



CHANGING SYSTEMS, CHANGES LIVES

# **From Learning to Action for Alabama's Adult Learners:**

Exploring the Impact of the (Re)Engage  
Alabama Community of Practice

February 2025





**"Changing Systems, Changes Lives"** is a series of case studies that explore the impact of a broad range of projects supported by the national nonprofit organization **Third Sector**. The case studies highlight the work of the forward-thinking government agencies and nonprofit organizations that partner with Third Sector to design, implement, and continuously improve initiatives aimed at dismantling historical inequities and advancing outcomes-focused public systems. **These initiatives are transforming local systems and catalyzing positive change for local communities—reducing homelessness and reincarceration, increasing health equity and access to care, and expanding access to education and work that lead to economic mobility.** They provide a valuable lens into the processes and people that drive systems change and offer lessons for changemakers hoping to do similar transformation work to address complex social issues in their own communities.



# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	5
Methodology	
Guiding Framework .....	7
Contribution vs. Attribution .....	9
An Equity-Driven, Participatory Process .....	9
Understanding the Alabama Context .....	10
The Untapped Potential of Adults With “Some College, No Degree”	
The Economic Imperative .....	12
Project History, Overview, and Goals	
The Pass Cohort, a Catalyst for State-Level Action .....	14
Existing Momentum in the State .....	15
A New Learning Cohort, (Re) Engage Alabama .....	16
SPOTLIGHT ON: Third Sector .....	20
System-Change Impacts	
Structural Change .....	23
Relational Change .....	28
Transformative Change .....	32
Community-Level Impacts .....	36
Discussion and Key Takeaways .....	44
Drivers of (And Barriers To) Change .....	45
Top Three Lessons for Technical Assistance Providers .....	48



Looking Forward .....	49
Glossary/Key Definitions .....	50
Acknowledgements .....	51
Appendix .....	53
References .....	55





# Introduction

This case study shares the story of the **(Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice** that was held between August 2022 and August 2023. This state-sponsored series of learning convenings aimed to change how four-year public higher education institutions across Alabama think about and serve adults with “some college, no degree”—a traditionally underserved population that represents tremendous untapped potential for advancing local education and workforce goals. The innovative Community of Practice was led by the state’s higher education coordinating body, the **Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE)**, and a prominent statewide nonprofit advocacy organization, **Alabama Possible**, with technical assistance from **Third Sector** and support from the **Education Strategy Group (ESG)** and **ECMC Foundation**. Nine institutions from across the state came together over the course of the year to explore data and share best practices for supporting adult learners from enrollment through degree completion, culminating in the development of institution-specific action plans. While many of the participating institutions had already begun to conceptualize and implement services for the some college, no degree population prior to the Community of Practice, engaging in shared learning and developing concrete action plans provided a valuable opportunity to build upon existing momentum and expand existing efforts.

This case study explores the impact of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice **in driving systems- and community-level change across the state**. Specifically, it seeks to understand how the initiative impacted participating higher education institutions, higher education-related public agencies, and nonprofit organizations, as well as the program’s impact on the lived experiences of returning adult learners themselves.

This case study is noteworthy because it highlights the role and value of a learning cohort program in driving social change. Learning cohorts are becoming increasingly popular as a way to bring stakeholders together to build meaningful connections and explore, share, and amplify best practices to address complex social issues. Yet, the long-term impacts of such cohorts are not well understood. As a leading technical assistance provider, Third Sector not only coordinates its own learning cohort programs, it also supports clients in designing and implementing such programs across the country. Understanding the enduring impacts of learning cohort programs like (Re)Engage Alabama can help Third Sector and similar organizations understand these efforts’ true return on investment.

The case study begins with an overview of the needs and challenges facing adult learners with some college, no degree, with a specific focus on the Alabama context. It then provides a brief summary of the evolution and goals of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice before presenting key findings on systems- and community-level impacts. The study concludes with reflections on drivers that contributed to the initiative's impact, as well as the challenges and barriers that may have hindered progress. It shares key lessons learned over the past year and highlights promising signs of change, offering valuable insights that can inform future efforts to advance adult educational attainment and economic mobility outcomes for communities nationwide.



# Methodology

**This case study presents key findings from an evaluation process carried out by Cause IMPACTS Consulting between April and September 2024.** The evaluation was initiated by Third Sector in order to understand better the long-term impact of its work on the government systems it serves and on the communities those systems serve. The evaluation leverages best practices from the emerging field of systems-change evaluation and takes an equity-centered, participatory approach to examine the systems- and community-level impacts of Third Sector-client projects like the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice. The ultimate goals of this impact evaluation are: (1) to understand if Third Sector is making measurable progress toward its mission of “transforming public systems to advance improved and equitable outcomes”<sup>1</sup> and (2) to contribute to collective learning for the broader field on what factors enable lasting systems change. The evaluation and the resulting case study signal Third Sector’s first attempts at measuring and sharing the long-term impacts of its work while demonstrating the organization’s deep commitment to continuous learning and improvement.

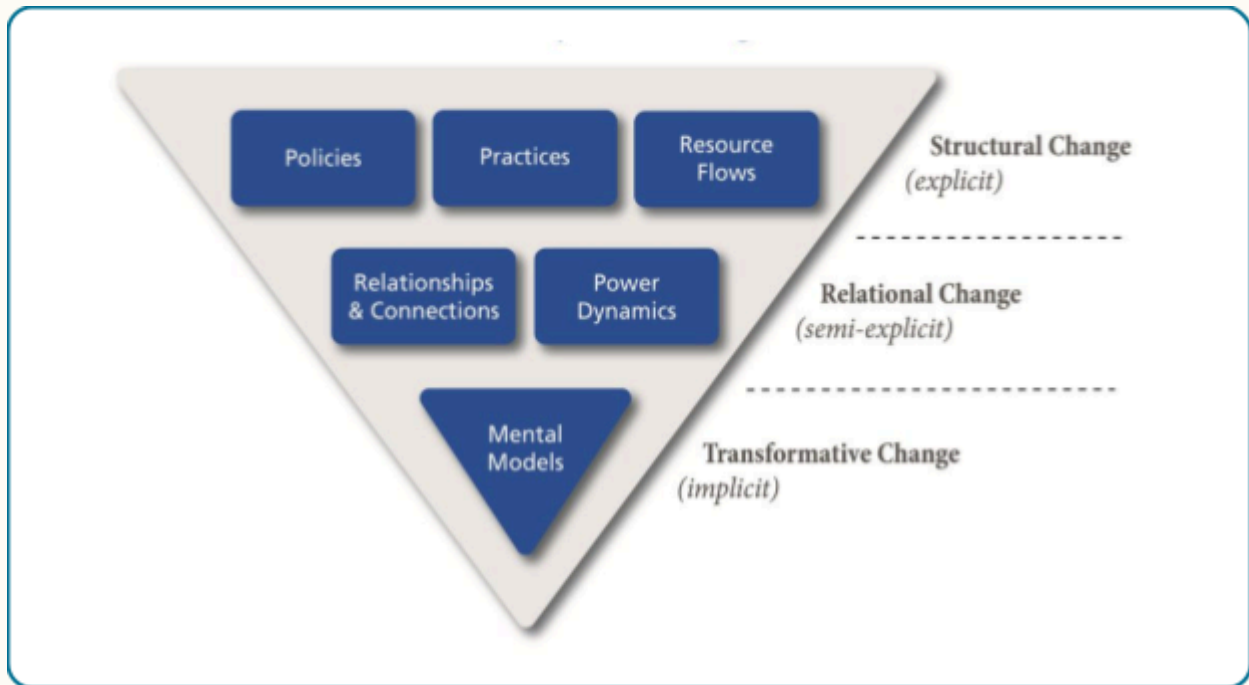
## GUIDING FRAMEWORK

The evaluation leverages FSG’s **“Water of Systems Change”**<sup>2</sup> framework to conceptualize systems change and describe systems-level impacts. This framework defines six conditions that hold complex social problems in place and have the potential to drive progress and change. These conditions include policy, practices, resource flows, relationships, power dynamics, and mental models. The six conditions exist at three separate levels of visibility, from the explicit to the implicit: structural, relational, and transformative ([Figure 1](#)).

To understand systems-change impacts, the evaluation looks for signs of change that may have come about at each of these three levels as a result of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice and, where possible, as a direct result of Third Sector’s involvement in the initiative.

The ultimate goal of any Third Sector project is to transform systems to become more focused and aligned to the needs of communities that are most impacted by a specific issue, referred to as an “outcomes-focused” approach. **Positive systems change occurs when public systems evolve toward a more equitable, outcomes-focused approach.** Any changes that center or are responsive to the voices, perspectives, power, or needs of community members, especially those from historically underserved and oppressed groups, indicate positive momentum toward becoming outcomes-focused.

Figure 1. The 6 Conditions of Systems Change



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## CONTRIBUTION VS. ATTRIBUTION

It should be noted that true social change cannot happen in a silo or through the efforts of one organization or even one initiative alone. **As one actor in complex systems, Third Sector cannot reasonably prove or claim attribution for most systems- and community-level impacts described in this report.** Recognizing this, the current evaluation does not attempt to prove causation or attribution. Instead, it focuses on exploring the ways in which Third Sector and the client projects supported by Third Sector may have contributed to wider change and impact. **This represents a unique and emerging approach to nonprofit impact evaluation that acknowledges the true nature of systems transformation and systems-change work.**

## AN EQUITY-DRIVEN, PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

The evaluation process and the final case study also aim to embody the core values of equity, inclusion, accountability, and shared learning. **The evaluation centers authentic stakeholder engagement and emphasizes lived experiences and storytelling over quantitative data and metrics alone.** Given the complex and intangible nature of systems-change work, the evaluation relies heavily on qualitative stakeholder feedback to assess and understand systems-change impacts. It also centers direct, qualitative feedback from individual program participants in order to explore and understand community-level impacts.

Key evaluation methods included:

- **A detailed review** of existing documents, research, and data related to the (Re)Engage Alabama initiative.
- **One-on-one or small group interviews** with 24 project stakeholders, including staff and leaders from ACHE, Alabama Possible, Governor's Office of Education and Workforce Transformation (GOEWT), ESG, Third Sector, and the following public four-year institutions that participated in the Community of Practice: Alabama State University (ASU), Athens State University, Jacksonville State University (Jax State), Troy University (TROY), and the University of South Alabama (USA).
- **Community listening sessions**, or focus groups, with 22 returning adult learners from the following public four-year institutions that participated in the Community of Practice: Jacksonville State University (Jax State) and the University of South Alabama (USA).
- **A community survey** of (Re)Engage Alabama Grant recipients, a known subset of returning adult learners. From a sample of 30 who received the grant in Spring 2024, four grant recipients completed the survey.

The case study went through a participatory review process, with stakeholders engaging in collaborative sessions and focus groups to review, refine, and co-create portions of the case study. They also provided feedback on draft versions of the report. **The final case study represents a culmination of this collective work, capturing the diverse perspectives of those involved in and impacted by the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice.**

## Understanding the Alabama Context

**The state of Alabama, located in the heart of the Deep South,** is known for its rich cultural history, distinct geographic landscapes, and complex social dynamics. Alabama has a population of about 5.1 million and spans a diverse land area of more than 50,000 square miles.<sup>3</sup> Its area stretches from the Appalachian foothills in the north to the Gulf Coast in the south, offering a mix of forests, rivers, and fertile agricultural land. The state comprises a mix of urban, suburban, and rural communities. Key urban centers include Birmingham, Mobile, Huntsville, and the capital city of Montgomery, though more than 40 percent of the population lives in rural areas.<sup>4</sup>

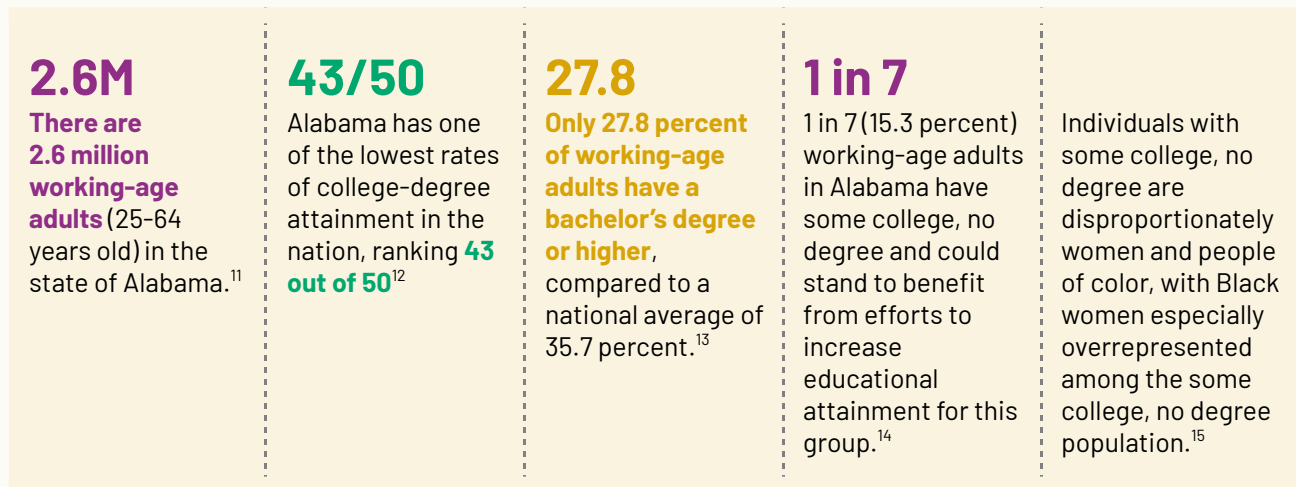
Demographically, 64.6 percent of state residents are White and 35.4 percent are people of color.<sup>5</sup> **Alabama is home to a significant Black population—the sixth largest in the nation.**<sup>6</sup> There are more than 1.3 million Black residents in Alabama, accounting for slightly more than a quarter of the state's overall and working-age populations (26.2 percent<sup>7</sup> and 26.5 percent,<sup>8</sup> respectively). The state's history is deeply tied to both the painful legacy of slavery and segregation and the transformative Civil Rights Movement. Key events like the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Selma to Montgomery marches have placed Alabama at the center of national efforts for equality and justice, giving it a unique place in the nation's history of social change.

