

Education Issue Brief

Julie Bruch, Kelley Borradaile, Milena Raketec, and Gina Lucchesi

Career Navigators in Adult Education: What Experts Say About their Role and How to Support their Success

Federal adult education strives to equip adults with the basic skills needed for employment and economic self-sufficiency and to assist them with transitioning to further education and training.ⁱ One strategy that adult education programs use in service of these goals is employing **career navigators**ⁱⁱ to guide and support learners in their career and college planning. Career navigators are full- or part-time staff who provide informational services to help learners explore careers and identify needed skills and education for those careers. Navigators also seek to address the

challenges that adult learners face as they navigate transitions to the workforce and/or to further education and training.

Career navigation services are a component of some effective program strategies emerging from research in adult education (Borradaile et al., 2021; Karp et al., 2021), suggesting that navigators could play an important role in helping learners make educational progress and improve their employment. Local adult education providers have increasingly hired navigators as and some

What is this brief?

The information presented in this brief comes from exploratory research activities designed to understand the role of career navigators; the competencies they need to be successful; and considerations for hiring, supporting, and training them.

How can the information in this brief be used?

This brief can be used by adult education practitioners to:

- **Define job responsibilities and design hiring criteria for career navigators.** Adult education state or local directors might use the information in this brief about common job activities to create a job description for hiring career navigators. In the screening or job interview process, they could look for evidence that candidates have the competencies needed to perform the job activities.
- **Make decisions about how to support career navigators.** Local adult education directors and other practitioners might use the information in this brief about navigator knowledge and skills to assess current staff development needs and areas for further development.
- **Identify trainings that support the development of career navigator competencies.** State and local adult education directors, professional development providers, and other practitioners might use the information in this brief to design a new training, assess and select an existing training, or adapt an existing training. They could use information about common activities and key competencies to determine the content to include in a training. They could also consider the information about promising features of training format and delivery.

state agencies either encourage or require federally-funded providers to do so (CLASP, 2016; State of South Carolina, Department of Education, 2018). So far, however, there has been little research on the responsibilities and function of navigators or on how to ensure they can be successful in helping learners to realize their career goals.

This brief is based on information the U.S. Department of Education's *National Assessment of Adult Education* compiled when designing the *Connecting Adults to Success* studyⁱⁱⁱ, a study evaluating a promising model of career navigator training. It summarizes the early work conducted for the study, which identified the key activities performed by career navigators, the competencies needed to perform those activities well, and specifications of a training that could potentially foster those key competencies.

How was the information compiled?

The findings in this brief are based on two sources of information, which were used to identify the activities of navigators and how states and providers may support navigators:

1. **A literature scan** to identify the range of activities career navigators perform, the competency areas believed to be important for career navigators in adult education settings, and the backgrounds of career navigators.^{iv}
2. **Interviews** with a group of adult education experts in organizations that support navigators and state adult education directors who offer trainings to navigators or are interested in doing so.^v

Activities career navigators are expected to perform, according to experts

The career navigator role can encompass a wide variety of activities. These include advising learners on educational and career pathways, as well as connecting learners to resources and supporting their skill development (CLASP 2016; Choitz et al. 2010). Practitioners may consider what activities they want their career navigators to perform when defining job responsibilities and design hiring criteria for career navigators or choosing among candidates to fill a career navigator position. Exhibit 1 describes five types of activities that career navigators are often expected to perform to support adult learners in their transitions to further education and careers, according to experts.

Exhibit 1. Key activities career navigators are often expected to perform, according to experts

