

# Chapter 11

## Enabling Lifelong Learning in California Community Colleges: Coordinated State and Local Efforts

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### ABSTRACT

*Creating flexible pathways for students, especially those who are caregiving, balancing working and learning, and/or acquiring skills and knowledge outside of classrooms, requires coordinated state- and college-level actions. This chapter describes how the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and its supporting Success Center, undergirded by the system's north star, the Vision for Success, established an infrastructure of policy and resources at the state level, especially through credit for prior learning and competency-based education, to enable colleges to better support students' lifelong learning. Colleges such as Shasta College leveraged these pre-conditions to advance new reforms and accelerate existing ones to transform student journeys.*

Janet Hubbert left the University of California - Berkeley at age 19 when she was placed on medical leave due to mental health. Returning home to her parents was not an option, and she found full-time employment to support herself. Every time she thought about going back to school, the financial burden loomed over her, and Janet knew her education was no longer in sight. So, she settled down and started a family. Janet stopped working when daycare became too expensive; she wanted to return to school but wasn't sure how to start. "I went back to being a stay-at-home mom with no education, no degree, no anything," she said. "The big question for me was, can I afford to [go back to school]? Do I know what I want to do?" Janet found the **Accelerated College Education (ACE) Program at Shasta College**,

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specifically designed to help adult learners balance education, work, and family obligations. Inspired by the level of commitment of ACE’s counselors and other staff to the students, she earned a temporary part-time position as a student success facilitator for the ACE program—a role she had not imagined for herself, but which she found she loved. “It’s rewarding for me. I know where they’re coming from, I know their struggles. And students know that,” said Janet. “I’m not just saying, ‘oh, you’ll be fine.’”

In 2018, the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, with the support of the Success Center at the Foundation for California Community Colleges<sup>1</sup>, initiated two strategic innovations to create more flexible and personalized pathways for adult learners<sup>2</sup> like Janet Hubbert: 1) save students time and money by offering credit for the college-level skills and knowledge that students acquire outside of college classrooms (credit for prior learning, or CPL); and 2) make programs more accessible by modularizing learning and enabling students to demonstrate mastery of content at their own pace outside the confines of the traditional credit hour (direct assessment competency-based education, or CBE) (Burnette, 2016; McDonald, 2018; Parsons et al., 2016;). Driving these efforts was the *Vision for Success*, a set of bold goals and core commitments guiding California community colleges to center students’ experiences in the design of pathways, policies, and processes.

This chapter first describes the California Community Colleges system, its students, and the imperative to create flexible pathways for students and the state. The chapter outlines concepts established in research about the needs of adult learners, evidence for CPL and CBE as promising practices, and conditions necessary within higher education systems to transform institutions. The literature helps explain why the Chancellor’s Office and Success Center prioritized actions at the system level first to create flexible pathways through CPL and CBE. The chapter next describes what actions the Chancellor’s Office and Success Center took to lay a policy and resource infrastructure for CPL and CBE, and early results of how the colleges are responding by implementing these reforms. The story of these system-level actions is told through the lessons learned, such as why it was important for the system to leverage actions of the state legislature. The chapter continues with an overview of Shasta College as a pilot college implementing CPL and CBE and as a leader in creating flexible pathways for students like Janet. The lessons may support other systems seeking to take similar actions.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **About California Community Colleges**

California leaders established community colleges as the most accessible higher education segment for students from all backgrounds, ages, socioeconomic status, and lived experiences (California Department of Education, 1960). The California Community Colleges system comprises 116 colleges governed by 73 districts with locally elected boards of trustees. District boards approve local policy and set student success goals. The system is overseen by the Chancellor’s Office, which has about 140 staff in nine divisions providing support to the colleges, overseeing compliance, and reporting to the state. The Chancellor’s Office receives guidance from its Board of Governors (“board”). A system-level Academic Senate represents unionized faculty, with local branches of this Academic Senate representing faculty across colleges. As part of a participatory governance process, a Consultation Council that includes representatives of the Academic Senate reviews proposed policy changes before they are presented to the board for approval. In this decentralized system, the Chancellor’s Office works in concert with fac-

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