

Research Report

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Assessing the Needs of UIC Adult Learners

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Introduction

The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) is Chicago's largest university, serving over 33,000 students. Further, UIC is the largest recipient of students from both Chicago Public Schools and City Colleges of Chicago (CCC). The majority of UIC adult learners, defined as matriculating when at least 25 years old, enter UIC as transfer students. Harold Washington College (HWC) is UIC's largest feeder school for adult learners and has a large proportion of Black and Latinx students.

UIC has previously set a goal of increasing retention from 80% to 85% and graduation from 60% to 65%, while achieving racial/ethnic parity. Progress on these targets have been made for first-year students. However, as their metrics differ, less attention has been paid to transfer students and, therefore, less attention to adult learners too. More recently, UIC has sought to better understand transfer student success, in part due to the increasing numbers of transfer students at UIC, which has led to a simultaneous increase in adult learners. A 2019 report (Back & Farruggia, 2019) demonstrated that, while transfer students overall do well, sizeable gaps are present as Black students, followed by Latinx students, have lower graduation rates compared to Asian students. Less is known about adult learners and this gap in knowledge needs to be filled.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), 40% of students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in 2018 are adult learners (25 years and older), reflecting almost 8 million students. Many adult learners are embarking on or

returning to higher education to further their career or begin a new career goal (Flynn et al., 2011). Unique challenges that adult learners face are well documented (although many studies focus on students in community colleges). For instance, adult learners are more likely to be parenting compared to their younger peers and thus not only have additional financial barriers, but are also often in greater need for child care (Flynn et al., 2011). In addition, adult learners are more likely to be working full-time and thus have greater need for flexibility in school hours (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Programming is being developed for adult learners in the areas of professional development and leadership. This study aims to better understand the needs and experiences of adult learners at UIC in order to develop programming to meet those needs. Specifically, we aim to understand background characteristics, success at UIC, and current engagement in professional development and leadership opportunities of adult learners, particularly those transferring from HWC as we will pilot programming with students who transfer from HWC. Further, we aim to gain a more holistic view of UIC adult learners, while also gaining an understanding of what is needed for them to have a successful experience at UIC. In order to meet the study aims, we will conduct a needs assessment that has two strategies. The first strategy is a deep dive into UIC's institutional data to look at characteristics, experiences and outcomes of: a) all transfer students; b) adult learners transferring from any CCC; and c) adult learners transferring from HWC. The second strategy is to conduct interviews with current and former UIC adult learners, current HWC adult learners who plan to transfer to a 4-year college, and key stakeholders at UIC that are not involved in the program development.

Methods

Participants

Two types of participants are included in this study: 1) UIC transfer students whose data are accessed from the university data warehouse; and 2) participants who were interviewed for this study. Students included in the institutional data file consist of 3,029 adult learners who matriculated to UIC between 2015 and 2021. For 2015, 2016 and 2017, only students who matriculated in the fall semesters are included. For 2018 through 2020, both fall and spring cohorts are included. Of those 3,029 students, 1,307 (43%) transferred from one of the City Colleges of Chicago with 939 (31%) from Harold Washington College specifically. See Table 1 in the Results section for additional demographic characteristics of the adult learners.

The second type of participants are those who participated in an interview, including 5 current Harold Washington College students, 4 current and former adult learners from UIC, and 3 current staff at UIC who are key stakeholders as they support transfer students, Black students, and Latinx students.

Procedures and measures

All institutional data, with the exception of the student engagement data and the career services data, used in this study were downloaded from the UIC data warehouse or the placement testing portal. Student engagement data and career services data were provided to the assessment team by the respective offices. Data are generally in seven categories: 1) matriculation data (e.g., transfer status, feeder institution); 2) background characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, first generation); 3) academic preparation (e.g., grades at feeder institution); 4) academic success at UIC (e.g., grades, retention, graduation); 5) noncognitive assessments (e.g., time management, academic self-efficacy); 6) basic

needs and financial concerns (e.g., food insecurities, concerns about paying tuition and fees); and 7) program participation (e.g., participation in Career Services and Student Learning and Civic Engagement offices at UIC). Given equity gaps in many indicators of student success by race/ethnicity, many of the institutional data analyses will examine data by race/ethnicity.

Students from HWC and UIC were interviewed, as well as UIC staff who are key stakeholders. HWC participants were referred by Dawn Fuentes of the transfer center of HWC. Students were sent an email asking them to participate in the interview. For those who agreed, the interviews were conducted over Zoom and ranged in time from 15 to 30 minutes. HWC students were asked about their experiences as an adult learner and plans to transfer to a 4-year university. Examples of questions include, “When thinking about transferring, what are you confident about? Concerns?” and “Are there any type of support that would be beneficial to have when you transfer to a 4-year college to support your career goals?” All HWC participants were provided a \$25 gift card as a thank you for their time. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