<p>Career planning, exploration, and counseling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply an understanding of industry needs and postsecondary programs to help learners understand which career paths fit with their skills and interests • Build knowledge about the labor market to help learners identify jobs aligned with their skills and interests and that are available in their area • Help learners understand the value of trainings, credentials, or degrees in pursuit of their career goals • Administer assessments or career inventories to help learners identify their interests, values, and skills • Assist learners in setting education and career goals • Track learner progress toward education or career goals <p>Educational planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help learners select appropriate coursework, credential or degree programs, and placements aligned with their career goals • Provide information on alternative credentialing such as stackable credits to help learners advance towards their career goals 	<p>Support to learners in navigating systems within and outside the adult education organization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information on credit transfer, financial aid, transition to postsecondary education, or dual enrollment • Connect learners to basic needs supports such as transportation and childcare or to resources that support transition to the workplace • Make referrals to other supportive services and resources, as needed <p>Learner skill building</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help learners develop executive functioning skills (such as planning, prioritization, time management, organization, and persistence), study skills, and study habits • Help learners develop skills for achieving education and career goals (identifying goals, planning steps, and monitoring progress) <p>Job search readiness and job development and placement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help learners apply for jobs (resume writing, mock interviews, and dress for success) • Provide referrals to job fairs and help learners build networking skills (such as, preparing an elevator pitch and understanding methods to maintain connections, such as email and social media) • Work with employers to identify or create job opportunities aligned with learners' skills and interests
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Exhibit 2 includes examples of how a career navigator might tailor these activities to learners with less work and education experience and to those with more work experience and prior credentials.

Exhibit 2. Examples of potential activities to support different learners

Type of activity	Learners with less work and education experience	Learners with more work and education experience
Career planning, exploration, and counseling	A learner shares they have a general interest in careers that help others. The navigator administers a career assessment instrument to help the learner understand their interest patterns. The navigator and learner interpret the results of the assessment and set up informational interviews with community members to learn more about promising career options.	A learner has recently earned a CNA credential. The navigator uses labor market data to assess whether this job is in demand in the local area, along with registered nurse (RN) positions. The navigator helps the learner compare the roles and job opportunities for CNAs and RNs.
Educational planning	The learner decides to pursue nursing. The navigator shares information about local education institutions offering coursework for Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) and associate's and bachelor's degrees in nursing.	The navigator works with the learner to develop a plan to achieve the learner's ultimate goal to become an RN by obtaining an associate's degree while working as a CNA.

Type of activity	Learners with less work and education experience	Learners with more work and education experience
Support to learners in navigating systems within and outside the adult education organization	The learner shares they might have trouble attending classes due to childcare, and the navigator refers the learner to a community-based organization that offers subsidized childcare.	The navigator helps the learner select their class schedule and identify and apply for financial aid.
Learning skill building	The navigator and learner develop a schedule that allows the learner to balance their priorities and set time aside to study. They discuss short-term goals, such as enrolling in a single course, and long-term goals of program completion. They identify flashcards as a tool the learner can use to prepare for quizzes and exams.	The navigator and learner develop steps the learner will take each semester to stay on track to become an RN within three years.
Job search readiness and job development and placement	As the learner progress through their coursework for the CNA credential, the navigator shares postings for job openings at hospitals in the area.	The navigator helps the learner update their resume and conducts mock interviews with the learner to help them prepare for CNA interviews.

Key competencies career navigators need, according to experts

To carry out navigator activities, experts indicate that career navigators likely need to have **knowledge** and **skills** that fall into four competency areas (see Exhibit 3). Practitioners may want to consider these competency areas when hiring staff or when assessing current staff development needs and areas for further development.

Exhibit 3. Key competencies for career navigators, according to experts





Knowledge of the adult learner population and skills for working with learners.

Adult learners may face challenges in navigating the transition to the workforce and postsecondary education. According to experts, these challenges may include a lack of knowledge about these systems, as well as systemic barriers, basic needs and life demands, and low confidence in pursuing education. Understanding these challenges, as well as learners' goals, strengths, and needs, is particularly important for adult learners, who may have been out of formal education settings for many years or never received strong support and guidance in formal education; who have complex personal and work commitments to balance with pursuing further education; and who might have had negative prior experience in education or work. Using interpersonal skills to demonstrate an understanding of these challenges and to build relationships with learners can help navigators guide them toward success.

Career pathway^{vi} is a combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that aligns with the needs of industry and helps an individual earn recognized credentials and enter or advance within their chosen occupational area



Knowledge of available career pathways and skills to help learners make informed decisions.

Adult learners may also lack knowledge of the workforce and local labor market, how to relate their interests and abilities to education and career paths, and how education can lead to a high-wage career path. This might be less clear for adult learners than for learners in secondary or college settings, who may have a more well-defined path. Navigators are expected to gather and analyze information about industry needs, postsecondary programs, labor

market trends, coursework, and credentialing to help learners make educational and career decisions within their local context. Career navigators help connect learners to career pathways and help them set goals relevant to those pathways.



