education northwest

POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Evaluating a Statewide College Reengagement Initiative



Partner InsideTrack

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Reengaging adult learners for a stronger workforce

Higher education plays an important role in boosting economic mobility and meeting the workforce needs of employers. Recognizing this, California set a goal that 70 percent of adults in the state attain a postsecondary degree or credential. Many Californians today have some college experience, but left school before completing their program. Reengaging these learners to complete their credentials would move California closer to its goal.

To support this work, InsideTrack launched California Reconnect, a statewide pilot designed to reengage learners, support their return to college, and help them complete their education and access greater economic opportunity. The initiative works across participating two- and four-year institutions: Highly trained coaches contact stopped-out adult learners to help them identify and overcome barriers to reenrollment.

InsideTrack needed to understand whether and how California Reconnect was working for individual learners and participating institutions. The organization partnered with Education Northwest to conduct an evaluation that would generate actionable evidence to guide program strategy, identify practices to better support returning students, and determine how to deepen impact across partner institutions.

Mixed methods, deeper insights

First, our team worked closely with InsideTrack to clarify the goals, activities, and intended outcomes of California Reconnect through a theory of change. We then examined implementation across participating institutions to understand how the initiative operated in different campus contexts.

We analyzed available coach and institutional data; reviewed student pathways; and engaged students, InsideTrack coaches, and college staff members to understand their experiences with outreach, coaching, reenrollment, and campus processes. We combined quantitative analysis of pathways and program data with qualitative insights from focus groups and conversations. The quantitative data highlighted how students moved from initial outreach toward reenrollment and where barriers emerged. Qualitative data added context to these patterns, highlighting students' circumstances, the support they needed, and the challenges coaches and college staff members encountered in navigating campus systems.

This mixed-methods approach helped translate evidence about individual student experiences into opportunities for program improvement and changes in institutional practice. The perspectives of the people closest to the work helped us look beyond enrollment outcomes to understand why students stopped attending college, what motivated them to return, and where institutional practices helped or hindered their progress.

We found that students often leave college for reasons beyond academics, including circumstances and competing demands that can change over time. Many are interested in returning but face practical and structural barriers. Targeted outreach, coaching, and warm handoffs can help them navigate the return process, but student support alone is not enough. We also found that colleges vary in their readiness to welcome returning adult learners. Different institutions have different levels of ability to use data effectively, coordinate campus stakeholders, and create adult-ready environments. These findings shifted the attention from individual coaching to the institutional conditions that shape students' ability to return and complete a credential.

Turning findings into action

Based on the findings, our team generated recommendations for improving reengagement and making college systems more responsive to returning students. These included using data to identify and reach former students, providing returning learners with individualized guidance and connections to resources, and helping institutions coordinate the people and processes needed to support reenrollment and persistence.

InsideTrack is acting on these recommendations by deepening its work with existing college partners. This creates opportunity to help institutions put promising practices into action, strengthen cross-campus coordination, and address structural barriers that make returning to college difficult. Our evaluation built a foundation for InsideTrack to focus implementation support where it is most needed and connect student-level strategies with institutional changes that can make reenrollment and continued progress more attainable.