Alabama's economy is rooted in agriculture and industry. It has experienced strong growth in the aerospace and automotive manufacturing sectors in recent years, driven by major employers such as Mercedes-Benz, Honda, Hyundai, Toyota, Mazda, and NASA.<sup>9</sup> Despite steady economic gains, key challenges persist, and prosperity is not evenly distributed. **About 16 percent of Alabamians live below the poverty line,** and the state has among the highest poverty rates in the nation.<sup>10</sup> Rising housing costs and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic recession continue to strain low-income households, underscoring the ongoing need for economic mobility-focused initiatives to help close economic and social gaps across the state.



# The Untapped Potential of Adults With “Some College, No Degree”

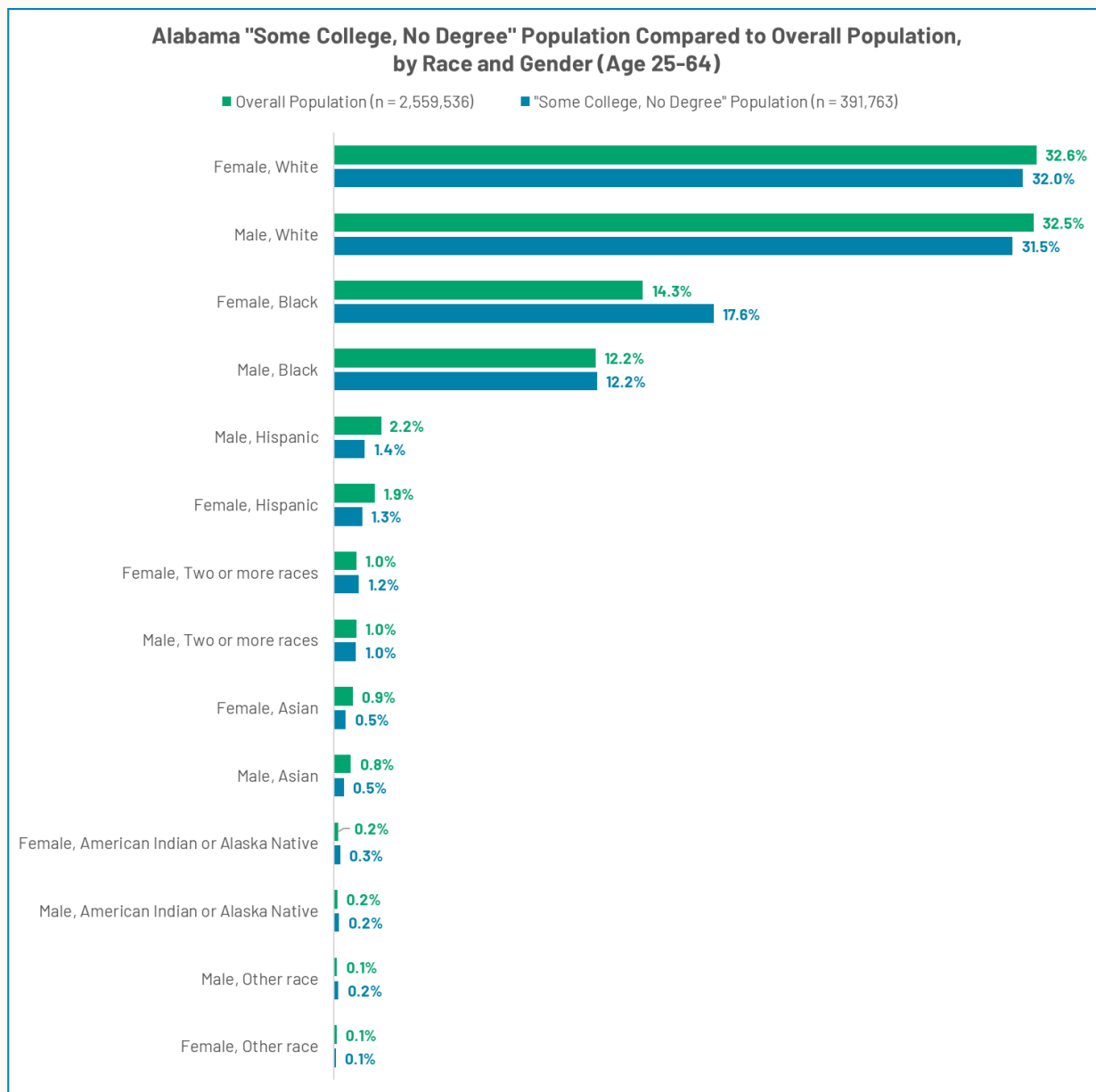
## BY THE NUMBERS:



**A college degree is a key pathway to economic mobility for many Americans** since earnings increase significantly as educational attainment increases. One commonly cited statistic is that college degree holders<sup>16</sup> earn more than \$1 million more in their lifetimes compared to non-degree holders. In Alabama, the median annual wages for workers with a bachelor's degree are a staggering 74.1 percent higher than workers without.<sup>17</sup>

Yet large numbers of individuals who enroll in college do not complete a degree. According to the most recent U.S. Census estimates, there are **33.9 million working-age adults (adults between the ages of 25 and 64) with some college, no degree across the nation**,<sup>18</sup> including **more than 390,000 in Alabama alone**.<sup>19</sup> This includes **1 in every 7 (15.3 percent)** working-age Alabamians. While educational attainment has increased over time, Alabama still ranks as one of the lowest in the country in the percentage of degreed individuals per capita, ranking 43 out of 50 states.<sup>20</sup> The majority of Alabama residents with some college, no degree are White men and women. However, **women and people of color**—especially **Black women**—are overrepresented among the some college, no degree population relative to their share of the general population (Figure 2).<sup>21</sup> Individuals from these groups face complex and compounding systemic barriers to postsecondary access and success, including financial barriers, limited access to college preparation and application support, and underinvestment in essential wraparound support services such as affordable child care. These disparities have significant implications for individual economic well-being and regional economic growth.

Figure 2. Demographic Overview of Alabama Some College, No Degree Population



## THE ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE

Today, there are more jobs in Alabama than there are people to fill them, but there is a shortage of skilled talent to fill these roles.<sup>22</sup> Factors such as low labor force participation, limited access to higher education and job training, and challenges in hiring and recruitment, especially for underrepresented communities, significantly impact talent availability in the region.<sup>23</sup> However, the demand for skilled workers in the state continues to grow, with an



estimated **two-thirds of the jobs that will be added to Alabama's labor market over the next decade requiring bachelor's degrees.**<sup>24</sup>

Without a college degree, a significant portion of workers are left stranded, unable to enter the state's robust workforce or access high-wage, upwardly mobile careers. Not only does this limit individuals' long-term earning potential and opportunities for economic advancement, creating disproportionate negative impacts for low-income people and communities of color, but **it also leaves the local workforce without essential skilled talent and stymies economic growth.** To address this shortfall, Governor Kay Ivey's Success Plus initiative has set a statewide goal of adding 500,000 credentialed Alabamians to the workforce by 2025.<sup>25</sup>

Adult learners play an important role in achieving this target. However, when adults with some college, no degree attempt to return to college, they often find that **most higher education institutions are not designed to serve learners like them.** Meanwhile, local higher education institutions are struggling to maintain enrollment numbers due to demographic shifts, such as a declining youth population and changing trends in college-going behavior among recent high school graduates.<sup>26</sup> Embracing adult learners could help institutions address these challenges and stabilize enrollment. Furthermore, a recent analysis by Alabama Possible valued the potential revenue gains that public institutions could realize by investing more than \$29 million in adult learners.<sup>27</sup>

**The opportunity is clear: by empowering adult learners to persist and obtain a degree, Alabama can meet the governor's ambitious workforce target, bolster local higher education institutions, advance economic mobility for residents, and support regional economic growth.** Increasing access to postsecondary education and improving attainment outcomes for adult learners with some college, no degree are essential to creating a stronger economy for Alabama and similar communities nationwide.



Looking at reality is a piece of it. Our traditional-age student numbers are declining, and the number of those students who are choosing to go to college is declining. So what's left would be the adult learners and those who have stopped out. There is a necessity to try to attract adult learners, and that's just a fact. That's the environment we live in."

— Dr. Catherine Wehlburg, President, Athens State University

# Project History, Overview, and Goals

## PROJECT TIMELINE:

January–May 2022	Alabama participates in Third Sector’s PASS Cohort
August 2022–August 2023	(Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice takes place <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Convening 1 - August 3, 2022</li><li>• Convening 2 - November 9, 2022</li><li>• Convening 3 - January 24, 2023</li><li>• Convening 4 - May 18, 2023</li><li>• Convening 5 - August 2, 2023</li></ul>
June 2023	The state legislature establishes the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program
January 2024	First semester of (Re)Engage Alabama Grant implementation (spring 2024)

## THE PASS COHORT, A CATALYST FOR STATE-LEVEL ACTION

The (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice story begins with another Third Sector project, **Partnerships to Achieve Student Success (PASS)**. PASS is a continuous improvement program structured as a learning cohort—a collaborative group where participants learn from each other’s experiences and collectively develop new approaches to complex challenges. As a core component of Third Sector’s “Post-Secondary Opportunity” portfolio,<sup>28</sup> PASS brings together state education agencies from across the country to explore innovative strategies for advancing equitable postsecondary outcomes for communities nationwide.

The inaugural 2019 PASS cohort included four states—Colorado, Connecticut, Ohio, and Arizona—and focused on leveraging Pay for Success contracts as a tool to utilize existing public funding streams to improve students’ higher education outcomes. The second PASS cohort launched in 2022 and focused on a specific population that was quickly rising in importance in the higher education sphere: adults with some college, no degree. The **Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE)** and **Alabama Possible** came together to represent “Team Alabama” as part of the cohort, alongside representatives from Rhode Island and Michigan.

Through the PASS cohort, Alabama participants gained a deeper understanding of adult learners' experiences, challenges, and needs through key data-driven activities, including a review of relevant disaggregated data on adult learner demographics and completion outcomes; root-cause analysis to understand disparities in outcomes between groups based on age, gender, race, and other factors; and an asset and gap analysis of the current higher education system in the state. This data revealed that enrollment and completion rates for adult learners varied significantly across four-year public institutions, sparking participants' desire to identify and amplify best practices that would enable all institutions across the state to optimize outcomes.

As the PASS cohort drew to a close, Third Sector approached Alabama with an opportunity to build on PASS's momentum and realize its vision of elevating best practices. Third Sector had secured funding from the ECMC Foundation to continue work related to supporting adult learners in Alabama.<sup>29</sup> These funds were used to bring dedicated technical assistance to the state to support the design and implementation of the **(Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice**.



By being in that initial PASS cohort with the other two states, it meant that we were thinking about this and trying to create plans about what it might look like to do a statewide effort for engaging adults. Without that kind of initial catalyst, it may have just gotten lost. (We realized) we could—even without a big grant program or without some kind of mandate from the state—build on some of the pieces that were more ground-up, more grassroots. ... (Third Sector) helped us build our own momentum.”

— Dr. Robin McGill, Deputy Director for Academic Affairs, ACHE

## EXISTING MOMENTUM IN THE STATE

**This new initiative fits into a broader body of work around adult educational attainment and workforce development already underway in Alabama**, including initiatives organized by ACHE and Alabama Possible, as well as other nonprofit and philanthropic organizations operating in the region. For example:

- **ACHE** had launched the “All in Alabama” campaign aimed at keeping highly qualified and educated people in the state’s workforce.<sup>30</sup> The campaign began in 2021 with Retain Alabama, a program that encouraged college graduates to live and work in the state after graduation. In 2022, it expanded to include Recall Alabama, a program that conducts outreach to former graduates to encourage them to return to the state.