Knowledge of learner skills that can lead to success and skills to support learners' skill building.

Adult learners may lack important skills required to progress toward their career goals. These skills may include prioritization, time management, organization, persistence, and goal setting. Adult learners might not have developed these skills in prior education settings, and they might be particularly important when pursuing education amidst other personal and work demands. Career navigators can help learners develop the skills they need to be successful. This competency area includes understanding which skills support learner success and honing their own ability to facilitate skill development in learners.



Knowledge of resources available to learners and skills to build and maintain strong partnerships.

Navigators can serve as a source of comprehensive support to guide learners through a myriad of often disconnected educational and employment resources. Navigators may also refer learners to resources that may help address underlying challenges to persisting in adult education, such as access to childcare and transportation. This competency area includes understanding the resources available to learners and building and maintaining partnerships that facilitate learners' connection to relevant resources.

Examples of specific types of knowledge and skills that navigators apply in their roles, within each of the four key competencies, are described in Exhibit 4.

Exhibit 4. Examples of knowledge and skills within each key navigator competency, according to experts

Knowledge	Skills
 <p>Knowledge of the adult learner population, including information about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characteristics of local adult education students, including demographic information (such as employment rates and educational attainment) and information about learners’ strengths and challenges • Systemic barriers that drive inequitable outcomes, such as racial discrimination and access to resources • Adult education programs generally, including policies and program offerings 	<p>Skills for working with learners, including strategies for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailoring services to address learners’ needs • Building and maintaining relationships with adult learners • Communicating effectively and appropriately with learners from a variety of cultures about education and careers • Using tools to monitor learner progress toward goals • Using motivational interviewing, a technique that helps learners to act toward their goals through open questions, recognizing strengths, and reflections • Practicing trauma-informed care, a technique that acknowledges the role trauma may play in the lives of learners, creating a safe environment
 <p>Knowledge of career pathways, including information about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available careers, labor markets, and in-demand industries • Education and training programs or courses, including their quality and likelihood for helping learners achieve their goals • Career assessment tools that are relevant to adult learners’ backgrounds and interests 	<p>Skills to help learners make informed decisions, including strategies for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering and understanding information about careers, labor markets, and in-demand industries • Gathering and understanding information on education and training programs or courses, including completion and future employment rates • Using results of career assessments to guide learners • Facilitating learners’ career explorations and mapping out career pathways • Guiding learners in understanding and using all available information (e.g., learner assessments and career requirements) to make decisions
 <p>Knowledge of learner skills that can lead to success, including information about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive functioning skills such as prioritization, time management, organization, and persistence • Skills for achieving goals such as identifying goals, planning steps, and monitoring progress 	<p>Skills to support learners’ skill building, including strategies for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaching learners to develop executive functioning skills and skills for achieving goals • Using tools such as goal-setting frameworks to support learners’ skill development
 <p>Knowledge of resources available to learners, including information about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of resources available to learners both within and outside of the organization • How to find and access resources 	<p>Skills to build and maintain strong partnerships, including strategies for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating and maintaining strong partnerships within and outside of the navigator’s organization, including referral partnerships • Facilitating warm hand-offs, or direct introductions, that connect learners with resources • Explaining the purpose of adult education and eligibility to partners and to the public

Considerations when thinking about training for career navigators, according to experts

Many adult education programs have or are hiring career navigators, and some evidence suggests these career navigators come with diverse backgrounds and experiences (Michael et al., 2014). Practitioners may want to consider trainings and other professional development activities to build the knowledge and skills that navigators need to perform key activities and support adult learner success, though there is currently no evidence about the effectiveness of such trainings. Adult education programs may decide to train navigators on their own, purchase a training, send their navigators to a broader training, or hire already-trained navigators. For practitioners who want to design, select, or conduct a training for navigators, they can consider whether (a) the training content and activities explicitly aim to develop the competencies considered here to be most important and (b) trainings are structured and delivered in a way to facilitate learning and engagement.

Does the training's content and activities align with career navigators' professional development needs?

