

College and Career Readiness Approaches in Adult Foundational Education: Directions for Research and Practice

Judith A. Alamprese, Alamprese & Associates

It is well recognized in the United States that adults require education and skills beyond the secondary level to obtain family-sustaining employment and advance their social, personal, and economic well-being. Recent data support a continuing trend of a positive association between adults' level of education and median weekly earnings, with the earnings of workers age 25 and older increasing with every level of education completed. In 2024, workers who had an associate's degree earned \$1,099 per week—a 33% increase over workers without a high school diploma—while those with a bachelor's degree earned 52% more than workers without a diploma (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025).

The projected requirements for jobs also reflect a premium on education. It is estimated that by 2031, 72% of jobs will require postsecondary education or training. Although there will still be jobs for individuals who have not received a high school diploma, many of them will not enable individuals to increase their economic mobility (Carnevale et al., 2023).

To encourage adults' further education and skill development, especially those with an education below or at the secondary level, the U.S. federal and state governments, philanthropic organizations, and other entities have invested in initiatives for adult foundational education (AFE) learners—adult basic education (ABE), English as a second language (ESL), and adult secondary education (ASE). These initiatives have been designed to facilitate AFE learners' transition to further education, training, and employment and to enhance state-level adult education and employment policy to support those

transitions. The efforts have included demonstration programs to test approaches to AFE bridge programs, integrated education and training, and other career pathways efforts, as well as the provision of technical assistance and training for AFE state staff and local service providers to implement career and college readiness (CCR) activities. The initiatives have also promoted partnerships among education, workforce development, businesses, local community agencies, and other entities in support of a coordinated education and workforce development system (Cotner et al., 2016; Darnton & Warden, 2018; Eyster et al., 2018; Joyce Foundation, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education [OVAE], 2012).

As the interest in expanding adults' access to career pathways and in improving training and employment programs moves forward with initiatives such as the federal government's Talent Strategy (U.S. Departments of Labor, Commerce, and Education, 2025), information about the types of CCR activities that can help to advance learners' education and training could be beneficial to AFE staff. Although CCR activities have been part of AFE services for decades, research on the effectiveness of CCR activities is limited (Seymour, 2009). This digest provides an overview of CCR activities that have been delivered in the context of AFE career pathways approaches and what is known about the effectiveness of these activities. The brief closes with steps that could be taken to strengthen the knowledge base on implementing CCR activities with AFE learners.

Overview of CCR Activities

AFE programs have developed CCR activities to support adult learners' retention and success in transitioning from AFE to further education and in participating in career pathway programs. Funding under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 and the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 has enabled AFE programs to expand their services. They go beyond teaching foundational and English-language skills and preparing adults to earn a secondary credential to supporting adults to become ready for college and a career (U.S. Department of Education, OVAE, 2013; Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). Discussed below are the activities that are involved in CCR, examples of how CCR activities have been delivered in AFE programs, and the available research on the effectiveness of those activities.

Defining CCR

A review of the literature on the inclusion of CCR in AFE transition and career pathways programs indicates that CCR activities are considered a critical component of those programs but that CCR activities may differ across the programs. Although the AFE field has not developed a formal definition of CCR, Conley's (2012) work in conceptualizing CCR in the context of high school preparation for postsecondary education is relevant to AFE.

Conley's CCR model posits that learners' readiness is determined by the extent of their skills in four areas: cognitive strategies, content knowledge, learning skills, and transition knowledge and skills. Cognitive strategies are the types of thinking required by college-level work. Key content knowledge is sufficient knowledge in core academic subjects, and technical knowledge and skills related to career goals. Learning skills consist of learning methods—such as study skills and time management—and learners' ability to set goals, persist in their learning, and develop self-efficacy. Transition knowledge and skills involve learners' ability to successfully pursue postsecondary education, including being aware of the careers that are possible options and understanding eligibility requirements and the costs of postsecondary education (Roberts & Grant, 2021).

AFE approaches to CCR include the components of Conley's model in varying degrees, and some approaches have additional skills that AFE learners may need to

succeed in transitioning to their next steps. Below are examples of how AFE bridge and integrated education and training programs have incorporated CCR activities.

CCR Approaches in Bridge Programs

Bridge programs are “one of the first steps in a career pathway for low-skilled adults, that support the transition from adult education to the next step in an occupational pathway” (U. S. Department of Education, OVAE, 2012, p. 3). Two early bridge programs illustrate approaches to CCR that take into account the varied experiences of AFE learners and the types of counseling, advising, and career or college knowledge that adults may need to succeed in further education or training.

