



# *Supporting Adult Learners Beyond Enrollment*

*Transformative Advising Practices at Eight Historically Black  
Community Colleges and Predominantly Black Community Colleges*

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*the*  
**GREAT  
EIGHT**

## ***The Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education (CIPE), University of South Alabama***

CIPE serves community colleges, universities, postsecondary partners, employers, and community partners to improve graduation rates and workforce outcomes for first-generation, under-represented, and under-resourced students. CIPE unifies the work of its partner communities to provide maximum benefit for participating institutions and the students they serve. CIPE assists higher education institutions in becoming more student-centered and equity-focused. CIPE catalyzes change among postsecondary institutions in digital teaching and learning, student advising, developmental education, student pathways, and capacity building, among other topics. Focusing on these objectives improves student outcomes and eliminates disparities, particularly among Black, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous students and students from low-income backgrounds.

Since 2015, Dr. Thompson and her team have honed their skill in creating partner communities, building consensus to articulate a shared learning agenda, and skillfully building relationships with site-facing supports and support providers. CIPE's purposeful and uniquely accomplished team is staffed by experts with the skill, knowledge, and ability to perform precisely at both the macro and micro levels. They develop unique operational service delivery frameworks for guidance, planning, strategy, and resources for partners to deploy in change management. CIPE's service deliverable supports constructs of holistic student success initiatives to serve students effectively and efficiently. The team's technical assistance enables partner institutions to build capacity by better understanding the practice of data utilization for decision-making and deploying efficiency in all-encompassing student success support.

**Dr. Kathy Thompson** is the Founding Director of the Center for Innovative in Postsecondary Education. She has over 30 years of experience in postsecondary administration, teaching, and workforce and economic development. Dr. Thompson currently serves as the Technical Assistance provider for the Lumina Foundation, Black Adult Learners Initiatives cohort of five HBCUs in North Carolina. Prior, Dr. Thompson served six years as the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Intermediary for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Frontier Set. She is motivated to eliminate equity disparities in education, particularly for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students and students from low-income backgrounds.

**Dr. Lisa Dunning**, Kaizen Education Group, has a deep-rooted passion for higher education. She served three years as a consultant on the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Intermediary Team for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Frontier Set. Dr. Dunning currently lends her expertise through technical assistance and strategic guidance to the Lumina Foundation's Adult Learner Initiative and Educause's CourseGateway Digital Learning Strategy. A significant chapter of her career includes her leadership role as the Associate Vice President for Student Success at a distinguished HBCU. Dr. Dunning's visionary thinking was instrumental in developing and implementing a newly designed academic advising framework, the cornerstone of student support systems.

**Carlisha Hartzog** is the Storytelling Team Project Manager, overseeing the project's design, management schedule, and outreach. She is the president and managing member of Hartzog Consulting, a full-service project and event management firm that integrates logistics management and communications support to support some of the world's most respected foundations, Fortune 500 corporations, and multinational enterprises. Her experience supporting higher education organizations includes engagement with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities (APLU), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) nationally, and public and private colleges and universities. She has more than ten years of experience managing initiatives that embrace diverse populations to create equitable access to resources and opportunities.

**Candace Spencer** is a communication specialist with more than a decade of experience in higher education marketing and strategy development. Throughout her career, she has

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**Lisa Becker** is a technical writer/editor with 28 years of experience contributing to projects and workgroups, including as Contributing Writer and Managing Editor of the Storytelling Team. She served as the communications arm of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's HBCU Intermediary Team from 2018 to 2022. She is currently contracted with the NASA Shared Services Center to work with NASA senior executives in drafting career history/achievement papers and Presidential Rank Nominations for executive career advancement and recognition.

**Issifu Appiah** is a student in the Master of Public Administration program at the University of South Alabama. Issifu earned a Bachelor's in Education from the University of Cape Coast, Ghana, West Africa. Issifu is a Graduate Assistant at the Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education (CIPE). Issifu has a passion for learning, participating in community service, and having a positive impact.