Practitioners can consider whether the content and activities of any training they provide address gaps in the knowledge and skills their navigators may need to apply in their roles. This is important because not all types of professional development for career navigators address all of the key competencies in this brief and the coverage of key competencies may vary by training.^{vii} Providers will need to assess whether a particular training aligns with what they want their career navigators to know and be able to do. Additionally, providers might have to prioritize specific competency areas for development given limited resources or time available for navigators to participate in training. State and local adult education directors, training providers, and other practitioners can assess their local navigators' professional development needs to identify the specific types of knowledge and skills they want to develop through trainings. They can

then select or design trainings to match the training content and activities with their staff's needs.

To determine navigator's professional development needs, consider:

- **Their background experience.** Navigators bring diverse backgrounds to their position, which informs their professional development needs. For example, if navigators have a counseling background, they may have expertise in building interpersonal skills but need training in developing knowledge about local postsecondary credential programs and career pathways.
- **The organizational context.** Different organizational settings might have different professional development needs because of the types of programs offered and other internal organizational resources available. For example, navigators at community-based organizations may need support in developing skills for building strong partnerships to connect learners with resources, while navigators at community colleges may already have relationships and access to internal institutional resources.
- **The types of learners they will serve.** Navigators who work in areas with diverse populations may need support in understanding how different cultural contexts might affect service delivery.

When selecting or designing a training for navigators, practitioners may want to examine the specific activities that participants engage in during training and assess whether they align with the key competencies. Exhibit 5 shows examples of hands-on and interactive professional development activities that aim to develop the specific types of knowledge and skills for navigation described in this brief. These examples are adapted from activities included in existing career navigator trainings available to adult education practitioners and are linked back to the four competency areas from Exhibit 3. Practitioners can review these examples when considering whether professional development trainings and materials are a good fit for their career navigators.

Exhibit 5. Examples of professional development activities to build navigator knowledge and skills

Types of knowledge or skills for navigators	Example of professional development activity
 Engaging and sustaining relationships; applying cultural competency	Reflect on factors that influenced navigators' own career planning and how those factors inform their work with learners
 Using motivational interviewing	Apply motivational interviewing strategies to learner scenarios
 Facilitating career explorations	Create a mock plan for facilitating learners' career exploration and career pathway planning and receive detailed, formative feedback from training providers
 Administering career assessments; guiding learners in synthesizing and interpreting all available information	Take a variety of career assessments and reflect on their purpose, strengths, and limitations
 Knowledge of skills for achieving goals; coaching learners to develop skills for achieving goals	Watch and reflect on videos of experienced navigators assisting learners with goal setting, monitoring, and planning
 Knowledge of skills for achieving goals; using tools to support learners' skill development	Review examples of career planning templates and compare the extent to which they incorporate goal-setting frameworks (such as SMART goals)
 Knowledge of executive functioning skills; coaching learners to develop executive functioning skills	Reflect on whether executive functioning skills are currently addressed in trainees' work with learners; select new resources to use with learners for skill development
 Knowledge of types of resources available; how to find and access resources	Complete a gap analysis of the adult education organization based on career readiness areas, identify external resources to address gaps, and develop a plan for incorporating resources
 Knowledge of types of resources available; how to find and access resources	Identify at least five community partners that support learners' transitions to postsecondary education or career and complete an inventory that describes supports that each partner provides

Key:

 Knowledge of the adult learner population and skills for working with adult learners	 Knowledge of career pathways and skills to help learners make informed decisions
 Knowledge of resources available to learners and skills to build and maintain strong partnerships	 Knowledge of learner skills that can lead to success and skills to support learners' skill building

Are trainings structured and delivered in a way that facilitates learning and engagement?

In addition to aligning training content with the key competencies they want navigators to develop or grow, practitioners may want to consider how trainings are structured and who delivers them. Format and delivery of trainings can influence how readily the content is understood and acted

upon. Exhibit 6 describes features of training format and delivery that are aligned with research-based adult learning principles and have the potential to engage participants and deepen their understanding and application of the content (Desimone 2009; Dunst et al. 2015; Merriam 2008; Vella 2002). These "promising" ways of presenting navigator training provide a check list that can be used when considering whether a training is a good fit.

