CCA White Paper: Promoting College Success in Nontraditional Students

Introduction

Across the country, colleges and universities are struggling to improve their students' completion rates. In one study, the six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who enrolled in 2009 seeking a bachelor's degree was 59 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).[1] Another study showed that only 39 percent of all community college students (full-time and part-time) seeking two-year degrees and certificates complete within six years (Juszkiewicz, 2016).[2] Simultaneously, statewide attainment challenges endorsed by departments of higher education and workforce and economic development agencies demonstrate that a workforce with post-secondary credentials is essential to a strong economic future. But the numbers are grim; according to the Lumina Foundation's national research on education attainment, less than half of American adults (25-64) have a postsecondary credential—and the numbers are worse among racial and ethnic minorities, whose completion rates range from 21.3 percent (Hispanic) to 29.3 percent (African American).[3]

The discrepancy between higher education enrollment and completion rates is particularly pronounced for the amorphous group known as nontraditional students:[4] 42 percent will leave college before completing a degree, while only 19 percent of traditional students will do so (Hutchens, 2016). Nontraditional students face barriers to college completion that stem from the multiple demands on their

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[1] Six-year completion rates also varied according to institutional selectivity. For example, at institutions offering open admission, 32 percent of students completed a bachelor's degree within 6 years. At institutions with less than a 25 percent acceptance rate, in contrast, the 6-year graduation rate was 88 percent.

[2] Researchers at the College Board indicate that IPEDS tends to underestimate college completion rates because it does not count completers who transfer to other institutions (Ma & Baum, 2016).

[3] Asian and Pacific Islanders are the exception to this trend, with college completion rates of 61.2 percent (Lumina Foundation, 2017).

[4] There are three factors to define the nontraditional student (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.):

- *Enrollment patterns.* Assuming that traditional enrollment in postsecondary education is defined as enrolling immediately after high school and attending full time, students who diverge from this pattern would be considered nontraditional. In this study, therefore, students who delayed enrollment in postsecondary education by a year or more after high school or who attended part time were considered nontraditional.
- *Financial and family status.* Family responsibilities and financial constraints used to identify nontraditional students included having dependents other than a spouse, being a single parent, working full time while enrolled, or being financially independent from parents.
- *High school graduation status.* Students who did not receive a standard high school diploma but who earned some type of certificate of completion were also considered nontraditional. This included GED recipients and those who received a high school certificate of completion. Students who did not graduate from high school or earn a certificate of completion (less than 2 percent) were removed from the analysis due to their limited access to 4-year colleges and universities.

time and originate from or are exacerbated by institutional policies that are geared toward traditional students and other constituents.

This paper highlights interventions to the typical post-secondary education system that show promise in increasing nontraditional students' ability to persist and thrive in certificate or degree programs. The findings are supported by a combination of evidenced-based, peer-reviewed research as well as first-hand observations and evaluations of more than a dozen post-secondary programs.[5] Other observations, primarily those related to career pathways, stem from extensive hands-on work and discussions with community colleges and industry organizations that have implemented relevant strategies and programs.

This white paper focuses on two types of interventions, **systemic changes within institutions** and **dedicated support and coaching**.

Systemic Changes: This section focuses on accelerated scheduling, credit for competency, and the concept of restructuring the classroom to mimic the workplace.

- Most commonly seen in graduate and professional degree programs, **accelerated scheduling** condenses learning into concentrated blocks of classroom time, sometimes punctuated by longer breaks between classes during which students are responsible for reviewing material and completing exercises. Accelerated scheduling affords adult learners more flexibility in managing school work alongside full-time jobs and family responsibilities, allowing them to enroll in full-time programs without disrupting their day-to-day routine.
- **Credit for competency** models (such as Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs)) acknowledge that many nontraditional students have valuable work and life experience that should accelerate their progress toward a degree. By awarding credit for military experience, on-the-job training, industry-recognized credentials, and other evidence of life-long learning, institutions demonstrate a willingness to value nontraditional students' knowledge and experience, allowing them to expedite their progress toward obtaining a degree or credential.
- Introducing cohort models, team-based work, networking opportunities, accountability, and career pathways mapping can allow the college **classroom to mimic the workplace.** Nontraditional students have opportunities to work with other adults, to be held accountable for things like attendance and performance, to network with employers, and to identify ways in which their degree will help them further their careers.

Coaching Models: Career coaches, college navigators, and similar one-on-one coaching models have a positive impact on nontraditional students—many of whom are first-generation college students—by providing customized, just-in-time support about not just academics, but also financial aid, priority setting, job placement, and more. Evidence supports the effectiveness of both staff and peer coaches for all students, regardless of traditional or nontraditional status. However, by connecting nontraditional students to resources available inside and outside the institution and advocating on behalf of the student

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when needed, coaches help remove barriers students may face to persist and complete. Colleges have found promise in utilizing coaches to:

- Assist students in navigating challenges associated with **enrollment** or **re-enrollment** in college. Many nontraditional students have stopped out of college at some point and may face issues associated with navigating debt or unpaid financial obligations to prior institutions that they have attended. Further, these students may have other barriers to enrollment, including struggling to pay for college, transportation issues, childcare issues, or other challenges.
- Act as **institutional liaisons** to help students navigate college systems**.** At many colleges that implemented coaching models, while they anticipated needing to work with students to address life challenges, such as those described above, they found their roles to be more valuable in helping students deal with institutional processes once they were enrolled. These services included assisting students in the registration process, as well as helping students navigate registration problems, including course availability and course sequences. Further, coaches have acted as advocates for students in interacting with admissions, registrars, and faculty to ensure that students are on track to complete. Coaches also have helped students to access college-based services such as tutoring.
- Offer **career preparation services** for students, including resume assistance, mock interviews, and connecting students with employers through job boards and job fairs.

Interventions
Systemic Changes
Accelerated Schedules

Often one of the barriers to education for nontraditional students is that they are the primary worker in the family and need to continue bringing in income while in school. Schedules for graduate degree programs (e.g., masters and doctoral programs) are often designed to complement career, family, and financial commitments by providing low-residency, condensed (including weekend classes only), and accelerated schedules. Other accelerated schedules, which are used at all levels of post-secondary education, include "evening classes, workplace programs, and distance learning" (Wlodkowski & Westover, 1999). In contrast, many undergraduate programs still have not adapted to the needs of non-traditional students with these types of flexible offerings. While some colleges have implemented undergraduate accelerated schedules, and research supports the efficacy of these efforts, further exploration into the success of condensed/low-residency graduate degree programs may be warranted.