A similar process was followed for the UIC participants. Students were identified as potential participants by staff in key offices, such as Career Services and some of the success centers. Students were sent an email asking them to participate in the interview. Interviews were also conducted over Zoom and typically lasted 30 minutes. Students were asked about their experiences transferring to and attending UIC as adult learners, as well as any experiences with either Career Services or Student Leadership and Civic Engagement offices. Examples of questions include, “Is there anything about coming to UIC that was different for you compared to younger students?” and “Do you feel like your prior institution prepared you for UIC?” Participating UIC students were provided a \$25 gift card as a thank you for their time. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

For the UIC staff, they were emailed and asked to participate in the interview. Two of the three staff participated in the interview over Zoom. One participated on an unrecorded phone call. The Zoom interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. For the phone call, detailed notes were taken. All three participants were asked the same questions regarding challenges that adult learners face at UIC, experiences with leadership and career opportunities, and unique strengths that adult learners bring to college. Examples of questions are, “What do you believe some of the more specific needs of adult transfer students in regard to career and any leadership development but also broader concerns or barriers that may also need to be addressed?” and “What professional development opportunities do you think are missing or could be enhanced for adult learners?”

Interview analysis

Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis by two assessment team members. One member was the lead on the student interviews, and one was the lead on the staff interviews. Interviews were read and an initial set of codes was generated. These codes were then refined and the two team members met and discussed their codes. Codes were reviewed and themes were generated from the codes. Interviews were coded for the themes. Once the interviews were re-coded, the two team members switched interviews and verified coding. Discrepancies were discussed and final codes were assigned. The two members then met with the assessment lead and discussed the themes and codes. These were then adjusted, and the interview coding was finalized.

Results

For the UIC institutional data, we focus on the adult learners who matriculated between Fall 2017 and Fall 2021. Of those 2,400 students, 2,389 (99.5%) entered as transfer students, whereas only 11 (0.5%) entered as first-year students. Of those adult learners who transferred to UIC during Fall 2017 to Fall 2021, 1030 (43.1%) came from one of the City Colleges of Chicago with most coming from HWC (776; 32.5%). For most of the sections examining the institutional data, comparisons are made among all adult transfer learners, adult learners from any of the CCCs and adult learners from HWC.

Background characteristics of Adult Learners at UIC

Background characteristics of adult learners are presented in Table 1. In terms of race/ethnicity, there is no racial/ethnic majority, regardless of whether it is all adult transfer learners, those from any of the CCCs, or those from HWC. That said, a greater proportion of adult transfer learners are white when looking at the students as a whole. When focused on students from CCCs or HWC, the proportion of students decreases and the proportion who are Black or Latinx increase. While there is a wide range of adults, adult learners are typically around 29 years old. Adult learners are slightly more likely to be female and the difference in proportion of women increases for CCC students and especially for HWC students. The adult learners also tend to be first generation in college, particularly those from CCC and HWC. A large portion also is Pell-eligible, an important finding given that many are returning to school from full-time work.

TABLE 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Adult Learners at UIC (Matriculated in Fall 2017 to Fall 2021)*

	All Adult Transfer Learners	Former CCC Adult Transfer Learners	Former HWC Adult Transfer Learners
Race/Ethnicity			
Asian American	11%	12%	13%
Black	12%	17%	16%
Latinx	27%	33%	31%
White	41%	29%	30%
Other	10%	9%	9%
Age in years			
Mean (s.d.)	30.9 (6.55)	31.1 (6.54)	31.0 (6.23)
Median	29.0	29.0	29.0
Range (lower and upper values)	25.0 to 70.0	25.0 to 70.0	25.0 to 61.0
Gender			
Female	52%	54%	56%
Male	48%	46%	44%
1 st Generation in College* (F2019)	52%	60%	58%
Pell Eligible* (F2019)	43%	55%	47%

*Note: data for first generation in college and Pell-eligibility are from Fall 2019 given some concerns about data quality for other years.

One of the reasons that adult learners work on their degree with a gap after school is that they may have served in the military after high school and returned to school after their service. We examine the Fall 2021 cohort for veteran status. Given challenges with the institutional data, there is not a good way of determining veteran status. That said, some students are coded as Chapter 31 or Chapter 33, reflecting that they themselves are veterans or are the spouse or dependent of a veteran; there is, however, likely missing data and thus this is an underrepresentation. Using these indicators, 4% were identified as having Veteran status. Given the relatively small numbers, we only examined this for all adult transfer learners and did not conduct sub-analyses based on their previous institution.

Of the 1,150 adult learners enrolled in Fall 2021, regardless of when they matriculated to UIC, 46 (4%) had veteran status. When examining this by gender, the students were much more likely to identify as male (75%). In terms of race/ethnicity, they were equally likely to identify as Latinx (39%) or white (39%) as the two largest groups; Black (6%), Asian (4%) and other (11%) were much smaller groups.

Academic Preparation and Majors of Adult Learners

Next, the academic preparation of adult learners at UIC was explored. On average, adult learners were academically successful at their prior institutions and, thus, prepared for UIC as evidenced by their previous institutional grades and credits earned (see Table 2). Further, HWC adult learners were similar in preparation to other adult learners on both metrics as well. It should be noted that adult learners appear to be transferring large numbers of credits. While this reflects the level of their prior success, it also indicates that some may be transferring later than necessary. Given that students need to complete a minimum number of credits at UIC, this can potentially prolong their total time to degree as well as put them in jeopardy for a SAP cancellation (the federal requirements for maintaining financial aid) as they may max out on allowed credit hours before they meet graduation requirements.

