

MI-RAISE AND MI-LEARN DESIGN LABS

A Summary of Evaluation Findings and Lessons for Future Programming



Prepared by the Michigan Center for Adult College Success (MCACS)

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Findings drawn from independent evaluations conducted by Basis Policy Research (MI-RAISE, August 2024) and Public Policy Associates (MI-LEARN, May 2026).

contents

1 Introduction

2 The Design Labs

- 2.1 MI-RAISE Design Lab
- 2.2 MI-LEARN Design Lab

3 Evaluation Approach

- 3.1 MI-RAISE Evaluation Methodology
- 3.2 MI-LEARN Evaluation Methodology

4 Key Findings

- 4.1 Institutional Readiness and Engagement
- 4.2 Program Structure and Content
- 4.3 Coaching: The Standout Feature
- 4.4 Outcomes and Impact
- 4.5 Common Challenges and Areas for Improvement

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

- 5.1 What We Learned
- 5.2 Recommendations for Future Design Lab Iterations
- 5.3 Ideas for Future Topics and Design Labs





1. Introduction

In 2019, Governor Whitmer launched the Sixty by 30 initiative, setting a goal for 60 percent of Michigan's working-age residents to hold a postsecondary certificate or degree by 2030. The Michigan Center for Adult College Success (MCACS), an initiative of TalentFirst, has pursued this goal through two complementary, sequential initiatives for postsecondary institutions: the MI-RAISE Design Lab and the MI-LEARN Design Lab.

MI-RAISE (Michigan Regional Adult Initiative for Skills and Education) helped institutions design evidence-based, adult learner-centered solutions and systems changes. MI-LEARN (Michigan Learning Evolution and Academic Restructuring Network) is the implementation-focused counterpart to

MI-RAISE, helping institutions implement, refine, and scale adult learner-centered practices. Together, the two Design Labs reflect MCACS's broader design-then-implementation model, though the two cohorts were not identical — several institutions carried forward from MI-RAISE into MI-LEARN, while others participated in only one program.

Each Design Lab was independently evaluated at its conclusion. Basis Policy Research evaluated the MI-RAISE Design Lab in August 2024, and Public Policy Associates evaluated the MI-LEARN Design Lab in May 2026. This overview synthesizes both evaluations into a single account of what was done, what was learned, and how the findings should inform future programming.



2. The Design Labs

2.1 MI-RAISE Design Lab

MCACS developed the MI-RAISE Design Lab in partnership with Sova Solutions, Education Strategy Group, and CollegeAPP, with funding provided by the Kresge Foundation and the State of Michigan, to help postsecondary institutions design solutions to the systemic barriers adult learners face. Fourteen institutions were selected through a competitive application process and participated in a design-sprint model between November 2023 and June 2024: a time-bound series of monthly workshops, offered in person and virtually, in which institutions assessed their local labor markets, examined data on the adult learners they serve, and worked through a structured self-assessment and asset-mapping process.

Institutions received individualized coaching throughout, along with technical assistance to prepare proposals for the state's Innovation Investment Award (IIA) grants and Sixty by 30 grants. By the close of the Design Lab, every participating institution had selected a set of best practices to implement — most commonly proactive advising, guided pathways, eliminating barriers for transfer students, and career-aligned pathways — and had submitted a grant proposal to fund the work.

2.2 MI-LEARN Design Lab

MI-LEARN, funded by the State of Michigan, is the implementation-focused counterpart to MI-RAISE. The two Design Labs are separate offerings rather than sequential stages every institution moves through. MI-RAISE asked institutions to design a solution to a systems-level barrier facing adult learners at their institution — the resulting plans spanned advising, policy, transfer barriers, and support services as often as curriculum. MI-LEARN, by contrast, is centered specifically on instructional and curricular reforms — credit for prior learning, competency-based education, accelerated course formats, and career-aligned pathways — and asks institutions to move a plan from paper to sustained institutional practice. Some MI-LEARN institutions were implementing a plan first developed in MI-RAISE; participation in MI-RAISE was not a prerequisite, and institutions were not required to carry a MI-RAISE plan forward. The program ran from September 2024 through September 2025 and convened participating institutions seven times — a kickoff webinar followed by six additional sessions — including sessions on curricular reforms such as microcredentials, accelerated courses, credit for



prior learning (CPL), and competency-based education (CBE). Institutions received structured content, coaching, team time, and access to subject matter experts such as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN).

Institutions used the Design Lab to build implementation plans, engage in continuous improvement, and strengthen their use of data to track progress. As with MI-RAISE, individualized coaching ran throughout the program and was consistently the component institutions valued most.

