



GROUP

L e a r n i n g f o r A c t i o n

## The Plus 50 Initiative:

### Executive Summary of the Year One Evaluation Report

October 2009

#### **Prepared For**

The Plus 50 Initiative  
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## Year One Accomplishments of the Plus 50 Initiative

The American Association of Community Colleges' (AACC) Plus 50 Initiative is a three-year initiative launched in June 2008, and funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies. It was created to support a pilot group of two-year institutions to develop or expand campus programs that engage plus 50 learners. The initiative focuses on three types of programmatic implementation: workforce training and career development; learning and enrichment; and volunteering. Programs also include the services and supports that allow plus 50 learners better access to community college offerings.

### Initiative Overview

With the baby boom generation (the 78 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964) now approaching typical retirement age, there is an increased focus on what this age cohort will do in its later years. This group represents a tremendous resource to the nation in terms of experience, skills, and leadership capacity. With Americans healthier and living longer, they are less interested in traditional retirement. Many of those who do not need to work for income will seek work to stay active and engaged, and others without the resources to carry them through their retirement years will work because they need to.<sup>1</sup> And baby boomers often want to stay connected by giving back to their communities through volunteering.

### The Vision for How Community Colleges Can Meet the Needs Of Plus 50 Learners

Community colleges are uniquely positioned to respond to the growing needs of the plus 50 population. Community colleges have a long tradition of welcoming the non-traditional student

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Community colleges can turn on a dime.

*AACC Staff*

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and are known for providing creative programming that meets evolving community needs.<sup>2</sup> The diversity of community college offerings from one college to the next indicates the innovation and flexibility that community colleges offer their diverse student body including plus 50 learners. Additionally, community colleges' strong partnerships with other local organizations allow them to connect plus 50 students to a large variety of work and volunteer opportunities.

### Initiative Goals

The overarching goal of the Plus 50 Initiative is to build the capacity of community colleges to substantively and continuously engage in helping plus 50 learners lead purposeful lives through education, work, and service. To reach this goal, the initiative focuses on: supporting the grantee colleges to develop and expand their program offerings; building stakeholder support among community college leaders to ensure the feasibility and sustainability of Plus 50 programming; and producing and disseminating knowledge that community colleges nationwide can use to develop their own Plus 50 programs. The specific goal areas listed below include short and long term goals, not all of which are expected to be realized by the end of the three-year initiative. To reach the desired impact, many goals will be achieved years after the Plus 50 Initiative is complete – leaving a compelling legacy of the initiative.

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<sup>1</sup> MetLife Mature Market Institute (2006). *Living Longer, Working Longer: The Changing Landscape of the Aging Workforce – A MetLife Study*. Westport, CT: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

<sup>2</sup> American Association of Community Colleges (2009). *Community Colleges in Their Communities*. Retrieved on February 3, 2009 from: <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Trends/Pages/communitycollegesintheircommunities.aspx>

## ***Support Community Colleges' Development and Expansion of Plus 50 Programs***

AACC supports the pilot group of grantee colleges in their efforts to increase offerings to the plus 50 population in three areas: (1) workforce training and career development; (2) learning and enrichment; and (3) volunteering. The initiative focuses not only on a simple expansion in the number of offerings, but also fosters innovation in how the colleges meet the particular needs and interests of this age cohort. This means developing new courses and redesigning existing ones; and it also means the development and expansion of support services that enable access to community college programming.

Another aspect of the initiative's goal to support the expansion of plus 50 programs is to grow the number of community colleges offering this programming beyond the initial grantee cohort. A long-term goal of the initiative is that 300 community colleges will implement and sustain plus 50 programs.

### ***Advocate for Plus 50 Students' Needs through Dedicated Leadership***

To foster the growth and sustainability of Plus 50 programming, key advocates and partners need to bolster support at community colleges. For the Plus 50 Initiative, this advocacy includes engaging an advisory committee composed of key stakeholders who can provide their insight, influence, and partnership-building to provide supports and opportunities. The initiative is also working to secure policies at local and national levels that are friendly to plus 50 learners.

### ***Create a Roadmap to Support Future Plus 50 Offerings***

A third overarching goal of the initiative is to disseminate information that will enable community colleges to implement, promote, and sustain high-quality plus 50 programming. Specific goals include: (1) building a business case that supports plus 50 programming; (2) capturing lessons learned from the pilot colleges to identify the "standards of excellence" that define high-quality programming; and (3) developing knowledge and tools that community colleges can use to develop and implement their own plus 50 programs.

## **Initiative design**

The initiative is designed to create an active learning community environment that supports the grantee colleges in their implementation of high-quality programs. The section below describes the focus areas of the grantees' programs, as well as the wide variety of supports for the grantees that are included in the initiative design.

### ***Programmatic Focus Areas***

The initiative focuses on three programmatic tracks: workforce training and career development, learning and enrichment, and volunteering. Plus 50 programming also includes support services that increase access of the plus 50 learner to community colleges.

- **Workforce Training and Career Development.** Workforce training and career development are courses and services that help people upgrade their skills for the purposes of re-entering the workforce or advancing their careers. Colleges offer a wide range of training programs and career services, including workshops in resume writing and job interviewing, computer refresher courses, and certificate programs that help students train for new careers, as well as job placement services and community partnerships with employers.

- **Learning and Enrichment.** Learning and enrichment courses are general studies (such as math and foreign language) or personal interests (such as cooking and yoga) that students enroll in for academic development, to relieve stress from their busy lives, and for personal enrichment.
- **Volunteering.** This focus area includes programs and services that support plus 50 learners in finding opportunities to volunteer their skills and talents in their communities. Services can include issuing a directory of volunteer opportunities and matching skilled volunteers with nonprofits.
- **Support Services.** As part of their Plus 50 programs, grantees are implementing services and supports to increase access of plus 50 students to the community colleges. The plus 50 population faces a variety of barriers to attending community colleges that younger adult learners in their 20s, 30s, and 40s may not experience. Some of these barriers include lack of awareness of the courses and activities geared to the plus 50 population, difficulties integrating into campus life, physical challenges (e.g. needing large print on handouts), and financial barriers. To address these barriers and to help attract and retain plus 50 students, Plus 50 colleges are investing in support services, including: (1) services that facilitate the integration of plus 50 students into the college; (2) supports that facilitate physical access; and (3) supports to increase the financial feasibility of college courses.

### **Supports for Grantee Program Implementation**

AACC is a “high engagement funder” that provides a wide range of supports and resources that help the grantee colleges to develop and implement high-quality programming.

- **Colleges work within three-college teams: one mentor college matched with two demonstration colleges.**<sup>3</sup> These teams share resources and support. Mentor colleges have more experience serving plus 50 students’ needs, and lend their experience to benefit demonstration colleges.
 

The relationship with [our mentor college] has been very beneficial. The expertise and experience that they offer is invaluable. The guidance and monthly conference calls [have] been an excellent resource for us.