Accelerated academic programs offer time-efficient educational opportunities to nontraditional students. Despite concerns about quality and student comprehension, studies have indicated that accelerated programs do not sacrifice learning or satisfaction for speed. In fact, studies suggest that the level of comprehension achieved by adult students in a five-week course and traditional students in a 16-week course was "indistinguishable" (Wlodkowski, 2003) (Wlodkowski & Westover, 1999). Accelerated courses are also viewed positively by current students and program alumni (Wlodkowski & Westover, 1999).

Even if they do eventually complete their degrees, nontraditional students are more likely to enroll part-time or to pause their studies, which makes their education more expensive (Capps, 2012). Part-time students are often not eligible for financial aid, which makes completing their education more financially onerous. At the same time, part-time or intermittent coursework delays the labor market and financial

rewards that most people are seeking through higher education. In short, there are few measureable benefits of a part-time schedule. On the other hand, accelerated programs allow students to carry a full-time course load with what feels like a part-time schedule. Findings of at least one study "touch upon the possibility that factors such as motivation, concentration, work experience, self-direction, and (paradoxically) an abbreviated learning experience may catalyze learning" (Wlodkowski & Westover, 1999). A 2010 study reviewing existing research on accelerated programs identified that when differences in student outcomes were reported, the advantages tended to be for accelerated curricula. "This pattern suggests, at the very least, that there is value in moving students through their studies at an accelerated pace, and our students are not at risk when they engage in accelerated learning experiences" (Tatum, 2010).

It is not surprising that nontraditional students prefer predictable course schedules that fit into their busy lives. One study, exploring why students chose to attend the branch campus of a flagship university in their state, concluded that students prefer the concentrated evening courses offered there (Hoyt & Howell, 2012). Yet even these minimally intrusive accommodations—such as evening courses—do not completely mitigate the barriers nontraditional students face. Institutional barriers result from university and college policies or structures that are not aligned with nontraditional student needs. For instance, class scheduling and administrative office hours are often inconvenient for students who can only come to campus in the evening (Bauer & Mott, 1990). Further, factors such as access to financing, the quality and availability of advising, and classroom location are all important to non-traditional students (Manjuanes, 2010). Although accelerated schedules may not directly address these challenges, by combining them with other interventions (such as the coaching models described in the next section), nontraditional students can benefit from the full spectrum of college supports and resources. One study suggested that accelerated courses maintain academic momentum for adult students by instituting highly structured and prescriptive degree plans that encourage students to prioritize class preparation and to persist in short, five-week bursts (Root, 1999). However, students likely to be successful in accelerated courses may self-select: students that did not adjust to the rigorous schedule usually dropped out by the second week (Kasworm, 2003).

A study completed at Bellevue University, an institution that has traditionally served adult students, investigated the success rates of about 4,000 students in a baccalaureate business program. There were three program models: online accelerated, in-class accelerated, and traditional. About 60 percent of the students were in the online accelerated program, while the in-class accelerated and traditional models both had about 20 percent of the enrolled students. The completion rates over four years reveal a significant difference in favor of the accelerated programs: 77.1 percent for the online accelerated program, 75.2 percent for the in-class accelerated program, and only 24.8 percent for traditional program. A one-way ANOVA test also demonstrated that the 3.53 cumulative average GPA of students in both accelerated programs was significantly higher than the 2.65 cumulative average GPA of students in the traditional program (Smith, 2015).

**Bellevue University Accelerated & Traditional Programs
Four-Year Completion Rates**

77.1%	75.2%	24.8%
Online Accelerated	In-Class Accelerated	Traditional
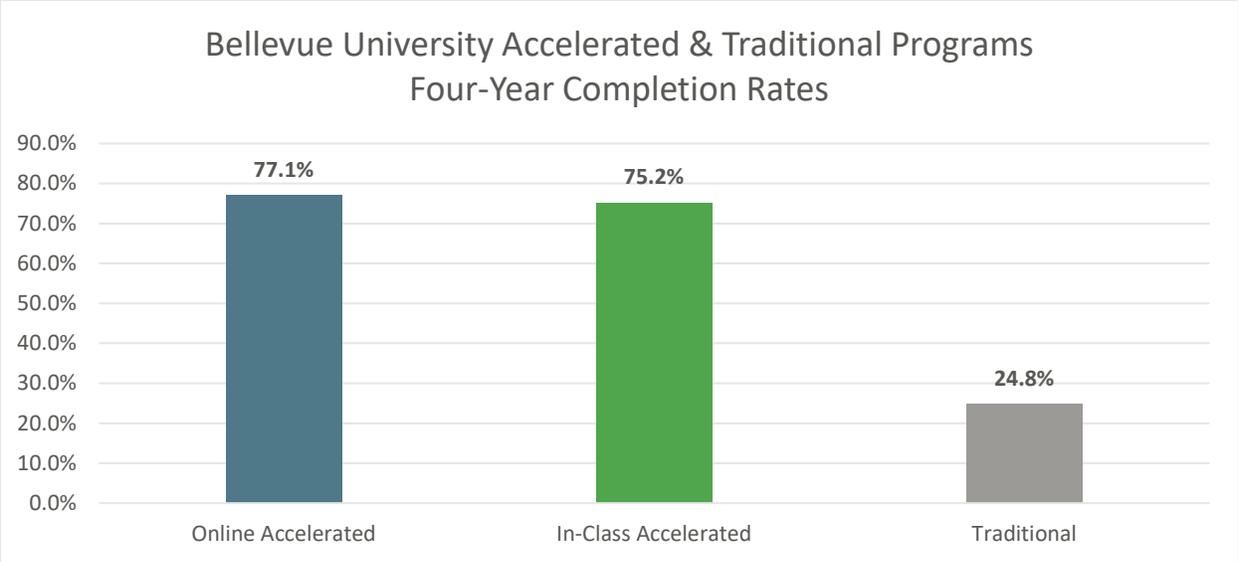
An integrative review of studies completed about accelerated nursing programs found similar results. Students in accelerated BSN (Bachelor of Science in Nursing) programs had significantly higher GPAs and significantly higher scores on subject matter exams. There was no significant difference in the pass rates for the NCLEX examination, however. Still, studies found that graduates from the accelerated programs had higher job satisfaction ratings and annual income, as well as faster professional advancement (Payne & Mullen, 2014).