TABLE 2. *Academic Preparation Prior to Matriculation (Fall 2017 to Fall 2021)*

	All Adult Transfer Learners	Former CCC Adult Transfer Learners	Former HWC Adult Transfer Learners
GPA at Previous Institution: Mean (s.d.)	3.15 (0.49)	3.15 (0.51)	3.15 (0.52)
Credits Transferred: Mean (s.d.)	76.94 (30.9)	73.11 (26.00)	72.53 (25.26)
Credits Transferred: Median	68	66	66

When students apply to transfer to UIC, they apply to a specific college and major. Table 3 shows the proportion of adult learners in each of UICs colleges. As seen in Table 3, adult learners are most likely to be in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences (LAS), followed by the Colleges of Engineering (COE) and Business Administration (CBA). While these are the three largest colleges for undergraduate students overall, LAS is proportionately much smaller for adult transfer learners, as LAS is typically around 60% of students who enter as first-year students. Interestingly, for HWC, students enter CBA in larger numbers than COE. Another important pattern is for the College of Nursing (CON) as students cannot apply to the CON as first-year students. This is proportionately a large number of students to enter a program that is very competitive. Again, HWC are less likely to enter CON compared to other adult transfer learners.

TABLE 3. *Distribution of Fall 2017 to Fall 2021 Adult Transfer Learner Cohorts across UIC Colleges*

College	All Adult Transfer Learners	Former CCC Adult Transfer Learners	Former HWC Adult Transfer Learners
Liberal Arts & Sciences	29%	27%	29%
Engineering	20%	19%	17%
Business Administration	19%	22%	24%
Nursing	13%	10%	8%
Applied Health Sciences	8%	9%	9%
Architecture, Design, & the Arts	5%	4%	4%
Urban Planning & Public Affairs	3%	4%	5%
Education	2%	3%	3%
School of Public Health	1%	2%	1%

Further, Table 4 shows the top 30 majors for matriculating adult learners. As seen, nursing is the most common major with 11% of adult transfer learners in the nursing BSN program. Beyond that, there is a range of majors typically in CBA, COE and LAS.

TABLE 4. *Top 30 Majors Among Fall 2017 to Fall 2021 Adult Transfer Learners*

Major	Percent	Major	Percent
Nursing-BSN	11%	Nutrition	2%
Business Administration	7%	Health Information Management	2%
Computer Science	7%	Computer Engineering	2%
Accounting	5%	Criminology, Law, Justice	2%
Biological Sciences	4%	Marketing	2%
Liberal Arts – Undeclared	4%	Political Science	2%
Psychology	4%	Public Policy	2%
Mechanical Engineering	3%	Graphic/Industrial Design Foundations	1%
Electrical Engineering	3%	Sociology	1%
Nursing (BSN)	3%	Urban Studies	1%
Kinesiology	3%	Biochemistry	1%
Finance	2%	Human Learning & Development	1%
Chemical Engineering	2%	Information and Decision Science	1%
Civil Engineering	2%	Economics	1%
Management	2%	Communication	1%

Academic Success of UIC Adult Learner

Overall, adult learners at UIC are academically successful. For the most recent cohort available (Fall 2020), retention rates were over all for: all adult transfer students (79%); CCC adult transfer learners

(82%); and HWC adult transfer learners (82%). However, racial/ethnic differences in retention are found, although there does not appear to be a clear pattern in these differences. Table 5 provides retention rates for adult learners by racial/ethnic groups for differing entering cohort.

TABLE 5. *First-to-Second Year Retention by Race/Ethnicity (Fall 2017 to Fall 2020)*

	All Adult Transfer Learners	Former CCC Adult Transfer Learners	Former HWC Adult Transfer Learners
2017 Fall			
Asian American	79%	62%	62%
Black	70%	65%	58%
Latinx	80%	78%	83%
White	85%	83%	87%
All	80%	77%	77%
2018 Fall			
Asian American	88%	83%	93%
Black	79%	88%	91%
Latinx	85%	90%	83%
White	86%	86%	90%
All	85%	86%	89%
2019 Fall			
Asian American	87%	90%	94%
Black	89%	96%	100%
Latinx	83%	83%	83%
White	84%	92%	95%
All	85%	90%	92%
2020 Fall			
Asian American	83%	81%	87%
Black	70%	70%	67%
Latinx	79%	79%	87%
White	81%	86%	84%
All	79%	80%	82%

In regard to gender (Table 6), for adult learners, female students tend to be similar or slightly higher than male students on retention. For students who attended HWC, the differences are more consistent and greater where female students have higher retention rates compared to male students.