*Demonstration College*
- **Each college forms a Plus 50 advisory committee.** As a requirement of the grant, these committees include college stakeholders and community partners. Plus 50 program staff leverage local expertise to help design and implement their programming.
- **AACC’s staff work actively with the colleges to help them meet their own program goals.** AACC staff provide a great deal of technical assistance and resources to the colleges. They consult on program design; conduct site visits to the colleges; and take the lead on aggregating and disseminating knowledge and tools that the colleges can use to support their programming.
- **As part of its active work on behalf of the colleges, AACC engages firms to support the colleges in their marketing and public relations.** Reingold, the marketing firm, creates Plus 50 branding templates that the colleges can use and adapt to their own marketing materials. They have also created the capacity for AACC to host Plus 50 “micro-sites” for each college that seamlessly integrate with their own college Websites. Steppingstone, the public relations firm, works to increase public awareness and maximize media exposure for the Plus 50 Initiative. Steppingstone’s work includes providing the colleges with talking points, speech templates, and press release templates.

<sup>3</sup> The initiative began with five three-college teams: fifteen colleges. Two demonstration colleges are no longer participating in the Plus 50 Initiative, so two of the five teams now consist of a Mentor-Demonstration pair.

- **As part of its work to aggregate and disseminate knowledge that can support Plus 50 programming, AACC sends a newsletter out every two weeks, and posts on its Website a large variety of resources and information.** The newsletter contains updates on the community colleges, the latest Plus 50 news stories, and resources to support Plus 50 programming in each of the three programmatic areas. The AACC Plus 50 Website is designed to provide the field with the knowledge and tools that it needs to implement and promote community college programming for plus 50 students. Those visiting the Website will find: all the past newsletters; practical tips for implementing the programs; examples of promising practices from the grantees' programs; links to Plus 50 news stories; AACC Plus 50 publications; past presentations given by AACC staff and Plus 50 grantees; and links to literature relevant to programming to plus 50 students.
- **The initiative leverages the expertise of a National Advisory Committee.** The National Plus 50 Advisory Committee members include representatives from Civic Ventures, AARP, Senior Corps, American Council of Education, the Institute for Competitive Workforce at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, as well as four former community college presidents. The Advisory Committee convenes to offer their expertise to AACC staff and to the grantee colleges.
- **Grantee colleges participate in an annual convening.** Starting at the initiative launch, AACC hosts a grantee convening each year. At this convening, colleges learn from one another, and AACC hosts sessions and working groups that bring additional resources to the colleges. The marketing and public relations firm present the latest tools and templates to the grantees. The national Advisory Committee members also attend this convening.

## Methods

AACC engaged LFA Group<sup>4</sup> to conduct the Plus 50 evaluation. LFA developed a mixed-method evaluation designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to assess the initiative and support continuous improvements over the course of the three-year initiative. The primary elements measured include grantees' implementation progress, participant satisfaction, and capturing lessons learned and promising practices from the first year of the initiative. To measure the many components of the initiative, LFA collected data using several methods: conducting interviews with program staff at each of the grantee colleges and with AACC staff; asking grantees to complete program implementation data collection worksheets; and partnering with grantees to administer participant surveys for the students taking part in Plus 50 programming.

## Progress in Program Implementation at Grantee Colleges

This section describes the progress that the grantee colleges are making in program implementation. A critical measure of program effectiveness is the extent to which programs are meeting the needs of their customers: the plus 50 students. Thus, this section includes the results of customer satisfaction surveys distributed to students at the grantee colleges.

### Overview of Grantee Programs

The table below provides an overview of the Plus 50 program tracks that each grantee implemented in year one. All of the grantees are implementing workforce training and/or career development services for plus 50 students, most are offering learning and enrichment courses, and about half of the grantees are offering volunteering opportunities and support.

<sup>4</sup> Formerly LaFrance Associates, LLC.

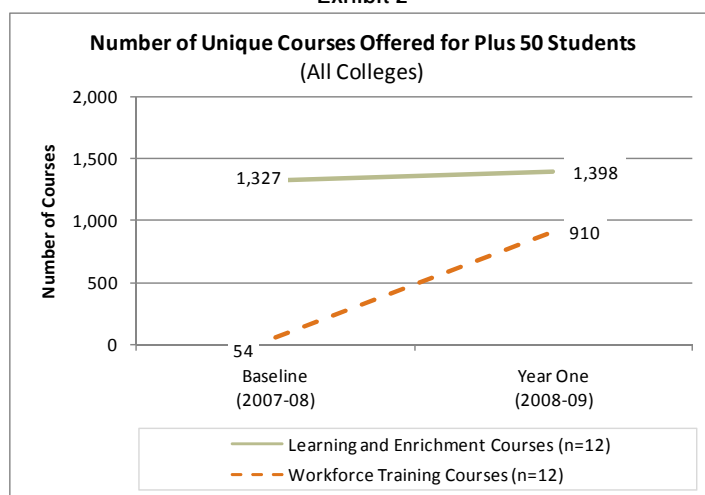
Exhibit 1

Plus 50 Grantee Programs				
College	Mentor or Demonstration	Plus 50 Program Tracks		
		Workforce Training and/or Career Development Services	Learning and Enrichment	Volunteering
Cape Cod Community College	Mentor	✓		✓
Central Florida Community College	Mentor	✓	✓	✓
Century College	Mentor	✓	✓	✓
Clark College	Mentor	✓	✓	✓
Community Colleges of Spokane	Mentor	✓	✓	
Clover Park Technical College	Demonstration	✓	✓	
Joliet Junior College	Demonstration	✓		✓
Luzerne County Community College	Demonstration	✓	✓	
Richland College	Demonstration	✓	✓	✓
Santa Fe College	Demonstration	✓	✓	
St. Louis Community College	Demonstration	✓	✓	
Wake Technical Community College	Demonstration	✓	✓	
Western Dakota Technical Institute	Demonstration	✓		✓

### Course Offerings and Enrollment at Plus 50 Colleges

Exhibit 2 shows the change in two types of courses offered to plus 50 students (enrichment and workforce training), specifically as part of plus 50 programming. There was a slight rise in the number of unique<sup>5</sup> enrichment courses, and a dramatic rise in the number of workforce training courses. Colleges are primarily focusing their Plus 50 programs on workforce training: **Plus 50 grantees collectively offered 856 more workforce training courses for plus 50 students in year one than at baseline.** This is a reflection of two things: the initiative encouraged colleges to move beyond the focus of enrichment for this age group, and to meet the workforce training needs of plus 50 students as

Courses Offered for Plus 50 Students (Changes from Baseline to Year One)<sup>1</sup>  
Exhibit 2



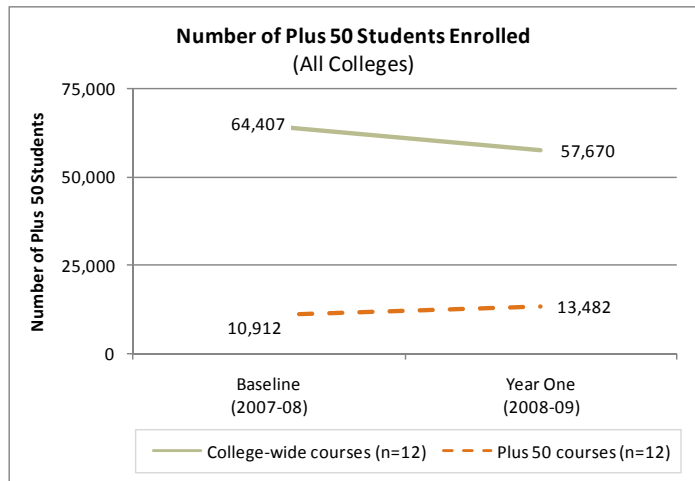
<sup>5</sup> The unique number of courses represents a college’s “course portfolio,” the number of unique courses that are offered at least once during the year to this population.



well. This rise also reflects the response of the colleges to the downturn in the economy, which resulted in growing needs of the plus 50 age cohort for workforce training courses.