- **Alabama Possible** had been doing significant work to raise awareness around the issue of transcript withholding, a policy that creates undue financial barriers for individuals seeking to return to college. They had also led national cohort programs such as “Degrees When Due” in partnership with the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP).<sup>31</sup> In 2020, they established the Alabama College Attainment Network (Alabama CAN) to bring together higher education partners to “break down barriers to increase college readiness, access, and completion in Alabama, particularly among students of under-resourced families, first-generation college-going students, and students of color.”<sup>32</sup>

In addition to these initiatives, many local universities were already beginning to think about the unique needs of adult learners and participating in local initiatives. For example, Jacksonville State University was part of Alabama Possible’s “Degrees When Due” program, while Athens State University had been working for many years to advance work on credits for prior learning and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in partnership with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL).

## A NEW LEARNING COHORT, (RE)ENGAGE ALABAMA

The presence of existing initiatives demonstrates that there was already energy and momentum in the state around serving adult learners. **The (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice built on this momentum, bringing together key stakeholders to align existing adult-focused initiatives to continue moving the needle for adult learners.** With assistance from Third Sector, ACHE, Alabama Possible, and other partners convened a five-session Community of Practice for public four-year institutions across the state to explore the barriers facing adult learners with some college, no degree, analyze statewide and institutional student-outcomes data, share best practices from the field, and develop action plans aimed at improving services and outcomes for this population. ACHE provided mini-grants to encourage institutions to participate in the cohort program, which could also be used as seed funding for any planned actions.

Goals of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice:<sup>33</sup>

1. Better understand and **discuss enrollment and completion data and outcomes for adult students** across four-year public institutions, as well as how these outcomes connect with labor force participation outcomes.
2. **Identify the impact of and support the scaling of specific solutions** that four-year public institutions have in place that improve adult enrollment and attainment outcomes (at the institutional level and across the state).
3. Connect, align, and augment **existing and ongoing state- and institution-level efforts** to support adults.



These goals contributed to the initiative's broader vision to increase educational attainment and economic mobility for adult learners. A Third Sector staff member who helped implement the project shared, “We were trying to strengthen the way that the state agency is working with higher education institutions to collectively serve adult learners.... A big goal was to improve outcomes for adult learners, in terms of helping to improve both enrollment and completion—and ultimately getting into life-sustaining careers that are actually of high value and meet the criteria of good jobs.”

While (Re)Engage Alabama was one among many adult educational attainment-focused initiatives underway in the state, **the program was unique due to its focus on four-year institutions and four-year degrees.** In fact, the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice was the first state-sponsored initiative specifically focused on adult learners pursuing four-year degrees. The convenings were also unique because they embodied a new approach to systems change by promoting the scaling of best practice solutions from the ground up (institutional level up to the state) rather than the top down. A leader from ACHE shared, “There were some institutions that were doing great work. What would it look like to build up from that rather than down from some kind of larger mandate, which is often how things go at the state.... (T)here are some really great things; how do we scale them?”

**Nine of the state’s 14 public four-year institutions participated in the Community of Practice,** including one of the state’s two public four-year HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities).<sup>34</sup> Collectively, these nine institutions serve nearly 60,000 undergraduate students annually, representing 42.5 percent of the state's public undergraduate population—highlighting the immense potential for long-term impact.<sup>35</sup> **As the Community of Practice concluded, each institution developed tailored action plans for how they would serve adult learners with some college, no degree better,** which were set to be implemented during the 2023-2024 academic year.



We specifically reached out to (four-year) universities rather than community colleges because the community colleges already serve a lot of adult students. So, we knew that they already had systems in place to support that population. But the universities, in our experience, had been very focused on traditional first-time, full-time student enrollment. We wanted to identify some best practitioners and also have them learn from each other around what was going on with adult students.”

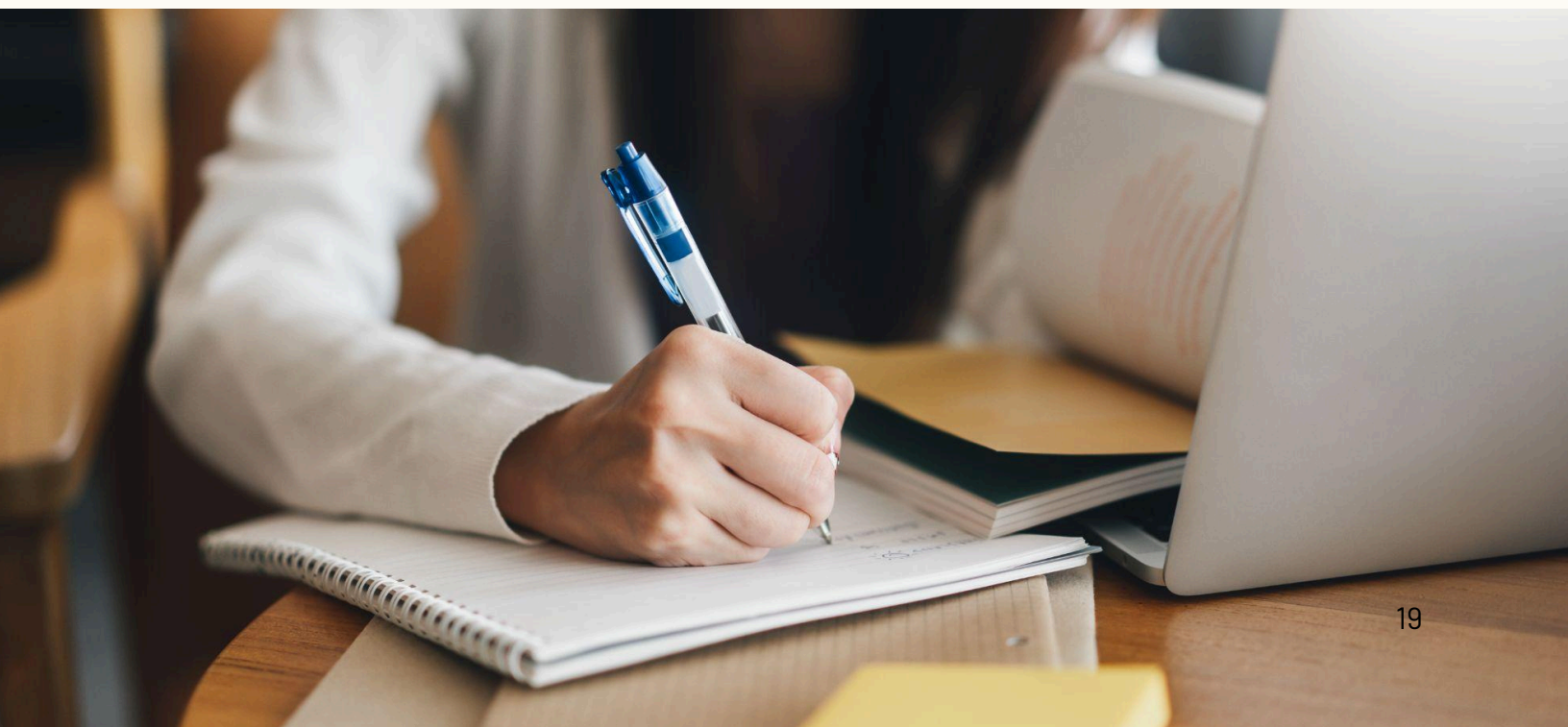
— Dr. Robin McGill, Deputy Director for Academic Affairs, ACHE

## About the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice Partners\*

\*Note: This list does not include additional organizations that acted as presenters or attended the first Community of Practice convening but did not continue forward in the program.

PARTNER	ROLE
<b>Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE)</b> <i>Lead convener</i>	<p>ACHE is the state agency responsible for the overall statewide planning and coordination of higher education in Alabama, the administration of various student aid programs, and the performance of designated regulatory functions.</p> <p>ACHE served as the lead convener for the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice. It also provided mini-grants to encourage institutional participation in the program.</p>
<b>Alabama Possible</b> <i>Strategic partner</i>	<p>Alabama Possible is a statewide nonprofit organization that breaks down barriers to prosperity through advocacy, education, and collaboration. Alabama Possible's initiatives focus on underserved and marginalized communities and work toward removing barriers to prosperity. The organization's work falls into four key pillars: postsecondary access, postsecondary success, advocacy, and civic engagement.</p> <p>Alabama Possible acted as a policy advisor and strategic partner in planning the Community of Practice, bringing essential expertise on local policy priorities.</p>
<b>Governor's Office of Education and Workforce Transformation (GOEWT)</b> <i>Advisor</i>	<p>GOEWT is a policy office established to implement Governor Ivey's Strong Start, Strong Finish education initiative and workforce development strategic plan by coordinating workforce development and education for Alabama.</p> <p>GOEWT acted as an early champion of the Community of Practice. The office played a critical role in bringing partners together to participate in Third Sector's PASS cohort, which ultimately gave way to the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice.</p>
<b>Third Sector Capital Partners (Third Sector)</b> <i>Lead technical assistance provider</i>	<p>Third Sector provided technical assistance to ACHE and Alabama Possible to support the implementation of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice, including strategic guidance for the development of the Community of Practice; preparing data and other materials for convenings, including data deep dives; planning and facilitating convenings; and providing coaching and support to participating institutions.</p>

<b>Education Strategy Group (ESG)</b> <i>Technical assistance provider</i>	<p>ESG is a consulting firm that works with K-12, higher education, and workforce leaders to achieve greater impact. It works across sectors to move the needle on issues that are critical to improving student success and advancing equity.</p> <p>ESG provided additional technical assistance and support for the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice, including deep-rooted expertise in the postsecondary education space and data support.</p>
<b>ECMC Foundation</b> <i>Supporter</i>	<p>ECMC Foundation is a national foundation whose North Star goal is to eliminate equity gaps in postsecondary completion by 2040.</p> <p>It provided funding support to the PASS Cohort and additional funding to continue working on the (Re)Engage Alabama effort.</p>
<b>Participating institutions in the Community of Practice</b>	<p>The following nine four-year public institutions participated in the Community of Practice and developed specific action plans for implementation:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Alabama State University (ASU)</li> <li>2. Athens State University</li> <li>3. Jacksonville State University (Jax State)</li> <li>4. Troy University (TROY)</li> <li>5. University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB)</li> <li>6. University of Montevallo (UM)</li> <li>7. University of North Alabama (UNA)</li> <li>8. University of South Alabama (USA)</li> <li>9. University of West Alabama (UWA)</li> </ol>



## SPOTLIGHT ON: Third Sector



*Third Sector is a nonprofit technical assistance organization that advises government agencies on effective ways to reshape their policies, systems, and services to achieve better outcomes for all people, no matter their race, background, or circumstances. Third Sector helps unlock possibility, confront inequity, and catalyze change to the benefit of the people and places governments, community-based, and philanthropic partners serve.*

All Third Sector client projects focus on six key levers within public systems: policies, services, data, funding, external relationships, and internal culture. These levers have the potential to be critical drivers for change in public systems and also reflect the key areas in which Third Sector provides support.

While (Re)Engage Alabama was a collaborative initiative, with partners working together to design and implement the Community of Practice and the resulting action plans, Third Sector made noteworthy contributions to the project, highlighting its immense value as a technical assistance provider.

### Third Sector carried out the following key activities for the (Re)Engage Alabama initiative:

#### FUNDING

- Helped to shift close to **\$40,000 in state funds from ACHE** to provide grants for institutions to participate in the Community of Practice and implement their action plans.
- Created momentum to support the passage of Senate Bill 175, establishing the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program, which shifted **\$9 million in state funds toward supporting adults with some college, no degree.**

#### DATA

- **Conducted data analysis and prepared deep-dive reports** presenting detailed, institution-specific data on adult learner outcomes. This data was disaggregated by sex, race, and other factors when possible to enable equity-based analysis of outcomes.
- Guided participants toward **more data-driven practices**, such as leveraging adult learner data to inform the development of institution-specific action plans and set outcome metrics for measuring the success of key initiatives.
- Encouraged the adoption of **continuous improvement processes**, such as ongoing review of adult learner outcomes. Specific continuous improvement plans were also included as part of institutional action plans.



SERVICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dedicated time <b>during convenings</b> and through <b>coaching sessions</b> to support institutions in developing clear <b>action plans</b> that outline service improvements to increase enrollment, persistence, and completion outcomes for adult learners with some college no degree.</li> <li>• Created an <b>"Action Plan" template</b> to guide the development of institutional action plans. This template was a tool to propel joint decisionmaking and provided scaffolding for participating institutions to craft program and service improvements thoughtfully.</li> <li>• Fostered the <b>sharing of best practices</b> for service delivery among institutions during Community of Practice convenings.</li> </ul>
EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS	<p>Cultivated stronger relationships between various stakeholders by <b>planning and facilitating regular convenings</b>. Key relationships include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Between the state higher education commission and public four-year institutions.</li> <li>• Among the nine public four-year institutions.</li> <li>• Between the state higher education commission, public four-year institutions, and local and national nonprofits and policy organizations operating in the higher education space (e.g., ESG, CAEL, Ithaka S+R).</li> </ul>
INTERNAL CULTURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fostered connections <b>between different staff and offices from within the same university</b>, breaking through silos to foster collective teams.</li> <li>• Helped public universities better understand the <b>adult learner journey</b> by providing specific tools and resources during the Community of Practice (e.g., journey map).</li> </ul>

### Reflections on Third Sector's Role and Value-Add:

- "Third Sector was the glue that kept us together to keep the ball rolling.... Over time, I would sometimes forget they were a consultant and not a partner in the state because they really became fused into the work. ... They were to us a part of that collaborative work, not just a consultant that guided us or facilitated us throughout the process." — Chandra Scott, Executive Director, Alabama Possible
- "From my point of view, the greatest value that we got was that additional capacity. We had these ambitions of wanting to do things and, without Third Sector, we wouldn't have been able to do them." — Dr. Robin McGill, Deputy Director for Academic Affairs, ACHE
- "I think having our (Third Sector) consultant just sitting down with us and spending time with us, helping us with our (action) plan, and kind of guiding us to a direction we need to be in (was helpful). There were times we were confused about what we needed to do, and Third Sector would just say, 'Well, I think y'all should look at it this way.' Having them there was very beneficial for the whole process." — Tammy Allen, Assistant Director of Graduate Programs, Troy University

# Systems-Change Impacts

At the time of writing, one year has passed since the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice last convened in August 2023. While it is too soon to know the enduring impacts of the work, early signs of change make it clear that the initiative has already contributed to changes in the structures, relationships, and mental models of the individuals and organizations involved, signaling broader change and transformation in the higher education system across the state of Alabama. While many of these changes cannot be attributed solely to the (Re)Engage Alabama initiative, the convenings contributed to and bolstered change in meaningful ways—in combination with aligned initiatives and existing work already underway in the state and at individual institutions. Key findings on systems-level impacts are summarized below (Table 1) and described in more detail in the pages that follow.

*Table 1. Summary of Systems-Change Impacts\**

\*Note: The headings and numbered items in the table below correspond to the information on the pages that follow.

<b>STRUCTURAL CHANGE</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Contributed to increasing public funding, including a dedicated state grant program for adult learners</li><li>2. Reduced financial barriers for students through institution-specific scholarships and financial support</li><li>3. Enhanced direct outreach and communications to re-enroll adult learners</li><li>4. Provided more personalized support services to increase persistence and completion</li><li>5. Scaled practices across campus, getting the whole campus involved to support adult learners</li><li>6. Increased staff capacity to serve adult learners</li><li>7. Increased awareness of available data and resources, and a honing of data-driven practices</li><li>8. Expanded flexible, online course offerings</li></ol>
<b>RELATIONAL CHANGE</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Created more open channels of communication between the state and higher education institutions</li><li>2. Cultivated relationships between higher education institutions, enabling them to share and amplify best practices</li><li>3. Increased coordination and collaboration WITHIN individual institutions</li><li>4. Increased visibility and recognition of lead organizations (ACHE, Alabama Possible)</li><li>5. Strained certain relationships when ongoing communication was not maintained</li></ol>
<b>TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Reinforced and deepened participants' understanding of adult learners</li></ol>

- 
- 2. Fostered participating institutions' recognition of themselves as leaders in the adult-attainment space
  3. Increased support and buy-in from institutional leadership
  4. Promoted recognition and prioritization of adult learners by the state

## STRUCTURAL CHANGE

### *Policies, practices, and resource flows*

Overall, all organizations that participated in the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice are more intentionally catering to adult learners and are continuing to bolster programming and support for this population. At the state level, there have been **major shifts in policy and funding for adult learners**. At the institutional level, participating **institutions have introduced or strengthened direct programs, services, and supports for adult learners**, with many implementing specific solutions from the action plans they created at the conclusion of the (Re)Engage Alabama convenings. The most common and cross-cutting developments across institutions are highlighted below, and a detailed list of specific changes introduced at each university can be found in the Appendix. While most of these impacts are not a direct result of the Community of Practice alone, the Community of Practice experience shaped and inspired these developments in meaningful ways.

### 1. Contributed to Increasing Public Funding, Including a Dedicated State Grant Program for Adult Learners

Since the launch of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice, the state of Alabama and ACHE, in particular, have invested more than \$9 million in public funds toward **initiatives aimed at supporting adults with some college, no degree**. This began in the fall of 2022 when ACHE made an **initial investment of about \$40,000** to provide grants of \$3,000 to \$5,000 to support institutions' participation in the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice and the creation and implementation of institution-specific action plans.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time that the Community of Practice convenings were underway, ACHE and Alabama Possible advocated for and secured additional funds from the state legislature to establish a dedicated grant program for adult learners. As a result, the state approved the **(Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program (S.B. 175)**, which allocated a **\$4.5 million supplemental appropriation in 2023 and another \$4.5 million in 2024**.<sup>39</sup> The program is the first scholarship in Alabama's history specifically dedicated to adult learners with some college, no degree. Modeled after similar programs in neighboring states, such as Tennessee Reconnect,<sup>40</sup> the grant helps adults who are just a few credits shy of graduation return to school and complete their degrees toward high-wage, high-demand occupations.<sup>41</sup>

A leader from ACHE shared insight into how the new funding was connected to the Community of Practice: "I think that the existence of the (Re)Engage initiative and the cohort of nine

institutions that were consistently meeting and taking steps towards improving the adult learner experience added momentum for those behind the scenes conversations and approval of that allocation of funds.” Thus, while the Community of Practice and legislative advocacy were separate lines of work, the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice played a supportive role in the passage of the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program.

## 2. Reduced Financial Barriers for Students Through Institution-Specific Scholarships and Financial Support



Adult leaders want to go get their college degrees, but there are so many barriers against them. Money is the number one thing.”

—Margaret Cabble, Coordinator of Strategic Initiatives, ACHE

In addition to the state-level grant program, individual institutions have introduced initiatives to alleviate financial barriers for returning adult learners, including **waiving application fees and expanding scholarship options**. The Community of Practice helped shape the development of these new initiatives by providing institutions with a deeper understanding of key challenges and barriers adult learners face in their education journey, with financial barriers topping the list.

For example, even before participating in the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice, Jacksonville State University had established a free readmission application and the “Finish What You Started” scholarship for returning adult learners.<sup>42</sup> After (Re)Engage, they continued to offer these programs and also expanded **learning partnerships with local employers and industry partners** (e.g., chambers of commerce, business associations) to offer scholarships and tuition discounts for employees.<sup>43</sup> Athens State University has a similar employer partnership program.<sup>44</sup> These partnerships enable institutions to access a pipeline of adults who may not have finished a degree and can benefit from low-cost access to college courses. A participant from Athens State explained, “We’ve seen a significant increase in the number of students coming in through the learning partnerships. We started with eight students. Now it’s close to 200 coming through learning partnerships.”

## 3. Enhanced Direct Outreach and Communications To Re-enroll Adult Learners

Public institutions are investing additional time and resources into marketing and communications efforts aimed at engaging adult learners. One new development inspired directly by the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice is Troy University’s **“Return to Learn” webpage** and accompanying inquiry form, designed specifically for re-enrolling adult learners.<sup>45</sup> “That was an idea we got from another school,” reflected Kim Shaver, Director of Online Academic Services at TROY. “We really didn’t have a name for it (our program for returning adult learners). So we just decided to do it, setting up a webpage and calling it something that students might resonate with.”



Many schools are also leveraging **Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems** to increase outreach and communications to adult learners. For example, the University of South Alabama revamped its communications plan and developed automated messages to recruit and enroll adult learners via Slate CRM. A key development has been increasing outreach during the critical time between readmission and re-enrollment—a change inspired by the Community of Practice. A participant from South Alabama shared, “(A)s a result of (Re)Engage, I started looking more closely at readmits and how we can do better to enroll a higher percentage of them. ... (T)hey are in this limbo land that they're readmitted students, but they're not active students, so they're not getting good communication of what they need to do. ... (Now) with our enrollment management system, every semester I send an email out and say, 'Hey, you were readmitted for this past semester, but you didn't register. How can I help you get set up for the term?’” The school has also established a dedicated support email, [readmit@southalabama.edu](mailto:readmit@southalabama.edu), as a central point of contact for re-admitted students.<sup>46</sup>

#### 4. Provided More Personalized Support Services To Increase Persistence and Completion

Adult learners have unique needs, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution for supporting this diverse population. Recognizing this, some participating institutions have introduced more personalized advising and coaching services to guide adult learners from enrollment through to graduation. For example, Alabama State University—a public HBCU located in Montgomery—has partnered with **InsideTrack Student Success Coaching** to provide tailored student support. This program, sponsored by Educational Advancement and the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, is ensuring returning adult students receive ongoing and individualized support. “In addition to reaching out to students helping them with the steps to get back, they (InsideTrack) are working with the students for nine months if they have any issues,” shared Dr. Ronda Westry, Alabama State’s Assistant Vice President of Student Success Units and a participant of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice. “It’s critical to make sure they know that they have support as they’re transitioning back in.”

Another participating institution has established its own dedicated office for returning adult learners. In October 2023, Athens State University launched its new **Adult Learner Services Office**, a one-stop shop where adult learners can receive advising, support, and resources they need to achieve their education goals successfully. This office evolved out of the school’s Adult Degree Programs department, expanding the range of services and supports available to students while continuing to maintain Athens State’s focus and leadership in work related to Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs). While ideas for an adult learner office were in the works for many years, the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice helped push the process forward. Participants from Athens State were inspired by fellow cohort members at the University of South Alabama, which has had an Office of Adult Learner Services since 2015. Felicia Mucci, founding Director of the Adult Learner Services Office at Athens State, reflected, “I think the ((Re)Engage Alabama) convenings and the conversations we had really crystallized what that

(office) could look like. The conversations had started, but it helped push us towards making that happen.”

## 5. Scaled Practices Across Campus, Getting the Whole Campus Involved To Support Adult Learners

Recognizing the importance of breaking down institutional silos, many Community of Practice participants have actively worked to raise awareness about the needs of returning adult learners and promote best practices for serving this group within their own institutions. As one participant from Troy University explained, “If you're not working with these students daily, it's hard to fully understand the challenges and obstacles they face every day.”

For example, beginning in the 2024 summer term, the University of South Alabama's Office of Adult Learner Services began **sharing its admissions reports with individual colleges at the university** to inform college staff about which students have re-enrolled and may need targeted support. “This is the first year that I was sending those lists to the colleges and saying, ‘Hey, here's all of your re-admitted students who aren't enrolled yet,’ so that they could do some outreach to connect them with the college too,” shared Director Bob Charlebois. Charlebois explained that bringing colleges on board to support adult learners has already increased enrollment rates: “We discovered that students did reapply to be admitted—not a lot, but a handful. Enough to make it definitely worth communicating. This little bit of extra emailing is making a difference.”

At Troy University, the **expansion of a novel credit review process** is helping more adult learners graduate with a degree. Troy staff members found that students sometimes have the credits they need to graduate but do not realize it and thus may not apply for graduation. Advisors already had a practice of thoroughly reviewing the transcripts of online and on-campus adult learners to see where students could apply their credits in the best way to graduate as quickly as possible. This credit review and auditing process started as something that was only done by Troy Online's Academic Services Office but has been scaled to other offices since the end of the (Re)Engage Alabama convenings, including the Records Office and the Graduation Center. This campus-wide expansion is helping to increase graduation rates for all students across the university, not just adult learners.



Helping students to graduate and move on with their lives is the most rewarding part of it. (The results of the credit audit) got us to look at our processes here at TROY. Why were these students not graduated? What can we change so that this doesn't happen?”

—Tammy Allen, Assistant Director of Graduate Programs, Troy University

## 6. Increased Staff Capacity To Serve Adult Learners

Many organizations and institutions that participated in the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice have added staff capacity to continue supporting adult learner-related work. Alabama Possible has doubled its staff size since 2022 when the convenings first began. Institutions like Jacksonville State University and the University of South Alabama have also added new staff members or redefined staff roles in order to dedicate more time and capacity toward serving returning adult learners. For example, South Alabama now has a role in the admissions office that specifically focuses on outreach to adult learners, while Jacksonville State has established a post-traditional recruitment subcommittee as part of its enrollment efforts. A participant from Jacksonville State shared, “We have people working daily with and on this population of students and trying to break down those barriers.”

## 7. Increased Awareness of Available Data and Resources, and a Honing of Data-Driven Practices

The (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice has also driven improvements in data-driven practices among participating institutions. While many universities already tracked adult learner data through sources like the National Student Clearinghouse, the Community of Practice provided **access to valuable new data from ACHE’s Statewide Data System**, including lists of adults with some college, no degree per institution. Institutions also received a **data deep-dive packet per institution**, prepared by Third Sector, with enrollment, persistence, and completion trends disaggregated by age, race, gender, location, and other demographic factors.