A 2015 research paper (Almquist, 2015) that analyzed results of several studies of accelerated programs at community colleges identified positive results for students. In one study (Geltner & Logan, 2001), the researchers found that students had higher success levels, higher average grades, and withdrew less in the short-term programs as compared to the longer-term, more traditional programs. Researchers in another study at one community college determined that students who enrolled in the shortest-term courses tended to have better success than students enrolled in the longer, more traditional course structures (Green & Almquist, 2012). A later study by Green & Almquist (2015) reviewed the same community college after it moved most of its course offerings to a time-compressed structure (changing 95% of its courses to a 7-week, time-compressed format). The authors found that overall course success rates increased from 62% in 2011 to 76% in 2012. In particular, at-risk (minority, adult, and lower income) students saw some of the largest gains (Almquist, 2015).

Some of the results of Almquist's findings are summarized in the figure below, which was provided in Almquist's study.
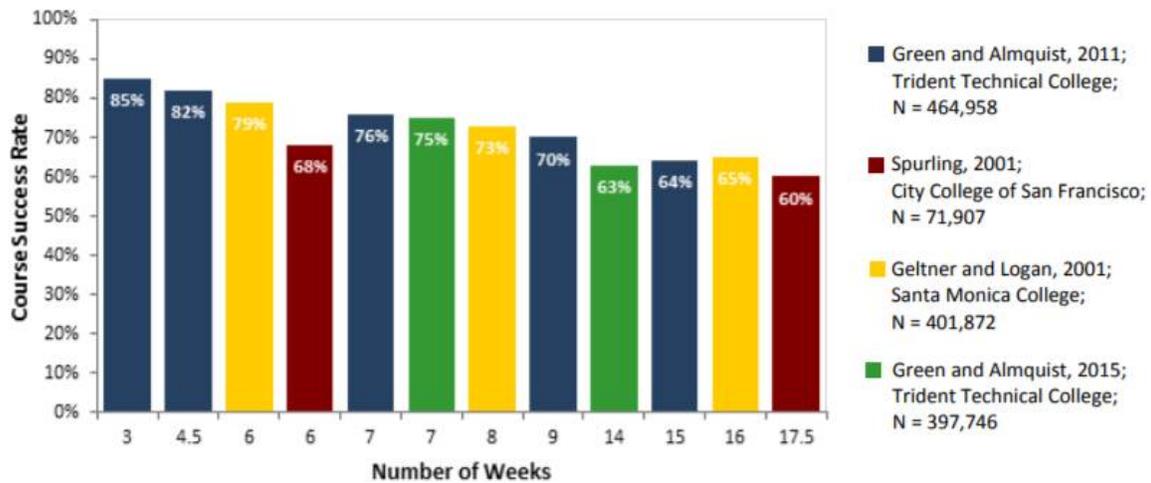
Figure 16. Community College Studies of Time-compressed Courses Across Multiple Disciplines.

While these are promising results, higher education institutions still must carefully structure accelerated courses to meet the needs of nontraditional students. First, accelerated courses should be designed to recognize and leverage the life experience of adult learners (Husson & Kennedy, 2003). This applies to both the curricula and the students' relationship with faculty members. As one scholar noted, nontraditional students must balance the same roles as many faculty members: parent, spouse, employee, etc. Availability, as well as their respect for this balancing act, drives nontraditional student satisfaction with faculty members (Hutchens, 2016); (Graham, 1998). Positive relationships with faculty also improve nontraditional student retention (Jacoby, 2000); (Laird & Cruce, 2009). Training faculty to effectively engage nontraditional students could make accelerated programs even more successful and lead to higher success rates. Other components that may contribute to success in accelerated programs include training and supporting faculty to encourage risk-taking; assist adult students in moving outside their comfort zones; and provide opportunities for students to take part in collaborative groups. (Spaid & Duff, 2009).

Accelerated scheduling offers nontraditional students an appealing blend of speed and structure, pulling them through a program more quickly than a typical semester-based system, while also offering the supportive structure of a rigorous schedule, immediate deadlines, and the ability to focus on one subject at a time. Two examples of promising practices in accelerated schedules are scheduling efficiencies and Open Entry/Open Exit (OEOE).

Scheduling Efficiencies
Several TAACCCT grantee institutions tested the approach of offering accelerated programs through condensing the learning timeline, offering block schedules that shortened the number of weeks (or months) of a training program. Typically these programs were structured to have a hard start and end date, which allowed the programs to fit in with traditional college systems (e.g., operate on a term structure and thus be eligible for Title IV financial aid) while allowing students to move through coursework and earn credentials more quickly. These grantees have found that for accelerated programs, it is especially important that the college provides individuals in the program with added support, which

can include things like help navigating the college structure, tutoring, and someone to check-in and ensure the student is on-track.

At one TAACCCT-funded institution, the training program was located nearly an hour from the main campus. However, many administrative processes at the college, such as obtaining a student ID, required students to come to the main campus. This created a burden for students, as they were taking classes during regular college hours and could not drive to the main campus while campus offices were open. To mitigate these barriers, the program's coach handled these processes

Open Entry/Open Exit

On the other end of the structure spectrum is the concept of Open Entry/Open Exit (OEOE) (also known as Open Entry/Early Exit (OEEE)) programs. The OEOE format increases flexibility for students by linking learning to competencies rather than contact hours. Students must master a set of learning objectives and demonstrate proficiency through a formal assessment before moving on to the next course in a sequence. Because learning is competency based, start dates are rolling, allowing students to enroll when it works for them instead of only at the beginning of an academic term. In some cases, OEOE programs also allow students flexibility in the time of day/days of the week that they come into the classroom. Other programs can be offered partially or fully online. Those that are offered partially online, using a blended format, often incorporate elements of a flipped classroom, which asks students to review material before coming to class in order to practice applying the material during their face-to-face time with an instructor. Further, students can progress through programs at their own pace and exit when they have completed the learning objectives or achieved proficiency (rather than completing a predetermined number of seat hours).

OEOE faculty support the student learning process through open office or lab hours rather than structured classroom time, providing one-on-one instruction that can be appealing to many students. However, success in a program like this requires students to be highly self-motivated and able to focus.