TABLE 6. *First-to-Second Year Retention by Gender (Fall 2017 to Fall 2020)*

	All Adult Transfer Learners	Former CCC Adult Transfer Learners	Former HWC Adult Transfer Learners
2017 Fall			
Female	80%	79%	81%
Male	81%	75%	73%
2018 Fall			
Female	85%	88%	90%
Male	84%	84%	87%
2019 Fall			
Female	86%	93%	95%
Male	83%	88%	89%
2020 Fall			
Female	81%	83%	87%
Male	77%	76%	77%

Another important metric of success is graduation within four years of matriculation to UIC. For those who transferred to UIC in Fall 2016, the three groups of adult transfer students all had similar graduation rates: all adult transfer learners (70%); former CCC adult transfer learners (69%); and former HWC adult transfer learners (72%). There does seem to be an overall improvement for those who entered in Fall 2015 versus those who entered in Fall 2016. The exception to this is Black students, where their graduation rates decreased from 2015 to 2016 across all three student groups.

TABLE 7. *4-Year Graduation by Race/Ethnicity (Fall 2015 and Fall 2016)*

	All Adult Transfer Learners	Former CCC Adult Transfer Learners	Former HWC Adult Transfer Learners
2015 Fall			
Asian American	66%	55%	*
Black	63%	66%	71%
Latinx	70%	57%	50%
White	62%	67%	63%
All	63%	62%	57%
2016 Fall			
Asian American	82%	83%	73%
Black	54%	55%	65%
Latinx	73%	74%	82%
White	71%	71%	71%
All	70%	69%	72%

*The number of adult learners in this category was too small to calculate.

As with retention, gender differences are identified for 4-year graduation (Table 8). Female students consistently graduate at greater rates compared to male students. This difference is found for students who transfer to UIC in both 2015 and 2016, as well as across the three types of adult learners.

TABLE 8. 4-Year Graduation by Gender (Fall 2015 and Fall 2016)

	All Adult Transfer Learners	Former CCC Adult Transfer Learners	Former HWC Adult Transfer Learners
2015 Fall Cohort			
Female	72%	67%	63%
Male	55%	55%	52%
2016 Fall Cohort			
Female	74%	72%	74%
Male	66%	65%	69%

When students transfer to UIC, they typically know what they want to major in as they have had at least some college to hone in on an area of they were unsure prior to the start of college. Therefore, one indicator of success is whether or not students progress and graduate in the degree they intend to earn. Table 9 shows the proportion of students who changed majors by entering cohort for all students and also by race/ethnicity. Despite students having an identified major, approximately 1 in 5 adult learners are changing majors after they matriculate to UIC. The proportion for all students in 2020 is lower, although there has only been one year in which a major change could be made. When examining by race/ethnicity, while there is some variation across years and student type, Latinx students consistently have among the highest rates of major changes.

TABLE 9. Academic Major Changes by Race/Ethnicity (Fall 2017 to Fall 2021)

	All Adult Transfer Learners	Former CCC Adult Transfer Learners	Former HWC Adult Transfer Learners
2017 Fall			
Asian American	18%	15%	15%
Black	17%	26%	25%
Latinx	23%	22%	28%
White	13%	16%	11%
All	17%	21%	21%
2018 Fall			
Asian American	9%	11%	14%
Black	14%	17%	14%
Latinx	15%	18%	18%
White	18%	22%	21%
All	16%	19%	19%
2019 Fall			
Asian American	16%	16%	6%
Black	20%	18%	13%
Latinx	19%	22%	23%
White	17%	20%	15%
All	18%	19%	16%

2020 Fall			
Asian American	12%	15%	13%
Black	15%	15%	13%
Latinx	17%	23%	23%
White	7%	9%	11%
All	11%	17%	16%

Noncognitive Assets of Adult Learners

Beginning in Spring 2020, transfer students complete a pre-matriculation inventory that assesses strengths and growth areas in a variety of noncognitive domains (e.g., time management, belonging uncertainty) and contextual factors (e.g., family school balance). These assets are scored so students can be identified as being in need of intervention in that area. See Farruggia, et al. (2020a) for a complete description of this inventory and the assets. Table 12 presents the percentage of students that scored in the “intervention needed” range. Generally speaking, there is little difference between all adult transfer learners, CCC adult transfer learners, and HWC adult transfer learners on the various assets. Top areas of challenge seem to be help-seeking and seeing the value or purpose in pursuing their degrees. Further, 10% of adult learners who matriculated from HWC report a lack of support for being in college. Other areas that are elevated are work school conflict and belonging certainty.

TABLE 10. *Noncognitive Assets of Adult Transfer Learners for Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 Combined*

	All Adult Transfer Learners	Former CCC Adult Transfer Learners	Former HWC Adult Transfer Learners
	Percent Intervention needed	Percent Intervention needed	Percent Intervention needed
Academic Goal Engagement	4%	3%	4%
Planning Strategies	4%	2%	3%
Work School Conflict	8%	8%	9%
Family School Conflict	4%	5%	6%
Support for Being in College	8%	9%	10%
Help Seeking	14%	14%	14%
Managing Stress	4%	5%	5%
Well Being	7%	5%	6%
Sense of Belonging	9%	7%	7%
Belonging Certainty	9%	8%	9%
Academic Self Efficacy	4%	4%	4%
Academic Readiness	4%	4%	5%
Value of Education	8%	9%	11%
n=	547	239	188

Basic Needs and Financial Concerns of Adult Learners

As part of the pre-matriculation inventory, students are asked if they would like to be referred for support in a number of basic needs (see Farruggia et al. 2020b for more detail). As seen in Table 13, food insecurities is the greatest need with 46% of HWC requesting this referral and this is greater than other CCC students and adult transfer learned in general. Further, 22% of HWC requested support from the Disability Resource Center, the office that provides accommodations among other support. This proportion reflects that more than 1 in 5 of the students may potentially require accommodations. Other areas also demonstrate high levels of need.