In collaboration with the ECMC Foundation, the Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education (CIPE) and Alabama Possible are delighted to share the first of a series of case studies. The focus is on the eight Historically Black Community Colleges (HBCC) and Predominantly Black Community Colleges (PBCC) in Alabama, collectively known as the "Great Eight." The eight HBCCs/PBCCs are Bishop State, Chattahoochee Valley, Gadsden State, George C Wallace, H. Councill Trenholm, J F Drake, Lawson State, and Shelton State. Over the next three years, Alabama Possible will consult with the CIPE Team to create case studies highlighting the successful initiatives of various institutions in promoting student success. These studies will cover a range of topics, including Academic Advising and Workforce Development, as well as the academic experience, campus climate, leadership and culture, data utilization, and technology. The CIPE Team's Storytellers conclude the project by developing a Storytelling Playbook that outlines these institutions' unique student success practices.

## Introduction

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Creating a better future is a collective effort that extends beyond individuals. This includes investing in community-building initiatives such as an education pathway to a college degree. Alabama's Great Eight community colleges understand this, empowering adult learners with skills and credentials and playing a crucial role in revitalizing local economies. These institutions are not just educational hubs but also economic engines, driving growth in their communities.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2024), enrollment of students over age 25 grew by 23% from 2000 to 2019. Community colleges across the United States were a major factor driving that growth. This trend highlights their vital role in upskilling the workforce and providing pathways for career advancement and personal development (McGill, 2020). Adult learners, often defined as individuals 24 or older, return to education for various reasons and bring unique experiences and needs to the classroom. These needs include balancing work, family, and other commitments, financial constraints, and the need for flexible learning options (Kasworm, 2018).<sup>1</sup>

Adult learners often have to balance work, family, and other obligations; they require specialized support to successfully navigate their academic journey (Rhijn, 2023). Further, achieving workforce goals relies on broadening access and supporting adult learner persistence through flexible delivery models and tailored services (Sogunro, 2014).

Since their inception, Historically Black Community Colleges, and Predominantly Black Community Colleges (HBCCs/PBCCs) have been a cornerstone for educational access and advancement for diverse learners, focusing on empowering black and African American students. With their mission-driven focus on workforce development and community impact, HBCCs/PBCCs are uniquely positioned to meet the needs of adult learners, who often seek educational pathways aligned with career advancement and serving their communities.

By examining advising models employed within Alabama's Great Eight Community Colleges, this analysis will highlight best practices that promote adult learner success within the HBCCs/PBCCs context. Best practices include personalized advising, where each student is assigned a dedicated advisor who guides them throughout their academic journey; flexible course scheduling, which allows students to balance their academic and personal commitments; and targeted adult learner support services. This case study reveals strategies that ensure all learners, regardless of age or background, are considered and valued and have the support and flexibility they need to achieve their educational goals. It is a testament to the pivotal role of advising practices and their impact on adult learner success within Alabama's Great Eight Community Colleges.

### ***Case Study Method***

The research was designed to be inclusive, with data collection methods including semi-structured interviews, analysis of college websites, and supplemental research on adult learner advising. Interviews were conducted with student success leaders at each participating college, including department heads and administrators overseeing academic advising and student success initiatives. Interview questions were carefully crafted to explore the institution's advising structure, flexibility measures for adult learners, data utilization strategies, and perceptions of challenges and successes.

<sup>1</sup> See endnote 1 for a definition of adult learners used in this case study.

## Institutional Profiles

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### ***Bishop State Community College***

- Bishop State Community College has a total fall enrollment of 3,568 students, with a significant representation of 58% Black or African American students and a sizable adult learner population of 35%.
- Their college is in the process of shifting from a faculty-only advising model to a staff and professional advising approach, demonstrating flexibility for adult learners' needs and providing a holistic advising approach.
- Key initiatives for adult learners include flexible scheduling options and targeted support services.
- Bishop State is taking proactive steps to address the needs of adult learners and support student success, such as offering extended hours during peak registration times.
- Bishop State Administers stop-out and non-matriculation surveys to understand students' challenges and adjusts support services, accordingly, showing a commitment to meeting their needs.