Exhibit 3 provides aggregate enrollment numbers for the grantee colleges. The bottom line shows the total number of plus 50 students enrolled in courses that grantee colleges included as part of their Plus 50 programming. (This number at baseline was already quite high due to the fact that mentor (and some demonstration) colleges already had programs and courses targeted to students in this age group.) The top line shows the change in the total number of plus 50 students enrolled at all the colleges (in *any* course, *including* courses that grantee colleges included as part of their Plus 50 programming).

**Plus 50 Student Enrollment College-wide, and in Courses that are Part of Plus 50 Programs (Changes from Baseline to Year One)**



The graph shows that although the total number of plus 50 students enrolled

college-wide at grantee colleges decreased over the last year, the number of students enrolled in courses associated with the **Plus 50 Program increased by approximately 2,500 individuals.** This increase can be traced at least partially to the fact that there are more courses associated with Plus 50 programming. However, survey data from students participating in Plus 50 programs also suggest that program outreach is drawing plus 50 students to the college. During the 2008-2009 academic year, 77% of survey respondents took a workforce training course for the first time, and 38% of survey respondents took an academic and enrichment course for the first time.

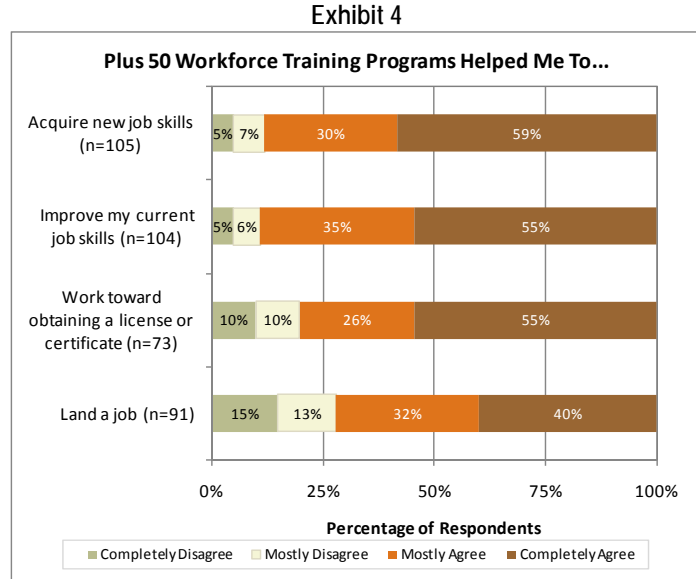
Why, then, did overall enrollment in this age group decline for the grantee colleges in the aggregate? One explanation may be the downturn in the economy. While the disappearance of retirement savings might draw some students to campus for workforce training courses, it can have the opposite effect for courses that people take for enrichment and personal interest. It may be that many plus 50 students no longer had the time or disposable income to enroll in such courses because they had to cut back on non-essential expenses or had to return to the workplace. It is the hope that in future years of the initiative, the ability of Plus 50 programming to draw students to campus will positively affect enrollment numbers overall.

### Meeting the Needs of Plus 50 Customers

Ultimately, the goal of the Plus 50 Initiative is to better meet the needs of plus 50 students. The proof is in the pudding: are students satisfied with the training, learning, and volunteering offerings? As part of the evaluation, the LFA team supported the colleges in administering a participant survey to their customers. The results are described below.

## Workforce Training and Career Development

The results of the student surveys reveal that students are very satisfied with what they are getting out of their workforce training courses. About 90% agree that the courses have helped them to acquire new skills or improve upon their current job skills; and 80% agree that the coursework is helping them make progress toward a license or certificate. **A remarkable 72% agree that their workforce training program has helped them to get hired into a job.** All of these results show that the workforce training programs that community colleges offer to plus 50 students are showing very positive student-level outcomes: they are supporting students in their efforts to achieve a range of career objectives, including finding a job in this very difficult employment environment.



In answering open-ended questions in the surveys, students spoke about the ways that courses had helped them to pursue their career goals. In attending workforce training courses, students were able to think about what their new options were, and what next steps they might want to take. Students also appreciated the new skills they got through taking the courses. Appreciation for new skills most clearly showed through in students' discussion of their computer classes. Several colleges offered computer courses geared to the needs and learning styles of plus 50 students. These courses aim to provide instruction in a supportive learning environment that makes students feel more comfortable with computers. These courses are especially designed for those who may not be up on the latest computer technology, and they got very positive reviews from their participants.

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The classes made me more aware of where I wanted to be going in my career at this time in my life.

[The classes] provided pertinent information to improve my skills in a timely fashion.

The classes helped me to prepare to re-enter the job market by improving my computer skills.

*Plus 50 Participants*

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The results of the student surveys show that students also have high levels of satisfaction with how career development services are helping them to adequately prepare for a job search (between about 75% and 85% agree that the services have helped them in several areas of preparing for a job search). They have lower levels of satisfaction with how these services are able to help them actually find a job.

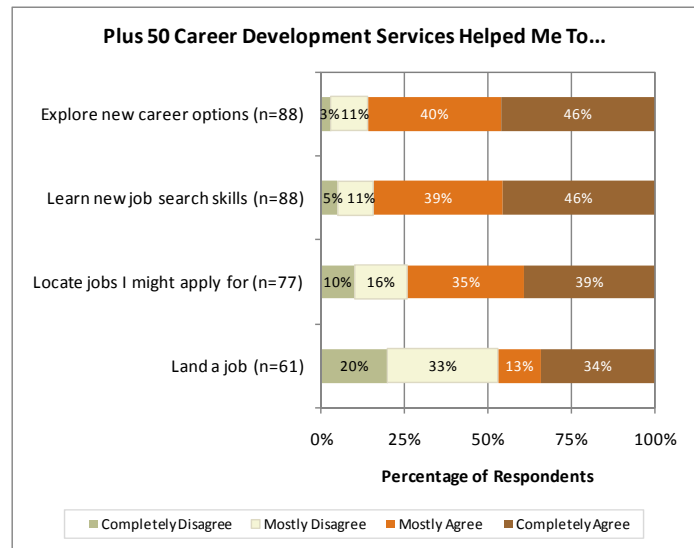
A comparison of the results for how the *services* have helped students land a job (47% agree) with how *training* has helped students land a job (72%, as reported above) suggests that training is a critical element in actually getting hired – and that training may be more helpful in getting hired than are career services. Nevertheless, these results show very positive student outcomes: services are supporting students in learning job search skills, preparing for a job search, locating job openings, and finding a job.