TABLE 11. *Proportion of Students with Basic Needs Referral Requests (Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 Cohorts Combined)*

	All Adult Transfer Learners	Former CCC Adult Transfer Learners	Former HWC Adult Transfer Learners
Disability Resource Center	22%	24%	22%
Undocumented Student Support	6%	8%	8%
Child Care	10%	11%	11%
Food Insecurities	36%	43%	46%
House Instabilities	16%	15%	14%

Also, as part of the pre-matriculation inventory, students were asked about financial obligations and concerns (see Farruggia et al., 2020c for more detail on these questions). While adult learners report that they have enough money for daily living expenses, many also reported concerns about the ability to pay for college expenses (Table 14). For former HWC students, this ranged from 32% for paying for transportation to 55% paying for tuition and fees. Further, almost half of former HWC adult learners will be helping to pay for their families living expenses and almost 2/3 will need to work to pay for their education expenses. Importantly, former HWC adult transfer students report greater financial concerns in most domains compared to other adult transfer learners.

TABLE 12. *Financial Concerns for Adult Transfer Learners who Matriculated to UIC Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 Combined*

	All Adult Transfer Learners	Former CCC Adult Transfer Learners	Former HWC Adult Transfer Learners
Family have enough for daily living expenses ^a	92%	89%	97%
Will help with your family's living expenses while in college	34%	42%	45%
Will work to help pay for your educational expenses	60%	67%	68%
Concerned about paying for college textbooks and materials	42%	45%	45%
Concerned about paying for daily living expenses	39%	39%	39%
Concerned about paying for transportation	28%	30%	32%
Concerned about paying for college tuition and fees	51%	53%	55%

^aThis question was only asked in Spring 2020.

While examining financial concerns by race/ethnicity (Table 15), there are differences, although they do not appear to have a consistent pattern. There is one exception where white students may not have the same financial concerns paying for college-related expenses other than tuition and fees.

TABLE 13. *Financial Concerns by Race/Ethnicity for Adult Transfer Learners who Matriculated to UIC in either Spring 2020 or Fall 2020*

	All Adult Transfer Learners	Former CCC Adult Transfer Learners	Former HWC Adult Transfer Learners
Will help with your family's living expenses while in college			
Asian	41%	46%	48%
Black	41%	50%	59%
Latinx	44%	46%	46%
White	24%	30%	34%
All	34%	42%	45%
Will work to help pay for your educational expenses			
Asian	61%	63%	62%
Black	63%	73%	68%
Latinx	64%	70%	76%
White	58%	61%	61%
All	60%	67%	68%

Concerned about paying for college textbooks and materials			
Asian	52%	46%	43%
Black	50%	53%	46%
Latinx	51%	50%	54%
White	30%	26%	29%
All	42%	45%	45%
Concerned about paying for daily living expenses			
Asian	55%	46%	43%
Black	48%	47%	46%
Latinx	37%	38%	38%
White	33%	23%	26%
All	39%	39%	39%
Concerned about paying for transportation			
Asian	52%	46%	48%
Black	37%	40%	36%
Latinx	25%	26%	32%
White	23%	19%	21%
All	28%	30%	32%
Concerned about paying for college tuition and fees			
Asian	59%	54%	52%
Black	46%	50%	46%
Latinx	57%	58%	62%
White	47%	47%	50%
All	51%	53%	55%

Program Engagement

Finally, we examined program engagement of adult learner transfer students with the Office of Career Services and the office of Student Leadership and Civic Engagement (SLCE). For Career Services, only 6.1% of adult learners who were enrolled at UIC at any time between Fall 2020 and Fall 2021 engaged with Career Services (Table 16). Across three semesters, only 107 unique adult transfer learners engaged with Career Services. This is particularly important as adult learners tend to be very career focused and may not be accessing needed support. For SLCE, the proportion was even lower. Less than one percent engaged in any program or initiative (Table 17). Across three semesters, only 10 unique adult transfer learners engaged with SLCE.

TABLE 14. *Career Services Engagement for Adult Learners Enrolled at UIC at any Point Between Fall 2020 and Fall 2021*

	All Adult Transfer Learners
Career Fair Engagement	2.9%
Career Service Appointment	3.8%
Engaged with Career Services	6.1%

TABLE 15. *Student Leadership and Civic Engagement for Adult Learners Enrolled at UIC at any Point Between Fall 2020 and Fall 2021*

	All Adult Transfer Learners
	0%
Service Leader	
MMM	0%
MLK Day	.3%
Leadership Workshop Series	0%
Leadership UIC	0%
Leadership Conference	0%
GIVE	.1%
Book Club	.1%
UIC Days of Service	.2%
Ignite	0%
SLCE Engagement	.6%

Interviews

As previously noted, interviews were conducted with five HWC students, four UIC students, and three UIC staff members with the aim of better understanding the needs of adult learners who transfer to UIC so UIC can develop programs in the areas of professional development and leadership. Thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the interviews resulted in four themes for the HWC students, four themes for the UIC students, and three themes for the UIC staff. Each of these themes are discussed.