### ***Chattahoochee Valley Community College***

- Chattahoochee Valley Community College enrolls 1,641 students, with Black or African American students comprising 46% of the student body.
- Approximately one-third (33%) of the student population are adult learners.
- Chattahoochee utilizes a tiered advising model, demonstrating a multi-faceted approach designed for student support and retention among adult learners.
- Their advising support ranges from extended hours and offering virtual appointments to accommodating adult students who require assistance beyond traditional operating hours.
- Student success data and technology are key components of Chattahoochee's advising practices to boost support for students.



### ***Gadsden State Community College***

- Gadsden State Community College, one of the largest institutions under analysis, boasts a diverse student body of 4,352.
- The percentage of Black or African American students (18%) may be lower than in some other colleges, but the institution's commitment to inclusivity is evident in its significant adult learner population (33%).
- After a period of implementing a faculty-based advising model, Gadsden State is now transitioning back to a centralized structure.
- The college offers adult learners a hybrid advising model, with centralized advising for early support and faculty advisors for program-specific guidance, further emphasizing its dedication to tailored support.



**George C.  
Wallace State  
Community  
College-Selma**

- George C. Wallace State-Selma, with a student enrollment of 1,860, stands out for its notably high proportion of Black or African American students (72%).
- The 21% adult learner population aligns with the overall trends observed in other Alabama Great Eight community colleges.
- Its commitment to individual student success sets George C. Wallace apart, demonstrated through its tiered advising model.
- This model provides adult learners with expertise in different program areas, ensuring tailored support throughout their academic journey.
- Wallace State prioritizes a student coaching program that focuses on supporting persistence, retention, and graduation.
- It involves proactive engagement with students, monitoring their grades, and utilizing dropout detection software to identify and address issues early on.



**Trenholm State  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

**H. Council  
Trenholm  
State  
Community  
College**

- H. Council Trenholm State Community College enrolls 1,984 students, with a significant Black or African American student population (73%) and a noteworthy percentage of adult learners (32%).
- The college primarily operates on a faculty program advisor model, with some support assistance from student services staff during peak advising periods.
- Trenholm is planning to implement a new platform designed to provide designated advising caseloads for faculty members.
- This shift suggests a commitment to structured advising support, a change that could significantly enhance the experience of adult learners.



**J.F. Drake  
State  
Community  
and Technical  
College**

- J.F. Drake State Community and Technical College has a student body of 976, with a 60% Black or African American student population and a large adult learner representation (47%), taking a unique approach.
- Drake State employs academic completion specialists during the first semester, providing specialized support to ease students' acclimation to college. This structure then seamlessly transitions to faculty advisors for subsequent semesters.
- This two-tier model offers specialized support for adult learners as they navigate both the initial adjustment to college and their specific degree program requirements.



### ***Lawson State Community College***

- Lawson State Community College plays a significant role in Alabama's community college sector. With a student enrollment of 3,153 and a highly diverse student body (81% Black or African American), it serves a sizable adult learner population (34%).
- Lawson has a robust suite of strategies to support adult learners.
- The college's approach involves a centralized advising center model. Students meet with Student Services Advisors during their first semester, followed by a transition to faculty advisors as they matriculate beyond their initial enrollment at the college.
- What sets Lawson State apart is that its faculty also work in the advising center and receive cross-training.
- This unique structure promotes a broader understanding of student needs and offers more flexibility for adult learners.
- Access to support services beyond daytime hours accommodates those with work or family commitments during traditional operating hours. This approach includes virtual advising sessions and personalized guidance.
- Their e-advising form streamlines the process for adult learners to get the information they need about their program advisor and relevant resources. By completing an electronic form, students can receive tailored support based on their majors and individual schedules.