Access to more detailed data on adult learners enabled schools to develop a deeper understanding of the population and refine strategies for supporting this group. The data played an important role in shaping institution-specific action plans created during the Community of Practice, including defining target populations and setting outcome metrics to measure the success of initiatives. Many participating institutions defined target populations based on age, registration status, and number of credit hours. For example, for the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), the target group of adult learners was defined as “stop-outs”—students whose first term at UAB was on or after fall 2016, who have not registered for three or more semesters, and who have not graduated from UAB.

Since the end of the (Re)Engage convenings, **many institutions have continued to strengthen their internal data systems and data review processes**. For example, both Troy University and the University of South Alabama regularly pull and review reports on adult enrollment at their campuses using their robust CRM systems (CRM Advise and Slate CRM, respectively). They have successfully leveraged this information to drive decisionmaking that improves programs and services for adult learners.



It (the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice) also helped us to start analyzing data. ... (W)e've started taking a look at information in different ways and learned a few things that kind of surprised us. There were assumptions about what actually prevented students from persisting, but when we took a look at the data, it was actually something else, which was enlightening."

*—Felicia Mucci, Director, Adult Learner Services Office,  
Athens State University*

## 8. Expanded Flexible, Online Course Offerings

Recognizing the unique barriers facing adult learners through the Community of Practice **inspired many universities to introduce more flexible—often online—course options to better meet the needs of adult learners.** A participant from the University of South Alabama reflected on the expansion of the school's online offerings, "A year ago, if you looked at our online programs, there was interdisciplinary studies and the RN-BSN program (Registered Nurse to Bachelor of Science in Nursing program), and that was it. Now, we have interdisciplinary studies, organizational leadership, criminal justice, general business. ... Someone in the school of computing contacted me and they're talking about creating an online program for next year." At Alabama State, the Student Success Units department is working with the Division of Online Education and Programs to expand online offerings. A participant from the school shared, "It's perfect for what we're trying to do with engaging nontraditional age learners. Some of them really do love being on campus, but because of their work schedule, a lot of time online is what's left. One of the things I keep saying is that we have to continue to work to expand our online programs. ... It's for all students, but it really will help our nontraditional age students."

## RELATIONAL CHANGE

*Relationships, connections, and power dynamics*



I feel like the relational elements of the project were really important outcomes, even though I know that can be harder to measure effectively. Just observing how institutions were working with ACHE and feeling comfortable sharing their concerns (directly with ACHE) as a result of it."

*—Third Sector Project Team Member*



A deeper layer of systems change brought about by the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice is the strengthening of relationships among key actors in the state's higher education system, including the state higher education commission, public higher education institutions, and supporting nonprofits. While most organizations involved in the Community of Practice had some existing level of familiarity, the project strengthened and transformed their connections, resulting in more open channels of communication and stronger coordination. However, maintaining these relationships long-term has been a challenge. In the absence of regular convenings, contact between certain partners has become sporadic or nonexistent—highlighting an important consideration for the sustainability of future relational change efforts.

## 1. Created More Open Channels of Communication Between the State and Higher Education Institutions

The (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice transformed the **relationships between the state higher education commission, ACHE, and participating public four-year institutions.**

One Community of Practice participant shared, “We’ve always been pretty active in communicating with ACHE; however, during the period in which the convenings were happening, it increased the frequency with which we were engaged in a conversation with our colleagues at ACHE, and it allowed us to showcase what we were doing both to the state and to other institutions.” Another participant echoed a similar sentiment, “I think we have more of a working relationship. So it’s not just an agency that’s passing out legislation; they are people who want to help our students. And I think it’s easier to view them in that way now. We feel like we have more of an open line of communication with them.”

Third Sector’s expert facilitation and ability to carve out a dedicated space for trust-building and connection enabled stakeholders to create closer ties and more open channels of communication. These developments helped dispel some tensions around power and authority between public institutions and ACHE. A Third Sector project team member reflected, “I do think that we saw the tension easing as far as the two-way communication between ACHE and the institutions. I think being able to have them all together relatively often, sharing data with each other, and ACHE really positioning themselves as wanting to support institutions with this definitely did ease the tension. Even though it could be a little bit awkward sometimes to hear institutions really candidly speaking about their concerns to ACHE, I think the fact that they felt comfortable doing that is a testament to the relationship improv(ing) as a result of (Re)Engage.”

These new relationships between participating institutions and ACHE have persisted beyond the Community of Practice, with many schools maintaining close ties with the commission and continuing to participate in additional ACHE-sponsored initiatives. ACHE also continues to work more intentionally with the institutions to share data, get their input on solutions, and recognize best practices and areas where they are excelling.

## 2. Cultivated Relationships Between Higher Education Institutions, Enabling Them To Share and Amplify Best Practices



I think one of the unintentional wins out of the process is that we brought four-year institutions together to no longer see each other as competitors but as a community of learning to build a system that works for adult learners.”

—Chandra Scott, Executive Director, Alabama Possible.

Another key relational change brought about by the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice is the **strengthening of relationships and connections between different public institutions from across the state**. Over the course of the convenings, institutions began to collaborate more closely with each other. A Third Sector project team member observed, “As the convenings went on, we saw folks from different institutions sitting together more and talking about their work more. We even heard offers of, ‘Oh, you should try this strategy. ... Happy to share more about this,’ and inviting each other to their (own) convenings. We definitely saw improved relationships and growth in relationships between the institutions as a result of it.”

Since the final convening in August 2023, most institutions have not remained in close contact, yet some relationships have endured and led to specific structural changes at campuses. For example, as stated earlier, the connection made between the University of South Alabama and Athens State University influenced the development of a new Adult Learner Services Office at Athens State. Additionally, Athens State brought an Alpha Sigma Lambda chapter to its campus, an honor society for adult learners that already had a chapter at the University of South Alabama.

## 3. Increased Coordination and Collaboration WITHIN Individual Institutions



It would be great to have an ongoing community of practice, but they’ve (institutions) built that community of practice within their institution. A lot of them had fragmentation around the offices and now they have more coordination.”

— Dr. Robin McGill, Deputy Director for Academic Affairs, ACHE

An unanticipated but enduring impact of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice has been a reduction in institution-level silos. The Community of Practice brought together individuals from different offices and departments *within* the same university, giving rise to more coordinated and cohesive teams. Not only did Third Sector's facilitation of institution-specific breakout sessions aid this process, but many individual leaders and staff connected on a more personal level and forged strong relationships during the physical journey (car rides) to in-person convenings.

As a result of participating in the Community of Practice, many institutions now have a cross-departmental team that works together to support adult learner initiatives. Chandra Scott, Executive Director of Alabama Possible, observed, "The institutions coming together and working among themselves, that was huge because when some people came, they didn't even know what their colleagues did, or what the other people in their own institution did." Catherine Preston, Executive Director of Academic Advising and Transfer Services at the University of South Alabama, described what this looked like for her institution, sharing, "The convenings were really great in that they solidified our USA team. ... (T)hat is really a great point of pride that we've got this office (Office of Adult Learner Services) and now we have this team that came out of (Re)Engage that works solely for the benefit of adult students." Dr. Nicole Carr, Associate Vice President of Student Academic Success, added, "We recognized the lack of coordination between units as a challenge for students and made a deliberate effort to address this."

#### **4. Increased Visibility and Recognition of Lead Organizations (ACHE, Alabama Possible)**

The (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice—and the parallel line of legislative advocacy work that happened around the same time—led to a shift in power dynamics for how leading organizations like ACHE and Alabama Possible are perceived across the state. ACHE's reputation and visibility in the policy and advocacy space have increased thanks to their leadership on the issue of adult learner needs and their promotion of the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program.

Similarly, Alabama Possible was already well-known for its policy and legislative advocacy work but has gained more recognition as an important player in the higher education sector thanks to the Community of Practice, alongside its wider portfolio of work. Some anecdotal evidence of this shift in dynamics is the fact that a chancellor of a major university system attended an Alabama Possible luncheon for the first time, signifying the organization's growing reputation in the postsecondary community.

#### **5. Strained Certain Relationships When Ongoing Communication Was Not Maintained**

While most relational changes stemming from the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice have been positive, there has also been slight straining of relationships when connections have not been supported or maintained over time. Reflecting on the year that has passed since the

end of the Community of Practice, one partner shared, “We don't like the feeling of having invested a year and a half in something, and we don't even know what the impacts are. That's a bad feeling.” Additionally, most participating institutions are no longer in touch with each other. Chandra Scott, Executive Director of Alabama Possible, shared, “I think there are institutions who are going on, doing absolutely amazing stuff based on what they've learned during that process, but it's not being shared. The co-learning experience is gone. And so, to me, that's the biggest loss.” While change continues despite this loss of partnership, it begs the question of how much more progress could be made if group learning and collaboration were to continue long-term.

## TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

*Mental models (mindsets, ways of thinking)*

The deepest level of systems change is the transformative change that one makes as a result of a shift in one's mental models or ways of thinking. Leaders and staff at ACHE, Alabama Possible, and participating four-year institutions have all experienced shifts in their mental models as a result of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice. From deepening stakeholders' understanding of adult learners to increasing institutions' self-recognition of their role as innovators in the field and helping to transform the mindsets of state and institutional leadership, there are many signs of this transformative change. These powerful changes will continue to influence how individuals and organizations develop and deliver services for adult learners with some college, no degree in the region for many years to come.

### 1. Reinforced and Deepened Participants' Understanding of Adult Learners



The most impactful thing (about the convenings) was affirming what we already knew. And that is, non-traditional-age students have their challenges. I'm just glad to hear more and more people are understanding that there really is a distinct difference when it comes to the non-traditional age students.”

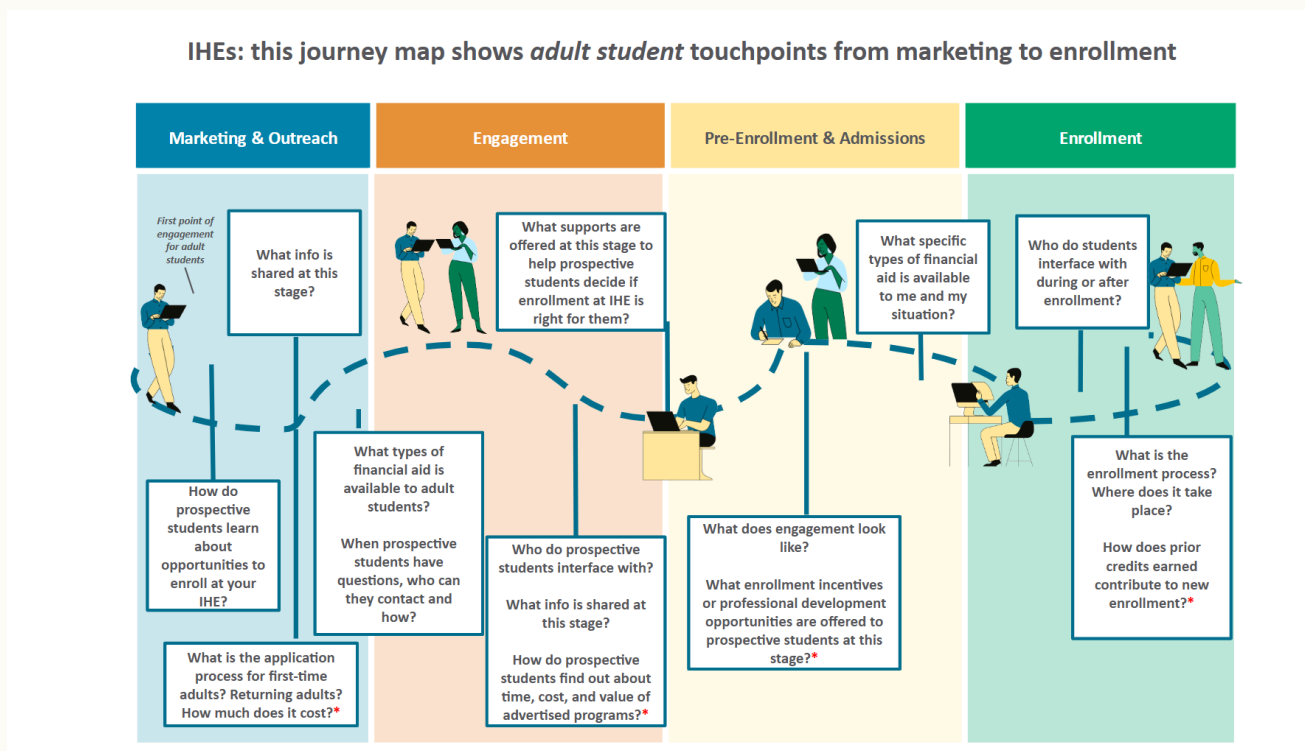
— Dr. Ronda Westry, Assistant Vice President, Student Success Units, Alabama State University

During the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice, stakeholders developed a deeper understanding of the adult learner population as they explored key data and considered the full student journey from pre-enrollment to completion. While ACHE, Alabama Possible, GOEWT, and participating institutions were already thinking about adult learners prior to the Community of Practice, open discussions and data exploration during the convenings reaffirmed and deepened participants' understanding of the unique challenges facing adult learners.