HWC Student Interviews

From the interviews with current HWC students, four major themes relevant to the program development emerged from the data. The first theme is *adult learners have leadership skills and are interested in building upon them*. Adult learners mentioned that they had largely cultivated leadership skills through their diverse work experiences and campus involvement. Notably, one student talked about being a business owner, as indicated by “I have leadership experience and like, I own my own business, so that was leadership. I’m like I had to basically do all of the logistical kind of stuff for the

business, like all of the just like everything that goes into owning a business, like the marketing and all of that.” Further, another HWC student discussed their role as student government president, reflecting that adult learner transfer students may already have college-related leadership experiences. Importantly, students did note that they were interested in engaging with leadership development opportunities, although some are unsure of the opportunities that exist. There is an interest in engaging in leadership development for their careers and for community advocacy and programs that would provide “opportunity for professional development within [their] career.”

The second major theme to emerge from the data is *that adult learners have career experience that is qualitatively different from younger students*. Adult learners have a diverse set of career backgrounds. Several of the HWC adult learners reported that they have held multiple diverse careers before entering Harold Washington College and while attending. Some adult learners are returning to school to improve career opportunities. This was reflected by one student who said, “I would never define myself as someone who has... a job that’s a career so far in my life. That’s one of the reasons I’m going to college.”

The third major theme was that *adult learners have financial concerns*. The students consistently reflected that they had financial concerns, and some noted limited financial support for undocumented students at public institutions specifically. One student mentioned that they are undocumented and will not be transferring to a public institution due to limited financial support. “Public schools are at the bottom of my list because I am undocumented and there is not as much funding for undocumented students.” The students also noted the need for financial resources. One adult learner mentioned the importance of providing resources to students struggling financially, such as food pantry access. Adult students also struggled with childcare and mentioned the need for affordable childcare centers. One issue also particular is around housing as because of the costs to rent and move closer to campus, as adult learner frequently “don’t want to live in the dorms.” As a solution to these challenges, adult learners noted the importance of sharing information with them related to what resources are available. Having this type of information before transferring to institutions would be helpful so they are prepared when they arrive.

The final major theme was *adult learners are concerned about their sense of belonging*. The HWC students were concerned about their sense of belonging at their transfer institutions. A few students mentioned that they were concerned about being with younger students. This was reflected by one student who noted that they “feel awkward with an age difference compared to other kids.” One student did recognize that they expect to be more confident as a transfer student than first-year students. Other students talked about concerns about a diminished sense of belonging due to their marginalized identities.

Suggestions for programming from HWC students:

- Career Services
 - Career services should give more information about what opportunities there can be with their degree
 - Career services should fold in the experience of the adult learner, particularly in resume building and helping students to highlight them being an adult as a strength
 - Mentored by someone in field of career interest

- When students transfer to the 4-year university, they want to ensure they have internships opportunities within their career field, including hand-on experiences
- Leadership
 - Provide clarification of what leadership means including concrete examples of what these experiences/activities/programs look like. These should be included in recruitment materials, on the website, etc.

UIC Student Interviews

From the interviews with current UIC adult learners, four themes emerged from the data. The first theme is that *adult learners need connections to navigate campus practices and policies*. Students were unsure about how to get connected to UIC, in part because of the pandemic. One student mentioned that they were unsure who to contact about next steps to enrollment, as reflected by one student who said, “The hardest part... getting acceptance letter and not knowing what to do next.” Relatedly, another student mentioned that “there were things like scholarships, financial aid, you know how to choose your classes things like that that were very new to me.” Even though the adult learners are further along in their college careers than other students who are arriving new to UIC as first-year students, they are not familiar with UIC’s practices and policies and need help figuring them out, as one student reflected, “I didn’t really know what to expect, so it was overwhelming.” Another student suggests developing a mentor program for adult transfer students to ask questions that they might be embarrassed about.

The second theme that emerged from the UIC adult learners is that *Career Services needs to tailor programming to adult learners* as much of the programming is for students with little work experience. For instance, Career Fairs should offer more opportunities geared towards adult learners, including positions for prospective employees who have job experience or are looking beyond an entry level position. Students also reflected that it was difficult to find an appropriate internship, as again, the positions they found were for students with less experience. This was reflected by one student who said, “It was difficult for me to find an internship through Handshake because I feel like they want students that don’t have, that were executive level at their previous employer.”

The third theme was that *engagement opportunities need to be flexible*. Adult learners were clear that they would like to get involved; however, it is difficult while balancing multiple priorities, including work and family. One student noted, “I did not join anything because I was like very overwhelmed with work and home life.” Opportunities for engagement should be provided at times or in ways (e.g., online) that allow for flexibility in students’ schedules.