Challenges: Accelerated Schedules

Scheduling Efficiency Challenges

While accelerated schedules can be an effective way to accommodate students' other responsibilities, some accelerated structures do the opposite. For instance, programs that require student attendance five days per week can leave them with little time to study, let alone take care of things like advisor meetings and financial aid deadlines. Accelerated schedules can also be a major hurdle for students with full or part-time employment. One Workforce Innovation Fund program saw students dropping out at a rate of almost 50 percent during a four-day per week non-credit program. When asked why they had left the program, many cited low-wage job opportunities that seemed more immediately beneficial. For these reasons, it may be important, when scheduling an accelerated program, to ensure that students will have time and access to student services available through the institution as well as the ability to balance outside responsibilities with coursework on behalf of the students. The benefits of coaching models are discussed in more detail in the next promising practices section.

Open Entry/Open Exit Challenges

A hurdle to the implementation of OEOE models is that Title IV financial aid cannot typically be applied to OEOE because it is structured to be administered on a term schedule.

For example, one TAACCCT grantee developed fully online, competency-based degree and certificate programs, and subsequently applied to the federal Department of Education (US ED) for an experimental site waiver under the subscription period disbursement option to secure the programs' eligibility for Title IV financial aid. The institution received approval from US ED to administer financial aid outside of the term structure, but the college's Financial Aid office could not practically implement aid disbursement for a non-term, competency-based program because it would have been too complicated and time-consuming. The college's student information and aid administration system could not cost-effectively accommodate the non-term model, and a manual process would have been cumbersome and error-prone, consuming a disproportionate share of staff time and resources. As one Leadership Team member explained, "The most significant barriers [the program] faces for success and sustainability are the [non-term] structure's incompatibility with systems at the college, which are extrapolated and replicated all the way up to systems at the federal level." – Leadership, TAACCCT grantee institution.

Additionally, for this same institution, the incongruence of the program's non-term structure with college administrative systems and processes created significant extra work for administrative tasks such as tracking, billing, and reporting. These tasks were managed manually by college staff, and consumed a significant portion of their time spent on the project. For instance, the Business Office had to track billing and course registrations through an Excel document, since the college's student information system could not accommodate a non-term structure.

For these reasons, OEOE models may be more effective in non-credit environments in which student outcomes are not tied directly to infrastructures designed to support financial aid, and semester-based grading systems, etc.

Credit for Competency

Ensuring both traditional and adult learners receive credit for prior education, training, and experience is extremely important to retention and completion. Particularly when the cost of education is prohibitively high, reducing the number of credit hours or courses a student must complete—and pay for—to earn a credential can make a significant difference in a nontraditional student's commitment to a degree program. Awarding credit for competency also demonstrates that the student's life and work experience is valued by the institution, which, as noted above, is no small factor in students' attitudes.

In addition to accelerated coursework as described above, prior learning assessment and credit for competency programs have improved outcomes for nontraditional student success. A report from the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning indicated that prior learning assessments can improve graduate rates. In a survey of over 60,000 students at 48 institutions, the seven-year graduation rate for students who had completed a prior learning assessment was 56 percent while it was only 21 percent for students who had not completed an assessment. The differences are more dramatic at the bachelor's degree level: 43 percent of the students who completed an assessment finished their degree. Only 15 percent of the students who did not complete an assessment finished in the same time period (Klein-Collins, 2010).

Another group of researchers studied the educational effect of prior learning assessments and found that they boost students' self-confidence. Some students even experienced a shift in their entire perception of themselves, which was determined to be a positive, transformational learning experience (Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010). Experiences like this suggest that such assessments can not only help students

gain credit to finish their credential sooner but also build confidence in their ability to pursue their educational goals.

Multiple TAACCCT grantees have taken approaches to provide credit for prior learning, such as challenge exams, portfolio review, and credit for credentials. The most successful solutions make information (such as policies and procedures) easily accessible and consistently applied to all students. For example, one TAACCCT consortium launched a state-wide PLA policy, which individual colleges then translated into PLA opportunities at their respective locations. PLA information and next steps are available via an online platform, which anyone can use to explore what may or may not count as prior learning credit. As with many other interventions discussed here, this helps with both recruitment and retention.

> "As a veteran and someone who has been out of school for a long time, I was worried about coming back. Getting the prior learning credits helped me realize I could do it – and get it done fast."
>
> TAACCCT Student

Providing proper training for faculty and staff to implement credit for competency programs is essential. A TAACCCT grantee coordinated a PLA training for instructors, laying foundational work in the development of Challenge Exams. Prior to creating the Challenge Exams, each instructor independently revised and sharpened the learning outcomes for each program of study and then developed corresponding Challenge Exams. The Challenge Exams incorporated both written and experiential skills portions. Students are then offered PLA credit based on their score on the Challenge Exam.

> "Using PLAs, we have been able to assess the prior experience for displaced workers. This has been huge in those enrollment numbers – we are seeing an increase in that enrollment."
>
> TAACCCT Instructor

Prior Learning Assessment Challenges

One of the challenges to implementing credit for competency policies is the timing/alignment between the state and colleges. In states where a PLA structure is not yet in place (but the college anticipates one to be in place at some point in the future), the college leadership may be hesitant to create a PLA structure without state guidance, and a grant program staff may be hesitant to create PLAs for their program(s) without a college structure in place.

Classrooms Mimicking Workplaces

TAACCCT grantees worked to incorporate employability skills into technical curriculum and daily classroom activities. Because many hiring managers have reported that communication skills, problem solving, and basic workplace practices are lacking among job applicants, colleges are beginning to treat the classroom like a workplace simulator. Students are sometimes required to wear uniforms, punch a time clock, call the instructor in advance of absences, etc. For some adult learners, this may be unnecessary, but for others, reinforcement of these skills is important. Faculty and program administrators in several career pathway programs have noted that, in the classroom as in the workplace, setting expectations around attendance and punctuality is a surprisingly effective retention tool.

All students, traditional or nontraditional, enjoy better educational experiences and improved outcomes if they are part of a like-minded community (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Generally speaking, however,

nontraditional students are at a disadvantage at institutions that are designed for traditional learners. One interviewee noted that campus culture, especially at large institutions, is focused on the development and needs of traditional students, not those working full-time, raising a family, and completing their education (Hoyt & Howell, 2012).

