

# Using the Federal Stimulus as a Fast Track to Economic Mobility

## AT LORAIN COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Postsecondary education leaders have a tremendous opportunity to reimagine current systems and uplift often underserved adult learners through strategic use of the federal stimulus provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security ([CARES](#)), Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations ([CRRSA](#)), and American Rescue Plan ([ARP](#)) Acts. In alignment with the Accelerating Recovery through Credentials [Rapid Response Toolkit](#) and [Adult-Ready Playbook](#), this case study focuses on Lorain County Community College's strategic and innovative use of the federal higher education emergency relief funds (HEERF) to scale the institution's Fast Track Program.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1** Lorain County Community College (LCCC) **used higher education emergency relief funds (HEERF) to scale the institution's Fast Track Program**, a program that provides individuals an opportunity to gain free, short-term credentials leading to employment in high-wage, in-demand industries.
- 2** **Strong advising and wrap-around support services were integral to student success** in the program; over 70% of Fast Track graduates were employed within nine months of graduation, and 51% continued their education toward an Associates Degree.
- 3** 800+ students have enrolled in the Fast Track Program since 2019, signaling that **designing programs to better serve adult learners can address enrollment challenges faced by community colleges**.
- 4** **Grassroots support, local government leadership, and braided funding are key** to sustaining innovative HEERF investments like the one at LCCC.

Nearly 13,000 students are enrolled at Lorain County Community College (LCCC), which sits at the nexus of urban and rural communities in Elyria, Ohio and serves a diverse workforce. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Lorain County community has worked to achieve shared economic recovery, particularly through LCCC’s [Fast Track Program](#). To best understand how higher education institutions can invest in their communities and build rapport among external stakeholders, this case study explores LCCC’s strategic and innovative use of the higher education emergency relief funds (HEERF) to scale the Fast Track Program—a program that is an exemplar in the field and vital to answering the demands of our evolving labor market.

## The Fast Track Program: Building On an Innovative Foundation

Launched in 2019, The Fast Track Program at Lorain County Community College (LCCC) offers students free certificate programs that can be completed in 16 weeks or less, leads to a high-wage, in-demand career, and articulates into a degree pathway. Certificates are aligned with business, computer and information technology, healthcare, and manufacturing industries. While enrolled, learners receive academic and career coaching, gain relevant work experience, and engage with employers. Programs are designed to meet learners where they are with a range of noncredit, credit, online and in-person offerings.

Approximately two-thirds of students enrolled in the Fast Track Program are 25+ years of age or exhibit other post-traditional student characteristics (e.g., learners who did not directly enroll in postsecondary education following high school, parenting learners, independent learners, etc.). By focusing on reskilling and upskilling adult learners through the Fast Track Program, LCCC is assisting those who need new skills to effectively compete in the post-COVID economy that increasingly requires a postsecondary credential. This, along with the college’s stated values of “safety, stability, and student success,” made scaling the Fast Track Program a priority for LCCC.<sup>1</sup>

## HEERF as a Tool to Scale and Innovate for Adult Learners

Early in the pandemic, LCCC conducted a survey to understand more about the Fast Track Program and its participants, including why students enrolled. Of the respondents, 44% reported being unemployed and seeking the skills necessary to gain employment, and 63% were eager to access the career and employer engagement opportunities provided by the program. From the survey, it was clear that the Fast Track Program was uplifting students seeking to upskill and reskill and therefore a good priority for some of the \$37 million they were allocated from HEERF.

Administrators recognized that scaling the program would require faculty ownership and participation. Resources were initially used to buy out faculty time to design new programs and courses. Faculty also received stipends for their assistance, provided by a variety of braided funds.

Leaders at the college also knew it was critical to build additional support from campus and community members. HEERF was used to align college outreach and communication efforts with community outreach efforts so that local residents were informed of this unique opportunity. As a result, grassroots efforts launched by community-based organizations such as [El Centro de Servicios Sociales](#) and the

### IN A SURVEY OF FAST TRACK PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS:

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<sup>1</sup> Ballinger, M. (2020, August 24). A new semester: Let’s get started. *Lorain County Community College president’s webpage*. <https://president.lorainccc.edu/page/2/>

Urban League of Lorain County along with others such as Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Ohio, Boys and Girls Club of Northeast Ohio and local churches have actively recruited students to join the program and play an integral role in shepherding students to the finish line. Further, Elyria City council recently dedicated an additional \$200k to support the future success of the program.<sup>2</sup> This level of financial support, beyond HEERF, will ensure the sustainability of the program.