Specific data and tools that Third Sector developed played an important role in facilitating this process. For example, Third Sector prepared institution-specific **data deep dives** that provided a lens into the specific needs and outcomes of adult learners at each school, disaggregated by demographic characteristics such as age, race, and gender. A Third Sector project team member shared how this data enabled equity-based analysis and revealed new insights, saying, “There were some universities in the room who were like, ‘Wow, I’ve never looked at the data on adults before,’ so it was a real ‘aha’ moment for them to (realize) we need to think of this population as distinctly different than the typical student population.”

Additionally, Third Sector and Education Strategy Group (ESG) created a **student journey map** (Figure 3) that enabled institutions to understand which areas of the adult learner experience they may excel in versus which areas they may need to dedicate more resources to in order to achieve better outcomes. This more nuanced understanding will enable participants to provide services and supports that are more responsive to the needs of individuals with some college, no degree. Dr. Robin McGill, Deputy Director for Academic Affairs at ACHE, shared, “I think some institutions were strong in some of these things, and they were able to share some of their strengths. But at the same time, they recognized that they might not have been particularly good at (other things, such as) pre-admissions counseling. By showing that there are different stages that students go through, we could help them identify what their strengths and weaknesses were. ... This diagram and conceptualizing the different stages was really transformative for the cohort.”

**Figure 3.** Student Journey Map





## 2. Fostered Participating Institutions' Recognition of Themselves as Leaders in the Adult-Attainment Space

The (Re)Engage Alabama convenings helped many participating institutions **recognize their own accomplishments and progress in serving adult learners**. The convenings increased their confidence that they were doing important work, helped them recognize themselves as systems-change leaders, and inspired them to continue this momentum. Reflecting on this shift, one participant shared, “(The (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice) made us understand that we were a little ahead of the curve. ... It also demonstrated that, if we can do more and get direct outreach to people, we may be even better suited than others in the state to get students to re-enroll with us.” Another participant shared, “I think the convenings just helped us to realize that we were on the right track with the projects that we were doing, but we just needed to expand them.”

For the schools asked to present as a part of certain convenings during the Community of Practice, **being recognized by the state as a leader in the field was especially gratifying** and helped drive home their own belief in themselves as leaders and innovators. “I think for me, one of the coolest things was when we went to the second meeting and we were actually used as an example,” reflected Adrienne Gannon, Associate Director of New Student Recruitment at the University of South Alabama. “I think that is really powerful to say (our school) is kind of in the forefront of this for the entire state. That was really neat to hear.”

## 3. Increased Support and Buy-In From Institutional Leadership

Another important change stemming from the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice is that leaders at participating four-year institutions are shifting their mindsets about adult learners. The initiative has helped to heighten leaders' awareness of adult learners, prompting institutional changes in policies and practices to serve them better.



The awareness of our campus as a whole, of how many students this truly impacts that have college credit under their belt but no degree to show for it—I do think that that changed. **I really think that the mindset shift was probably the thing that I'm most proud of because those students are now considered in most decisions that we make.** ... It just really set us up for success going forward with these students and it's not an uphill battle now. When we talk about this population of students, everyone is just very aware and focused and committed to serving these students.”

— Jessica Wiggins, Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management at Jacksonville State University

Wiggins went on to describe an example of the mindset shift in practice. Jacksonville State's presidential cabinet must approve any changes in scholarship structures or new offerings at the

school. Now, when adult learner programs are proposed, “We’re not having to provide that data refresh every time and talk about the importance of this population when we need to make those changes, it’s understood and it’s trusted that those students need this additional help.”

Many institutions, such as Jacksonville State University and Athens State, have also incorporated re-engaging adult learners into their **strategic plans for the first time**. Dr. Catherine Wehlburg, who was a provost at the time of the (Re)Engage convenings and is now the president of Athens State University, shared, “We are in the process of developing a new strategic plan. One of the tracks is focused on adult learners and their success. ... I think it may be the first time they’ve been singled out. We are going to be looking at more data and putting more resources into how we are recruiting and retaining adult learners.”

#### 4. Promoted Recognition and Prioritization of Adult Learners by the State

As the first official ACHE initiative focused explicitly on adult learners with some college, no degree, the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice played an important role in shaping the state’s view of adult learners. While ACHE had already begun thinking about adult learners prior to (Re)Engage, **ACHE leaders are now elevating adult learners as a priority population for college access** alongside traditional students (high schoolers entering college). Dr. Robin McGill, Deputy Director for Academic Affairs at ACHE, shared, “(ACHE’s previous work) on college access and success was all focused on that traditional, first-time, full-time student. This kind of **broadened the scope of ACHE’s work** on college access to be also thinking about adults as a different population that has different needs, that wasn’t going to be captured through those other efforts. ... The idea is that now we can kind of broaden our scope on college access to be inclusive of adult experience that we had not really been paying attention to before.”

Evidence of this transformative change is the fact that in 2023, ACHE incorporated (Re)Engage Alabama—referring to the new state grant program—as a third pillar under its “All in Alabama” umbrella of programs. ACHE has also expressed interest in developing a regular adult data report that it will publish alongside other annual report offerings. ACHE is currently working with ESG on a data pilot project to help realize this vision.

Beyond ACHE, **legislative support for adult learner-focused initiatives** is further evidence of an increased awareness and prioritization of adult learners at the state level. For example, the bill that established the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program passed in a single legislative session, showing widespread, bipartisan support for this line of work and a recognition that swift action is needed. Chandra Scott, Executive Director of Alabama Possible, explained, “We were able to get this passed because everyone saw the benefit that this will have for our workforce in our state. I think that’s something that none of us have stopped long enough to give credit to. We can’t let that be glazed over like that was a norm in our state, because it was not.”

# Community-Level Impacts

The (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice is already generating significant positive impacts for Alabama's higher education system. While it is too soon to measure the long-term impact the initiative will create for adult learners, there are promising early results at the community level, such as an increase in the number of programs for adult learners and an increase in scholarship funds available to adult learners. Additionally, the potential for broader, long-term impact is significant—**more than 6,000 adult learners in the state could benefit if the participating institutions fully implement their action plans.**<sup>48</sup>

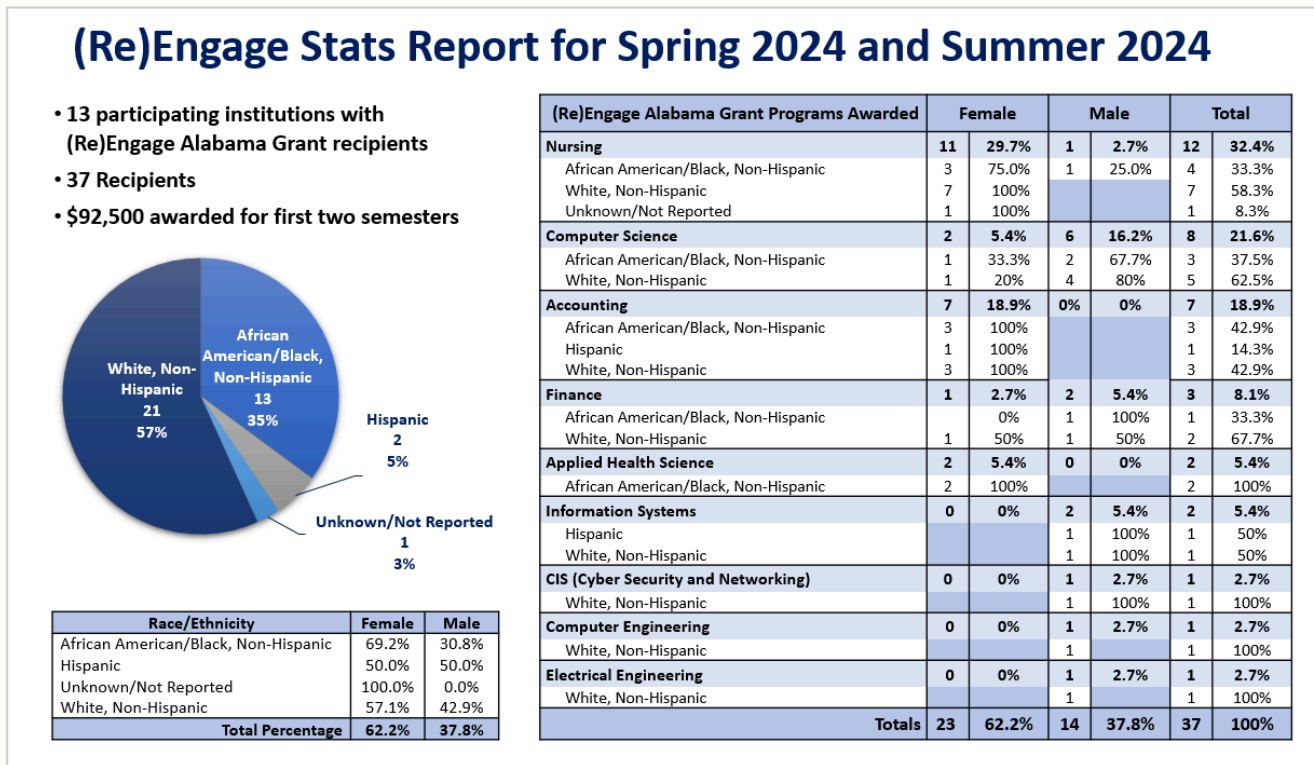
While precise impact data is not yet available from many of the new programs introduced over the past academic year, some early signs of positive change for adult learners have emerged. For example, Dr. Catherine Wehlburg, President of Athens State University, shared the following story: "I am so proud of the programs that we have. **We've got commencement tomorrow. And I know that we're going to see a bunch of our students walking across the stage that are adult learners that came to finish their degree.** Many of them came back to be role models for their kids. I talked to a dad just yesterday whose adult son partied too much and dropped out of school several years ago. Now he has a family, a new baby, and really wants to improve his financial outlook. And so he's come back to Athens State to get a degree in logistics and is doing great and has a 4.0. His dad is so proud of him and what he's doing. **It's because he's ready now and he's got the support that he needs to do this. And that's just one story of hundreds.** ... I cannot speak highly enough of the impact that this is making on the state."

## (RE)ENGAGE ALABAMA GRANT PROGRAM OUTCOMES AND SURVEY FINDINGS

Early outcomes of the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program also shed light on the changing experiences of adult learners. During the spring 2024 and summer 2024 semesters, the first period during which the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant was available, **37 individuals received grants, representing an investment of \$92,500 in scholarships for adults with some college, no degree.**<sup>49</sup> Additionally, **four grant recipients have already graduated with a degree,** signaling the immediate positive impact of the grant program, since many returning adult learners are only a few credits shy of earning their degree. More than half of grant recipients were women (62.2 percent) and slightly more than 40 percent were people of color (40.5 percent)(Figure 4). A Community of Practice participant from the University of South Alabama reflected on the grant's impact, sharing, "I think that within the year, the fact that we have multiple students that qualify for the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant and could be receiving additional funding to come in and finish their program is super impactful. ... I think that that's made a huge difference on those students."

Despite this progress, **only about 2 percent of available grant funds were expended during the 2023-2024 fiscal year**, highlighting the challenges and complexity in identifying and engaging adults with some college, no degree and in implementing new state funding on the ground. The grant's specific eligibility requirements and<sup>50</sup> the absence of infrastructure funds to support institutions with grant implementation may also be contributing factors. As a new program, building stronger recognition and grant uptake will take a few cycles. Even so, partners continue to recognize the importance of the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program and its vast potential for impact. The state legislature recently approved the grant for another cycle, with an appropriation of \$4.5 million for ACHE's 2024-2025 budget.<sup>51</sup>

**Figure 4.** (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program Outcomes, Spring and Summer 2024





The reality is this is still an investment that the state made that wouldn't be there otherwise, and this still got institutions to think about what is an adult learner and how we can best serve them. So, it's a start along that path. ... Even if it's just X people, it's still a movement forward by the legislature. We're still a step further than we were before this started. And that's important."

— Dr. Disraelly Cruz, Associate Director, ESG

To learn more about the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program's impact on adult learners in the state, **a survey of spring 2024 grant recipients was conducted in partnership with ACHE and awarding institutions.** While only four grant recipients participated (a response rate of 13.3 percent), their insights provided a valuable lens into the lived experiences of returning adult learners. All four respondents believe the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant had a very positive impact on their lives, and three out of the four said the grant played an important role in helping them re-enter college. Respondents shared the following reflections on the grant's impact:

- *"The (Re)Engage Alabama Grant has assisted in relief of financial difficulty. As a mother and homeowner, this is incredibly important as it allows me to focus on my coursework. ... I love that this incentivizes program completion. I wish more people knew about it!"*
- *"I had to cover some of my tuition out of my own pocket. As a father and a full-time worker, as well as student, this really helped me cover that. It helps those who need it."*

### COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSION FINDINGS

In an effort to incorporate additional community voices given the low survey response rate, a series of community listening sessions with returning adult learners were hosted in partnership with two institutions that participated in the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice: the University of South Alabama and Jacksonville State University. Twenty-two returning adult learners joined these listening sessions to share their lived experiences and insights. While every effort was made to recruit a diverse and representative sample of adult learners, women and people of color—especially those of "two or more races"—were significantly overrepresented among listening session participants, while White and male students were underrepresented (Table 2). This may be a positive development since the experiences of groups facing higher barriers are amplified in the dataset.