For nontraditional students, a cohort of students grappling with the same balancing leads to more effective learning and supportive peer networks. They have self-identified this; they favor programs tailored only for nontraditional students (Wyatt, 2011). One study summarized their needs well: "Through engagement with fellow adults who are full-time workers and through use of cohort group projects and cohort-based classes, they experienced a learning community of shared perspectives and applications. More important, these adults felt a sense of support in the midst of their pressured lives" (Kasworm, 2003, 20). One student remarked that there is a shared sense of responsibility within the cohort: "The group is a positive force, because the group demands that you do your homework. It's not a matter of you just letting yourself down, you're letting other people down that you're responsible to" (Kasworm, 2003, 20).

Establishing Career Pathways
Designed with in-demand jobs and industry input at their core, career pathways provide more immediate job opportunities than traditional academic programs. Well designed, seamless career pathways provide job seekers with a high-level overview of the training, skills, and certifications needed to advance in an occupational family while simultaneously aligning and streamlining the disparate parts of the system. In many cases, programs that cater to nontraditional students "tend to be market driven rather than discipline focused, they are performance based, granting credits and degrees based on competency rather than seat time" (Wlodkowski & Westover, 1999). All of these modifications are designed to create an education experience that is more like the workplace, giving students important contextualized experiences while also building their technical skills.

Since many nontraditional students work while they complete their education, they often pursue vocational tracks (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). Similarly, their motivation to finish their degree or credential is motivated by their careers and professional goals (Chao & Good, 2004). As a result, they tend to value specific learning goals rather than assignment grades or institutional grade point averages (Eppler & Harju, 1997). This may be connected to the trend of up-skilling, which describes the behavior of students enrolling in courses or programs only to gain immediate labor market benefits—rather than to pursue a credential. Up-skilling helps students and their current or future employers, but creates challenges for education providers that receive funding and other supports based upon student completion rates (and may be one of many contributing factors to the low completion rates this paper addresses). Acknowledging this trend and designing education to respond to it may be an inroad to improving education attainment rates among nontraditional students.

Encouraging career connections can also push adult students, who may be lacking recent academic experience, to outperform traditional students in the classroom. Adults tend to learn more effectively when they can apply what they know and what they have experienced to their coursework (Graham, 1998). This focus on how what they learn will directly apply to their lives can drive their academic success (Fairchild, 2003). This can be accentuated when combined with student success coaching and cohort-based programming.

Developing Industry Partnerships

Career pathway strategies require a strong relationship with local employers as well as regional and national industry groups such as sector partnerships. The relationship between educators and employers serves a dual purpose. First, it ensures that learning outcomes are relevant and faculty are knowledgeable about current industry trends. In fields such as advanced manufacturing and healthcare, where changes in technology and public policy can significantly impact the way work is done in the industry, this is critical. Second, nontraditional students want to know that they are going to be able to get a job (better than the one they most likely already have) when they graduate. Entering a program with strong connections to industry allows students to make meaningful connections with potential mentors and hiring managers.

There are several ways that colleges and universities can strengthen the connections between students and their future employers. One such strategy includes internships and co-operative education programs, which allow students to gain valuable work experience while also earning college credit. However, these work-based learning opportunities must be designed to be meaningful and—like the accelerated programs described above—flexible. For instance, a student who is already employed full time in the target industry would benefit more from completing a special project or on-the-job training with their current employer rather than having to juggle both the full-time job and the internship. Faculty or coaches can work directly with supervisors to customize a work-and-learn program that is mutually beneficial.

Less time intensive but still valuable to students are interview events, employers' visits to campus, and company tours. Each of these events, while minimally time consuming, can create meaningful networking connections and provide students with exposure to myriad workplace cultures. In the most successful of such events, students can leave with job offers. For example, one TAACCCT grantee college coordinated a "speed dating" style event for its students, bringing in several hiring managers to interview each student. Students were coached on interview questions prior to the event, worked with career coaches to update their resumes, and conducted research on the companies attending. Several students left this event with more than one job offer, which inspired the department to develop a coaching session on negotiating multiple offers. Other students were hired for jobs at a higher skill and wage level than they expected. This was in part because of the coaching and support provided, but also because the curriculum was aligned with specific industry-recognized credentials.

Aligning Programs to Industry Credentials

Career pathway programs and systems often link coursework, postsecondary certificates, and degrees with industry-recognized credentials. These credentials become short-hand for the competencies industry needs program graduates to develop during their education. Validated by subject matter experts and neutral third parties, industry-recognized credentials become the bridge between the language used by faculty and curriculum developers and the language used by hiring managers. Adoption of and alignment to credentials can also help streamline the articulation process between similar degree or certificate programs. For example, in Florida, several institutions in the state college system have aligned the core courses in engineering to a set of industry-recognized credentials, thus creating a statewide articulation agreement that ties credentials to college credits. Some states have established transfer agreements that support articulation across education providers, and have been helpful resources for TAACCCT grantees. These can be beneficial, because they allow for easy articulation from one program to the next.

Similarly, the State of Ohio developed the Career-Technical Assurance Guide (CTAG) system to increase transferability across career/technical training institutions and public institutions of higher education, and