Exhibit 6. Promising features of training format and delivery

Number of sessions	Trainings that are delivered over time in multiple sessions may help trainees retain knowledge better than one-off trainings. These trainings often break key content into modules and encourage a “learn, apply, reflect, share” cycle, which can help learnings stick.
Ongoing support	Ongoing supports offered through booster or supplemental sessions , provided with locally or state-tailored information in mind, may help reinforce learning. Possible supports include communities of practice, coaching, and best practice sharing.
Trainers	When trainers with different roles and backgrounds conduct the trainings, trainees learn the perspectives of career navigation experts, local staff or leaders, and local partners. Trainings can balance a “top-down” approach to training with information provided by experts with a “bottom-up” approach, including best practice sharing among local peers.
Type of activities	Trainings that include experiential learning such as skills practice, group activities, and field work can reinforce skills and ground content in the local context.
Inclusion of partners	Trainings that include partner organizations or materials produced by partner organizations may help trainees understand what various partners can offer, and partners can share information on how to refer learners to services.

New study of these expert-informed training models on the horizon

The *Connecting Adults to Success* (CATS) study will test whether providing navigators with training that includes content to help career navigators develop each of the key competencies described in this brief and includes the training format and delivery features listed above leads to improvements in learners’ education, employment and earnings outcomes. The study will also describe the navigators’ role within study sites, the background and skills that navigators bring to it, and the types of services navigators report providing. This can help policy makers, program leaders, state administrators, and other parties interested in career navigation understand what navigation might look like in different contexts.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (see Section 202: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-113publ128/pdf/PLAW-113publ128.pdf>).

ⁱⁱ Some adult education providers may use other terms to describe this career navigator role such as transition coordinator or advisor, success coach, or career advisor or counselor.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Connecting Adults to Success study is being conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences, the U.S. Department of Education's office for independent education research, evaluation and statistics. The study will expand the evidence on how training for career navigators may improve learners' education and employment outcomes (see https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/projects/evaluation/pathways_evidence.asp).

^{iv} The terms used to identify literature were intentionally broad to cover the variety of ways the career navigator role is defined in adult education and other settings. The first set of terms allowed the team to identify literature on career navigators; the second set helped the team focus on key aspects of career navigation. These two sets of terms were used in combination when conducting the literature scan. The scan also included literature on navigation in other settings serving individuals with similar education and workforce backgrounds and goals as adult education learners (for example, in community colleges or American Job Centers).

^v Twelve semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with three groups of respondents: organizations that support navigators (three interviews) and state adult education directors who offer trainings to navigators (four interviews) or are interested in doing so (five interviews). Interview respondents were selected based on input from a Technical Working Group of researchers and practitioners as well as information gathered through attendance at several national adult education professional conferences. Interviews solicited input on learner experiences in navigating transitions to postsecondary education or the workforce, the competency areas that navigators need, and promising components of trainings to develop navigator competencies.

^{vi} This is an abbreviated definition of "Career Pathway". The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (29 U.S.C. § 3102(7)), the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006, as amended by the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) (20 U.S.C. § 2302(8)), and the Higher Education Act (20 U.S. Code § 1091(d)(2)), define "career pathway" in the same way, as follows— A combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that: (1) Aligns with the skill needs of industries in the economy of the State or regional economy involved; (2) Prepares an individual to be successful in any of a full range of secondary or postsecondary education options, including apprenticeships registered under the National Apprenticeship Act; (3) Includes counseling to support an individual in achieving the individual's education and career goals; (4) Includes, as appropriate, education offered concurrently with and in the same context as workforce preparation activities and training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster; (5) Organizes education, training, and other services to meet the particular needs of an individual in a manner that accelerates the educational and career advancement of the individual to the extent practical; (6) Enables an individual to attain a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, and at least one recognized postsecondary credential; and; (7) Helps an individual enter or advance within a specific occupation or occupational cluster.

^{vii} As part of the early work for the Connecting Adults to Success study, the content and format of a set of existing career navigator trainings were compared against the specifications described in this brief. This was for the purpose of determining whether a training existed that was promising and feasible to study. Documentation for each training was obtained through web searches and from the developers directly. All available documentation was reviewed by two trained reviewers who systematically documented key

features of the training such as format, intensity, cost, and content. The reviewers also conducted interviews with training developers to fill in any gaps in available documentation about the training.

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