Customers of the career development services spoke about the ways that career services were helpful to them. These include services such as career assessment tools, career counseling, career workshops (e.g. resume writing, interviewing, networking), and job matching. Students were able to use these tools and services in a way that helped them find direction and brush up on the skills they needed to conduct an effective job search. They reported that they had received assistance to: define career objectives; create or update resumes; learn new job-hunting skills; network; learn how to efficiently look for job openings; and use new technologies to hunt for jobs.

The job market in 2008 and 2009 was very challenging to begin with, and seeking to re-enter the workforce is even more difficult for those 50 and older. Bureau of Labor Statistics figures show that older workers are out of work much longer than younger workers: those in the 45-54 and 55-64 age groups are out of work for over 22 weeks; those in the in the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups are out of work 15.3 and 18.7 weeks (respectively).<sup>6</sup> In this difficult environment, plus 50 customers were especially appreciative of the helpfulness and supportiveness of the career services staff, and the

<sup>6</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2008). *Current Population Survey: Unemployed Persons by Age, Sex, Race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, Marital Status and Duration of Unemployment*. Washington, DC.

Exhibit 5




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Reviewing my skills and abilities, personality traits and strengths, I was able to direct my energy toward solid decisions.

*Plus 50 Participant*

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[I had] abundant support from staff who exhibited a sincere desire to help me succeed ... and I did.

[What was valuable to me was] speaking finally with a person who understands the age problem and job market in our society.

[The staff person] was very understanding of what the job search for someone over 50 might require and was very encouraging and helpful.

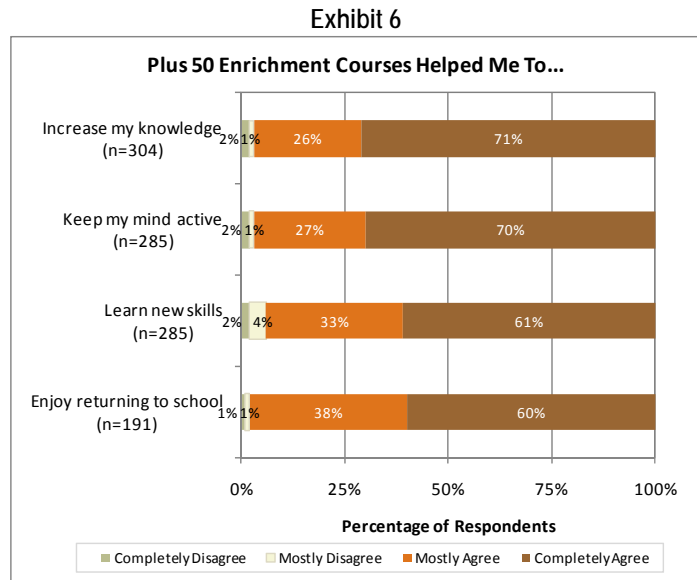
*Plus 50 Participants*

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fact that they understood the particular needs and challenges of those 50 and older seeking to re-enter the workforce and advance their careers. These customer reviews show that the Plus 50 colleges have found success in tailoring their career service offerings to this age group.

### Learning and Enrichment

The variety of enrichment programming available at Plus 50 colleges provides opportunities for plus 50 learners to do everything from updating technology skills to taking cooking classes to learning new languages. **Nearly all survey respondents agree that Plus 50 enrichment classes increased their knowledge and helped them to learn new skills.** Plus 50 learners pointed out that the enrichment courses helped them hone their interests and goals, as well as develop plans for pursuing further training or coursework that might contribute to earning a degree or certificate.



In addition to valuing the intellectual stimulation of the enrichment courses, plus 50 learners also expressed appreciation for the social aspect of Plus 50 enrichment programming. Nearly all respondents agree that the enrichment courses contributed to their enjoyment of returning to school. In response to open-ended questions, plus 50 learners talked about looking forward to getting out of the house and attending classes with like-minded people. Sharing new experiences with other plus 50 learners reduces feelings of isolation and fosters feelings of community and excitement.

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**I tried something I had never tried before. I got to get out of the house and do something besides errands. It gave me something to look forward to.**

*Plus 50 Participant*

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## Volunteering

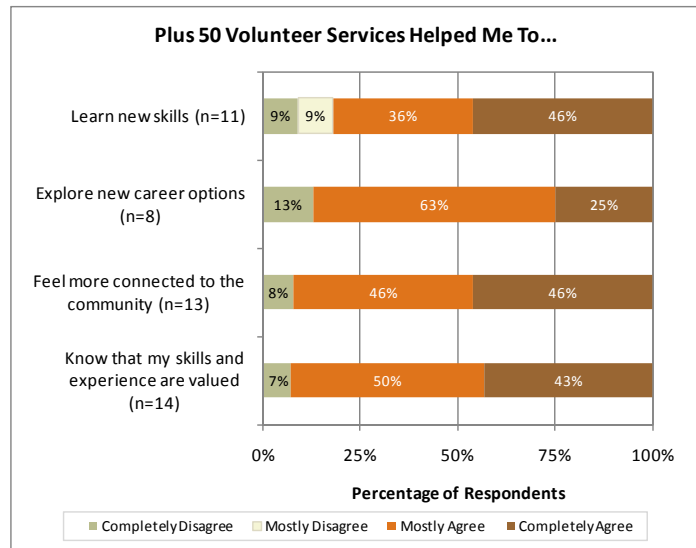
Altruism, a desire to stay engaged, and connecting to community members of all ages inspired plus 50 volunteers. Baby boomers have higher rates of volunteerism than previous generations<sup>7</sup> and continuing to capitalize on their capacity and desire to volunteer will have profound effects for community organizations. Through Plus 50 volunteering programs, students have found opportunities to use their skills and knowledge to benefit their communities.

Fewer than half of Plus 50 colleges are focusing on the volunteer track, and one of the programs had not been in place long enough to survey participants.

However, among this small group of respondents, the results are very positive. **Very large majorities agree that through their volunteering opportunities they have been able to learn new skills, explore new career options, feel more connected to the community, and feel that their skills and experiences are valued.**

There were 22 participants who reported on their surveys the number of hours they had spent in volunteer work. The results from these surveys showed that **volunteers averaged 174 hours of community service during the first year of the Plus 50 Initiative.**

Exhibit 7



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I was able to use my skills, talents, and knowledge in a setting that was beneficial to the organizations I volunteered with. It also allowed me to become more familiar with the community.