The fourth theme that emerged from the UIC adult learner interviews was *adult learners have leadership skills and are interested in building upon them*. Adult learners often entered UIC with leadership skills already developed from their careers. One student said, “Because I am an adult learner, I’ve already had a career. A very lucrative and successful in the corporate ladder.” Importantly, adult learners are interested in further developing their leadership skills; however, they are often not aware of what opportunities are available for them. When specifically asked about the Office of Student Leadership and Civic Engagement, adult learners were unaware of what SLCE is, although they would be interested in their civic engagement opportunities. One student reflected, “If I knew it existed, I would have done volunteer service.”

Suggestions for programming from UIC students:

- Leadership programming experiences and development opportunities should be made more widely known, including informational meetings.
- Programming should include advanced leadership opportunities so adult learners can use the leadership skills that they already have and develop the skills further.
- Programming should work with cultural centers and meet the needs of students' diverse backgrounds.
- Programs should include strategies to help students build confidence
- Careers and professional development topics should include interview skills, interpersonal skills, presentation skills, and basic computer skills, such as Microsoft products and typing
- Advocacy skill development should be part of the programming
- There should be dedicated space for adult learners to have access to.
- In the marketing of their programs, offices should be explicitly marketing opportunities for adult learners
- Programming needs to be at times with modalities that meet the needs of all adult learners. Some programming needs to be in the evenings and possibly weekends. Further, there should be a range of opportunities, both in-person and remote/online, including self-paced programs.

UIC Staff Interviews

The final group of stakeholders that were interviewed were UIC staff members. From these, three themes emerged from the data. The first theme was that *there are two types of adult learners*. The first are adult learners that are looking for a career change and the second are adult learners that want to move up in their careers. "I think there's two different kind of adult learners there's those that are currently working that want to advance within their area of employment and there are those that want to completely change what they're doing." Given these different types, the staff member reflected that the needs of adult learners would vary depending on where they are in their careers and what their goals are.

The second theme is *connections and networking are critically important for adult learner success*. Similar to themes generated by the students, UIC staff reflected that adult learners need to feel connected to campus and that there is a concern that sense of belonging for adult learners is low. Staff felt that it would be helpful for adult learners to "connect to others who maybe are even alum, who can give them some tips and pointers." Further, the staff reported that adult learners need to connect with people in the industry of their career interests. It is important for adult learners to connect with faculty and people working in their industry of interest. Adult learners need to connect to the working world quickly and get a sample of what the job they are interested in will be like through internships and volunteer experience. This was reflected by one staff member who highlighted the importance of "helping them get started making those connections, because we can send anybody out there with the degree, but the degree is only going to get them so far, they need the experience." They also noted that adult learners have a better understanding of the role of networking in employment: "They will network like there's no tomorrow because they know how important it is." Relatedly, personalized outreach is helpful. One staff member mentioned that personalized service to make connections is very helpful. Students are individual people and would prefer to not receive automated emails. Knowing students by

name and face and also the students knowing the administrators name and face as well is helpful for their success.

The third theme is that *engagement opportunities for adult learners should be structured around their multiple priorities*. Adult learners have many obligations, typically more than younger students do, often balancing multiple priorities, including work, school, and family. This came up many times with many emphasizing the importance of this challenge:

“They’re working full time and it may be some have flexible hours some do not the majority of them don’t they have to work full time during the day and then come to UIC during their hour lunch break... we are extremely inconvenient.” “Normal people have families, jobs, responsibilities, bills... they realized that they have to have an education to make more money to be able to take care of all of that, but they also have responsibilities, you cannot ignore your children.”

“Family is the challenge for many adult learners, juggling family, and school responsibilities. Many are working at least full time as they have other responsibilities.”

To address these challenges, staff highlighted a number of suggestions for programming:

- Engagement opportunities need to be flexible with opportunities available for adult learners to accommodate their multiple priorities and schedules.
- Career and profession development programs should include career exploration, resume writing, interviewing techniques
- Programming should include topics around financial health and money management.

Discussion and Recommendations

The study aimed to better understand adult learners at UIC. Institutional data demonstrated that adult learners typically enter UIC as transfer students, with the greatest proportion coming from the City Colleges of Chicago and Harold Washington College in particular. In terms of demographic characteristics, adult learner transfer students are racially/ethnically diverse, with proportionate increases of Black and Latinx students for HWC students. Adult learners, on average, are around 30 years old when they matriculate, with some ranging up to 70 years of age. Given these age differences compared to their younger peers, adult learners are going to be at different places in their lives and programming needs to be tailored to recognize this.

In terms of academic preparation and educational plans, adult learners who transfer to UIC are ready for a 4-year college. They have had academic success at their prior institutions and come to UIC with over 77 credits earned, on average. However, as noted in the results, too many credits transferred can put the student at risk of losing financial aid to due SAP requirements. Adult learners are most frequently enrolling in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS), followed by Engineering and Business Administration. For LAS, while it is the largest receiving college, they do get a much smaller proportion of adult learners compared to entering first-year students, which is typically around 60% of first-year students. Importantly, the College of Nursing also has a large proportion of entering adult learner transfer students with the BSN Nursing being the most common major of all adult learners who transfer to UIC.