**Table 2.** Comparison of “Some College, No Degree” Population vs. Community Listening Session Sample

	Alabama, Working-Age Adults with Some College, No Degree <sup>[1]</sup>		Community Listening Session Sample <sup>[2]</sup>	
	#	%	#	%
Population Size	391,763	—	22	—
Average Age	—	—	35.9	—
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	184,349	47.1%	5	22.7%
Female	207,414	52.9%	17	77.3%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>				
Asian	3,888	1.0%	0	0.0%
Black	116,905	29.8%	5	22.7%
Hispanic	10,679	2.7%	1	4.5%
White	248,727	63.5%	11	50.0%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1,972	0.5%	0	0.0%
Two or more races	8,520	2.2%	4	18.2%
Other race	1,072	0.3%	—	—
No Answer	—	—	1	4.5%
Any BIPOC race	143,036	36.5%	10	45.5%

Sources: [1] IPUMS USA. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Data. 2022. IPUMS Center for Data Integration, University of Minnesota. <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>. [2] Self-reported by Community Listening Session participants at the time of session registration. Notes: Race/Ethnicity categories are mutually exclusive. Working-age is defined as 25-64 years old. BIPOC is defined as any Race/Ethnicity that is not White alone.

The listening sessions provided firsthand insight into how institution-level changes impact returning adult learners, including what programming and supports they have accessed and what challenges persist. Overall, current adult learners feel supported on campus, and **the majority are accessing some form of support, with general advising, academic support, and disability accommodations emerging as key themes.** An interesting trend is that many of the resources leveraged by returning learners are not specifically targeted at this group but are broader resources available to the entire student population. In fact, apart from advising, few students know about or are accessing supports specifically designed for adult learners.

Students also shared persisting barriers and challenges that they continue to face despite supports available on campus. **Key challenges include limited course availability, affordability and the need for financial aid, as well as balancing competing work, life, and home priorities**—especially parenting and child care. Although finances remain a key challenge, most listening session participants were not aware of the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program or institution-specific financial aid opportunities for adult learners.

Despite the persisting challenges, **it is clear that the changes implemented by institutions are creating a positive impact for students. The overwhelming sentiment from listening session participants was positive, and most admit their current experience in college feels better than the last time they were enrolled.** This was attributed to the increase in available institution-level support, as well as intrinsic, individual-level changes in drive, motivation, and feelings of readiness. However, **it is also evident that not all efforts are reaching their intended audiences. This points to the need for ongoing outreach and communication to adult learners to ensure they are aware of the available targeted resources and support.** Institutions should also conduct broader equity analyses to investigate which adult learners are successfully accessing services and identify if disparities exist between groups based on gender, race, or other factors.

## KEY THEMES FROM COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSIONS

### SUPPORTS MENTIONED BY ADULT LEARNERS

There are many supports and resources that have helped to improve participants' current experiences as students compared to when they were enrolled in college in the past. Common supports highlighted by participants include:

- **Strong advising support.** The presence of advisors and other staff (e.g., professors) who provide dedicated attention and support was a common theme. Students from both participating institutions noted this support plays an important role in their success. Session participant Tamisha Garrett shared, *"When I was failing this class, (my advisor) reached out. She came in and said, 'Hey, you're having problems with this class. Do you need some help?' So they really check on you. Even though we are adults, we still have somebody in our corner."* (Read more about Tamisha in the "Community Voices" section on page 27.)

Another participant compared the support they receive now to their past college experience, highlighting how the support has strengthened: *"So when I did my first undergraduate, professors could have cared less about you. If they had to advise you, you were (treated like) the biggest inconvenience ever, and I felt like I had to navigate everything by myself. One of the biggest differences when I got here, everybody from my advisor to my professors, they've treated me not only like an adult, but they've actually just—they remember me, they know who I am. They've really worked hard (to help me)."*

- **Access to free academic support and tutoring.** Listening session participants from Jacksonville State University also highlighted free tutoring support available through the Student Success Center as a key resource that has helped them persist and succeed in college. The Student Success Center at Jacksonville State is located in the library and is free and available to all students, not just returning adult learners. A participant shared, *"The Student Success Center, that's really how I have been passing my classes. Having the available tutors there has just been such a great thing for me because I know if that was not there, I would be struggling this far into the semester."*
- **Disability accommodations.** Many listening session participants shared that they have learning disabilities or physical limitations that have impacted their education journeys; with appropriate accommodations, they have been able to navigate the college journey with more success. One participant shared, *"Since I had my car accident in 2004, it's been hard. That was one of my reasons for getting out of school; my back couldn't handle it. But the disability services (office) has helped me. They've got recorders and stuff we can take. It gives me more time on my test and on some of the assignments."*

Another student reflected on how he wasn't aware of these services in the past, *"I didn't know then that there was a student disability services (office) that you can register with. Now they advertise it more and you can register with it. (They show you) this is what you want to go through when you have health issues."* Gaining access to this support has been a game-changer for many returning learners with physical disabilities or unique learning needs.

- **HONORABLE MENTION: Automated and online communications.** Though mentioned by only one listening session participant, innovative support worth mentioning is the University of South Alabama's use of automated email messaging via CRM to connect adult learners with additional support and resources (also discussed earlier in this report under "Structural Change"). This participant noted that she received an email invitation to join a virtual group specifically for adult learners, sharing, *"They automatically emailed it to me. I never even had to say I was an adult student, they just went ahead and sent it."* She went on to describe the virtual group, hosted on the mobile app GroupMe, *"(On the group) you can ask questions and they will tell you what you need to do, where you need to go, step by step if you need it. They're really there for you as an adult learner."*

## PERSISTING CHALLENGES FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Listening session participants also shared challenges they continue to face despite the supports available for returning adult learners. Common challenges faced by adult learners attending local institutions include:

- **Course availability to meet degree requirements.** While the availability of night and online courses has enabled more adult learners to return to school, scheduling remains a noteworthy pain point. The most commonly cited challenge listening session participants shared was the limited availability of certain classes. For example, classes may only be offered one time per year, at one specific time of the day, or have a limited number of registration slots. This makes it difficult for students to complete the necessary coursework to graduate on time. One student who hopes to graduate this fall shared the following story, *"I almost had to quit and give up because for one of my classes, the professor retired and they were going to only offer it during the summer, which I wasn't going to be able to pay for. ... My advisor went to bat for me and made it where I can do (the course) as independent study this semester. That's the only reason I'm here able to finish my degree is because of him (my advisor)."*
- **Financial barriers.** Despite statewide and institution-level investments in scholarships and financial aid programs for returning adult learners, many individuals continue to cite the cost of education as a key barrier to completing their degrees successfully. The community listening sessions also revealed that many students are unaware of current available resources, such as the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program or Jacksonville State's "Finish What You Started" scholarship. One participant shared, *"The only thing I was really offered was a transfer scholarship from transferring from community college to university, but, as far as adult learners, I haven't been notified about any resources."* Another shared a similar experience, *"I'm a single mom and I have four dependents. FAFSA-wise, I'm the highest level of need (but) that still does not cover my full tuition. I'm still left with about \$1400 to \$1700 each semester that I have to figure out how to pay. I've been taking out student loans and it's gonna be horrendous when I graduate, but it was the only way I could get through it. I've been here and I still have gotten zero scholarship money, and I have applied for all sorts of them."*
- **Lack of recognition that adult learners are a distinct group with distinct needs.** Many returning adult learners continue to feel frustrated with the fact that their unique needs are not always recognized. They often feel "lumped in" with transfer students or traditional college-age students who are typically younger and coming straight out of high school or community college. Adult learners want institutional staff, especially professors, to recognize that they have competing priorities and needs, including work, family, and home obligations, that they are trying to balance at any given time outside of school. One participant shared, *"I'm not saying that people who are older should be given special treatment, but these people do have families to take care of and they do have other responsibilities. And so it would be nice if that was taken into account sometimes. ... When you're telling students they have to work 60 to 80 hours a week on classwork, that's just not realistic for most people. I think maybe some of the professors just need to be more aware of that."*



## COMMUNITY VOICES

**Tamisha Garrett, 46, is a current student at Jacksonville State University pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Business Management.** She is a proud mom balancing life as a full-time college student, a government employee, and the owner of Misha's Travel Business.<sup>52</sup> Her desire for higher-wage work and competitive spirit inspired her to return to school to complete her degree.

*"Returning to school as an adult learner was a big decision for me, but it's been really rewarding. I work full-time for the government and a lot of the jobs we have require education to boost your chances of getting into higher-paying roles. That's really important to me. Going back to school will help me move up a little higher on the job brackets when I apply. Plus, my daughter graduated from Jacksonville State University, and seeing her succeed inspired me even more—I wanted to earn my degree too!"*

*Balancing my business, work, school, and family life hasn't been easy, but Jacksonville State has been a great source of support. When I was struggling in math, I didn't know what to do. But the Student Success Center really came through for me. In three weeks, they literally changed my life. I went from failing to making an 'A' on my next test! The tutors were amazing and helped me turn things around. If it wasn't for that Student Success Center and the tutors, I wouldn't have gotten the grade that I got. I also feel like my advisors genuinely care about my success. Even though I'm an adult student, they check in on me regularly. I don't think I would've made it this far without that support.*

*Now, I'm on track to graduate in May 2026 with my degree. It's been a challenging journey, but I feel like I'm setting an example for others, showing them that it's never too late to pursue your goals."*

Though community-level impact data on the effects of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice is limited, early feedback from adult learners—gathered through the survey of (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program recipients and through community listening sessions—is promising. While some key challenges persist, prioritizing services and supports for this population through initiatives like the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice is helping individuals to enroll, persist, and complete their degrees and achieve their educational goals. Over time, it is hoped that this will lead to long-term economic mobility for individuals and economic growth for the region.



## Discussion and Key Takeaways



"I'm not going to say it (the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice) single-handedly drove additional initiatives that we implemented on campus. But it certainly was in our mind as we looked at other initiatives that we started. It was absolutely a part of the decisionmaking as we started thinking about our adult learners."

— Catherine Preston, Executive Director, Academic Advising and Transfer Services, University of South Alabama

The launch of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice in 2022 marked an important turning point for the state of Alabama. While many adult-focused education and workforce initiatives were already underway across the state, the Community of Practice represented the first state-sponsored initiative specifically targeting adults pursuing four-year degrees. It created a dedicated space for public four-year institutions from across the state to come together to learn more about the unique needs of adult learners with some college, no degree, share and amplify best practices for serving this group, and build relationships that could drive the work forward.

Just one year after the final convening, the higher education system in Alabama is already showing promising signs of change and transformation inspired by the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice. **The Community of Practice has catalyzed changes in the services and supports public institutions provide for returning adult learners, strengthened relationships between key higher education stakeholders, transformed mental models to give greater priority and attention to adult learners, and contributed to historic state investments to support adult learner educational attainment.** Additionally, the use of disaggregated data on adult learners to drive these changes—along with the breaking down of silos within and between organizations to better serve this group—indicates that the higher education system in Alabama is transforming toward a more outcomes-focused approach.

Among the most noteworthy impacts of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice are the on-the-ground, campus-level improvements for adult learners. Every single one of the public institutions that participated in interviews for this report (representing five of Alabama's 14 public four-year institutions) has either strengthened existing programs or implemented new programs and supports specifically designed to boost adult learner enrollment, persistence, and completion outcomes. **This means that at least one in every three public universities in the state now has dedicated programming for returning adult learners.** Examples of these offerings include coaching and advising support, marketing and outreach campaigns, expanded flexible course options, and new scholarships and financial aid options—including the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program, a multi-million dollar state scholarship exclusively for adult learners.



“There were changes that happened close to that student experience within the institutions themselves ... where institutions were staffing up offices for adult student services or adult education, and recognizing that the supports adults need are different from the traditional student, and having more of a one-stop shop. They were dedicating staff to it. They were putting administrative resources toward those efforts. ... I’m most proud of those pieces because the students experience them directly. They can find the adult office now. They can find somebody who’s aware that their experience is different and try to connect them with resources.”

— *Dr. Robin McGill, Deputy Director for Academic Affairs, ACHE*

It is too early to know the long-term impact that systems-level changes inspired by the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice will create for individual adult learners; however, early community-level outcomes show positive signs of change. To date, **37 individuals have received the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant, and four grant recipients have graduated with their degrees.** Though it will take time to see other systems-level changes translate to clear, measurable outcomes for individual community members, **more than 6,000 adult learners in the state stand to benefit if institutions fully implement their Community of Practice action plans.**

Ultimately, the (Re)Engage Alabama initiative has helped raise the visibility of adult learners as a priority population for public institutions and for the state. While there have been many initiatives related to adult education and workforce development underway in Alabama over the past few years, **(Re)Engage Alabama has played an important role—reinforcing, catalyzing, and adding momentum to other efforts, and bringing a unique focus to four-year institutions and four-year degrees.** As this report demonstrates, there are already some clear, tangible impacts from the work that can be tied back to the Community of Practice and Third Sector’s involvement. These findings highlight the value of focused learning cohort programs in increasing education access and economic mobility for adult learners and other historically underserved groups.