Dimension	MI-RAISE Design Lab	MI-LEARN Design Lab
Timeline	November 2023 – June 2024	September 2024 – September 2025
Core focus	Design and systems change — identifying barriers and designing adult learner-centered solutions across advising, policy, and support services	Implementation and scaling of instructional and curricular reforms — turning an adult learner-centered plan into sustained institutional practice
Participants	14 postsecondary institutions, selected via application	12 postsecondary institutions, selected via application
Delivery partners	Sova Solutions, Education Strategy Group, CollegeAPP	Sova Solutions, Education Strategy Group, CAEL, C-BEN, and other subject matter expert organizations
Core supports	Coaching, self-assessment, asset mapping, labor market data, IIA grant proposal support	Coaching, convenings, team time and office hours, CAEL resources, data tools
Funding connection	Prepared institutions to apply for Innovation Investment Award (IIA) and Sixty by 30 grants	No direct funding connection
External evaluator	Basis Policy Research	Public Policy Associates

Table 1. Program comparison at a glance.



3. Evaluation Approach

Both Design Labs were evaluated by independent, external research firms using a mixed-methods approach: an end-of-program or session-level survey combined with structured interviews of institutional leads, coaches, and program staff.

3.1 MI-RAISE Evaluation Methodology

Basis Policy Research administered a single survey at the close of the MI-RAISE Design Lab in June 2024, inviting all 96 participants across the 14 institutions; 38 responded, a 41 percent response rate split between institutional leads and design team members. Basis then conducted five interviews with institutional representatives and four interviews with MCACS and its delivery partners, and reviewed program documentation collected throughout the initiative. Findings were developed through descriptive analysis of the survey data and content analysis of the interview transcripts.

3.2 MI-LEARN Evaluation Methodology

Public Policy Associates collected a short survey at the end of each of the seven convenings, yielding 94 total responses between December 2024 and September 2025. Between January and April 2026, PPA conducted nine interviews — five with institutional leads, three with technical assistance providers, and one focus group with MCACS staff — and analyzed the results in Dedoose, a qualitative analysis platform, triangulating interview themes against the survey data.

Evaluation Metric	MI-RAISE Design Lab	MI-LEARN Design Lab
Survey responses	38 of 96 invited (41% response rate)	94 responses collected across seven convenings
Interviews conducted	9 total: 5 institutions, 4 Center/partner staff	9 total: 5 institution leads, 3 TA providers, 1 staff focus group
Data collection window	June – July 2024	December 2024 – April 2026
Highest-rated component	Coaching (8.48 of 10)	Coaching (rated essential by 100% of institutions)
Overall satisfaction	7.94 of 10; expectations met at 7.84 of 10	Session relevance ratings ranged from 7.55 to 8.82 of 10

Table 2. Evaluation methodology snapshot.



4. Key Findings

4.1 Institutional Readiness and Engagement

Institutions applying to MI-RAISE found the application itself easy to access and complete, but the window between the application's release and its due date left little time to secure the required leadership commitments. Several institutions also said they would have benefited from more upfront detail on the Design Lab's scope and time commitment, since that information would have helped them select the right people for their design teams from the start.

MI-LEARN institutions, by contrast, entered the program with a strong grasp of its goals — a number of them carried that clarity over from having already participated in MI-RAISE. Even so, every participating institution identified designing a scalable implementation plan as a primary challenge, and staff turnover and competing responsibilities were the most frequently cited barriers to readiness. Supportive institutional leadership consistently made the difference between an institution that could keep pace with the work and one that struggled to.

4.2 Program Structure and Content

Both evaluations found the programs to be well organized and well facilitated. MI-LEARN survey respondents rated session relevance between 7.55 and 8.82 on a 10-point scale across all seven convenings, with 100 percent of respondents in the April and June sessions rating the organization and facilitation as good or excellent. In MI-RAISE, coaching (8.48 of 10) and IIA grant proposal development support (7.91 of 10) were the two most highly rated components, with 89 percent of participants rating the overall content a six or higher.

Structured working time was valued in both programs, though institutions in both cohorts wanted more of it. MI-RAISE participants asked for more strategically designed workshop time built into in-person convenings, while MI-LEARN institutions who used team time and office hours rated them very or extremely useful 79 to 100 percent of the time — however, many other institutions did not use office hours, largely because the process for accessing it was unclear.



4.3 Coaching: The Standout Feature

Coaching is the one component both evaluations single out, independently, as the most valuable part of the experience. In MI-RAISE, it was the highest-rated item on the survey. In MI-LEARN, every institution interviewed described coaching as essential, and many called it the single most valuable part of the Design Lab.

Coaches in both programs did far more than check in on progress. They helped institutions set goals and priorities, connected institutions to one another around shared interests, helped develop new programs, policies, and grant proposals, and in some cases helped resolve legal or logistical questions standing in the way of implementation. The consistency of this finding across two different evaluators, two different institution cohorts, and two different program designs makes coaching the clearest evidence-based investment for future iterations.