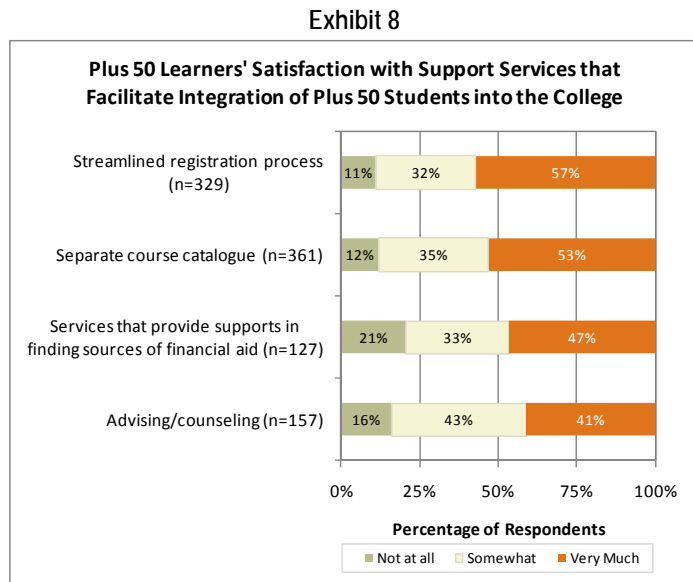
*Plus 50 Participant*

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<sup>7</sup> Corporation for National & Community Service (2007). Baby Boomers and Volunteering: Findings from Corporation Research. Retrieved on February 3, 2009 from: [http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/07\\_0307\\_boomer\\_research.pdf](http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/07_0307_boomer_research.pdf)

## Support Services

Many plus 50 learners are operating outside their comfort zones, given that they may have been out of college for several decades or may have never attended college. To help plus 50 learners navigate the college system and become familiar with the colleges' offerings, grantee colleges are implementing services tailored to the needs of this age cohort. **Nearly all survey respondents agree that streamlined registration processes facilitated their integration into the college.** Course catalogues tailored to plus 50 learners, support for financial aid, and advising also aided plus 50 students' access to Plus 50 community colleges and garnered favorable satisfaction ratings from participants.



## Putting in Place the Fundamentals for Plus 50 Programming

Program implementation is not simply a matter of offering enrichment and training courses, career services and volunteering programs, and supports to facilitate plus 50 student access. High-quality program implementation also depends on *how* these offerings are put in place. Do colleges base program planning on assessing the needs of their target population? Do they sufficiently tailor their offerings to those needs? Do they leverage expertise of community partners? Are their programs sustainable? The sections below address these implementation issues.

### Conducting a Needs Assessment

Several of the colleges had conducted needs assessments even before they applied for the Plus 50 grant; and several more conducted needs assessments during the grant's first year. These colleges have found that needs assessments were vital to really understanding what their customers wanted. Using the results of needs assessments, they were able to better understand how to tailor their offerings to plus 50 students.

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Our experience [is]: don't go into a community and tell them what they need. Let them tell us what classes, seminars, and programs would be of interest to them. [...] Some make the mistake of going into communities [without] knowing what they need. [If you assume you know what they need], you might be sorely disappointed.

*Demonstration College*

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### Innovating to Meet the Needs of Plus 50 Students

To ensure that plus 50 learners engage successfully in coursework and services that are offered as part of plus 50 programming, grantee colleges are tailoring their offerings in a variety of ways.

- **Tailoring courses to plus 50 students' learning styles.** Plus 50 colleges are making efforts to ensure that the teaching style for classes offered to plus 50 students fits with the learning styles of plus 50 students. For example, a Program Associate from one college spoke about taking an asset-based approach to working with plus 50 students.

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I must say that the classes were taught in a manner that took into consideration that plus 50 [students] had skill levels different from younger [students]. Excellent teaching techniques.

*Plus 50 Participant*

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- **Creating inviting learning classrooms and workshop spaces.** Designing classrooms tailored to plus 50 learners includes being aware of how physical abilities change over time such as hearing and vision loss. Several colleges have adapted their learning spaces to accommodate these and other physical needs. Meeting these needs means removing a barrier to learning that might otherwise obstruct plus 50 learners' access to courses.

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[We] use dual monitors so they can enlarge the text so that they can read on one monitor and do their work on another.

*Mentor College*

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- **Offering short-term courses.** For plus 50 students who need to upgrade their skills to enter or re-enter the job market, time is usually a major consideration. These students do not want to enter a program that could take them several years to complete; instead, they are interested in learning or brushing up on skills quickly, or in obtaining certification on an accelerated schedule. Colleges also recognize that plus 50 learners who found themselves out of work and needing to retool require that courses be available immediately: it is a hardship for them to have to wait for the next semester to enroll. Grantee colleges have recognized both of these needs, and are working actively to implement short-term training programs, including very short-term offerings that students can enroll in before the next semester arrives.

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Short-term [course offerings] are very much in demand [as] opposed to something long-term over many semesters. We're looking at short- programming that gets people out and on their way.

*Demonstration College*

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### **Marketing and Outreach to Bring Plus 50 Students to the Program**

Plus 50 colleges are using a wide variety of marketing and outreach efforts to raise the visibility of Plus 50 programming and attract students to the campus. Strategies adopted include:

- **Media Coverage.** The hard work of Plus 50 colleges in the areas of marketing and public relations has paid off. All of the colleges have reached out to the local media, and have been featured in newspaper articles, radio spots, and online updates. This has raised the profile of the colleges' Plus 50 programs, and brought new students to the campus.

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One of the greatest successes has been on how well the local media has responded to this initiative. [...] This has in turn provided an influx of registrations from the community.

*Demonstration College*

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- **Establishing and using the Plus 50 brand.** With the support of marketing and public relations consultants hired by AACC, Plus 50 community colleges received logos, photos, templates, and guidelines to brand the Plus 50 program. The Plus 50 brand also represents the entire initiative further strengthening the brand and visibility of Plus 50 programs nationwide.
- **Harnessing the power of Websites, social marketing, blogs, and electronic newsletters.** Plus 50 colleges were savvy users of college Websites, blogs, and e-newsletters to spread the Plus 50 programming message. Additionally, Plus 50 colleges' e-mail listservs helped colleges communicate to specific audiences, spread consistent messages, and get the word out about last minute updates.
- **Using plus 50 students' stories to raise awareness.** Some Plus 50 colleges capitalized on the experiences of plus 50 students to tell the story of their programs and/or services. Through student blogs, student videos, and word of mouth, more plus 50 students connect to community colleges. Hearing the stories from and about plus 50 students helps others to envision themselves as students at the college, and to feel excited and encouraged about the new possibilities of participating in community college programming.
- **Getting the word out through college catalogues, brochures, and fliers.** Traditional community college marketing opportunities such as course catalogues, brochures, and college magazines continue to play an important role in getting the word out about Plus 50 programs and services including direct mail. Some colleges are collaborating with organizations such as their local AARP to share targeted "ready-made" mailing address lists.
- **Offering open houses to bring Plus 50 learners into community college campuses.** To welcome plus 50 learners into the community college campus, increase awareness of their programming, and facilitate an easier process of connecting to and registering for Plus 50 programs, some colleges have been holding open houses. These have served as an opportunity to engage many stakeholders in the community college including admissions staff, faculty, and volunteers to welcome and market offerings to plus 50 learners.
- **Marketing to internal stakeholders to ensure they are aware of the colleges' Plus 50 programs.** Plus 50 community colleges conducted "inreach" to their internal stakeholders from staff and faculty to their presidents. Some Plus 50 colleges capitalized on professional development days to raise awareness about the Plus 50 Initiative to their faculty and staff.
- **Community outreach.** Plus 50 program staff are hitting the streets of their communities to meet some of the plus 50 learners they are hoping to serve and raise awareness about Plus 50 offerings at their colleges. Many Plus 50 program staff attend local events such as open houses and job fairs to talk about their program offerings and establish a presence in the community.