the Transfer Assurance Guide (TAG) system to enhance transferability across Ohio's public higher education institutions. Approved CTAG and TAG courses guarantee that the courses and their credits will transfer and apply toward a major at Ohio's public institutions of higher education.
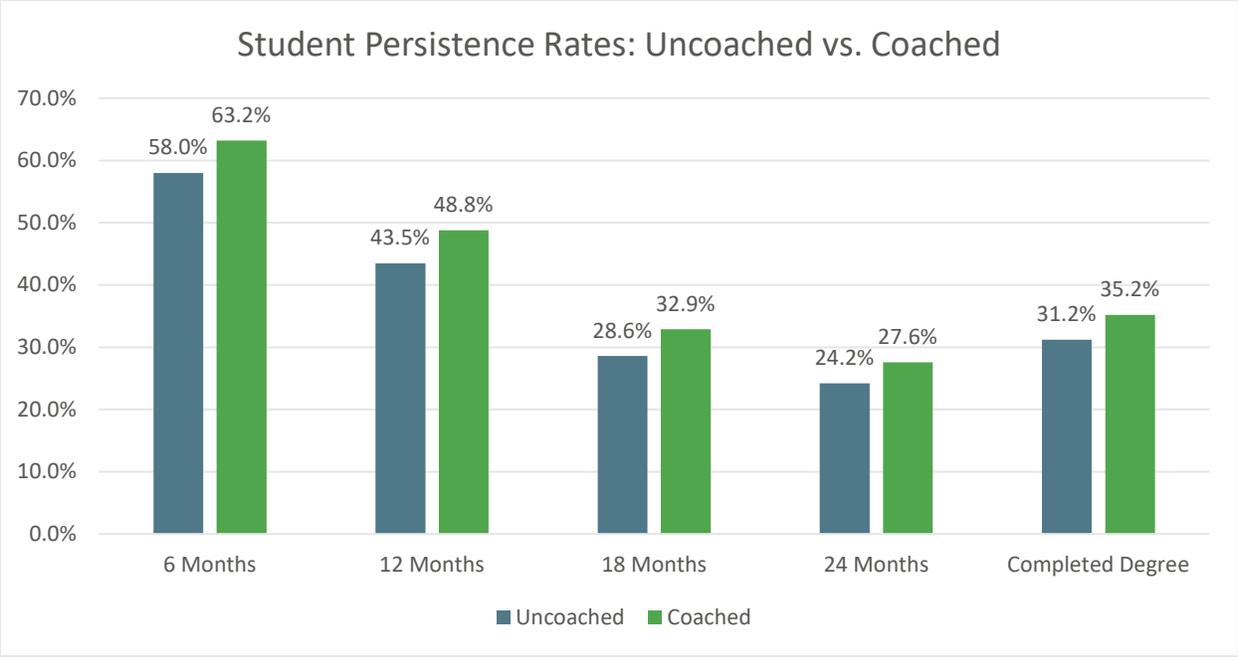
Dedicated Support and Coaching

Student success coaching is among the most promising interventions in improving completion rates. Coaches (also referred to as Navigators, Success Coordinators, or Completion Coaches) have been used to assist in student recruitment, retention, and success to great effect. While not exclusively beneficial to adult learners, research shows that traditional students generally have a wider support system on campus (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002), so it has been suggested that institutions focus on providing more support to nontraditional students (Fairchild, 2003).

Nontraditional students appreciate engaged faculty in the classroom, but they also want advisors who will advocate for them and help them navigate institutional barriers. Specifically, nontraditional students want an advisor that understands their specific challenges and can represent them to university administration (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). In many cases, coaches can and have fulfilled these roles.

Quantitative evidence confirms the efficacy of nontraditional student coaching. One study, commissioned to evaluate a coaching program called InsideTrack, measured student persistence among approximately 8,000 students who received the coaching services and approximately 5,500 that did not. InsideTrack is a proprietary program that pairs coaches with students for two semesters; these coaches proactively contact their students through phone, email, text message, and social networking sites to establish a relationship and regular communication (Bettinger & Baker, 2014).

In the study, the average age across both groups was 30.5, indicating that the population was largely nontraditional. The results were immediate: within the first year, the coached students were about 5 percentage points more likely to persist in their program. That was a 9-12 percent increase in retention. The study also found that the effect on persistence lasted beyond the coaching services. The students who were coached were 3-4 percentage points more likely to persist 18 to 24 months after the start of the program. That represented a 15 percent increase in retention. After four years, the graduation rate for the coached students was 4 percentage points higher than those who did not receive the services. All of these results were statistically significant and did not change when the researchers controlled for gender, ACT score, high school GPA, SAT score, residence status, Pell Grantee status, and participation in math and English remediation (Bettinger & Baker, 2014).

Student Persistence Rates: Uncoached vs. Coached

Period	Uncoached	Coached
6 Months	58.0%	63.2%
12 Months	43.5%	48.8%
18 Months	28.6%	32.9%
24 Months	24.2%	27.6%
Completed Degree	31.2%	35.2%

■ Uncoached   ■ Coached

The InsideTrack program has also been used to successfully attract and retain students into degree programs. At the College of New Rochelle, located in New York, InsideTrack coaches converted 30 percent of admissions inquiries from adult students into enrollments. During the same period, the College converted 11 percent. A similar coaching model was implemented at Our Lady of the Lake University. The second-semester retention rate for students who attended at least seven coaching sessions was 93 percent, dramatically higher than the 69 percent of the retained students who attended only one session (Farrell, 2007).

A number of TAACCCT and WIF grantees utilized coaching models to assist with student recruitment into grant-funded programs, as well as to support students after enrollment in the program. While some colleges had anticipated that coaches primarily would be utilized to assist students with basic needs (e.g., transportation, financial aid, etc.), colleges found that once students were enrolled, coaches were more frequently called upon to provide support in navigating processes at the college. In many cases, coaches served as liaisons between the students and the college or acted as advocates on behalf of the students for institutional processes that created barriers for students. Program staff, college leadership, and students at the grantee colleges and consortia felt that coaches were valuable assets in these areas. This white paper addresses the following themes for promising coaching practices: Enrollment, Re-Enrollment, and Recruitment; Institutional Liaisons; and Career Preparation.

Enrollment, Re-Enrollment, and Recruitment

In some cases, coaches have been utilized to help recruit students into programs and help them navigate issues associated with enrollment (or re-enrollment, for those who had stopped out). As one grant consortium identified, barriers such as transportation, child care, and finances may prohibit students from enrolling in college at all. The coaches were assigned to help students address these challenges up front so that enrollment was not as daunting.

Coaches in this consortium spend a significant amount of their time helping students navigate the barriers to returning to college. Because they focus only on students who have stopped out, the students' financial situations are usually one of the biggest challenges (loans that they haven't made payments on, or they owe money to the colleges). The students have other challenges to returning to college, such as transportation issues and childcare. The coaches have spent more time getting students ready to get started.

> "I felt hopeless before working with [the outreach coordinator]. With medical issues and the school world and the work world not accepting as you would hope, I didn't think it was possible for me to return."
>
> WIF Student

At other grantee colleges, coaches played the roles of recruiting students to enroll in the college or to participate in funded programs. At some colleges, coaches focused on recruiting students who were currently enrolled at the college, whereas at others, they focused on recruiting students from the community, including nontraditional students.

In many cases, coaches were successful at recruiting students to enroll in programs, in particular by communicating with students about the support services that could be made available to them, as well as by actually assisting students through the enrollment process and by helping to meet basic needs that may act as barriers for students to enroll or re-enroll in college.