### ***Shelton State Community College***

- Shelton State Community College, with the second largest enrollment (4,166) among the institutions analyzed, plays a key role in serving adult learners.
- While the percentage of Black or African American students (38%) is lower compared to some colleges, Shelton State still serves a significant adult learner population (30%).
- The college's tiered advising system, with professional advisors as primary contacts and technical instructors as secondary advisors, ensures that adult learners have access to both general academic support and program-specific guidance.
- Shelton State's proactive approach to advising is comprehensive and student-centered.
- Their model emphasizes the importance of strengthening relationships, demonstrating effective communication, and utilizing data to support adult learner success.

## Positive Trends Supporting Adult Learners

The institutional profiles reveal positive trends that suggest a commitment to academic advising and support mechanisms for adult learners within Alabama's Great Eight community colleges. The interviews with student success and advising administrators shed light on innovative practices already in place to empower adult learners.



**All eight colleges enroll a notable percentage of adult learners**, indicating an awareness of this student demographic and the need to tailor advising and support services to meet their unique needs.



**The diverse range of advising models employed**, including centralized, tiered, and faculty-based approaches, suggests that colleges are actively exploring ways to serve their adult learner populations best.

Their journey is one of commitment and dedication, coupled with the discovery of centralized, tiered, and faculty-based advising models. It positions these colleges for broader implementation and scaling of their best practices throughout the state system.



## Advising Best Practices

### Key Findings #1

#### *Tiered Advising Models*

- A significant finding within the Alabama Great Eight community colleges is the prevalence of tiered advising models. This approach, evident in institutions like Chattahoochee Valley, Wallace Community College Selma, J.F. Drake State, and Shelton State, provides adult learners with a multi-faceted support system. As one advising administrator at J.F. Drake State expressed, **“The tiered model allows us to provide initial support that gets adult learners acclimated to the college environment, then connect them with advisors who have deep knowledge of their specific program requirements”** (J.F. Drake advising administrator, personal communication, February 2024).



### Key Findings #2

#### *Career-Oriented Decisions and Guidance*

- Subsequent advising by faculty or technical instructors ensures that adult learners receive the program-specific guidance crucial for making career-focused decisions and navigating the complexities of their chosen field. An advising administrator from Shelton State elaborated on this, stating, **“Our faculty advisors can speak**



**directly to the skills and knowledge employers are looking for, helping adult learners tailor their coursework to their career goals.”** (Shelton State advising administrator personal communication, February 2024).

- The emphasis on career-focused guidance aligns with broader research in higher education. McGill, Ali, & Barton’s (2020) research emphasizes the importance of advisors possessing the skills and competencies to personalize advising interactions and support learners in aligning their academic choices with their career goals. This type of individualized guidance is essential for adult learners navigating career changes or seeking to advance within their professional fields.
- As a testament to the effectiveness of this approach, a Wallace Community College advisor administrator commented, **“Adult learners frequently return to education with specific career aspirations. With their field-specific expertise, faculty advisors are uniquely positioned to offer invaluable guidance on coursework that aligns with these goals”** (Wallace advising administrator, personal communication, February 2024).
- It is important to acknowledge that this model must account for time constraints and challenges. Ensuring faculty have the capacity, such as adequate time and frequent advising training, is critical for success.
- As one advising administrator at Trenholm State aptly put it, **“The potential for faculty advising to be more responsive to student needs is indeed exciting. However, we must also ensure that faculty are equipped with the necessary time and resources to provide comprehensive advising alongside their teaching duties”** (Trenholm State advising administrator, personal communication, February 2024).

### Key Findings #3

#### ***Accessibility and Flexibility for Adult Learners***

- A focus on flexibility is apparent within the Alabama Great Eight community colleges. Institutions like Bishop State, Chattahoochee Valley, and Shelton State offer extended advising hours, recognizing the time constraints many students face balancing their education with work and family commitments. These extended hours, a convenience and a lifeline for adult learners, are designed to support them in their educational journey, making it easier to plan their needs around a traditional schedule. Like Wallace Community College, walk-in advising policies offer additional flexibility and accessibility.
- An advising administrator at Bishop State emphasized this, noting, **“We know that adult learners often cannot plan their needs around a traditional schedule. Extended hours and walk-in appointments allow us to be responsive to them.”** These measures align with research emphasizing the importance of removing logistical barriers to support adult learner success (Hsu & Hamilton, 2008).