Funding per student has increased to support those enrolled in the Fast Track Program since Fall of 2020. Using HEERF, LCCC leadership prioritized disbursing emergency aid, scaling emergency aid processes, and providing additional resources to students through the institution’s Advocacy and Resource Center. These efforts contribute to the success of students enrolled in the Fast Track Program. It is important to note that this use of HEERF is allowed and encouraged by the U.S. Department of Education (see ARPA 2021 HEERF III FAQ link).

**WITHIN 6 TO 9 MONTHS OF COMPLETION:**



**Tracking the Early Success at Lorain County Community College**

The Fast Track Program’s early success is demonstrated by the number of students who successfully completed the program since Fall of 2019, and the communal support that will sustain the program for years to come. Institutional leaders report that since 2019, approximately 23% of graduates completed a Fast Track Program preparing them for a high-wage job. Moreover, a survey of Fast Track graduates found that 72% were employed 6 to 9 months after completing the short-term credential.

**WITHIN ONE YEAR OF COMPLETION:**



Another measure of the program’s success is the rate at which Fast Track students continue their education at LCCC. Within one year of completion, 51% of Fast Track students were working toward an Associate degree. This rate is even higher in specific tracks. For example, approximately 75% of individuals who completed the Fast Track Program’s State Tested Nurse Aide certification since 2019 have continued to the Associate Degree in Nursing. Moreover, 87% of individuals who completed the Software Development Introduction certificate program are currently working towards an Applied Associates Degree in Business. These examples signal the potential of short-term programs to provide functional opportunities for stacking and continued upskilling or reskilling.

**The Key to Fast Track’s Success: Comprehensively Addressing the Needs of Adult Learners**

The Fast Track Program’s strength lies in its ability to comprehensively and systemically address the needs of adult learners. In Education Strategy Group’s *Adult-Ready Playbook: A Comprehensive Policy and Practice Guide to Improve Outcomes for Post-traditional Learners*, core components of the systemic change needed to serve adult learners—**accessibility, program change, operational change, data and partnerships**—are discussed to assist states and institutions working to innovate systems that were established to only serve traditional-aged students. The Fast Track Program addresses each component of the playbook and serves as an exemplar.

First, the Fast Track Program addresses **accessibility** directly by transparently communicating that the program is free. LCCC accomplished this by braiding funding,

<sup>2</sup> Yost, L. (2020, December 16). *Elyria to dedicate \$200,000 toward City Education initiative*. Chronicle Telegram. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://chroniclet.com/news/244960/elyria-to-dedicate-200000-toward-city-education-initiative/>.

including institutional, state, and federal aid, as well as philanthropic dollars, to cover the cost of the program for eligible students. Campuses should use HEERF to address program costs for adult learners, as research indicates that paying for postsecondary education is the biggest anxiety for post-traditional students.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, LCCC has made a concerted effort to make its academic programming more flexible and responsive by offering Fast Track Programs in an online, hybrid and accelerated format. From this, the program is serving those who have historically been underrepresented in higher education and often marginalized in our economy. For example, a majority of Fast Track learners are female (69%), with 32% being learners of color. The stackability of certificates provided through the Fast Track Program are another component of **program change** that aid students considering transitioning into degree programs. Directly confronting common concerns about course availability, transition, and time to degree promotes adult learner success.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most important components of the Fast Track Program is the wraparound support services that are offered to enrollees. LCCC provides a holistic approach to delivering education through the institution's [Advocacy and Resource Center](#). Coupled with strong advising, students enrolled in the program have access to counseling, emergency aid, technological support, food assistance, professional wear, case management, and other resources that extend beyond the classroom. Post-traditional learners need this sort of **operational change**—coordinated, holistic advising, and support services that remove barriers to completion.<sup>5</sup>

Building out robust **data** collection and reporting systems is necessary to effectively monitor and track student progression. Institutional researchers positioned at LCCC have focused heavily on the Fast Track Program, leading to data collection and analysis that will inform decision makers for years to come. While data continues to be collected through surveys, interviews, and the institution's enrollment management software, key metrics have been identified and shared to underscore the success of the program. These metrics include disaggregated data by race, enrollment by program, completion rates, gainful employment rates, rates of continued education, etc.