The Transition to College and Careers (TCC) model blended college preparation and career development for adult learners in New England. A key feature of the TCC model was the provision of proactive counseling and support in group or individual sessions to develop learners' resiliency and persistence, problem solving, and time management skills. Learners also prepared a Career and Education Plan. The findings from the project pointed to the importance of designing programs that can foster personal readiness as well as academic readiness and college knowledge. Furthermore, including career counseling and planning, as well as occupational-specific preparatory courses, can provide learners with background knowledge that can help them in finding a career that is a good match for their interests and aptitudes (Goodman & Kallenbach, 2018).

The Oregon Pathways for Adult Basic Skills Transition to Education and Work Initiative (OPABS) involved 13 of the state's community college-based Adult Basic Skills (ABS) programs. OPABS included accelerated ABS courses in reading, writing, and mathematics that incorporated occupational applications from Oregon's high-demand industries. A College and Career Awareness (CCA) course provided information about the characteristics and educational requirements of jobs in local labor markets; the educational programs in the colleges related to these jobs; and learners' skills, interests, and educational and employment backgrounds. Learners also prepared a Career Pathway Plan and had access to Advising Modules (Alamprese, 2011). A quasi-experimental follow-up study of OPABS found that OPABS learners were significantly

more likely to enroll in and complete postsecondary transfer courses and earn a postsecondary certificate or degree than a matched comparison group (Alamprese, 2024). Furthermore, correlational analyses found that learners who took the CCA Course were 4.3 percentage points more likely to attain any postsecondary transfer or occupational credits ($p < .01$) (Alamprese & Price, 2021).

CCR in Integrated Education and Training

Integrated Education and Training (IET) is defined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act as “adult education and literacy services that are delivered concurrently and contextually with workforce preparation activities and workforce training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster for the purpose of educational and career advancement” (WIOA, Section 203(11) and 34 C.F.R., 2014, p. 187). Accelerating Opportunity (AO) was an integrated education and training initiative that aimed to help adults with low basic skills earn occupational credentials, obtain well-paying jobs, and sustain rewarding careers. It was one of the first efforts to replicate and scale elements of Washington State’s Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) model. The key elements of AO learner services were strategies to accelerate learning and credential attainment; academic and social student supports; dual enrollment strategies; and marketable, stackable, and credit-bearing certificates and degrees. Findings from a quasi-experimental evaluation of AO indicated that overall, the program helped participants with low academic skills earn more credentials from community college programs than similar non-AO learners. However, labor market gains for AO learners were mixed. Staff and learners also indicated that the individualized attention that AO adult education instructors and staff provided were important to learners’ success (Eyster et al., 2018).

Strategies for Strengthening the CCR Knowledge Base

The evaluations of AFE transition and career pathways programs in which AFE learners have participated suggest that the multi-component CCR activities involved in

these programs have facilitated learners’ development of foundational skills, attainment of education credentials, and enrollment in further education and training (Peck et al., 2021). Descriptive studies of CCR activities in bridge and IET programs (Alamprese & Cheng, 2021) also reinforce the need for a range of services to support AFE learners’ movement to and success in further education and training.

A gap in the current research on CCR activities is the lack of detailed information about the types of support services and college and career knowledge activities that are being delivered to AFE learners. The provision of more comprehensive descriptions of the operation of those activities, including defining the key services and specifying the assumptions about the use of the services, would provide AFE staff and researchers with a better understanding of the ways in which CCR activities are implemented and could be replicated.

Another approach to strengthening the knowledge base is to conduct analyses of the contribution of the components of services to the outcomes measured in a study (Klerman et al., 2023). This information could enable AFE staff to be strategic in determining the CCA activities that would be most helpful in facilitating learners’ success and could contribute to the further development of CCR activities that support AFE transition and career pathways programs.

Conclusion

AFE programs have implemented transition services and career pathways approaches that involve a range of CCR activities to support learners’ development of their academic skills, college and career knowledge, and social and emotional skills to help them further their education and training and obtain family sustaining jobs. Of particular interest is the range of support services (e.g., time management, study skills, social and emotional skills) and approaches to the development of college and career knowledge that are part of CCR activities. More detailed information about the design, delivery, and effectiveness of these CCR activities could be helpful to AFE staff in determining which services would be most helpful in facilitating AFE learners’ success.

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