## DRIVERS OF (AND BARRIERS TO) CHANGE

There are several key factors that have enabled the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice to achieve the impacts described in this report and influence change and transformation across the state of Alabama. These drivers represent strategic levers that can strengthen efforts to support adult learners and make adult attainment-focused initiatives more inclusive and impactful, while the barriers highlight common challenges that efforts may need to overcome.

Key drivers and barriers of the (Re)Engage Alabama initiative include:

- **Cross-Sector Leaders.** It took a group of forward-thinking leaders coming together around a shared vision to bring the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice—and its resulting impacts—to life. Key figures included Nick Moore, Education Policy Advisor and Coordinator for the Governor’s Office of Education and Workforce Transformation; Executive Director Dr. Jim Purcell and Deputy Director for Academic Affairs Dr. Robin McGill at ACHE; Executive Director Chandra Scott and Deputy Director Manisha Mishra at Alabama Possible; Director Alysha Alani at Third Sector; and leaders from participating four-year public institutions. These leaders’ commitment to cross-sector collaboration and relationship-building was essential in driving the work forward.
- **Support and Buy-In From the State.** Backing from the state of Alabama—specifically, the fact that ACHE sponsored the initiative—was another key driver in pushing the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice forward. As one Community of Practice participant shared, “(Re)Engage Alabama was pretty significant because it was being supported and encouraged by ACHE. Statewide, they are a driving force in what happens in higher education.” Another participant added, “We’re never going to turn down an opportunity from the state to be at the table.”
- **Opportune Timing, Ripe for Innovation.** The (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice took place during the 2022–2023 academic year, just as schools were emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic and grappling with historically low enrollment rates. Institutions were eager to innovate to meet this challenge, which opened their minds to the potential of adult learners. “There was this spirit of innovation with people recognizing ‘We can’t always do things the way we’ve always done them,’” reflected a leader from ACHE. “At the time, the amount of resources available for education were still high because there was so much spending going on (e.g., CARES Act, ARPA). Your opportunities for innovation are higher when there is abundance. ... (I)t gives you more space to innovate.”
- **Leveraging Existing Momentum.** There were a number of initiatives focused on adult learners already underway across the state of Alabama, and adult learners were seen as an important target population for advancing the Governor’s postsecondary attainment goals. There was also some existing momentum among local agencies, nonprofit organizations, and higher education institutions to engage with this population. The timing of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice was highly serendipitous and added momentum and resources to the work already underway in the state.
- **Availability of Funding To Support the Work.** The availability of philanthropic and public dollars to fund the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice and the implementation of resulting action plans also played a key role in driving progress. Funding from the ECMC Foundation—and later from ACHE and the state legislature—has shifted more resources towards programs and support for adult learners. On the flipside, a lack of critical funding may slow the pace of change. For example, when the (Re)Engage Alabama Grant Program was approved without funding for infrastructure, it left institutions on their own to figure

out the marketing and implementation of the grant. This may be partly responsible for the relatively low uptake of the grant during its first year.

- **Learning Cohort Structure Brings People Together.** For many Community of Practice partners and participants, the act of coming together to attend structured convenings at a regular cadence provided a level of rigor and accountability that helped drive the work forward and prevent it from becoming deprioritized. One participant shared, “These convenings hold us accountable. That’s a good thing about these convenings. We drive up there, (and) we sit at the table—we have to have something to share.”
- **Third Sector’s Expert Technical Assistance and Support.** Third Sector played an important behind-the-scenes role in driving the progress and impact of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice. First, Third Sector acted as an important catalyst for bringing attention to the challenges of adult learners with some college, no degree to leaders in Alabama. Third Sector also prepared detailed data deep dives that enabled institutions to develop a stronger understanding of the adult learner population. Finally, it provided an Action Plan template and other tools that enabled institutions to translate key learnings, ideas, and best practices into clear strategies that could be implemented at the school level. Most participants agree that, without Third Sector, the initiative would not have advanced to the level that it did. See the “Spotlight” box on page 10 for a more detailed overview of Third Sector’s contributions.
- **Barrier: Securing Widespread Buy-In From Four-Year Institutions.** While nine of Alabama’s 14 public four-year institutions participated in the Community of Practice, two of the state’s largest and most influential colleges—the University of Alabama and Auburn University—did not. By engaging “a coalition of the willing,” the initiative may have missed out on an opportunity to influence more widespread change across the state.
- **Barrier: Maintaining Relationships and Partnerships Long Term.** While most relational changes resulting from the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice have been positive, there has also been slight straining of relationships between partners when connections have not been supported or maintained over time. Failure to maintain relationships is a barrier to progress since it erodes trust, recreates past silos, and inhibits organizations’ abilities to drive collective impact.

These drivers and barriers helped create the systems- and community-level impacts seen to date from the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice. While every context is unique, leveraging these factors can support replicating similar work in communities nationwide.

## TOP THREE LESSONS FOR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS

The (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice also highlights a number of best practices technical assistance providers like Third Sector can leverage to drive momentum on cross-cutting social impact projects. The top three lessons include:

- **Bring people together to learn, especially in person.** The impacts inspired by (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice reinforce the value of learning cohorts as a tool for creating systemic change. In the hustle and bustle of day-to-day work, stakeholders rarely have time to step back and reflect on the possibilities for change in services or to think about how to address complex issues in new and innovative ways. Creating a dedicated time and space for collective ideation provides changemakers with an opportunity to consider the possibilities for change and build meaningful connections with other changemakers. The impacts of these relationships are hard to measure, but they are enduring and often lead to ripple effects for the region.
- **Provide specific data, tools, and templates to move the work forward.** Starting from scratch can be a barrier for many client organizations. Providing templates with easy prompts increases participation and can help guide clients toward possible solutions in a quick, easy, and accessible way. Further, gathering data and identifying insights is a time-consuming process that most entities value but do not always have the capacity or resources to carry out. Third Sector developed various data resources, tools, and templates for the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice that participants found immensely valuable. Some included:
  - **Data deep dives** that contained adult learner data per institution
  - An **adult learner journey map** that outlined key stages of the educational journey
  - An **Action Plan template** that participating organizations could easily fill in to develop a plan
- **Establish sustainability plans or processes to maintain momentum post-departure.** One of the greatest missed opportunities of the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice was the loss of connections between organizations after the formal convenings ended. Although Third Sector left participating institutions with specific action plans to implement, it did not leave behind a clear direction or plan for how to maintain cross-sector connections. In some cases, this led to a straining of relationships between partners when once-regular communication became sporadic or nonexistent. Learning from this experience, a best practice is to work with clients and partners to develop strong sustainability plans that outline next steps for an initiative after a technical assistance provider's departure.





## Looking Forward



“I think we are doing more than we were one year ago, three years ago, four years ago. We are going in the right direction. (But there’s a) lot more that we can do.”



— **Bob Charlebois, Director, Office of Adult Learner Services, University of South Alabama**

Adults with some college, no degree represent a tremendous pool of untapped potential to advance local workforce and higher education goals in Alabama. Thanks to the collective efforts of ACHE, Alabama Possible, GOEWT, ESG, and participating four-year public institutions, along with the dedicated support and technical assistance of Third Sector, the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice demonstrated how a learning cohort can inspire change and transformation in the local higher education system to advance outcomes for this group.

While noteworthy progress has been made, there is still work to be done to ensure systems can effectively support all adult learners—especially those from diverse and historically underserved communities—to reach their educational attainment goals and achieve lasting economic mobility. It is hoped that this important work will continue and that the relationships, ideas, and investments cultivated through the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice will drive meaningful impact across the state for many years to come.

# Glossary/Key Definitions

**Outcomes-focused approach**—An approach that centers and is responsive to the voices, perspectives, power, and needs of community members who are directly impacted by an issue area or who are the direct beneficiaries of a specific program or service. The ultimate goal of an outcomes-focused approach is to result in more improved and equitable outcomes for impacted communities. This approach moves public systems away from a traditional compliance-based approach toward one that centers the quality of life and life outcomes of real people and communities.

In practice, an outcomes-focused approach may look like:

1. Using disaggregated data to drive decisionmaking that continuously improves community outcomes;
2. Engaging stakeholders' perspectives and experiences to improve services and programs;
3. Breaking down silos between agencies and departments to make services and programs more accessible and/or responsive to the needs of communities; and/or
4. Using tools like human-centered design and root-cause analysis to ensure solutions reflect community needs.

**Some college, no degree population**—The adult learners who have attended college for some time, but did not complete their degree.

**"System" definition**—The workforce development system in the Rural Capital Area of Texas. This includes public workforce agencies, workforce nonprofits, education and training providers, employers, and other partners (e.g., wraparound support providers).

*Note: This definition is specific to this particular case study.*

**Systems-level impacts**—Changes in the way government systems operate. How system stakeholders are working or thinking differently as a direct or indirect result of a project or initiative.

**Community-level impacts**—Changes individuals experience in accessing the system or services. Meaningful change for communities because of transformations to the system.

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# Appendix

## List of Programs and Services for Returning Adult Learners at Participating Four-Year Public Institutions

The following list includes new or expanded programs, services, and supports for adult learners with some college, no degree available during the 2023-2024 school year at four-year public universities that participated in the (Re)Engage Alabama Community of Practice.

*Please note: The information below is based on firsthand interviews with representatives from each university and may not be an exhaustive list of programs and services. For the most up-to-date information, please consult each institution. A website link for each is provided for convenience.*

### 1. **Alabama State University** (<https://www.alasu.edu/>)

- Launched a partnership with InsideTrack Coaching with support from sponsors Educational Advancement and the Thurgood Marshall College Fund. Through the program, students receive ongoing follow-up and support for nine months from a dedicated success coach in order to increase persistence.
- Introduced more flexible online course options.
- Offer application fee waivers for adult learners who need it (not a formal policy).

### 2. **University of South Alabama** (<https://www.southalabama.edu/>)

- Systematized recruitment workflow using Slate CRM. It now has more consistent processes and dedicated staff leading this work, enabling the university to expand the net of students who receive direct outreach.
- Growing attention on ensuring re-admitted students are re-enrolled. This is achieved through CRM outreach and coordination with individual colleges across the university.
- Continuing to offer programs and services through the well-established Office of Adult Learner Services.
- Introduced more flexible online course options.
- Established a coordinated Transfer Team with clear lines of communication between formerly siloed units (e.g., Admissions, Recruitment, Advising, Financial Aid, Scholarship) and added a new Transfer Center webpage for students (<https://www.southalabama.edu/departments/admissions/transfer.html>). While these resources are not exclusively for returning adult learners, they support adult learners due to the significant overlap between these groups.

### 3. **Troy University** (<https://www.troy.edu/>)

- Rebranded adult re-enrollment as “Return to Learn,” adding a dedicated webpage and inquiry form to the TROY website (<https://www.troy.edu/applications-admissions/admissions-process-requirements/#:~:text=Return%20to%20Learn&text=Let%20us%20assist%20you%20by,a%20pathway%20toward%20degree%20completion>).



- Continuing to perform degree audits and credit review to understand which degrees may be the most attainable for students and support students in reaching graduation requirements.
  - Expanded this process to include both online and on-campus students.
  - Expanded this process to include other campus departments and offices.
- Continuing to use the CRM Advise system to maintain constant communication with students and generate reports for staff that enable data-driven decisionmaking. Example reports include:
  - “Active not Registered” report shows which students haven’t attended in the previous two terms.
  - “R&R list” shows students who have not registered by the last week of the registration period; these students receive registration reminders to encourage them to register for classes.

#### 4. Athens State University (<https://www.athens.edu/>)

- Transformed its Adult Degree Programs Office into the Adult Learner Services Office, envisioned as a one-stop shop for adult students.
- Brought an honor society recognizing adult learners to campus: Alpha Sigma Lambda.
- Called out adult learners as a specific track or focus in the upcoming strategic plan; this may be the first time that this group has been singled out specifically.
- Continuing to invest in efforts around Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) credits. For example, there is now a partnership with local community colleges; if they award PLA credit, Athens will accept it.
- Continuing to develop learning partnerships with local businesses and industry partners, including tuition discounts for employees.

#### 5. Jacksonville State (<https://www.jsu.edu/>)

- Added new staff to support the Enrollment Initiatives Office (doubling size from one to two).
- Performed website audits and revamped webpages based on student-user-experience feedback.
- Dedicated marketing and outreach to recruit adult learners who were a few credits shy of graduation.
- Launched a partnership with ReUp Education to provide personalized outreach (coaching, counseling, and marketing) to returning adult learners.
- Continuing to develop learning partnerships with local businesses and industry partners, including tuition discounts for employees. It also has two career-focused scholarship options for partners (education and first responder).

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