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Always go back to the student successes – if you can develop relationships with your participants and keep communicating with them and what their successes are – people want that real-life experience to relate to.

*Demonstration College*

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These [open house] nights have grown from a few participants to almost 100 at our last event.

*Demonstration College*

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## Community Partnerships

Program staff extol the virtues of involving community partners in their programming. Partners provide a wide range of supports, described below.

- **Membership in the college's Plus 50 Advisory Committee.** As part of the initiative design, community partners participate in an Advisory Committee to the Plus 50 program. This is a way for community partners to have regular communication with program staff, and to offer their expertise and connections to additional resources in a timely way.
- **Providing marketing and outreach support to the Plus 50 programs.** Partners offer free publicity, advertising, and outreach for the Plus 50 program, and they provide marketing expertise to program staff. Several colleges have been able to take advantage of the mailing lists of community partners – lists that would have taken a great deal of effort and expense to compile.
- **Referring new customers to the Plus 50 program.** Almost half of the grantees reported on the fact that they have also enlisted their community partners in referring their own clients and members to the community college Plus 50 programs. While program staff say that sometimes these referrals result in new participants in volunteering programs, the main benefit is receiving new students in training programs (such as nursing or truck-driving), or people who want to use the career development services (such as workshops or job fairs). This probably does not denote that workforce partners are better at referring people; more likely, it is a function of the fact that – due to the current economic client – plus 50 individuals have an increasing need for workforce training and career development.
- **Partnering in course or workshop development, instruction, and hosting.** Over half the Plus 50 grantees say that community partners have either developed courses or workshops for their programs, or else partnered with them in developing courses or workshops. In addition to developing workshops and courses, community partners often provide free instruction, or host entire workshops or seminars.
- **Contributing to career services events.** Program staff from several colleges reported that community partners have worked with them on job fairs or career counseling events. For example, one college has partnered with its local Workforce Investment Board to offer an annual Job Search Expo and Job Fair. At another college, the local workforce council assists with teaching interviewing skills.

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The community partners have become invaluable to [our college's] Plus 50 successes. They extend our ability to reach out to the plus 50 demographic; they monitor emerging needs of boomers in the workforce and in our community; and they can always supply a "success story" when one is needed.

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What works well [is] working with the local Workforce Development Council. We get a lot of student referrals from workforce agencies. They handle dislocated workers – that drives a lot of our students to our campus.

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## Sustainability

Community colleges are actively working toward making their programs sustainable. They are using a variety of strategies to this end, and they usually use multiple strategies.

- **Course revenues.** For 12 of the 13 grantee colleges, courses are central to Plus 50 programming. An important part of sustainability, then, is the ability to develop courses that generate sufficient revenue. Colleges charge tuition for their courses, and tuition fees (plus the state funding that supports credit courses) generally cover the cost of offering a course. Thus, as long as a course is targeted in some way to the needs of plus 50 students, the sustainability model is already built in to the way that community colleges do business.

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We hope to have about 20 new [training] programs. And then they have to bring in their own revenue and [become] self-sufficient.

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- **Applying for additional grants to pay for staff time and program activities.** Community colleges routinely seek grants from public and private funders to support their programs. Their participation in the Plus 50 initiative has built their capacity to provide programming to students in this age group. Thus, the Plus 50 grantees find themselves at the intersection of growing funder interest in two areas: community colleges and support of the baby boom generation. They are ahead of the curve in applying for additional funding.
- **Embedding an orientation toward plus 50 learners in the standard operating procedures of college departments.** Colleges are going beyond efforts to create and sustain a specific Plus 50 program; institutionalization also happens by embedding specific practices in standard operating procedures. A very good example of this is to have advising personnel for whom part of their job description is serving plus 50 students, and who are trained to provide high-quality, tailored services to this population.

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No matter what, we have [federal] funding [for a specific training program]. [...] We ... will continue to have outreach [to plus 50 students] from there. One of our college focal points is plus 50 issues.

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- **Writing program components into the annual college budget.** When programs are funded by grants, they can easily be discontinued when the grant is over. By making program components or the program as a whole part of the annual college budget process, colleges will ensure that there is a steady funding source for plus 50 activities.
- **Leveraging community partnerships to contribute to sustainability.** Partnerships contribute to sustainability in several ways, including: referring customers to the plus 50 program; providing in-kind services; participating in revenue-sharing; and making commitments to provide funding if there is a shortfall in any given year.

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[When there is] a real solid partnership, [when] one of the partners runs out of funding, the other partner takes up that slack and keeps the partnership going. [...] They should be sustainable as long as one or two is doing well.

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## Effectiveness at the Initiative Level: AACC Support to Grantees, Knowledge Dissemination, Advocacy, and Expansion to More Colleges

Effectiveness of the Plus 50 Initiative is measured not only in terms of how program implementation for grantee colleges is progressing; it is also measured at the initiative level. Initiative-wide process and outcome goals include:

- AACC support provided to Plus 50 grantee colleges (including marketing and public relations support, as well as the development of a learning community);
- The production, aggregation, and dissemination of knowledge to the field;
- Advocacy designed to place on the policy agenda the issues of plus 50 students at community colleges; and
- Expansion of Plus 50 programming to colleges beyond the initial pilot group.

### Support to Grantees from AACC

AACC has provided a wide range of support for grantee colleges. AACC staff are in frequent phone and email contact with grantees to act as thought partners, provide support with marketing and public relations, collect and distribute a large amount of valuable information and tools, and facilitate a learning community that allows grantees to learn from one another.

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I've been 100% pleased with the support we have received from AACC. [They have] been very helpful with advice and counsel and encouragement.

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### AACC Responsiveness

AACC received extremely positive reviews for their responsiveness to grantees, and for the large store of ideas and resources they had to share. Plus 50 program staff express a deep appreciation for the general support they have received from AACC staff. They describe communication as quick, easy, informative, and encouraging. Many colleges describe AACC as “another mentor” and feel that AACC staff are interested in and supportive of what the colleges are doing. Plus 50 program staff reported that they felt they could pick up the phone to call AACC staff with questions and receive help at any time: the Program Director and Senior Program Associate were described by one college as “a phone call away.” Staff at another college said about AACC staff that “I feel like [they are] on our team in some ways.”