When examining indicators of success, adult learner transfer students at UIC are generally successful as indicated by retention and graduation rates. There are differences by race/ethnicity, although they are not consistent, as well as differences by gender to a lesser degree where females outperform males. That said, given that a sizeable number of adult learners are not graduating, who are also well-prepared for college, it is important to provide programming that will both engage them in college and also meet their professional goals.

Noncognitive assets, basic needs referrals, and financial concerns also had some interesting patterns. When examining noncognitive assets, adult learners generally indicated low levels of “intervention needed.” Help-seeking was the most challenging for adult learners across the three student types and support for being in college was also elevated for students who transferred from HWC. For basic needs, adult learners were more likely to request referrals compared to first year students in all domains with the exception of housing insecurities. For instance, more than 1 in 5 adult learner transfer students requested information regarding disability accommodations and almost half of the HWC student wanted more information to support food insecurities. Child care needs were also more common with over 10% requesting information child care. Despite many adult learners having work experiences, they still report high levels of financial concerns and obligations. This is particularly true for Black and Latinx adult learners.

To better understand the current engagement of adult learner transfer students in Career Services and SLCE, programmatic data revealed relatively low levels of engagement, with less than 7% of adult learners engaging with Career Services and less than 1% engaging with SLCE. The interview data serves to understand the low levels of engagement. Students and staff highlighted that programming needs to be better tailored to adult learners to address both their experiences that generally provide them with advanced skills, as well as their unique needs that need to be in place to allow them to engage in the programming. Based on these, a number of recommendations are made to develop professional and leadership programming for adult learner transfer students at UIC. These support some of the specific recommendations made by students and staff in the interview section of the results. These include:

1. Career Services needs to expand programs to support students who have more advanced work experience, including those looking to be promoted within their fields as well as making a career change.
2. Student Leadership and Civic Engagement needs to provide programming that recognize that many adult learners have leadership experiences through their work, as well as personal lives. Programming can help engaged students who feel a diminished sense of belonging as indicated by the interviews.
3. Programming needs to be delivered in a flexible format, such as virtually, in the evening, and asynchronously.
4. Programs need to work closely with campus partners, such as the disability resource center, cultural centers, and success centers, to ensure programming is tailored to meet the needs of students.
5. Given the financial concerns, food insecurities and family obligations, programs need to ensure that delivery is not creating additional financial burden and should explore ways to reduce some of those burdens, such as providing food or child care during programming. These can also help students create community with other students with similar experiences.

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Addendum

During the course of the interviews, both students and staff talked about concerns and made recommendations that, although were not directly related to the program being developed, was helpful for the wider UIC community. As such, these interviews were analyzed for the additional content and themes emerged that are presented below.

- **Diverse learning and mental health**
 - Several adult learners mentioned a recent diagnosis of a disability and think that that impacted their performance throughout K-12. One student highlighted how their recent diagnosis with ADHD makes them nervous about transferring because they believe they will need a lot of help. Another student mentions the importance of providing programming and support around mental health.
- **Orientation issues**
 - UIC adult learner transfer students were unsure about how to get connected to UIC, in part because of the pandemic and because orientation felt more geared towards first-year students. Another student felt that orientation being presented as an online module was unhelpful, especially with campus being closed due to the pandemic, making it harder to visit and connect.
- **Communicating with advisors and professors**
 - One UIC adult learner mentioned that they were nervous to reach out to advisors or professors as they did not want to ask questions they were embarrassed about. An HWC student recommended programming that teaches adult learners how to communicate with a professor in a setting with many students. One UIC adult learner mentioned that transferring was difficult as a first generation student and they wished that their advisor had communicated with them about different resources like scholarships and financial aid and also helped them to choose classes.
- **Lack of flexibility**
 - One staff member mentioned that transitioning from CCC to UIC is very difficult because of UIC's traditional programming. There are a limited number of undergraduate classes that are after 5pm and there is no formal online degree. Other schools in the area have more flexible scheduling, and some of our transfer students transfer to those schools that are better able to meet their needs. There is a suggestion to have faculty teach online or at a range of hours during the day to meet the needs of adult learner transfer students.
- **Learning what resources are available**
 - UIC students mentioned that they would like to be made more aware of the resources available to them. This includes information related to financial aid, loans, scholarships, and getting involved on campus. There is likely also a knowledge gap in what more additional resources that they would find beneficial, given that they do not know what they do not know.
- **Care center for parents of adult learners**
 - Some adult learners have the responsibility of taking care of a parent. One staff member suggested creating a care center at UIC for parents of adult learners.

- Additional Programming
 - HWC
 - Conflict resolution and “communication in general”
 - Center for people who are struggling financially
 - Time management
 - Presentation skills
 - College 101: scholarships, finances, time management
 - UIC Students
 - Undocumented students- Programs to help undocumented student find a sense of belonging. Also help with becoming comfortable and providing a safe space
 - Mentoring program with alumni to help guide them through their education journey on campus
 - UIC Staff
 - UIC should provide tutoring services, including opportunities on the weekend