the use of placement. Because many adult learners have large gaps between high school (or GED) completion and beginning college, it is often believed that they would not be successful in college-level courses due to skills degradation. However, many of these conclusions are based on historical reliance on a single score from these placement tests which don't measure these students in a more holistic manner.

Of course, for adult learners who may not have taken any math or English course in a number of years, these tests present certain issues related to how students perceive/prepare for them. Many times, adult learners don't understand that these tests will be used to place them into coursework. As a result, they may not prepare as well as they could. Other main concerns, as discussed by [Bailey et al. \(2015\)](#), include:

First, most incoming students are unaware of the purpose and consequences of the placement tests...Second, placement test content is often poorly aligned with academic standards and expectations of college-level coursework. Third, and perhaps most important, the skills that can be tested on a short multiple-choice test represent only a small subset of those needed to be successful in college. (p. 127)

Other major concerns of these exams range from their overall predictive accuracy to the sheer number of students erroneously misplaced by them

(Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Paape, 2022; Scott-Clayton, 2012; Scott-Clayton et al., 2014). Through their own research, College Board reports extremely low correlations between the Accuplacer exam and math and English outcomes (Mattern & Packman, 2009). Scott-Clayton (2012) found that the sole use of placement exams led to severe misplacement of students into remedial math and English. Research has also found that, when considering other factors such as HS GPA, any predictive power from placement tests is often reduced to nonsignificant levels (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Paape, 2022; Scott-Clayton et al., 2012)

Effects on Underserved Populations

As mentioned, adults are often disproportionately represented in remedial coursework. This is especially true for students of color who often are placed into and successfully complete these courses at far lower rates than White students (Bahr, 2010; Chen & Simone, 2016; Scott-Clayton et al., 2014). Bahr (2010) found that White students enrolled in remedial courses were more likely to complete them than Black or Hispanic students (3.1 and 1.6 times, respectively). Similarly, Chen and Simone (2016) found that among students examined that began at two-year institutions, 78.3% of Black students and 74.9% of Hispanic students took remedial courses in any field compared to 63.6% of White students. The same study also found that Black and Hispanic students tend to take a higher average number of remedial courses, with Black and Hispanic students found to take 4.0 and 3.5 courses, respectively, compared to 2.4 courses taken by White students (Chen & Simone, 2016). However, it is important to note that “...race itself is not a *cause* of the disparities; rather, it is the many correlated facets of inequality that lead to lower preparation and achievement among historically disadvantaged racial groups” (Bahr, 2010, p. 212).

USING MMAS TO IMPROVE ADULT LEARNER SUCCESS

In simple terms, MMAs are the use of multiple factors to assess a student’s potential to pass college-level courses. They have emerged as a viable replacement for test-only policies, showing promising results on student outcomes in both course and degree completion. While institutions seemed to lag in adapting these models to replace test-only policies, they were given special attention during the COVID-19 pandemic due to many testing sites closing. As a result, colleges were forced to find alternative placement methods to accommodate students who wished to attend school during the pandemic. These models can include variables that allow for a more complete picture