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AACC has been marvelous. [...] They're very responsive on the phone and email. The best thing about them is how accessible they are.

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### Marketing and Public Relations Support

AACC staff share marketing strategies, materials, and public relations tools to help spread the word about the Plus 50 program. The Reingold partnership allows all Plus 50 grantees to benefit from the work of one firm, creating valuable economies of scale. Reingold makes the process of marketing the Plus 50 program simpler and more cost-effective for all the participating grantee colleges. All materials include the Plus 50 branding

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Being able to use some of the slogans and the logos [have been most helpful to implementation]. The whole slogan with “rehired, re-inspired, rewired” was genuine.... It's the heading for our brochure. It really says what program is about. Simple, effective, and it was very beneficial for us.

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while allowing each college to customize the materials and brand their institution and its individual programs. The strong Plus 50 brand and the work of Reingold increase grantees' marketing efficiency while offering flexibility for colleges to accomplish their individual goals.

### **Learning Community**

In order to maximize information-sharing and collegiality, AACC has established a Plus 50 learning community that includes all grantee colleges and AACC staff. Participation in the Learning Community involves active participation in the Plus 50 listserv, attending the annual Plus 50 Initiative Conferences, hosting site visits, visiting other Plus 50 colleges, and sharing ideas for project implementation strategies and resources. The colleges find participation in this learning community to be very helpful; they learn from the other colleges on their team, and they learn from all of the colleges in the pilot cohort.

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We've gotten a lot out of the others in the initiative. Just having access to what their projects are [and] how they're doing things. "Oh we could do that; that's easier; maybe we could incorporate that." It's helpful to have that coalition of people, so we're not having to think of everything on our own.

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### **Knowledge Dissemination**

Goals of the Plus 50 Initiative extend beyond that of supporting individual colleges to implement programming for plus 50 students: its ultimate goal is systemic change. As part of the Plus 50 vision, high-quality programming tailored to the needs of plus 50 students will eventually be institutionalized in community colleges nationwide. A critical ingredient for systemic change is the dissemination of knowledge to practitioners in the field, and AACC is actively working to produce, aggregate, and disseminate knowledge to the stakeholders who will be agents of change.

### **Media Exposure**

A public relations firm (Steppingstone) and AACC provide support to individual colleges to succeed in getting covered in their local media outlets. They have also been successful in reaching national media outlets. During year one, the Plus 50 Initiative or at least one of its grantee programs appeared in 160 media spots reaching over 74 million readers, viewers, and listeners.<sup>8</sup> Plus 50 programs have been featured in major news outlets such as the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and National Public Radio.

### **Conference Presentations**

As another way to disseminate knowledge to the field, AACC has also put considerable effort into ensuring that it presents at regional and national conferences the lessons learned and promising practices for Plus 50 program implementation. AACC always invites grantees to co-present. During year one, AACC and ten grantees presented at seven conferences. These conferences were hosted by AARP, AACC, Maturity Works (with the National Council on Aging), The League for Innovation in the Community College, and the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development. Conference presentations included such titles as: *Are You Ready for Plus 50 Learners?* and *Serving Plus 50s through Public and Private Partnerships*.

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<sup>8</sup> Media coverage data provided by Steppingstone LLC

## **The Ageless Learning Newsletter**

AACC sends out a bi-monthly newsletter: *Ageless Learning*. The newsletter always includes updates on what the grantee colleges are doing, as well as links to and descriptions of resources that are useful in implementing programs in each of the three tracks. It systematically aggregates information that colleges implementing Plus 50 programming will find useful.

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I open up those links [in the newsletter] and those have been really beneficial. [...] It's always helpful to have information on a national level – I can have statistics at my fingertips.

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## **Knowledge Creation**

AACC not only aggregates existing knowledge in the field, but also generates it. In year one, AACC commissioned a study of the programming that community colleges nationwide offer to plus 50 students. It also commissioned a publication that lays out the business case to community colleges for how they can tap into the growing market of plus 50 learners.

## **Webinars**

To help promote the Plus 50 Initiative, to encourage participation in Plus 50 programming, and to support grantees, AACC is developing and hosting a series of six interactive Webinars. The development of these Webinars began during the first year of the initiative and the rollout occurs during the second year. Webinars include topics such as *Tools to Assess the Needs of Your Plus 50 Population*, and *Creating and Sustaining Your Program for Adult Learners*.

## **The Plus 50 Website**

The Plus 50 Website is a vital repository of information and resources related to Plus 50 programming. Accessible on this Website are the original Plus 50 publications; links to the Webinars; practical tips for serving plus 50 students; descriptions of promising practices at the grantee colleges; links to media stories; an archive of all past *Ageless Learning* Newsletters; and conference presentations. AACC uses this Website to aggregate and disseminate a great deal of information that practitioners can use to build support for and implement their own colleges' Plus 50 programs.

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The Website they've created for the initiative gives us access to what's going on at other places ... to understand what's going on across the country. And that's been invaluable to us.

*Mentor College*

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## **Advocacy**

All of the knowledge production, aggregation, and dissemination constitute advocacy activities: they are all designed to put the issue of plus 50 students on the public agenda. AACC has additional accomplishments in this area, however. AACC has partnered with the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) to create a Joint Legislative Agenda for 111<sup>th</sup> Congress. Included in this legislative agenda is the statement that AACC and ACCT support the following legislative priority: "Improve new opportunities for education and training for a maturing workforce by tailoring federal programs to meet its unique needs and preferences; help colleges provide comprehensive life-long learning opportunities for the older student."

AACC has also created two templates for op-ed pieces that members of the National Advisory Committee and college presidents can use to write op-eds for local and national media outlets.

These templates were created at the end of year one; it is expected that in year two these national and local spokespeople will have published op-eds in multiple media outlets.

## Initiative Expansion to New Colleges

As a result of the success of the initiative, AACC has expanded the Plus 50 program beyond the original 13 colleges and added expansion colleges. The expansion links new community colleges to the success of current Plus 50 colleges. The expansion plans include:

- Century College will be a learning partner for nine Minneapolis community colleges. Century will host a regional meeting for the local expansion colleges to work on Plus 50 Initiative program implementation in the workforce training and retraining area.
- Western Dakota Technical Institute will host a conference for community colleges near National Parks to form partnerships and disseminate lessons learned from their innovative pilot program working with the National Park Service to train plus 50 adults to serve as seasonal rangers and interpretive guides.
- Three Plus 50 Initiative community colleges in Washington - Clark College, Clover Park Technical College, and the Community Colleges of Spokane - will host a regional conference focused on how to start a Plus 50 Initiative program, involving as many as 30 community colleges from Washington and Oregon.
- St. Louis Community College (STLCC) will be a Learning Partner for Metropolitan Community College, Longview. STLCC and this Kansas City area community college share regional concerns and have similar economic and educational demographics that make them ideal partners.
- Central Florida Community College will serve as a learning partner for Rose State College. Both of these colleges are expanding training and retraining opportunities for plus 50 students seeking to stay in the workforce.
- Joliet Junior College will serve as a learning partner for neighboring Moraine Valley Community College, which will expand its efforts to help unemployed plus 50 workers who want to find employment.