Finally, administrators at LCCC recognized **community-based partnerships** were necessary to uplift the Fast Track Program. Whether through local government officials or community-based organizations, such as [El Centro de Servicios Sociales](#) and the [Urban League of Lorain County](#), grassroots efforts have contributed to the success of the program and the students enrolled. Active participation from community leaders has increased the program's ability to enroll and graduate more students, uplift the local economy, and provide a more skilled workforce. Strategic partnerships are necessary to connect learners to employers and ensure the curriculum is representative of industry needs.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, partnerships have brought forth conversations and resources pertaining to sustainability for LCCC.

3 Sheffer, H., Palmer, I. & Mattei, A. (2020). The comeback story: How adults return to school to complete their degree. Center on Education, Labor, and Skills. [https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/The\\_Comeback\\_Story\\_.pdf](https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/The_Comeback_Story_.pdf)

4 Hanover Research. (2018). Best practices in course scheduling. <https://f.hubspotusercontent30.net/hubfs/4523134/Hanover%20Research%20-%20Best%20Practices%20in%20Course%20Scheduling-1.pdf>

5 Blankenstein, M., and Wolf-Eisenberg, C., Measuring the Whole Student: Landscape Review of Traditional and Holistic Approaches to Community College Student Success; September 30, 2020. <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/measuring-the-whole-student/#post-313888-footnote-33>

6 Business Higher Education Forum. (2018). *Creating Purposeful Partnerships: Business and Higher Education Working Together to Build Regional Talent Ecosystems for the Digital Economy*. Retrieved 2020, from [https://www.bhef.com/sites/default/files/BHEF\\_2018\\_CEO\\_playbook\\_0.pdf](https://www.bhef.com/sites/default/files/BHEF_2018_CEO_playbook_0.pdf).

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## Conclusion

Higher education institutions have an opportunity to connect and engage with those in need of upskilling and reskilling using HEERF. Our economy and local communities depend on individuals with the skills necessary to fill persistent employment gaps. A postsecondary credential is a must-have currency to compete in today's labor market, and there are innovative ways to leverage HEERF to ensure more learners receive high-quality education and subsequent employment.<sup>7</sup> For institutional leaders adamant about student success and building a strong regional economy, advancing initiatives that increase student retention and success rates may be a prime use of HEERF.

**For institutional leaders looking to build an adult-ready institution, ESG recommends leveraging our “Enroll. Complete. Compete.” framework that highlights strategic stimulus investments to advance adult learner success. While we recommend leaders take on one or more of the strategies, institutional leaders leading the Fast Track Program at LCCC have implemented an impressive 7 of the 10 strategies:**

- Target aid at post-traditional learners to ensure personal well-being and academic success, while supporting enrollment in high-quality pathways.
- Promote high-quality, in-demand credentials through targeted aid and program support.
- Partner with community-based organizations to provide satellite programs, services, and course offerings to students in diverse locales.
- Incentivize students to move from part-time to full-time status and/or continuously enroll in degree programs following certificate completion.
- Build and sustain capacity for effective and proactive advising.
- Increase course and program structure flexibility to better meet the needs of post-traditional students.
- Integrate career and academic advising that elevates real-time labor market data to inform students of high-wage, high-quality pathways and careers.
- Strengthen relationships with local employers to design programs and enhance regional labor market pipelines.
- Bolster students' social and economic mobility by increasing access to and investing in work-based learning aligned with their academic pursuits.
- Strengthen institutional data capacity to track graduate outcomes and for program quality improvement, especially for programs enrolling large numbers of post-traditional learners, learners of color, and low-income students.

<sup>7</sup> Yost, L. (2020, December 16). *Elyria to dedicate \$200,000 toward City Education initiative*. Chronicle Telegram. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://chroniclet.com/news/244960/elyria-to-dedicate-200000-toward-city-education-initiative/>.