

LEARNING IS



The Michigan
Center for
Adult College
Success



NMU Evergreen: A Lifelong Approach to Learning

The journey to supporting adult learners at Northern Michigan University (NMU) isn't just about adding new classes, it's about modernizing the university's internal framework to meet students where they are. Through a model called NMU Evergreen, the university is redefining education as a "60-year curriculum," ensuring that whether a student is 18 or 55, there is a clear, flexible path waiting for them.

Supported by an Innovation Investment Award (IIA) from The Michigan Center for Adult College Success, NMU has navigated the complex work of internal culture change and system modernization to make their learning vision a reality. At the heart of this work is a shift in how the university views time and credit. The NMU Evergreen model recognizes that adult learners don't always need a traditional four-year linear path. Instead, they need a "lifelong" approach that values both college degrees and professional credentials.

It's about modernizing the university's internal framework to meet students where they are.

The Innovation Investment Award was the catalyst that allowed NMU to bridge the gap between these two worlds. By updating their Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) system, NMU can now formally honor the skills and competencies adult students have developed in the workforce.

Because of the Innovation Investment Award from The Center, a significant internal transformation is taking place at NMU. Implementing a major shift like NMU Evergreen requires education and collaboration from stakeholders both within the university and throughout the region. NMU used the Innovation Investment Award to build consensus and collaboration through change management training. By engaging influential faculty, staff, administrators, and community members in the refinement of CPL, the creation of micro-credentialing definitions, and the laddering of credentials throughout a lifetime, the project turned skeptics into a guiding coalition.

“The pieces have been in place for a long time at NMU, but they have long been isolated and seemingly unrelated to many of us, including students. Evergreen is the glue that holds the pieces together so that students can not only envision where their educational journey can take them, but they have a clear pathway to take them there that leverages all of NMU’s resources. Evergreen not only provides clarity, it supports adult students and hopefully inspires them to learn throughout their lifetime.”

— Dr. Steve VandenAvond, Associate Provost for Extended Learning and Community Engagement and Dean for the College of Technology and Occupational Sciences

For adult learners, one of the biggest barriers to returning to school is a lack of clarity. To address this, NMU utilized grant resources to partner with marketing experts who helped distill the complex “Evergreen” concept into a compelling, simple message. By creating new advertising concepts and clear communications strategies, NMU is now prepared to get the word out to the Upper Peninsula and beyond. Their hope is to show adults that their previous experience isn’t just welcomed; it is a foundational part of their future degree.

The true impact of this flexible, credential-focused model is best seen through students like Sarah. After taking a break from education to focus on her family, Sarah discovered a passion for cybersecurity. Through the U.P. Cybersecurity Institute at NMU, she achieved several industry-endorsed credentials while pursuing her degree in Information Assurance and Cyber Defense.

This stackable approach allowed her to intern with a local industry partner and eventually led her to secure a role as a Cybersecurity and Program Analyst. Sarah’s journey from industry credentials to a bachelor’s and eventually a master’s degree is the NMU Evergreen model in action.

The success of the NMU Evergreen initiative is already branching out beyond the university. NMU is now collaborating with local high school districts to offer professional credentials to students before they even graduate, and other initiatives like the Labs Unleashed summer camp are exposing younger students to STEAM disciplines. By using the Innovation Investment Award from The Center, NMU has been able to build a sustainable, faculty-supported system for adult learners. NMU is ensuring that the “Evergreen” path remains open and accessible for every learner, at every stage of life.

About the Innovation Investment Awards

The Michigan Center for Adult College Success is supporting nine institutions through the Innovation Investment Awards to help postsecondary institutions implement best practices or pilot new ideas to better serve adult students in a way that increases completion rates.

The Center awarded \$6.4 million in Innovation Investment Awards through a competitive award process to postsecondary institutions seeking to implement innovative solutions for improving persistence and completion rates among adult learners over the age of 25. Grants of up to \$1 million were awarded to Michigan colleges and universities that show they are ready to launch effective, lasting improvements to systems that help students 25 and older obtain postsecondary credentials.