## Preliminary Findings on Standards of Excellence

It is a goal of the Plus 50 Initiative that at the conclusion of the grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies, formal standards of excellence will be announced. The search for standards of excellence is embedded in AACC's ongoing efforts as it works with the colleges and experts in the field to understand the success factors that facilitate program implementation, as well as what works best for plus 50 students.

AACC is also leveraging the work with its evaluator (the LFA team) and the National Advisory Committee to uncover standards of excellence. The LFA team used qualitative data collected through interviews with grantee colleges to develop an initial list of standards of excellence, and presented this list at the second annual convening to the National Advisory Committee. This list was used as the basis for a facilitated discussion of the Advisory Committee members. Using the notes from that discussion, the qualitative data from grantee colleges, and the survey data collected from plus 50 students, the LFA team can offer preliminary insights on what the standards of excellence may be. The word *preliminary* should be stressed here: this is meant only as an initial foray into the standards of excellence. The preliminary findings can be used as a basis upon which to build during the coming years of the initiative.



- **Plus 50 offerings should be tailored to the needs, interests, and objectives of the plus 50 population.** Colleges should conduct needs assessments so that they can base program design and development on the needs of their target market. There are also some clear messages about the ways in which offerings should be tailored, aside from the particular interests of the local plus 50 population. First, short-term programming is in high demand for the workforce training courses. Second, the learning environment for all courses should be comfortable for this age group. This can mean physical accessibility (e.g. large print on handouts), but it also means taking into account the learning styles of the plus 50 student. Instructors who were able to do this got high marks from the plus 50 students in their survey responses.
- **Related to the issue of tailoring: faculty and staff should receive professional development that provides them with the skills they need to teach courses and provide services that effectively meet the needs of plus 50 students.** Professional development for instructors will enable them to take into account the learning styles of plus 50 students as they are conducting their courses. Professional development is also important for staff providing services, such as career counseling. In the open-ended responses on surveys, students made very clear when they felt that staff understood their situations, and also when they did *not* feel that this was the case. When staff had a good understanding of plus 50 assets, constraints, and challenges, their customers were very happy with the services they received. When customers felt that they were *not* understood by the staff serving them, they did not feel that the services were useful. It is important that colleges recognize that plus 50 students are not the same as students in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, and thus that it is important to provide professional development to faculty and staff in order to build their capacity to work effectively with this population.
- **Plus 50 offerings should be marketed in such a way that does not appeal to a student's identity as a "senior."** Plus 50 marketing must walk a fine line between (1) letting the customer know that the offerings are tailored to their needs, and (2) not making people feel like "senior citizens." It is clear that tailoring the offerings is important. In addition, to attract plus 50 customers, colleges need to let them know that they understand the needs and interests of this market. However, there are those (especially in the 50-64 age bracket) that don't necessarily want to see themselves as grouped into one plus 50 age group. The Advisory Committee suggested that colleges implementing Plus 50 programming should segment the market in ways that appeal to life-stage rather than to age (e.g. "retired and interested in lifelong learning;" "retired but want to work to stay active;" and "can't afford to retire;" "unemployed and need to work;" and "employed but interested in career-switching").
- **To attract plus 50 students to campus, colleges should publicize student stories.** There is nothing like a story to draw people in. When people hear from someone that they can identify with about their experience at community colleges, this is very likely to entice them to try out college offerings. Student successes will set other students up to believe in themselves, and to know that they can find success as well.
- **Colleges should set up a Plus 50 Advisory Committee to help develop programming and to support sustainability efforts, and should ensure that it includes community partners, as well as people who have expertise with this age group.** The colleges have found that local expertise has provided invaluable support in program development. They have also found that Advisory Committees are most successful when members have experience with this age group: this type of experience is just as important as functional expertise. In other words, when the Committee includes someone with experience in workforce development, it is especially helpful if that person understands the issues involved with workforce development specifically for those 50 and older.

## Conclusion: The Factors Contributing to the Successes of the Plus 50 Initiative in Year One

The Plus 50 Initiative has been extraordinarily successful in a very short period of time. Not only have its 13 grantees greatly expanded their offerings to plus 50 students, but, program quality is also high: the survey results from students show that the programs have done an excellent job in bringing about positive outcomes at the level of the individual customer. AACC has also generated and aggregated a great deal of knowledge, information, and tools, which it effectively disseminates through its *Ageless Learning* newsletter and its Website. The initiative has also expanded beyond its pilot cohort, bringing in new community colleges to attend regional convenings, or to be learning partners with pilot grantees. It has designed a Webinar series that provides additional information and tools to community colleges nationwide that they can use in designing and launching their own plus 50 programs. The grantee programs and the initiative as a whole have attained a high level of media exposure, with over 160 media spots reaching 74 million readers, listeners, and viewers.

The LFA team has experience evaluating other multi-grantee initiatives that seek to bring about systemic change. From the perspective of the evaluator, the progress of the Plus 50 Initiative in one year represents an unusually high level of accomplishment. These types of initiatives generally take much longer to build momentum, and typically have a lower public profile. What are the factors that contribute to Plus 50's success? In the opinion of the members of the LFA evaluation team, these factors include:

- **A very high level of engagement between AACC and the grantee colleges.** Grantee colleges report that AACC staff have been highly supportive and responsive. Staff conduct site visits, work actively with colleges to problem-solve and improve their programs, are always “just a phone call away,” and have set up an active learning community from which grantee colleges benefit.
- **Active engagement of a National Advisory Committee.** While LFA has seen other initiatives include Advisory Committees, they are sometimes convened only at the beginning of the initiative and then fade away. AACC is making a strong effort to leverage the expertise and influence of those on its Advisory Committee. They returned to the second annual convening and dove enthusiastically into their assignment of identifying Plus 50 programming standards of excellence.
- **The choice to hire marketing and public relations firms that build grantees' marketing capacity as well as their ability to generate media coverage.** In offering the support to grantees that its marketing and public relations contractors provide, AACC is efficiently building grantees' capacity to market its programs, conduct outreach, and maximize media exposure. The attention to how a funder with multiple grantees can make use of these scale economies to build awareness is unusual.
- **A deep commitment to building the capacity community colleges nationwide.** AACC has not stopped at its focus on its pilot grantees, but has actively worked to leverage their pilot colleges' success into a variety of efforts to build capacity for colleges nationwide. Capacity building efforts include all of the information disseminated through the Website, and especially the Webinar series for which design began during year one.

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I would say that out of all the initiatives that I've been a part of, I've never received this great [an amount of] support for marketing....

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The enthusiasm of AACC staff, and their commitment to their grantees and the field as whole, position the Plus 50 Initiative to build on its year one accomplishments during years two and three. The initiative is well on its way to leaving a strong legacy, enabling community colleges nationwide to develop and sustain high-quality programming for plus 50 students.