The coach at one grantee college utilized a variety of events to recruit students to the grant program, including an expo to highlight the grant program and other related programs. This was the first such event the college had ever conducted, and now it intends to hold one each year. The event attracted approximately 20 prospective students, as well as members of the general public. Two other grantee colleges reached out to the community to attract students. Staff at another consortium college engaged in community recruitment by visiting restaurants, barbershops, and other community gathering places to garner interest in the program.

At other colleges, coaches acted in more supporting roles for student recruitment. For example, coaches followed up with interested students or acted as their first point of contact when they arrived on campus. Students indicated that it was nice to talk with a peer and meet with them as their first contact, because it

> "The peer coach was my first contact person at the college. They helped me enroll and get through that process."
>
> TAACCCT student

made them feel comfortable, and students felt they could be more open. At another college, while coaches did not participate in recruitment directly, they assisted in following up with students and connected students with resources on and off campus after they had applied to the college, to ensure that they were able to enroll.

Institutional Liaison

In some instances, the coaches' initial role was envisioned to be assisting students with access to community services such as TANF, Medicaid, childcare, transportation assistance, or mental health services. However, once the coaches began working with students, they determined that students actually needed more support in navigating the college system itself, not the outside processes of the social safety net. This included activities such as completing developmental courses, registering for classes or changing

class schedules, dealing with sometimes limited course availability, identifying how to gain credit for competency or prior learning, and assisting in how to address in-class struggles.

At the TAACCCT and WIF grantee colleges, coaches reported providing supports for students designed to help them navigate college processes and communicate with staff and faculty across the institution. Coaches reported the importance of establishing trust and rapport with students, so that students felt comfortable coming to them with challenges and questions.

> "There are resources, and there are choices. As a teenager I wasn't aware of these things. Having [the outreach coordinator] point these out has been extremely helpful."
>
> WIF Student

Coaches at several grantee colleges were able to help students in grant-funded programs to navigate processes at the college, including how to enroll and how to apply for financial aid. Coaches also assisted students in continued registration for classes and in ensuring that students enrolled for courses in the right scope and sequence. In some cases, coaches also helped students address issues that might be barriers to continued enrollment or retention, and some acted as advocates on behalf of the students.

At many of the TAACCCT colleges, coaches were either embedded in the programs for which they were supporting students, or were given training to ensure that they were knowledgeable of the programs and their requirements. As such, many coaches were able to help students with a variety of activities related to ongoing course enrollment and addressing academic challenges associated with the courses. Some colleges also attempted to provide flexibility for coaches to better accommodate students' schedules. For example, at a consortium college that held night classes, the coach stayed on campus until 10PM once a week so as to be available for the night students.

At another TAACCCT college, the coach was able to help students navigate a college policy that required certain students to meet with an advisor prior to registering. However, because students in the program frequently were working and unable to come to campus during the day (when advisors were available), they would be unable to register for class. The coach was able to gain permission from the college to work directly with students to allow them to register. In addition, because the coach was knowledgeable about the specific program in which the students were enrolled, the coach was able to ensure the students were enrolling for courses in the right scope and sequence for the program.

> "We do a lot of tech support; we help [the students] decipher their coursework. When a student says, 'I'm going to drop all my classes', I can explain that it will impact their financial aid."
>
> TAACCCT Coach

Coaches at another college assisted students with activities such as registering for classes; identifying the processes for getting credit for prior learning or prior work experience; understanding financial aid eligibility; navigating technology systems (such as online course registration systems or online course tools); or assisting with the tuition reimbursement process, especially for non-credit seeking students. The coaches indicated that because many of the students were working adults either who had never before attended college or who had stopped out, they were frequently called upon to answer questions and to simplify processes.

Colleges in one grantee consortium utilized a structure that included career and educational counselors that were employed by the college, as well as peer coaches. The peer coaches were students who were taking the same courses as the students they were coaching. However, these peer coaches received rigorous training to help them better understand institutional policies and processes. The peer coaches acted as liaisons between the college and the students in the programs. They assisted with recruitment and campus tours, as well as helping students through the admissions process. The peer coaches also sat in on grant-funded courses so that they could help enrolled students with coursework.

> "We have developed good relationships with our students. They feel they can ask us anything they want, whenever they want."
>
> TAACCCT Coach

Ensuring students make adequate academic progress is another important role for coaches who play the institutional liaison role. At one TAACCCT college, coaches connected very closely with program faculty to monitor students' academic progress. Because most of the students the college served were working adults, a return to the classroom often posed challenges. The coaches established good relationships with program faculty, and faculty provided coaches with updates on students in the program who were struggling. Because the coaches had established a strong rapport with the students, the students reported feeling comfortable connecting with the coaches to discuss these issues.

At other consortium colleges, coaches reported that their relationships with students served as an early intervention mechanism and allowed them to be proactive. Rather than waiting for campus databases to track absences, or for faculty to notice that a student was struggling, the students felt comfortable approaching the peer coaches. The coaches then could take measures to ensure that the students got the support they needed. The coaches reported that students saw them as a trusted resource for discussing academic challenges, or even as resources to check in to discuss successes and challenges in the program. In some cases (usually upon request), the coaches provided highly individualized support, including creating individual plans for success. At another college, coaches met with instructors to discuss student progress, with meetings occurring as frequently as three times a week to every other day. The coaches at this college also individualized their approaches, tailoring support to students' varying backgrounds and comfort levels. The coaches referred students to tutors, as needed. The coaches expressed that they were able to create a level of openness and comradery with students by regularly visiting classes and making themselves available to the students. Because

> "If it weren't for [the coach], I probably would have dropped out of the program. I struggled with math classes, but [the coach] really fought for me. [She was] somebody in my corner to help me navigate the school."
>
> TAACCCT Student

of this relationship, the coaches felt that students were comfortable discussing issues and challenges that they may not be comfortable discussing with other college staff, such as advisors or instructors.

Career Preparation

A key component of career pathways programs is neutral career counseling, which provides students with information about an occupation, interconnected certificate and degree programs, credentials, and on- and off-ramps to degree completion and/or jobs. The goal of neutral career counseling is to provide students with enough information about themselves and their options to make the best decision. This is

the kind of information upon which nontraditional students rely when deciding to go back to school. One TAACCCT grant consortium conducted career assessment and interest assessment to help prospective students identify where they might be able to fit occupation-wise and what kind of training is available.