The Alabama Great Eight community colleges’ advising practices, which are both data-informed and proactive, have been remarkably successful.

***The widespread use of early alert systems, such as Dropout Detective, clearly indicates their commitment to identifying and supporting at-risk students. Advisors do not wait for issues to escalate; they proactively utilize data from these systems to initiate timely interventions.***

*These interventions, which can range from arranging tutoring sessions to connecting students with academic resources, have proven effective. This proactive approach is designed to reassure adult learners about their academic journey.*

While the Alabama Great Eight community colleges have achieved notable successes in their advising models, there are opportunities for further development to optimize support for adult learners. Some colleges express a need for more comprehensive training on advising models tailored to adult learners, enabling them to cater to the unique needs of this population. Moreover, while institutions are committed to flexibility and data-informed interventions, integrating advanced data analytics tools could significantly enhance the advising process. These tools would provide deeper insights into adult learners' specific challenges in different programs, leading to more targeted support strategies. By focusing on these areas, the Alabama Great Eight community colleges demonstrate their dedication to continuous improvement and their position as leaders in providing transformative advising experiences for adult students.

#### Key Findings #4

##### *Data-Driven Advising*

- A data-informed approach is evident within the Alabama Great Eight community colleges' advising practices. Advisors proactively utilize data from these systems to initiate timely interventions.
- As an advising administrator at Lawson State explained, **“Early alerts give us a heads-up when a student is struggling. We can reach out immediately, hopefully preventing small issues from snowballing”** (Lawson State advising administrator, personal communication, February 2024). While the focus is on using data for immediate action, this approach aligns with research on data-driven advising for adult learners, which emphasizes the importance of proactive support tailored to individual needs (Wong et al., 2022).



## Challenges and Opportunities

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Alongside the successes observed within the Alabama Great Eight community colleges' advising models, there is room for further development and refinement to optimize their support for adult learners. Some advising and student success administrators express a desire for more robust training on advising models specifically designed for adult learning to ensure that they can tailor their interactions to this population's unique needs.

Further, while institutions demonstrate a commitment to flexibility and data-informed interventions, advisors could benefit from enhanced data analytics tools. These tools would allow for deeper insights into the specific challenges faced by adult learners within different programs, leading to more targeted support strategies. By addressing these areas, the Alabama Great Eight community colleges can further strengthen their position as leaders in providing transformative educational experiences for adult students.

## Recommendations

The data collected in this case study underscores the essential role of advising in promoting adult learner success within Alabama's Great Eight community colleges. As key stakeholders, each college demonstrates a strong foundation for supporting adult learners. Their dedication to serving diverse populations, offering flexible advising models, and utilizing data-driven tools has established a solid foundation for this support.

To maximize their positive impact, the following two recommendations aim to further refine their already successful approaches, ensuring transformative experiences for all adult learners:

<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<p><b><i>Integrate help-seeking into program orientation:</i></b></p> <p>This proactive, front-loaded approach aligns with the need for adult learners to quickly adapt to the college environment.</p> <p>Normalizing asking for help could benefit adult learners and contribute to a more supportive and inclusive college culture.</p>	<p><b><i>Foster collaboration with faculty:</i></b></p> <p>Faculty members play a pivotal role in shaping student mindsets. By partnering with them, colleges can foster a culture of support that extends beyond the advisor-student relationship.</p> <p>This collaboration can lead to a more comprehensive approach to student support, reinforcing the importance of help-seeking throughout a student's entire degree program.</p>
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### Recommendation #1

#### ***Integrate help-seeking into program orientation***

Integrating elements of help-seeking into program orientation offers a powerful opportunity for college leaders within the Alabama Great Eight system to enhance the experience of adult learners. As emphasized by Lettman (2017), these students often arrive with unique challenges and anxieties stemming from the complexities of navigating higher education alongside their existing life commitments.

By proactively addressing these potential obstacles within orientation, colleges empower adult learners to seek the support they need.

