



Vignette

Promising Progress

Empowering Adult Learners with Lumina Foundation's Prioritizing Adult Community College Enrollment Initiative (PACCE)

April 2024

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FULTON-MONTGOMERY

Small *and* Mighty: Fulton-Montgomery Adult Learner Success

In partnership with [Lumina Foundation](#) and Achieving the Dream (ATD), Equal Measure is the learning and evaluation partner for the Prioritizing Adult Community College Enrollment (PACCE) Initiative. Twenty colleges were awarded grants and technical assistance for the initiative from October 2021 through May 2023. The [PACCE](#) initiative was designed to identify and scale promising strategies for increasing the enrollment and reenrollment of adult learners in high-quality credit and non-credit programs. **This vignette delves into some of Fulton-Montgomery's (FM) strategies for adult learners.** FM is a State University of New York (SUNY) Community College.

"The vast majority of [adult learners] have no upper-level education or training whatsoever. Right out of high school, they went right into the closest job they could find. So, we're a perfect ground zero for developing this type of program." FM Staff

FM Adult Learner Context and Strategies

In 2023, Equal Measure visited FM to learn about their context, approach and early implementation of promising adult learner strategies. Some of the actionable insights we learned include:

- **Adult Learners at FM.** FM understands its community and the adult learners that it serves. It builds relationships with regional employers to ensure it is creating successful career pathways for adult learners.
- **The Collaborative Career Learning Program (COCAL).** FM creates individualized career pathways and [short-term credentialing](#), allowing adult learners to tailor their coursework to align with regional internships and employment opportunities.
- **FM's Institutional Culture.** FM has the benefit of a small, tight-knit college community. Possibilities blossom when staff, faculty, and leadership take an all-hands-on-deck approach toward improving learner experience and outcomes.

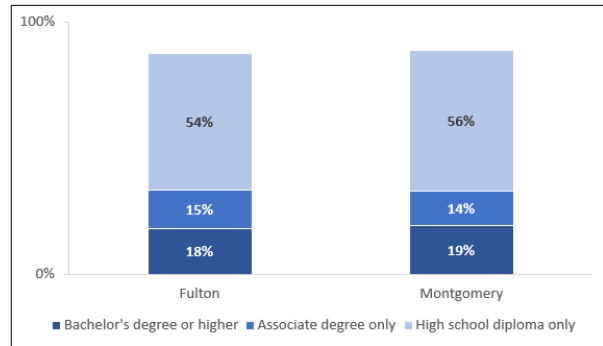
- **Mindset and Practice Change.** Strong programs intended to improve adult learner outcomes benefit from mindset and practice change. Greater change is possible when practitioners are conscious about learner challenges and differences.

Snapshot: Fulton-Montgomery

Nestled in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains, Fulton-Montgomery (FM) serves a largely rural community in upstate New York. FM is a State University of New York (SUNY) Community College with approximately 800 full-time and 1200 part-time students.

According to the 2020 census, 88% of Fulton and Montgomery County residents are white, 89% of adult residents have earned a high school diploma, and 19% hold a bachelor’s degree or higher.

The cost of living in this community is relatively low, and many residents reportedly “live comfortably” without attaining a college degree. This lived experience sometimes leads potential learners to question the value of higher education. The community’s questions about postsecondary educational value, particularly during the COVID-19 health emergency, encouraged FM administrators, staff, and faculty to ensure alignment between their adult learner strategies and the wants and needs identified by learners.



FM’s Adult Learners

When Equal Measure visited FM, adult learners described the small college community as supportive and welcoming. They also shared that their academic experience in the nurturing learning environment at FM was a tremendous confidence booster. Adult learners appreciate the college’s support services, like academic coaching and counsel, technology support, on-campus childcare, and career planning, which were made more visible and accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While some learners admitted feeling overwhelmed with anxiety when starting their classes at FM, we also learned about their competing priorities like children, caregiving, and job responsibilities. For some adult learners, because they “have been out there working a while,” staff find they “come to FM, they’re homed into a very specific thing.” These learners have clear goals for career advancement, changing professions, or gaining specific skills. And a few of them

“It feels like I’m home. I feel comfortable here. Last semester was my first semester in 20 years, and I had a hard time, a real hard time. I was ready to quit and walk out of there because all this was new to me. And with the encouragement from [FM faculty and advisors], everybody telling me that I can do it and working with me, it made me have the encouragement to say, ‘I can do this.’”
 FM Adult Learner

realize, after a successful semester or two, that they've got what it takes to transfer to one of SUNY's four-year colleges.