4.4 Outcomes and Impact

MI-RAISE institutions left the program having selected concrete best practices to implement — proactive advising (74 percent), guided pathways (58 percent), eliminating barriers for transfer students (58 percent), and career-aligned pathways (58 percent) were the most common choices — and all but one institution applied for an IIA grant to fund the work. Participants also reported a broadened understanding of the barriers adult learners face and, notably, of their own institution's role in addressing them. Average satisfaction with the program was 7.94 of 10, and the program met expectations at 7.84 of 10.

MI-LEARN institutions showed measurable growth in confidence over the course of the program, from an average of 6.73 in May to 8.64 in September on a 10-point scale. Several institutions pointed to specific new programs or policies adopted as a direct result of participation, including incorporating Adult Learner 360 survey results into strategic planning and adopting degree plans that accept community college transfer credit. Institutions also reported a shift in posture toward one another — moving from viewing peer institutions as competitors for a limited pool of adult learners to seeing them as partners in a shared goal — and an improvement in how they access, interpret, and use data to guide decisions.



4.5 Common Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Several themes recurred across both evaluations, suggesting they are structural rather than specific to either program:

- Communication and logistics. MI-RAISE participants wanted communication that was more timely, better organized, and more centralized; the same instinct shows up in MI-LEARN's recommendation for a clearer, more proactive process for connecting with subject matter experts.
- Role clarity for external partners. MI-RAISE partner organizations wanted a clearer sense of how their roles related to one another; MI-LEARN technical assistance providers, similarly, wanted a clearer view of the program's overall learning arc and how their work fit within it.
- Underused expert resources. MI-LEARN's office-hours model for connecting institutions with subject matter experts was underutilized, in large part because the sign-up process was confusing and access was ad hoc rather than proactive.
- Data access. Institutions in both programs cited difficulty accessing reliable, consistent institutional data as a real barrier to setting benchmarks and tracking progress — a constraint on the work independent of how well either Design Lab was run.
- Appetite for more peer collaboration time. Both cohorts asked for more structured time to work with and learn from one another, particularly around shared topics such as credit for prior learning and data-sharing agreements.



5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 What We Learned

Together, the two evaluations validate MCACS's two-stage model. Institutions that came to MI-LEARN with MI-RAISE experience behind them were consistently better prepared, evidence that the design-then-implementation sequence compounds rather than simply repeats. Coaching is the through-line asset of both programs and the component most worth protecting and expanding as the model evolves. And in both cohorts, the primary limit on how far institutions could carry the work was less about the quality of the programming than about institutional capacity — staffing, leadership bandwidth, and data infrastructure — a constraint MCACS can help institutions plan around but cannot fully solve through Design Lab design alone.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Design Lab Iterations

- Front-load complete program detail — scope, timeline, time commitment, and milestones — in application and kickoff materials, and share it directly with the people who will do the work, not only the initial institutional contact.
- Lengthen the application-to-deadline window (Basis Policy Research recommended roughly six weeks) so institutions can secure leadership sign-off and assemble the right team from the outset.
- Replace ad hoc access to subject matter experts with a structured, proactive engagement model, rather than an office-hours sign-up process institutions found confusing.
- Centralize communications and resources in a single hosted hub — a shared calendar and document repository accessible to every participating institution.
- Continue and formalize post-program coaching support so institutions have a clear "off-ramp" and can sustain momentum once formal programming ends.
- Build named, structured peer-collaboration time into the agenda around specific shared topics — credit for prior learning and data-sharing agreements were both named directly by participants — rather than general open networking time.



5.3 Ideas for Future Topics and Design Labs

- Employer engagement and workforce alignment. Interest in employer partnerships and workforce-aligned pathways surfaced in both cohorts and could support a dedicated Design Lab track or session series.
- A competency-based education (CBE) cohort. Given the complexity of CBE program design, institutions asked for a more structured cohort or resource set specific to CBE adoption.
- Cross-state learning exchanges. Participants expressed interest in learning from comparable efforts in other states, including a specific example of a credit-for-prior-learning framework adopted statewide in Minnesota.
- Data infrastructure and data-sharing agreements as a named priority. Because data access was flagged as a recurring barrier in both evaluations, a future Design Lab component focused specifically on data systems and inter-institutional data-sharing agreements would address a constraint institutions cannot resolve on their own.
- An alumni community of practice. Connecting MI-RAISE and MI-LEARN graduates into an ongoing network would sustain the collaborative, non-competitive posture both evaluations found the programs helped institutions build.



About The Michigan Center for Adult College Success

The Michigan Center for Adult College Success is the state's primary resource to improve the enrollment and completion of postsecondary education by adults. As an initiative of TalentFirst, our goal is to meet the statewide need for a skilled workforce. The Center collects research, shares best practices, funds innovative pilots and provides technical assistance. We partner with a wide range of educators, business leaders and policy makers toward our shared goal of helping more adults get the credentials they need to reach their full potential, so our state can thrive.

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