For example, leaders can include a session and supporting guidebook on 'Navigating Academic Resources' where students are introduced to the various support services available on campus. This could be followed by a 'Student Success Panel' where current students share their experiences and strategies for seeking help. Leaders can champion the destigmatization of asking for help, emphasizing advising, tutoring, and counseling as tools for maximizing student success.

Further, it is crucial to connect help-seeking skills with the goals of affordability, accessibility, and acceleration (Lettman, 2017). Providing clear examples of how a proactive approach can lead to more efficient degree pathways strengthens student buy-in.

College leaders can foster an inclusive and safe learning environment by dedicating a portion of orientation to addressing potential anxieties experienced by adult learners. Integrating these strategies transforms orientation into a powerful tool that fosters independence, reduces anxieties, and empowers adult learners from the outset, ultimately contributing to overall institutional success in serving this crucial student population.

## Recommendation #2

### *Partner with Faculty*

The research underscores the importance of collaboration across campus for optimal student success (Giroir & Schwehm, 2020). To achieve this, college leaders must champion a model where faculty play a proactive role in student support systems. This involves establishing structured communication channels between faculty and advisors and facilitating ongoing dialogue about student needs. **Faculty can be empowered to connect students directly with advising, counseling, and other resources, both addressing challenges and proactively promoting a help-seeking mindset, which refers to a student's willingness and ability to seek assistance when needed.** Additionally, leaders should encourage faculty integration of support references and resources within course materials. These collaborative strategies improve student success metrics like retention and foster a stronger sense of community on campus, creating a culture where seeking support is recognized as a vital part of the learning process.

Data analysis reveals a clear correlation between collaboration and student retention rates. Institutions with the most collaboration between faculty and advisors saw significant gains in retention rates between 2012-13 and 2017-18. Specifically, two-year institutions experienced a 6.1% increase. (Giroir, & Schwehm, 2014). These findings underscore the potential of faculty-centric collaborative practices in creating a more supportive learning environment for adult learners, ultimately enhancing their success, and benefiting institutional retention goals.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

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This case study of the Alabama Great Eight community colleges underscores the importance of intentional and adaptable advising practices. It not only illuminates the vital role of advising in supporting adult learner success within the HBCC/PBCC context but also shares inspiring success stories. With their commitment to serving a significant adult learner population, these colleges demonstrate a promising foundation for providing educational opportunities that align with career advancement and community impact.

### *Key Takeaways*

- 1** The various advising models employed, including tiered structures and faculty-based advising, highlight a willingness to explore innovative approaches.
- 2** The focus on flexibility, seen in extended hours and walk-in policies, also acknowledges the unique needs of adult learners who often juggle work, family, and other commitments.
- 3** The widespread use of early alert systems demonstrates a commitment to data-driven advising. While this currently focuses on immediate intervention, there is substantial potential to expand this approach towards more proactive, tailored strategies specifically designed for adult learners. Investing in targeted training for advisors and enhancing data analytics tools could further optimize support.
- 4** These strategies not only empower advisors to identify challenges, anticipate needs, and provide personalized guidance but also pave the way for continuous improvement, benefiting adult learners seeking to achieve their career goals.

By continuing to explore, evaluate, and refine their advising models, Alabama's Great Eight community colleges and other HBCCs/PBCCs can remain at the forefront of providing transformative advising experiences.

## Endnotes

1. For this study, an adult learner is defined as an individual 24 years or older who is enrolled in a degree or certificate program at a community college.
2. U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. (2024, March). College Navigator. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/>
3. A tiered advising model provides students with multiple levels of support throughout their academic journey. Typically, this includes centralized advising for initial onboarding and general academic guidance, often provided by professional advisors. Students are then transitioned to faculty advisors or program specialists who possess in-depth knowledge of specific program requirements and career pathways within their field.
4. Stephanie Giroir and Jillian Schwehm, "Implementing Intrusive Advising," in Driving Toward a Degree: Collaboration is Crucial to Holistic Student Supports [Research Brief] (Washington, D.C.: NASPA Advising Success Network, May, 2020), accessed March, 2024.

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