The Collaborative Career Learning Program (COCAL)

Just a few years ago, FM's more than twenty-year-old individual studies program was "on the chopping block." The Collaborative Career Learning Program (COCAL) was given new life during the Lumina PACCE grant period. Recognizing the need of adult learners in their community seeking shorter-term credentials for upskilling, successful completion of COCAL promises a one-year certificate in Individual Studies. Benefiting from FM's strong external partnerships with regional employers, individualized COCAL learner plans are also aligned with upstate New York industries like healthcare and manufacturing, in addition to emerging industries like cannabis. FM staff shared that often, adult learners know *what* they want but do not necessarily know how to pursue their goals. Centering on adult learner needs and ambitions, the COCAL program is valued by learners with an appetite for professional growth, short-term credentials, or an entry toward an undergraduate degree program.

"COCAL allows a small institution like ours to cater to individual interests, even though we're really, really tiny." FM Staff

FM's Institutional Culture

In addition to strong relationships with regional employers and committed FM career staff, the success of COCAL can also be attributed to FM's small, tight-knit community. FM has a culture of collaboration and

"Our organizational structure has always been somewhat flat. So whatever position you're in, you're going to wear multiple hats, and you're going to be hands-on...I think that culture, the spirit of that, has carried us." FM Staff

hands-on involvement, which allows it to pivot quickly and implement learner-centered approaches. The COCAL program capitalizes on a case management model and a devoted team of adult learner advocates. These champions support customized curriculum development and implementation, enhance visibility and access to student success supports, and facilitate job and internship placement opportunities for adult learners. The team collaborates with a broad range of internal partners, from admissions staff to workforce development specialists and external partners like local employers and community-based

organizations. FM staff, faculty and leadership take an all-hands-on-deck approach to learner experience and outcomes. At FM, they don't focus on titles; they concentrate on collaboratively supporting individual students.

Mindset and Practice Change

In addition to a collaborative institutional culture, FM has embraced an adult learner lens. Mindset and practice changes at FM can be attributed to an explicit commitment to eliminate barriers for learners. It is also associated with a willingness to change. Change means acknowledging the differences between 18-24-year-olds and learners age 25 and older. FM respects that many of its adult learners are motivated by the prospect of better jobs or promotion opportunities, liveable wages, and earning practical credentials quickly.

Mindset and practice shifts happened in admissions, where processes and staff interactions with adult learners have become more tailored and empathetic. Student success staff began thinking more about learner challenges and barriers, like finances, parenting, home care, and work demands. When FM became more conscientious about adult learner differences and challenges, creating a welcoming environment and the conditions necessary for improved learner experience and outcomes became easier.

"We changed our whole mentality to really be better at understanding what an adult learner would be like when they come in here. As soon as they walk into the admissions office, how an admissions counselor would deal with an adult learner now is completely different from when I first started. When I first started, if an adult learner came in, I'd be like, 'okay, here's the degrees we offer.' And then, if a 17-year-old walked in with their parents and they were going to be graduating soon, I'd say the same exact spiel. And that makes no sense." FM Staff

Advice to Peer Community Colleges

FM's journey holds valuable lessons for other community colleges aiming to support adult learners focused on improving their educational and career pathways. When developing programs for learners, learn about their priorities and needs. Cultivate pragmatic partnerships internally and externally that benefit learners. Focus intentionally on shifting mindsets and breaking away from practices and processes designed for recent high school graduates. When possible, offer learners individualized pathways that can be customized and expedited to help meet their learning and career aspirations.

"We're used to just one viewbook for traditional high school students coming into college. And you go two years here and transfer to a four-year school, and this is how it goes. But it's not what people want, especially the adult learners in our area, which is a huge population that is underserved." FM Staff

About Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Our goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy.

About Equal Measure

At Equal Measure, we hold that building sustainable equity strategies in a postsecondary context necessitates that community colleges assess (1) their institutional history and readiness to implement equity strategies, (2) the history and context (like economics and demographics) of the communities they are intended to serve, (3) and what learner populations in their community have and continue to experience postsecondary inequities. This foundational knowledge will help colleges develop and implement equity strategies for learners who've been historically underserved.

LUMINA PACCE TEAM

Equal Measure's Lumina PACCE team includes Alice Soo-a Choe, Victoria Worthen Lang, Katie Mosher, Steph Skinner, and Kelly Sloane.