Another consortium college revamped their Advanced Manufacturing Day to better "open people's eyes to what Advanced Manufacturing actually is." Instructors at the college indicated that this exposure has attracted students who have stronger interest in the field, which makes them a better fit for the program.

> "I credit [the coaches] exclusively with getting my job. One did a mock interview. The other emailed me a lot about updating my resume and then followed up with me—how did the interview go."
>
> TAACCCT Student

At grantee colleges, coaches often worked with students and employer partners to help students in career preparation activities, such as resume design and mock interviews, as well as, in some cases, to connect students directly to job opportunities. Coaches at one college assisted students with mock interviews and helped them design and tailor their resumes to meet the particular needs of local employers. The coaches also helped students address soft skills that are important to employers. At another college, coaches helped facilitate job placement through mock interviews conducted with actual employer partners, as well as providing individual job search support. At this college, coaches also created and maintained a job board on their program's webpage. Another college also assisted students with resumes and job searches. Coaches at this college also assisted individual students in filling out job applications.

At other colleges, while career services were provided on campus, they were not required or were not embedded into the technical programs served by the coaches. For example, at one consortium college, while career services were offered for academic programs, students enrolled in technical programs (who were usually non-traditional students) typically did not access career services, because they did not see the services as relevant. As such, coaches provided these supports, and students felt more comfortable working with the coaches for job searches and to identify internship opportunities. According to the coaches, without these supports, students would not have received career information.

Challenges: Coaching

Although various coaching models have shown promise in supporting student retention and completion, they are not without their challenges. For instance, coaches that were required to deal with larger student caseloads expressed challenges at being able to provide individualized support. At these colleges, coaches sometimes noted frustration at their lack of ability to connect to students, or to even make themselves visible to students. Coaches indicated that when they were assigned too many students, typically the only activities they could successfully complete were visiting classes to present the services they could offer, or connecting students to resources on campus. These coaches expressed concern that because of the size of their caseloads, they were unable to provide proactive support.

Turnover was another major challenge in several grantee colleges, although it is difficult to identify whether turnover occurred because the coaching position was grant-funded (therefore, the existence of the job was dependent upon the existence of the grant), or if it occurred due to burnout. Many full-time coaches indicated the difficult nature of the role, including needing to be available to students on more than an eight-to-five basis, as well as needing to help students navigate challenges. When coaches left, typically grant staff were required to either drop coaching altogether or shift responsibilities to other grant staff until new coaches were identified. This could create gaps in services.

Grant staff and coaches pointed to the importance of flexibility and being able to meet students where they are. For example, at one TAACCCT college where coaches were located at a different campus location, coaches and grant staff reported availability challenges. Because the coaches were stationed at a different campus, students had to make appointments to connect with the coaches. In contrast, at colleges where the coaches were located on the campus at which the programs were occurring (often in the same building as the programs); students could stop by and visit with the coaches when it was convenient.

In the peer coaching model, there was naturally a lot of turnover because peer coaches graduated, and new coaches would need to be identified and trained. Further, in the peer coaching model, students had coaching responsibilities on top of coursework, which in some cases led to turnover.

Another grantee college offered student support services on the main campus, but several programs operate at other campus locations. This college determined that they needed to ensure that student support services, such as tutoring, were offered at the satellite campuses and not just the main campus. Further, the retention specialist (coach) frequently visited the satellite locations to work with students, as opposed to the students having to come to the coach. A second grantee consortium also identified this as important. For this program, coaches were primarily located at workforce centers; however, the coaches frequently went on campuses to meet with students. Students served by the project noted the value of their coaches (called outreach coordinators) coming to them. At a third grantee college, grant programs were located at satellite campuses, and the college placed the coaches at those locations so that students had direct access, while the rest of the grant staff were located on the main campus.

Conclusion

If we are to see significant changes in the college completion rates of nontraditional students, institutions of higher education will need to make meaningful and systemic efforts to remove barriers and streamline processes. Administrators, faculty, and staff need to revise the mental picture they have of a homogenous student body made up of single, childless young adults whose primary responsibility is college. By embracing today's post-secondary students as a diverse population with unique challenges, strengths, and goals, nontraditional student success rates can improve.

Each of the interventions described in this paper—accelerated schedules, credit for competency, classrooms that mimic the workplace, and dedicated student support and coaching —show promise at making incremental improvements as they are implemented in individual programs of study, academic departments, and colleges. Taken at a systems level, these interventions could disrupt the infrastructure of higher education, replacing the one-size-fits-all model with customized approaches to scheduling, financial aid, and more.

The following next steps are recommended, based on the findings in this paper:

1. **Implement multiple interventions simultaneously:** We have observed degree programs and colleges successfully integrate more than one intervention—such as career pathways tied to credentials and Open Entry/Open Exit scheduling, coaches integrated into accelerated schedules, etc.—and argue that this approach can be more effective at removing barriers to student success than integrating one intervention at a time.

2. **Seek sustainability:** The promising practices in this paper have stemmed from grant-funded programs that infuse departments with resources. This process is valuable for its ability to drive innovation, but on its own, it does not make lasting change. Budget and policy changes that accommodate full-time success coaches, offer greater accessibility to financial aid, and provide administrators with the flexibility to create processes that work will be essential in this movement. Changes to system infrastructure (such as learning management systems and student portals) will also increase sustainability.

3. **Reduce required classroom hours:** Whether through universal adoption of prior learning assessment policies, increased use of accelerated schedules, or infrastructure updates that accommodate competency-based learning, research and promising practices support the efficacy of moving adults through their certificate and degree programs more quickly. Measuring learning through contact hours is no longer an effective strategy.

4. **Connect students to professional networks:** Often, nontraditional (and first-generation) students admit to having trouble navigating institutional processes and social norms. Likewise, students with barriers to success in school may be more likely to have trouble with job interviews and employability skills. What student success coaches, mock interviews, and work-based learning programs have in common is that they introduce students to successful professionals and give them insider information on how to navigate a system. This kind of learning is integral to nontraditional students' ability to persist, find work, and advance in a career. Colleges and degree programs should make a concentrated effort to not only introduce their students to professionals in the industry but also help them forge meaningful relationships.

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